

INHARMONIOUS



TAMMYE HUF

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—*BOOKLIST*

(starred review)

BOOKS BY TAMMYE HUF

STANDALONE NOVELS

Inharmonious

A More Perfect Union

INHARMONIOUS

TAMMYE HUF



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E-book published in 2026 by Blackstone Publishing
Cover design by Alenka Linaschke
Author photo by Isabel Infantes Morcillo

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Trade e-book ISBN 979-8-8748-6870-3
Library e-book ISBN 979-8-8748-6869-7
Fiction / Historical / World War II

Blackstone Publishing
31 Mistletoe Rd.
Ashland, OR 97520

www.BlackstonePublishing.com

For my family

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

—W. E. B. Du Bois,
The Souls of Black Folk, 1903

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The title of this novel refers to a government policy outlined in the 1936 Federal Housing Administration *Underwriting Manual*, which instructed banks and lending institutions to deny any loan that would allow Black people, or other racial minorities, into white neighborhoods.

Natural or artificially established barriers will prove effective in protecting a neighborhood and the locations within it from adverse influences. Usually the protection against adverse influences afforded by these means include prevention of the infiltration of business and industrial uses, lower-class occupancy, and inharmonious racial groups.

PART ONE

The term “white person” shall apply only to the person who has no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian.

—Racial Integrity Act, 1924
(commonly known as the one-drop rule)

CHAPTER ONE

Out of Gas

“Benny, would you come on? You’re gonna make Momma late for work.”

Benny searched under his bed for his shoes, then under a pile of clothes, his work overalls, and some T-shirts heaped in the corner. Nothing. He pulled back the curtain they’d hung to separate his sister’s half of the room when they’d grown uncomfortable sharing a bedroom into their twenties. One glance at her neatly made bed and books in alphabetical order and he knew he wouldn’t find anything there that didn’t belong.

“I can’t find my shoes,” he shouted. He hurried to the living room and dropped to his knees, feeling under the couch.

“Did you move them somewhere, Cora?” He looked up in time to see her roll her eyes.

“Just wear any old something. We have to go.”

He didn’t even acknowledge that comment after she’d spent half the morning running her thick hair through the hot comb and changing from dress to skirt to dress again. And she knew good and well that the only other shoes he had were for baseball. Fat chance he was showing up at Aunt Teen’s cookout in those.

Cora pulled on her coat and picked up a plate of corn bread cut into even squares. “I swear, Benny, you’d lose your head if it wasn’t attached.”

“Benny North,” Momma said, her voice quieting both of them.

He looked up at her and she tipped her head toward the kitchen table. There, under his chair, were his worn but well-polished leather shoes, which he now remembered kicking off at dinner the night before. He slipped them on and tied them up, then ran back to his room for a coat and rushed out to his sky-blue Plymouth where Momma sat waiting in the passenger seat and Cora in the back, with the plate of corn bread on her lap and a sweet potato pie to her side. They barely made it ten feet down the road when Momma noticed the gas needle bouncing on the line above the E.

“Benny, this car is dead on empty. You didn’t fill it up before you came home last night?” Her voice lifted the end into a question, like the curved tail of a scorpion set to sting.

“I’ll handle it. We’ll be fine.” He glanced in the rearview mirror to see Cora press her mouth into a line.

“I can’t have you two stuck on the side of the road,” Momma said, her tone clipped and sharp. She sagged in her seat when she said, “You best go on and get the gas.” Cora caught his eye and shook her head.

Momma worked a cleaning job over at the Bayside Hotel. Mr. Hall ran a tight ship, and every maid knew he didn’t play when it came to lateness. “Come on time or don’t come at all,” was how he put it, and he’d fired more than a few to prove he meant it.

Benny knew the needle could fall to just below the line until he was well and truly empty. That’d be enough to take Momma to the hotel, but then he’d have to get gas at the segregated Texaco close by or run out for sure.

At the junction where they could turn right for the Esso station, where anybody could buy, he turned left for the Bayside Hotel. They couldn’t afford to lose Momma’s paycheck.

“Turn this car around,” Momma said through her teeth. “This ain’t no game. I don’t want you fooling with those people.”

“Don’t worry,” he said, and then added, “Cora’ll be all right,” because that’s who she was worried about. With his brown hair and light eyes, he could pass if he needed to. Cora couldn’t. Her skin was almost as light, her hair almost as straight, but everything lay just short of convincing. Especially her attitude: timid and retreating instead of bold and demanding.

No. Cora couldn’t pass for anything but what she was.

Benny kept his eyes forward, avoiding the rear view of Cora in the back seat until they pulled up to the service entrance of the hotel to let Momma out, but she sat tight, looking mad as a buzzard.

“Now you both listen to me good, cause I’m only gonna say this one time. You were too young to remember Rosewood, but let me tell you, we did not run for our lives and survive that nightmare to go courting trouble in Mangrove Bay.” She cupped Benny’s cheek. “Let this be the last time, Benny. I mean it.”

He nodded his agreement because he didn’t want to upset her, but it wouldn’t be the last time. And not just because passing made so many little things easier. It didn’t matter that it was illegal or run-you-out-of-town dangerous: he got a rush from fooling those bigots that quieted the constant rage simmering just below his skin. If he didn’t find ways to muffle it, it would pulse and flare and make him do something reckless.

They watched Momma hurry inside before pulling away and heading toward the Texaco. Cora pinched her lips smaller and smaller the closer they came. “Let me out before they can see us.” The quaver of fear in her voice made his guilt hitch.

Benny slowed, looking for a spot to stop, but a black Ford pickup truck with two men inside drove up behind them. He sped up, passing the gas station with its big red star on a pole by the side of the road. About a half mile down at the T-junction, he rolled to a stop. The needle sat just under the E line. The pickup truck filled the rearview mirror with no blinker to tell Benny left or right.

Benny eased the car to the right, hoping they wouldn't follow. When the truck pulled off to the left, he and Cora breathed a sigh of relief. After a few seconds, he pulled over beside a clump of trees.

“You can stand behind those.” He felt a rush of blood color his face that hinted at the anger inside. They shouldn’t have to do this.

Cora climbed out, leaving the pie and corn bread on the back seat, and ran to the trees, picking her way through rough, patchy grass. He watched her tuck herself behind the tree line and pulled away, back to the gas station where a blue Chevrolet filled up at the first pump.

Benny pulled up to the second and waited for the attendant.

“Fill her up,” he told him, keeping his voice steady and even.

Benny’s heart pounded, but the man just nodded and fed the nozzle into the side of the car, then sauntered back to the Chevrolet to wash the windows, back and front. He took payment from the man through the window, and the car pulled away. Benny relaxed a little when it was just him and the attendant.

“Wash your windows?” the man asked, back at his side.

“No, thanks,” Benny said, trying to act casual.

The attendant took out the pump and wiped the drip of gas from the side of Benny’s car with a rag from his back pocket. Benny handed him a twenty-dollar bill and said, “And a Coke if you have one cold.”

He’d long ago discovered at penny candy shops, state fairs, drugstore counters, and public toilets that the best way to pass was to act like you belonged, and the more you expected them to hop to, the less they looked at you.

The man went inside to get his change and his Coke.

As Benny waited, a white Chrysler pulled up to the other pump. He nodded a greeting at the couple inside and turned away, his hands pooling nervous sweat. When the attendant came out with his change, he wiped his palms on his thighs before holding out his hand for the cash and the drink.

Benny thanked the man as he turned the key, starting the engine, then eased the Plymouth back onto the road. When he got to where he'd left Cora, she peeked around a tree trunk before dashing to the car.

"I brought you a Coke," he said, reaching between his thighs where he'd clamped the drink, the coolness of it making the glass bottle sweat into his trousers. Every place he went that she couldn't follow, he brought her something back, and every one of those somethings was a little rebellion. He handed the Coke to Cora, who flashed him a smile and drank it down quick as a click, each swallow a little victory. Benny pulled the car onto the road, turned back around, and headed to Aunt Teen's cookout.

CHAPTER TWO

The Cookout

The taste of Coke lingered sweetly on Cora's lips as they drove, stopping on the way at Jackson Hole to pick up Benny's best friend, Roscoe. Benny leaned on the horn in front of Roscoe's dingy boarding house until Cora shooed her brother's hands from the wheel.

"Stop making all that noise," she said. "It's not just Roscoe living here."

Seconds later, Roscoe came bounding out of the house like a giant puppy. He poked his handsome face into the car window and flashed Cora a playful scowl. "What're you doing in my seat?" Then to Benny, "You know I ride shotgun. You throwing me out for your little sister?"

"He sure is," Cora said, teasing him right back. "Looks like you're riding in the rear today."

"So, that's how it is." Eyes dancing, he folded his broad frame into the back seat of the Plymouth. "I'm gonna remember this, Cora North." He pulled the door shut, and the handle nearly came off in his hand.

"Hey! Take it easy," Benny said. "I don't want to have to fix that again."

His boss at Keeler Motors had thought the car was beyond repair and sold it to Benny for parts. He'd looked on in amazement as his employee painstakingly restored it, one belt, one screw, one pump at a time, to something roadworthy, even if it looked like a junky old jalopy.

When Benny and Roscoe had clasped and slapped hands in their own special greeting, with Cora rolling her eyes at just how long it could take two people to say hi, Benny drove on to Jasper, who came out trumpet in hand. Ever since Jasper had started performing at the local clubs a few years ago, people expected him to play something at every gathering he went to, so he'd taken to bringing his trumpet with him wherever he went. When he didn't have it in his mouth, Jasper talked a mile a minute with not a thing in the world to say, so that was another reason to keep him playing. Not one second after he climbed into the car, Jasper was already running his mouth about lawn fertilizer.

"I'm telling you, it'll keep your grass green as you like. No more patchiness and you'll never have to reseed."

Jasper lived on the third floor of an apartment building and had never owned a blade of grass in his life, but he had a new day job as a parks attendant, and three months in, he styled himself a green-thumbed expert.

Roscoe groaned. "Nobody here's trying to plant grass, Jasper." Cora tried to stifle a giggle that came bursting out as a snort.

"Oh, you think that's funny?" he said.

"She thinks so because it is," Roscoe said.

At the same time, Benny said, "It's not Cora's fault Roscoe's got jokes."

The two of them eyed each other through the rearview mirror and grinned approval, like two peas in a pod.

Blowing a puff of air through his lips, Jasper slouched lower in his seat. "I don't care what you do with your patchy grass. I'm just telling you how to keep it green, but you can have brown, raggedy, bald grass all you want."

When Benny pulled up to Lee's place, Cora's stomach bunched into a knot. She caught herself biting her lip, waiting for him to step out of his uncle Drew's town house.

Lee and Jasper had met playing the clubs together. A true musician, Lee played the trumpet, clarinet, French horn, and especially the saxophone.

When the two hit it off, Jasper introduced him to Roscoe and Benny, and he became a kind of plus-one to their Three Musketeers.

Cora stared as he came out of the house, because looking at Lee was like looking at music. The energy, the rhythm, the pull and sway of him. Lee was a beat change, a key shift, the tune you didn't know you were waiting to hear until there it was, gliding right through you, setting everything on fire.

"Morning, Cora," he singsonged, the rise and fall of his voice like a siren call. She couldn't even answer him. He slid into the car with a short, "Fellas," for the other three, and they were off.

Most folks were still at church when they arrived at Aunt Teen's, so the five of them got busy helping Aunt Teen and her daughter, Patsy, drag card tables out back to set up the food. Aunt Teen's patch of back garden flowed into her neighbors' on the left and the right, but since she invited them to her cookouts, they didn't mind that her friends spilled over onto their lawns. Her small patch of balding grass dipped down into a ditch, and on the other side of the ditch, the brown grass led to the next row of houses. Cora saw Jasper looking at it and jumped in to say something before he started in on fertilizer again.

"Momma said to say sorry she can't make it until later. They changed the schedule on her. Someone got fired so . . ." She shrugged. So, the rest of them had to pick up the slack or face the same.

Cora and Patsy took dish towels out to cover up the food they'd put on the tables, waiting on everyone to arrive. Out back, Lee tossed a baseball with Benny, Roscoe, and Jasper.

Cora followed the ripple of his muscles, the swing of his arm. No one threw like Lee.

This season he'd been picked up by a Negro League team to play catcher, so now he had every fellow with a half-decent arm coming out of

the woodwork wanting to throw with him, trying to prove they were pro-ball material too.

The guys tossed the ball around, and when Lee caught it, he pulled back his arm to throw, but then he saw her watching him. Their eyes locked and he grinned. Then he threw.

“Ouch, Lee! What’s the big idea?” Jasper shook the sting out of his hand.

“Sorry, Jas,” Lee said, stealing a glance at Cora. “I got a little carried away.”

Sister Pearce was the first of the churchgoers to show up, having ducked out before the last song.

“I did not need to listen to Sister Candice screeching about peace,” she said. “I had more peace picking myself up and getting out of there.”

The others arrived in a flood, and Lee used the commotion to take Cora’s hand and guide her to the hall closet, looking left and right to make sure no one saw them before pulling her inside. As soon as he shut the door behind them, his mouth found hers, probing and gentle but hungry. If they’d been truly alone, she would have stripped off her clothes to press her skin against his.

“Lee,” she said when he released her mouth and they’d drawn ragged breaths.

“I missed you,” he said, nuzzling her ear, his hands cupping her bottom.

“It’s only been three days.” Her arms circled his neck, her lips curving into a satisfied smile.

“Much too long.” He kissed her again and ran his hand up her front to her breast. “When can I see you again?”

“I don’t know.”

He pulled away and looked at her with hard determination. “Saturday.”

“I don’t know if I can sneak out.”

He shook his head. “I’m gonna come to your house and knock on your door and take you out,” he said. “You want to go to the pictures?”

She stared and blinked. “What about Momma?”

A smile spread across his face, dimples showing. “I don’t want to take your momma to the pictures.”

She smacked his side to make him be serious. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah.” His voice turned tight. “I know what you mean. But, Cora, I’m tired of waiting on folks to think I’m good enough for you. I want you, and you want me. Isn’t that all we need?”

She bit her lip as anxiety closed her throat, thinking about the fit her momma would have if she knew. Out at the party, she heard Jasper’s trumpet belting out a tune.

“You do want me, don’t you?”

She leaned her face close to his, cradling his cheeks. “You know I do.”

“Good. Because I’m crazy about you, Cora May North.” When he kissed her again, she felt it in her toes. “No more hiding,” he said against her mouth.

“What if—”

“No what-ifs.” He nuzzled her neck. “You’re a grown woman, Cora. You can step out with whoever you want.” His lips trailed up to her jawline. “If you let them, they’ll tell you how to live your whole damn life.” He slipped his hands around her and squeezed her bottom, pressing himself against her. “Please don’t let them.”

She sighed at the feel of him, going a little lightheaded with wanting. She nodded, only half knowing she was doing it.

“Yes?” he asked, grinning as he kissed her. “Saturday?”

She nodded again, pulling him against her. “I’ll try.”

Cora wanted to step out with Lee. She just dreaded the gossip and whispers and snide comments about good-girl Cora dating godless Lee with his juvenile record. Church would be unbearable, and Momma the worst of

all. But if they were going to have a future, she needed to find her courage. It was high time everyone knew about them. Like he said, she was a grown woman. And Lee was her man.

By the time they slipped out of the closet, ruffled and rumpled, the party was in full swing. Cora smoothed her hair and fixed herself a plate of food behind some church men debating Joe Louis's chances in his next fight: a rematch with Buddy Baer in Madison Square Garden.

"I don't know why he thinks he can beat the champ," Deacon Gray said. "Joe's already given him a whipping."

"I guess he's ready for another," said Brother Jones.

Cora spooned potato salad onto her plate.

"I heard a radio interview where Baer said he's been practicing for months with nothing on his mind but taking the heavyweight title," Brother Twiggs said. "To hear him tell it, Joe better watch out."

"Just because you say you can do a thing, it don't mean you can," Deacon Gray said through a mouthful of food.

"But you can't always win either," Roscoe said. "He's got to lose one day, and it's his twentieth title fight."

"Joe will do him just like he's done all the others," Deacon Gray said. "Keep knocking them down until they don't get back up."

Sister Hammond clapped her hands and called for music, with a pointed look at Jasper.

"I just got done playing," he said, holding up his plate of food to show he wanted to eat.

"Fine. Finish your plate, but then let's hear something stepping," she said.

He piled on more chitlins, more rice and beans, more collards, more corn bread.

Patsy picked up Jasper's trumpet from where he'd left it by the side of the house and handed it to Lee. "How about it, Lee? You haven't played

yet.”

Lee raised his eyebrows at Jasper, asking if it was all right with him. When Jasper nodded, he took the instrument, testing the finger stops and checking the mouthpiece. Then he locked eyes with Cora, slid his tongue across his full lips, and brought the trumpet to his mouth. The notes eased out like buttered honey. His best instrument was the saxophone, but he still played a better trumpet than Jasper any day. He sounded like Satchmo himself right there on Aunt Teen’s lawn. His whole body swayed with it as his fingers danced over the stops, and Cora flushed hot, feeling his music vibrating right through her.

“Now, I know for a fact,” Aunt Teen said in her teacher voice, like Cora was back in the eighth grade, “that your momma wouldn’t want you making eyes at that boy.” It was like ice water down her spine.

“Let me take that for you, Aunt Teen,” Cora said, plucking the empty plate from her hands and turning to march inside. Standing by the sink, she felt like screaming.

Lee was a good man. Why couldn’t people see that? It wasn’t his fault he’d been raised by the streets, running wilder than wild, getting into trouble until his defense lawyer saw his potential and turned his client into his ward. Even after six years, the good people of Saints of Mercy Baptist couldn’t see past the hellion he’d once been. And no matter how many times he’d been to the house on his best behavior, Momma still called him *Benny’s hooligan friend*.

Cora rinsed her hands and straightened her spine. Saturday. She had until Saturday to bring Momma around. She and Lee were right for each other, and Cora was a grown woman.

Momma and everyone else would just have to learn to accept that.

CHAPTER THREE

December 7, 1941

Lee didn't play memorized songs or practiced chord progressions. He played moods and feelings and life, letting the instrument speak his truth. As he watched Cora, his music shifted, a little slower, a little deeper. Saturday couldn't come fast enough.

When she went inside, he played for a few more minutes, picking up the pace and ending his impromptu set to Patsy's enthusiastic clapping. Jasper nudged his shoulder, taking back his horn. "Man, oh, man. I can't believe you're gonna give all that up for baseball."

"Who says I am?"

Jasper made a face that was all eye roll. "Your contract with the Eagles, for starters."

"What contract?" Lee said. "Those jokers are so loose, they won't commit to me past the next game." He said it light, like it was nothing, but it frustrated him, this game-to-game uncertainty. No contracts, no sick leave, no security at all. "I figure I might as well keep the music going. Play the clubs when I can. What do they care, as long as I perform on the field?"

Jasper swung his arm around Lee's neck in a playful chokehold. "Good to hear we won't completely lose you to those meatheads."

"Jasper, get off that man before you choke him for real," Patsy said, sidling up to the two of them.

“So what if I do? You’re a nurse. You can patch him up again.” He pulled harder on Lee, making him lose his footing and tumble to the ground, taking Jasper down with him, laughing.

“If you break my neck, I won’t play baseball or music,” Lee said, shoving Jasper off him. There was a breath of time, barely a moment as they lay there, when Lee sensed the disquiet in Jasper that came every now and then. It made him feel like his friend was living in a different key from everyone else.

“You okay?” Lee said, sitting up, watching Jasper rub his face.

“Yeah. Fine,” he said, wide grin back in place, and the moment was gone.

Leaning against the back door, Betty Hammond called, “Did Brother Drew teach you to play like that?”

Drew was not Brother Drew. He didn’t care much for their church or their titles. Instead, he chose the title “Uncle” for himself when he chose Lee, building a family where there was none.

“Uncle Drew gave me his old trumpet when I moved in with him,” he said. “He thought it might keep me busy.” And off the streets, away from my old crowd, he didn’t add.

“How come you play the saxophone so well?” Patsy asked.

Lee glanced at Jasper, who knew the whole story. “He bought me one as a present,” he said, not adding that the gift was to celebrate the end of Lee’s probation sentence.

“He’s a good man, that Drew Brooks,” Mrs. Hammond said, and Lee heard the part she didn’t say, that he was good to have taken in a delinquent, given him a chance, and set him on a path other than prison.

“That he is.”

From the other side of the ditch, a neighbor waved his arms and shouted over the talking and laughing.

“What’s he saying?” Jasper said.

“Don’t mind him,” said Patsy, turning her back to the man. “Five cents says he’s come out to complain. That old man can’t stand anybody having a good time.”

“They bombed us,” he seemed to be saying. “We’re getting blown up.”

Lee cocked his head and frowned. “Say, what?”

“Did he say ‘bomb’?” Jasper said.

“Turn on the radio,” the old neighbor shouted, and Delores Pearce rushed inside, hollering, “Where’s your radio, Teen?”

Lee hurried in behind her and found Cora at the sink, looking confused by the sudden excitement. He stood beside her and slipped his hand around hers.

Cora shifted to block their clasped hands from view. “What’s going on?” she said.

“I don’t know. Someone said there’s a bomb.”

The cookout crowd jostled for space in the too-crowded living room as the radio wheezed and warmed to life. Then the somber voice of the broadcaster filled the room. The more he talked, the quieter they fell until they were still as the grave.

“Preliminary reports confirm significant damage and casualties after severe bombing,” the voice explained. “President Roosevelt has called an emergency session of Congress. All naval and military activities on the principal island of Oahu have been affected. We repeat, the Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor.”

CHAPTER FOUR

December 8, 1941

On Monday morning, Momma shook Cora awake. She'd overslept. That's what came from staying up half the night worrying about war. Or, at least, worrying about Benny and Lee and Roscoe crowing about enlisting, which was what they did as soon as Aunt Teen switched off the radio. Thank God Jasper was a voice of reason, but still, Cora was glad to come home to keep from having to hear about it.

Up until then, it had all seemed so far away. She'd convinced herself that folks would keep arguing about America joining the fight until the whole thing was over and done with. The Japanese put an end to years of dithering.

In the kitchen, the morning papers lay on the table announcing what she already knew:

Pearl Harbor Bombed, Thousands Dead and Wounded; President Roosevelt to Address Congress.

She ate a bowl of cereal and hurried out to the bus stop, where folks segregated themselves into two groups, but everyone talked about one thing.

“If I were still young, I’d be enlisting today,” said a white man, old but not that old.

Cora looked impatiently down the road for the bus.

“Our boys’ll get them,” a sour-faced, pasty woman said. “They’ll sink their whole island.”

Over in Cora’s cluster, two women spoke about a nephew who had already joined the navy but wasn’t at Pearl Harbor. “They got him out in California somewhere.”

“Thank the Lord,” said the other woman.

When the bus trundled up, Cora stood back, pulling her coat tighter against the morning chill. Once the white passengers were inside, Cora’s group climbed on, passing four full rows of seats followed by three empty rows behind them. At the back of the bus, in the colored section, every last seat was taken. The bus started up, jostling Cora, and she held on to the backs of the seats, steadyng herself. She stood with her feet planted wide for balance as they rumbled down the road, her eyes resting, the whole way, on the rows of empty seats.

Cora made it to the insurance company offices and slotted her time card into the punch clock on the wall with five minutes to spare. Even with America in an uproar, Mr. Griffin wasn’t likely to tolerate lateness from her or Loretta. He’d made it clear he’d stuck his neck out to hire them and, in return, he expected them to keep their toes in line.

She strode through the spacious secretarial pool, with its large windows and whites-only coffee station smelling of fresh coffee, past the men’s cubicles and Mr. Griffin’s office to a windowless closet. Inside, a plywood table stood pushed against the wall with two folding chairs tucked beneath it, side by side. Loretta was already there, perched on one chair, and Cora squeezed in beside her.

“Did you hear?” Loretta said, pulling two oranges out of her bag and handing one to Cora. Orange season had started and, like every year, Loretta’s tree was bursting full. “They say thousands are dead. Thousands. Even civilians.”

Cora took the orange and nodded her thanks, putting it to the side for later. "I know," she said. Of course, she'd heard. Everybody had.

"They say those Japs were on a suicide mission. Just crashed those planes into us, even though they'd never survive it. Can you imagine?"

Cora threaded a page into her typewriter and pulled out the notes Mr. Griffin had dictated to her at closing time on Friday that he wanted typed up first thing Monday morning.

"And did you hear about Rick Mortimer?" Loretta went on, peeling her orange and separating the wedges. Rick Mortimer was a towheaded clod who collected baseball cards and brought stinky egg sandwiches for lunch.

Cora started typing, grateful for the clunk of the keys that drowned out Loretta's words. She'd heard enough war talk at Aunt Teen's, but her friend leaned close so Cora couldn't miss her news. "He enlisted."

She'd never cared a fig about Rick Mortimer, but now he was the link that brought her world crashing into the one she read about in the papers.

Half the secretarial pool still hadn't come in by midmorning, and neither had the stalky clerk who kept the books.

At lunchtime, Mr. Griffin turned on the radio, waiting for the president's broadcast. When FDR's voice filled the room, the office gathered around the radio while Loretta and Cora hung back. Mr. Griffin waved them closer.

Yesterday, President Roosevelt said through the crackling radio static, December 7, 1941, a date which will live in infamy, the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.

Linda Smith burst into tears, and Sally Baker put an arm around her shoulders, looking like she might start crying any minute herself. The president talked on, listing places the Japanese had bombed all through the night and into the morning. Places Cora had never even heard of, like Wake Island and Guam.

Gordon Cleavers lowered himself to the floor, leaned back against the wall, and put his head between his knees.

No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the president was saying, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.

Susan Murphy hugged Gretchen Jones and Ted Williams, and then she hugged Cora standing beside them, like it was nothing at all. Cora stood statue-still with her arms at her sides, unable to hug her back, unable to pull away, until Susan released her and threw her arms around Jeff Meadows and then Barbara Watkins.

Mr. Griffin closed the office after the announcement and Cora went straight home, eager to be somewhere safe and familiar. She was surprised to find Benny already there with Roscoe, Jasper, and Lee, huddled together in the living room, talking in low, urgent tones. They fell quiet when she walked in, throwing glances at each other.

“What are you all plotting?” she said.

Lee rose from the couch in a fluid motion, like smoke taking shape. “Hey there, Cora.” He stepped over, standing close to her.

“Hi,” she said, with a nervous glance at her brother.

Benny said nothing and barely looked at her, but Jasper stared at them with a strained expression until Lee led her out the door. They walked up the path to the park, where he tucked her behind the first thick-trunked tree and leaned in to rest his forehead against hers. “I can’t believe this is happening,” he said. “Did you hear the president on the radio today?”

“Yeah.” She felt heavy, like her bones were weighted down by the news. “I’m so sick of hearing about that damn war. Let’s talk about something else. How was baseball practice?”

“Not good.” He leaned back with a sigh and took her hands. “Everyone was distracted and on edge. Just like everywhere else, I guess.”

“It’ll be better tomorrow.”

He pulled her hands up to his mouth, kissed her fingertips, and grinned. “I smell orange,” he said. “Has Loretta been feeding you from her tree?”

Cora nodded. “Fresh-picked oranges.”

“Your favorite,” he said. “One day, when we get our own place, I’m going to plant you an orange tree.”

“That sounds divine,” she said, but her stomach fluttered with anxiety at the idea of having to first come clean to everyone. She dreaded what people would say after their date on Saturday and the church ladies’ snickers. And Momma would throw a fit and a half, with Aunt Teen egging her on.

She hadn’t noticed she’d tensed at the thought until Lee ran his hands over her arms, soothing her strain. The hurt look that pulled at his features confirmed he’d known what she was thinking. She wanted to kick herself for making him feel less than. It wasn’t that she was ashamed of him: she just didn’t feel strong enough to withstand the torrent of disapproval that would rain down on her. She knew she was being a coward, but she didn’t know how to be stronger.

“I’ve been thinking,” Lee said. He searched her face and rubbed her arms, and the longer he took to speak, the more anxious she grew. When he finally took a deep breath and said, “I’m going to enlist,” it seemed to Cora like the whole world collapsed. His words hung in the air like some foreign thing, as strange and incomprehensible as the faraway war.

“No,” she said, her breath deepening and quickening as she struggled to control a rising panic.

“If I wait until they tell me to go fight, it won’t be the same thing. I need to do this.” He ran his hands up and down her arms. “It matters that it’s my choice.”

Fear hooked into Cora’s gut and pricked its way outward to her chest and down to her fingertips. “You could get yourself killed.”

“I’m not going to be killed, Cora.” His voice sank to a flat, dismissive tone. “I’ll be fine.”

Too much air made her lightheaded. “That’s how they fight wars, Lee. The people on one side try to kill the people on the other side. Is that what you want to go do?”

He stood back, rigid, already changing from lover to soldier. “I want to stand up and be counted. Show what I’m made of. Answer back for Pearl Harbor and for Hitler. For injustice.”

“But why you, Lee?” She came toward him, closing the gap he’d opened.

“Maybe I have something to prove,” Lee said, his back stiffening with stubbornness.

Her heart thundered in her chest at the thought of him rushing off to bombs and bullets. “What does your uncle Drew say about this?”

“He understands.” He reached for her, but his hands felt too heavy on her shoulders.

“Well, I don’t,” she said, balling his shirt in her fists. Her voice tipped into a whine, but she couldn’t help it.

“I need to do this.” She saw the clench of his jaw, the storm in his eyes. “This is my chance.”

“Please, Lee. Stay here with me.”

“Cora,” he said, soft as a caress, but she heard his *no* in the deep, throaty vowels wrapped in a sigh.

He leaned in to kiss her, but she turned her head and, with fear and heartbreak crystallizing to anger, she shoved him away from her and marched through the park, back to the house, Lee trailing close behind.

In the time they’d been gone, Momma had come home and made dinner. Black-eyed peas and corn fritters. Cora set the table, ignoring Lee’s offer to help.

Lee, Jasper, and Roscoe often came by for dinner, and usually Cora loved the friendly, lively chatter, but today conversation clashed and spluttered, circling around the one thing they couldn’t stop thinking about.

“This war is an opportunity we shouldn’t waste,” Benny said.

“An opportunity for what?” Jasper huffed. “To get yourself killed?”

“Every able-bodied man has a responsibility,” Roscoe said, helping himself to more black-eyed peas.

“And what exactly is a colored man’s responsibility to the United States of America?” Cora said, her anger and frustration so high it thumped in her ears. “All of a sudden, you want to risk everything for a country that’s never cared if you live or die?”

“It’s as much our country as anybody’s,” Roscoe said. “And we have the same responsibility as any citizen. I live here, don’t I?”

“That doesn’t mean this is your fight,” Cora said, with a side-eye to Lee. “I’d say you all have enough battles right here.”

“Amen to that,” Momma said, nodding. “You should be looking out for you and yours, not running off to foreign fights without a thought for folks counting on you at home.”

Benny’s leg bounced under the table as he clutched his fork like he was trying to choke the life out of it. “Momma, don’t you remember how mad you were when Jesse Owens won all those gold medals in Berlin and Hitler wouldn’t shake his hand? You said somebody needed to straighten him out.”

“I remember he won those gold medals for America, and Roosevelt didn’t shake his hand either.”

“They attacked the navy,” Cora said. “But the navy won’t even let you fight for them. They only take colored cooks and stewards.”

“That’s right,” Momma said. “This ain’t your fight cause they won’t even let you fight. America don’t want you for a hero.”

“Well, I’m not enlisting,” Jasper said, glaring at the guys. “Because I don’t owe this country a damn thing.” Roscoe exchanged a look with Benny and ducked his head, saying nothing.

Jasper's father gave his blood, sweat, and tears to America in the Great War and was repaid with kicks and cuffs and forced labor in a chain gang for the crime of *playing dice*, and after his release, a run-in with a sheriff left Jasper fatherless at six years old. "It's one America for them and another for us, so let them fight for it."

"Amen to that, too," Momma said.

"Hell, they don't want me in their army anyway," he said, with a bitterness so deep it took Cora by surprise, considering he didn't want to go in the first place.

Lee laid down his fork and spoke in a steady, even tone. "Well, I don't owe anything either." Lee's daddy was clubbed to death for registering Negro voters. His momma was killed for trying to get justice. No one ever got arrested for any of it. "But I'm not fighting for them. I'm fighting for us." He shot a look at Cora, and she glanced away. "I'm fighting for respect," he went on, "and because they'll never admit this is our country if we don't treat it like it's our country."

"What kind of fool talk is that?" Momma said. "Our people have fought in every single war America ever had. Revolutionary, Indian, Civil, Mexican, Great War." She pointed at Jasper. "All of them. They're never gonna think this is our country. You don't need to get yourself killed to prove it."

The black-eyed peas sat like stones in Cora's stomach, and she was glad when dinner was over. She stayed behind to wash the dishes when the whole group went next door to listen to the evening broadcast on their neighbor's radio. Cora was sick to death of hearing the latest news.

She'd filled the sink with soapy water when Lee slipped back inside and came up behind her, planting gentle kisses on her neck. He slid his hands around her waist.

"Cora," he said, breathy and quiet. A longing. A plea.

She closed her eyes. There was so much she would give to this man, if only he would stay with her. She slid her wet hands over his and guided him up her front to her breasts. His palms cupped her as she turned her face to him. He looked raw and beautiful.

She pressed against him and reached her hand to the nape of his neck, pulling him closer, kissing him. “Don’t go,” she said.

She felt his arousal, heard his breathing change, opened her mouth to his probing tongue, allowed his hands to wander, dipping under her blouse. Then he pulled away from her. He released her breasts and slid his hands down her front. His pressing weight against her lifted. His searching mouth, gone. He kissed her shoulder and slid his hands from her hips, like he was retracing his steps. For a long moment, he stared at her, as if to memorize her, and then he tucked his head and walked away.

CHAPTER FIVE

Declarations

Three days later, Benny hunched over his cereal bowl with the morning paper spread out on the kitchen table. Excitement and frustration had coiled a tight, tense knot in his stomach. When Cora stepped into the kitchen with a “Good morning,” he stabbed his finger at the headline.

“You seen this?” The words *Germany and Italy Declare War* blazed boldly across the paper. “I told you we’d be in it on both sides before long. Next is gonna be the draft,” he said. “You watch. Anybody who wants to volunteer better get on it, like Lee, before they up and call your number.”

Her mouth puckered, and she pressed her fingers to her temple.

“And look at this.” He tapped another headline farther down the page that read *US Torpedoes Japanese Sub.* “We got another one,” he said with satisfaction.

“Benny, enough,” Cora snapped, startling him. She held up her hand for silence, but Benny didn’t know what to say anyway.

When Momma came in, she took one look at the headline and told him to get the paper off the table. “We’re trying to eat in here, not have our stomachs turned.”

He’d hoped the news would shift Momma and Cora’s attitude some, but each day they doubled down, no matter what the papers said. Benny ate quickly, barely tasting his Corn Flakes, and drove to work past recruitment

posters all along the way telling guys, “Uncle Sam Wants You.” In the colored neighborhoods, they had extra posters telling men they could be like Dorie Miller, the Negro hero of Pearl Harbor who carried his ship’s captain to safety, and then shot down two Japanese planes, even though he was only an untrained mess attendant. Benny didn’t need to be a hero, he just didn’t want to be a coward, hiding behind his momma’s skirts while the whole world fought around him. This was his chance to prove his manhood, and he was not going to sit on the sidelines.

At work, he replaced a Chevrolet’s transmission and refitted the brakes on a Ford. Keeler Motors had the contract to fix the Mangrove Bay area Hertz Drive-Ur-Self fleet, which kept him in repairs. Where Benny usually cracked jokes and hummed tunes while he worked, today, stretched under the Ford, he brooded, until finally old Mr. Keeler pulled up a chair next to his outstretched legs.

“Benny, you’ve been quieter today than a broke-down car, and moodier than my wife sitting in a broke-down car. Why don’t you tell me what’s going on with you?”

“It’s nothing, Mr. Keeler,” he said, staring at the underbelly of the Ford. “I just got stuff on my mind.”

“It’s definitely not nothing if it’s got you mouse-quiet in here all day long. Come on and talk to me.”

Mr. Keeler was one of the good ones, but as good as he was, Benny didn’t expect a white man to understand what he was wrestling with, so he talked about it in simple terms, watering down the dilemma that was eating him up. He stayed scooched up under the car, where it was easier to talk about things, and told Mr. Keeler he wanted to enlist, but that Momma and Cora needed him at home and wanted him to stay put.

“Nothing wrong with fighting for your country,” Mr. Keeler said. “And it’s only natural they’d worry about you going and want you to stay.”

“Yes, sir, but it’s more than that.”

“Of course, they rely on you as the only man in the house, but what do you think it’s like for all the other families? It’s a sacrifice for any young man to go.”

Benny bit his lip and stayed quiet. How could he speak his whole truth to a man who’d once called the Rosewood massacre “a speck of trouble?”

“You know that you get a paycheck in the army, right? With not much chance to spend it. Easy enough to send that home to them. They’ll be okay. The army will see to it.”

He closed his eyes and breathed in the fumes of spent oil and gas. The poignant familiarity soothed him. “It’s just not that easy.”

“I suppose not, but think on this.” Mr. Keeler’s chair squeaked as he leaned forward. “If you don’t go, how many years will it take for you to stop wishing you had?”

Benny slid out from under the car and looked up at Mr. Keeler’s kind, round face.

“I’ll probably have a harder time getting by without you than anyone, but you have to live your own life. Even I can see that.” He stood, dragging the chair back to the desk.

A blaze of frustration simmered and swirled around Benny. Even if Mr. Keeler couldn’t understand his situation, his boss was right about needing to live his own life. He just wished he knew if the ache to go that was tearing him apart was more painful than the guilt that would eat him up once he’d gone.

It took a week for Benny to work up the courage to tell Momma and Cora what he’d decided. Lee getting his induction papers through was the push he needed. He came home that evening to soft voices and a dinner smell coming out of the kitchen, heavy with onions and tomatoes.

“What’s wrong?” Momma said when she saw his face. “Something happen?” As if something hadn’t been happening every day since Pearl Harbor.

“Can you sit down a minute?” he said. “I’ve got to talk to you. You too, Cora,” he told his sister at the stove. She turned the burner off and came to the table, her head tilted in concern.

He only got as far as “I’ve decided to enlist” before the onslaught came. He expected resistance, but this was a doggone assault.

“No,” Momma said, cutting and final. “There are plenty of men in this country. Let them fight.”

Cora paled. “Benny.” She said his name, laced with heartbreak and hurt. “You can’t.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Her eyes teared up, and she blinked hard. “How could you do this? First Lee and now you?”

Benny sank low in his chair, his confidence in his decision fizzing out like air from a flat tire. “I can still help take care of things when I’m away,” he said. Momma sucked her teeth and turned her head. “I can send my army pay home and—”

“You’re not sending anything anywhere cause you’re not going,” she said, her mouth barely moving, tension clenching her jaw.

He mashed his lips into a tight line, the strain pulling at the muscles in his neck.

“Does this war mean more to you than us?” Cora said, with a bite to her hurt that stung.

On the wall, the tick of the clock marked the seconds passing.

“You know that’s not true,” he said, his voice straining at patience. He counted to ten, then tried again. “How can you two act like everything’s the same?”

“Because everything’s the same for us,” Momma snapped.

Benny ran his hand through his hair. Stood. Sat. He knew it was their fear talking, but it was his life—his choice—and everything was not the same.

“Lee passed his physical,” he said. “He got his army reporting papers.” He could feel the tension spike. “I’m driving him to the reception center tomorrow.”

Cora stared at him with wide eyes. “This can’t be happening.”

“That hooligan boy’s nothing but a runaround fool,” Momma said, “jumping from one half-baked idea to another.” She stood and went to the counter, sliding an empty frying pan into the sink where it clamored noisily as it fell. “And now, just because he’s running off to get himself killed—”

“Momma—”

“There’s no call for people with sense to follow after him.”

“I’m not following after him,” he exploded, stamping his foot. “I have to go. Why can’t you understand that?”

“You don’t have to go,” she said, her words like ice. She ran the water in the sink and washed the pan, banging it against the sides as she turned it over. When she finished, she washed it all over again, letting the water run and run.

Benny dug his fingers into his thighs and turned to Cora, whose face had grown blotchy and flushed.

“Lee wanted me to ask if you’d come say goodbye.”

Her nostrils flared. “I already said goodbye,” she said, folding and refolding her hands in her lap. “How many goodbyes can a person say?”

Benny watched her try to hide her fluster. “Is something going on with you two?”

She looked away and, with a strained voice, said, “I don’t think he should go.”

A warm tingle ran down his spine. He worried that he’d missed something important about two people so close to him. “Cora, I promised him I’d ask you to come.”

Her gaze flitted around the room like she was following a midge fly. Her breath got quicker, louder, and he wondered about the hidden parts of

Cora's life that he had no idea of.

"She's not going," Momma said with her back to them, the water still running.

He stiffened at the sound of her voice, and Cora got up and went to her at the sink, reaching past her to turn the water off, taking the pan from the sink and drying it with a rag.

Benny had too much to say, and the words caught in his throat, as frustration burned through him.

This was his decision. His risk. His life. The legs of his chair scraped and caught on the uneven floor as he pushed back from the table to stand. He left the house and drove, going anywhere as long as he kept moving. He choked with guilt at the thought of leaving them, and fumed that they would ask him to stay. After half an hour of driving up and down the streets, he was close to Jasper's place. He needed to talk to a friend, he realized, but Jasper would bombard him with all the reasons he should stay put and a list of ways America had failed him, so Benny turned his car around and headed to Roscoe's boarding house.

In Roscoe's bedroom, the two of them huddled together, talking in low tones, blocking out the noises from the other boarders. "I'm getting some things in order," Roscoe said, "and then I'm gone."

Benny felt unreasonably abandoned. "You've already decided?"

He nodded, then grinned and smacked Benny's chest, snorting out a laugh. "I can't let Lee get all the glory, can I?"

Benny forced a smile. He'd always felt sorry for Roscoe for not having a family. When they were sixteen and Roscoe's momma ran off, his daddy had already been gone for years. Roscoe didn't want pity, but he needed help, so Benny had him come stay with them, sleeping on the sofa for two years until he turned eighteen and got himself into the boarding house. Benny used to watch him bunk down in the living room and think how awful it would be to not have a family, but now, it made him free.

“I’ve got Momma and Cora to worry about,” Benny said.

“You can send them your checks.”

“But what if I don’t make it back?”

“I’m not even thinking about that,” Roscoe said. “And you shouldn’t either.”

“If I’m gone, the money’s gone, Roscoe. They couldn’t stay in our home with just two paychecks. And I know Momma worries about it, even if she won’t talk about it.” Benny picked at the calluses on his palm, embarrassed to reveal just how much he’d be abandoning his family if he left. “I overheard her telling Aunt Teen that she and Cora would move to one of those run-down shacks on Gator Plane if they lost my pay. I can’t let that happen.”

For a moment, Roscoe sat thoughtfully, then dug into some leaflets beside his bed. Dog-eared and well thumbed, they were army recruiting brochures. He flicked through them until he found what he was looking for.

“Here,” he said. “Right there. The army pays out to dependents if you die for your country.”

Benny took the leaflet and read the section Roscoe pointed to. “That’s for wives and kids, not sisters and mommas.”

Roscoe nodded, a slow smile spreading across his face. “We need to get Cora married.”

Benny spat out a dismissive huff. “I can’t marry my sister, Roscoe.”

His friend’s eyes sparkled, looking like a man with a straight flush in his hand and an ace in his pocket. “No, you can’t,” he said. “But I can.”

Benny stared at him, caution dampening the excitement. “You’re not trying to pay me back like this, are you?” he asked. “Because—”

“I know. Friends don’t keep score,” Roscoe said in a droning voice, quoting Benny’s frequently repeated words. “And I owe you nothing. I got it. But when my momma left, you were there for me like no one else. Let me be here for you.”

Benny shook his head. “I appreciate you, and it means a lot that you’d do this for me, but it’s too big. I can’t ask you to marry my sister.”

Roscoe sat back and pinned Benny with a hard look. “It’s too big? Or I’m not good enough?”

“Don’t be stupid. We’re talking about getting married. Cora’s not going to just do what I say. This isn’t kids’ stuff.”

“Benny, you know I’ve been sweet on Cora for years, and when I was living with you all, you made it crystal clear she was off-limits—”

“Because you were living with us,” Benny protested.

“And I’ve respected you. I haven’t pushed. But she and I could have a real chance. And this could help you out in the process. So, do you not really want to go? Or am I not really good enough?”

Benny regarded his friend. He knew he’d been sweet on Cora. Would it have turned into something if Benny hadn’t stopped it? Roscoe was a good guy, and he knew Cora cared about him. And if there was anybody she’d agree to do this with, surely it would be Roscoe. “You sure about this?”

Roscoe nodded and held out a hand that Benny slapped and twisted in their complicated handshake.

“Thank you, Brother,” Benny said, grinning now as the excitement took hold. They were going to enlist. They were going to war.

CHAPTER SIX

The Proposal

Cora spent the night balled up on her bed, with the curtain drawn tightly closed to Benny's side of the room, feeling abandoned, first by Lee, now by Benny. And even though they hadn't gone anywhere yet, she already feared for their safety. In the morning, she woke with grainy, tender eyes, a dull headache, and regret. She shouldn't have told Benny she wouldn't say goodbye to Lee, because now she couldn't stand the thought of letting him go without seeing him one last time. She pulled the curtain back to ask Benny what time he wanted to leave, and her stomach dropped. Benny's bed was empty. She ran to the kitchen, hoping to find him eating breakfast, but there was no sign of him. A flurry of panic erupted inside her, clashing with the too-still house. She'd missed her chance.

That whole morning, she and Momma barely spoke, but Cora saw the red in Momma's eyes and the puff of her lids. She knew her mother's tears were all for Benny's declaration, not Lee's going, and carrying the extra grief in silence made her feel desperately alone. Cora didn't know what to do with the ocean of feelings that swirled around her, choking out the oxygen, and it was a relief to step outside, letting the crisp December air cool her lungs on her way to work.

At Sunshine State Insurance, she noticed a buzzing tension the minute she walked inside.

“What’s going on?” she asked Loretta when she took her spot at the plywood table.

“Three of the men are gone.”

“Gone?”

“Enlisted,” Loretta whispered.

The word felt dangerous to Cora, full of hidden threats and horrible consequences, and in its syllables she heard fighting and killing and loss, and all of this Lee had chosen over her.

With his workforce suddenly cut to size, Mr. Griffin looked about as haggard as Cora felt. His easy manner turned clipped and impatient as he ran himself ragged trying to cover the extra work. Around midmorning, he slammed down his phone so hard it made Cora jump.

“You and me need to start looking for a new job,” Loretta whispered.

“What do you mean?” Cora asked.

Loretta fished an orange out of her bag and sniffed it before digging her nail into the rind and tugging it back to peel.

“I typed up a dozen letters explaining that Sunshine State’s life insurance won’t pay out if folks die from an act of war.” She handed Cora an orange slice. “That’s why so many policies are getting canceled. And when business goes bad,” she popped another wedge into her mouth, “you know as well as I do that we’ll be the first to go.”

Cora wasn’t sure what upset her more, that she was about to lose her job because of this damned war, or that a rich insurance company wouldn’t pay life insurance if a man died fighting in it.

“That’s not very patriotic,” she said.

Loretta shrugged. “In case you haven’t noticed, companies are in the business of making money.” She leaned closer and lowered her voice. “I don’t know about you, but I’m quitting before I get fired.”

“To do what, though?” Cora whispered. “And we might not even get fired if everyone else keeps leaving. He’ll have to keep us.”

Loretta made a face and dumped her peel in the trash. “I need my paycheck, Cora. I can’t wait and hope I still have a job.”

“But—”

“I’m gonna find me some war-safe work. Something in an ammunition factory or somewhere sewing uniforms.”

It was the smart thing to do, but Cora felt a kind of loyalty to Mr. Griffin for having taken a chance on her. With Lee and Benny deserting her, it didn’t sit right to abandon Mr. Griffin.

By the end of the day, she was bone-tired, and when she got home, she flung herself onto her bed and pulled her pillow over her head to block out the world, but she couldn’t block out her thoughts, which returned again and again to Lee breaking her heart and marching off to a war he had no business fighting.

She heard Benny come in, and when he headed toward their room, she grabbed a *Life* magazine from the pile by her bed and pretended to read an article about women wearing trousers. She didn’t want him to see her falling apart, and she definitely didn’t want to hear about Lee leaving that morning.

She was hiding her face in the pages when he opened the door. “You’ve got company.”

Cora peeked over her magazine to see if he was serious, then got to her feet when she saw he was. For a split second, she dared to hope it was Lee as she followed her brother into the living room. He hadn’t gone through with it. He couldn’t leave her.

No one was there but Roscoe, and Roscoe didn’t count as company. She made a show of looking around the empty room, then raised her eyebrows at Benny. “What’s going on?”

Roscoe hopped up from where he’d been perched on the edge of the couch, and her brother sat down, clasping his hands so tight that his fingertips went from Benny-white to bright white.

“You look very pretty today,” Roscoe said.

She clicked her eyes over to Roscoe, standing in front of her, shifting from foot to foot. He held out a bunch of red flowers. Firespikes that looked like they’d been filched from the park. The two of them were up to something.

“These are for you,” he said. “Beautiful flowers for a beautiful girl.” A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth despite her mood.

Leave it to Benny to get Roscoe to come and smooth things out between them after all their days of bickering. She pecked their friend’s cheek in thanks and brought the flowers into the kitchen, searching for something to put them in. They followed her.

“So, uh, me and Benny were talking.”

“Yeah?” she said, filling a jug with water.

“I thought it would be a good idea, and Benny thinks so too, we both think so, but it was my idea.”

“What? The flowers?” She snipped the bottom tips off the stems. “It was a nice idea. Thank you.” He looked nervous, worried. “You okay, Roscoe?”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s just, I didn’t mean the flowers. I meant something else.”

Cora arranged the blooms in the jug and turned to face him. “What did you mean, then?”

“Just say it,” Benny said, hovering by the doorway.

“I’m getting to it.”

“Come on, Roscoe.”

“Would you hush? Just give me a minute.”

Cora let out a nervous titter. “Just say what?”

Benny nudged Roscoe in the ribs and bugged his eyes out at him.

“Stop rushing me.” He shifted on his feet. “Cora, why don’t you sit down comfortably on the sofa?” He tugged her hand, leading her to the

living room.

She bit back a smart-alecky response about him inviting her to sit on her own couch. The hand clutching hers was sweaty and cold, which made her pulse pick up its pace to an anxious two-step.

“Benny?” she called behind her, her voice wary, because whatever this was, it was Benny’s doing.

Roscoe sat her down and stood in front of her, digging his hands into his pockets.

Benny followed them, sat beside her, and nodded encouragement at Roscoe.

“So, now, Cora. Where were we?”

She blinked, helpless. “The flowers?”

“No, not the damn flowers,” Benny said, exasperated. Then to Roscoe, “Are you gonna say it or not?”

“You’re both acting so—”

“Let me do this in my own way.”

“We need you to marry Roscoe.”

She stared at her brother, then at Roscoe, her mouth falling open.

“For Pete’s sake, Benny! I was gonna say it better than that.”

“We’d have been here all night and into tomorrow waiting on you to say it.”

“Wait,” Cora said. “Just hang on. Did I hear that right?”

“Cora, look,” Roscoe said. “I know this is not how you propose to a girl”—he glared at Benny—“and I know we’re not even a couple, but it’s . . . it makes sense.”

She barked out a short laugh. “How, Roscoe? How in the world does this make sense?”

“This way I know you’ll be all right when I go,” Benny said. “If anything happens, there’d be widow’s money. See?”

“You have both lost your minds.” She moved to stand, but Roscoe held out his hand, stalling her.

“It’s a good plan.” He knelt on one knee in front of her. “It makes sense if you think about it.”

She glared at Benny sitting beside her. “Did you put him up to this?”

Benny shook his head. “It was his idea.”

She wanted to shake the both of them. “First of all,” she counted off on her fingers, “if you don’t go you don’t have to worry about making it back, and second of all,” she turned to Roscoe, “if you do come back, we’ll be married, for crying out loud.”

She caught the hurt look that passed over his face before he smoothed it away, replacing it with a crooked, cocky smile. In a tone as light as a breeze, he said, “Well, then, I guess we’d get to play house,” and wagged his eyebrows at her.

Benny punched his leg.

“Shut up, fool,” he said. Then to Cora, “Forget about that for now. We’ll deal with it later. The point is, we have a solution.”

“No, we do not.”

“Please, Cora. I need you to agree to this so that I can go.”

“Why would I, when I want you to stay?”

“Because you know that if I don’t, I’ll never be right with myself.” He took her hands in his and squeezed. “I need you to do this for me. Please, let me go.”

“Benny,” she said but fell silent. Her tongue weighed in her mouth like a dead thing. How she wanted to tell him to stay, but the thought of him leaving her anyway, like Lee did after she’d begged him to stay, was too much. She wished it were Lee who’d cooked up this harebrained scheme and stood in front of her, offering what security he could before going.

But it was sweet, kind Roscoe.

She caught sight of a red petal by the door that had fallen from his clutch of firespikes. “Did you really come up with this idea by yourself?”

Roscoe nodded, reaching out and taking her hand. “Call me crazy, but it doesn’t seem like much of a hardship getting hitched to a beautiful girl.”

She shook her head at the ridiculousness of him, but also the goodness, the generosity. She squeezed his hand. “I’ll think about it,” she said, because she couldn’t say yes, but she didn’t have the heart to say no.

All weekend, her stomach balled into tighter knots, worrying about how to tell Roscoe and Benny she wouldn’t do it. Benny had built his hopes on her agreeing to the plan, and she felt selfish for wanting to refuse. He would be crushed when she turned Roscoe down. And she couldn’t stop thinking about that hurt look Roscoe had quickly hidden. Or about how Momma worried about money and about the future. If there’d been no Lee, it might have been a good plan. She’d always been fond of Roscoe. He was the sort of decent man a person could learn to love. But she already loved Lee, and as flattered as she was by Roscoe’s sweet offer, she couldn’t imagine anyone filling the gaping hole Lee had gouged out of her chest when he left.

“It’s not just the money, you know,” Benny said on Sunday night after they’d gone to bed, the curtain drawn closed between them. “He’s been sweet on you for a long time. And he’d take good care of you.”

She felt a pang of guilt that she’d only ever thought of him as her brother’s friend. “You don’t need me to marry Roscoe to enlist,” she said. “If you want to go this badly, you could just go. Lee did.”

“Yeah, but the difference is I care for you and Momma. I can’t just leave like he can.”

Her throat closed up in the dark room. He didn’t know about her and Lee, so he couldn’t know that he’d put words to the worry she’d carried since Lee left. *The difference is I care for you.* If Lee loved her like he said he did, how could he just leave? And since he’d left, did that mean he never really loved her? Momma had warned her enough times that a man will say

anything to get a girl to lie with him. But that hadn't been Lee. He'd meant the things he said to her.

All those promises.

Doubt crept in and lingered like a foul odor, keeping her awake and wondering until a quiet fear slid through her, that maybe she'd been wrong about Lee, that maybe Momma and the church ladies were right.

At work on Monday, Cora's mind churned over the same questions she hadn't found answers to all night. She felt Loretta nudge her and blinked to attention to see Mr. Griffin looking at her with an impatient eyebrow climbing up his forehead.

"She's working on that letter right now, sir," Loretta said, coming to her rescue. "The typewriter got jammed, is all. But it's fixed now, right, Cora?"

Cora looked at the letter in her typewriter, where she'd got as far as "Dear Mr. Palmer" before her mind had wandered. "Yes," she said, with a grateful glance to Loretta. "Jammed typewriter."

"You have a nice lunch, Mr. Griffin," Loretta said, "and she'll have it for you by the time you get back."

"On my desk," he said, heading for the door.

When it closed behind him, Loretta rounded on her.

"What on earth has got you thinking so hard you're gonna get yourself fired?"

Cora slumped in her seat and put her head into her hands. In a breathless rush, she told her how Lee's leaving had devastated her and how badly she felt to turn down Roscoe's sweet proposal, delivered with Benny's help.

"You and Lee?" Loretta said, her eyes going wide. "You should have known better than to put your trust in someone like that. You know his past,

don't you? He's been in trouble with the law since he was twelve years old."

"That was before. He's different now."

"Oh, honey, please. You have a good man like Roscoe trying to take care of you, and you want to turn him down to wait on a hooligan who ran off without a backward glance? You need to say yes to Roscoe before he changes his mind."

"But I don't love him. I love Lee."

Loretta looked at Cora like she was simpleminded. "Every woman has a story about some good-looking bad boy they went gaga over, but you don't wait for them, you don't marry them." She crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. "Especially when he didn't even propose."

"Loretta—"

"And you don't turn down a good man like Roscoe for them."

Cora felt sick to her stomach. "But—"

"Did Lee ask you to wait for him?"

She thought of the last time she'd seen him. She'd placed his hands on her body, and he'd pulled them off. Her eyes filled with tears, remembering how he'd walked away from her.

"No."

Loretta pinned her with a look that was almost pitying. "Then don't wait for him."

After work, Cora walked to Roscoe's, her heart thudding in her chest. Reason and logic told her she was doing the right thing, even if her whole body told her she wasn't. She reminded herself of what Loretta had said, what Benny had said, and what Lee hadn't said. She'd followed her feelings long enough.

Roscoe opened the door, looking surprised and happy to see her. She stepped inside and found Benny with him. The hopeful expression that settled over her brother's face was almost painful to see, but it steeled her resolve. She could do this. This was best for everyone.

"I've thought about it," she said, her eyes flitting around the room, too nervous to rest on anything. The tension in her neck made her ears ring. "It's a kind thing you're wanting to do for me." She swallowed. Licked her lips. Swallowed. "So, I've come to accept your offer."

Roscoe grinned, and Benny sprang forward, grabbing her shoulders and pulling her toward him to kiss her forehead. "Thank you."

Already she wanted to take it back, but the relief and gratitude in Benny's voice silenced her. Tears of frustration and sadness flooded her eyes, and when they fell, it was Roscoe who wrapped his arms around her.

"It's gonna be okay," he said quietly into her ear, and she nodded, hoping it would be true.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Married

Once Cora had agreed to marry him, Roscoe felt less in a rush to get to the war. He hadn't expected that. With Christmas just around the corner, he and Benny had planned to wait until the twenty-sixth to go to the justice of the peace and sign up for service, but Momma North made it clear that she didn't care what kind of scheme they had going on: if he wanted to marry her daughter, Roscoe would have to come courting. She had no intention of letting the church gossip squad speculate about why Cora married a man she wasn't even dating.

He came by most nights, sometimes taking her to a picture show, sometimes out on long walks. Most times he sat with the family at home, talking and laughing. He enjoyed being part of a real family. It was something he'd missed out on after his daddy up and left when Roscoe was only seven, walking away from his responsibilities like stepping out of too-tight shoes. And then his momma started bringing home a string of bad boyfriends, each one worse than the last. Those years had nothing to do with family. She finally ran off with a no-account swindler when Roscoe was sixteen, and he went to live with Benny's family for the next two years. He'd fantasized about truly belonging. Now he would.

Cora wouldn't let him kiss her, and he decided that was fine. He'd wait until she was ready. He had learned how to do right by a woman by getting

a good, close look at all the ways men do wrong, and he'd seen how it was when a man took before a woman was ready to give. He didn't want to be like that. Lately, Cora had been letting him put his arm around her waist or laying her head on his shoulder. They'd get there.

He realized pretty quickly that Momma North was using the courtship as a delay tactic to keep Benny home longer, but he didn't mind. He settled into a rhythm with them: dinners, church, and visits to Aunt Teen. It was nice. Familiar. And felt like the beginning of a promise.

Christmas came and went, and by the time New Year's rolled around, Roscoe had become a fixture at the North household, and happier than he'd been in years, so when Cora and Momma North asked him to wait a little longer, he didn't see why not. Benny, on the other hand, paced the house like a caged lion. By the middle of January, he'd had it.

"Is this happening or not?" he exploded at Roscoe one day. "Because I've waited long enough. If you're backing out, tell me now, and I'll find a new plan."

The last thing Roscoe wanted to do was back out. "We don't want to rush her," he said weakly.

"Rush her? It's been over a month. You agreed to do something, now be a man and do it."

"Don't you dare," Cora said with steel in her voice. "Roscoe is being a gentleman, and more generous than you had any right to ask him to be, and he'll do it in his own good time, not yours."

Roscoe warmed with pleasure to see her spring to his defense and felt a bond solidify between them. Roscoe-and-Benny was becoming Roscoe-and-Cora. But Benny was right that he'd waited longer than he'd meant to. He'd let pleasant days and Momma North's courting plans derail him, so that week he went to the justice of the peace to make an appointment to get married. The earliest date they could offer him was the second week of February. There'd been a run on weddings.

The icy weather on the morning he was to marry caught Roscoe by surprise. Northern winds had blown through Florida, chilling the state so badly that he'd woken up to frost on the windows. At the courthouse, he tucked his hands under his arms and stamped his feet for warmth, waiting for Cora and the others. His suit jacket, old, too small, and splayed open, left his chest exposed to the biting cold.

Jasper turned up first, not even trying to dress up.

"Nice of you to make an effort for my big day," he said.

Jasper shrugged. "I thought of trying to find a suit, but then I thought, I might be dressing up for nothing."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He rubbed the back of his head and twisted his face into a hesitant question. "Are you sure about this?"

"Yes," Roscoe said, and he was. This was a win-win-win. Good for Benny, good for Cora, and good for him. He'd had a soft spot for Cora for years, and in the weeks he'd spent courting her, she'd warmed to him, offering a gentle word here, a kind gesture there. Just yesterday, she'd told him he was a good man, and his heart had melted and swelled. The marriage was going to work out just fine.

"I know you wouldn't ever marry, Jas, but this is right for me."

Jasper frowned and blew noisily through trumpet-trained lips, making the sound extra loud. "I might marry."

"Yeah, right." Roscoe stepped closer, glancing down the street and lowering his voice. "I've known you your whole life. You think I don't know?"

Jasper's eyes widened, and he froze. For a second, it seemed like he'd admit to what Roscoe had realized years ago but never spoken about. There'd never been a girl for Jasper, never a date, never even a lingering look, until he'd started bringing Lee around.

Jasper shook his head, clenched his jacket tighter, took one step back, and then another. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He shuffled farther away, turning from Roscoe and looking down the road like he wanted to bolt.

“Forget it, okay? I don’t know what I’m saying.”

Jasper bobbed his head, arms clenched tight to his chest. He didn’t come closer.

“It’s wedding jitters,” Roscoe said. “I’m sorry, man.”

Down the street, Aunt Teen and Cousin Patsy were headed over. By the time they reached them, Jasper had smoothed his expression, replacing tight lips with an overstretched smile.

“Well, look who we’ve got here,” he called to them. “You two look like a couple of Hollywood movie stars.” Jasper looped his arms through theirs. “And you smell good enough to eat.” He wiggled his eyebrows at Patsy, who socked his shoulder.

“Will you hush and behave for once? You’re going to a wedding, not a juke joint.”

Benny and Momma North arrived with Cora, shivering in a thin dress. She huddled in her short coat, pulled tight under her chin as her skirts wrapped around her legs, twisting in the wind. In her hands, she clutched a small bunch of snapdragons for a bouquet.

“Good,” Benny said. “We’re all here. Let’s go in.”

The ceremony was quick, more business than romance, but when the justice of the peace asked for the ring and Roscoe produced a thin gold band, the look of surprise and pleasure that flooded Cora’s face warmed him to his core. He’d done the right thing by using his savings to get it for her. They made promises to one another with an *I do* each, and it was over with *You may now kiss the bride*. Roscoe leaned forward and hesitated. They were not a normal bride and groom, and all the weeks of Momma North’s forced courtship hadn’t changed that. He didn’t know where it left

them with kissing, but Cora tipped her face to his, inviting him, and he pressed his lips to hers, probing for a response that came back hesitant, until Benny clapped them both on their backs.

Grinning, Benny grabbed Cora by one arm and Roscoe by the other and marched them out of the door like a cotillion threesome, their shoes echoing noisily in the wide hall.

Back at Cora's, Momma North made a wedding feast of pork chops and gravy, lima beans, stewed okra, yellow rice, and buttermilk biscuits. All Benny's favorites. But despite the festive food, Momma North had the subdued air of being at a funeral and kept touching Benny and Roscoe's faces, arms, and hands.

Cora ate little and spoke less, and all Roscoe's attempts to draw her out were met with flat smiles and unconvincing assurances that she was fine. But Benny talked and ate for two. His excitement was palpable, and since their plan was to go down to the recruitment office to enlist in the morning, the whole evening felt like a send-off instead of a wedding.

Roscoe hoped to take his bride home to his boarding house for the few days they'd have until he got his papers to report for induction, but when Jasper, Patsy, and Aunt Teen left, Cora planted a chaste kiss on his cheek and wished him a good night. Before he could put words to what he'd been wanting, she'd retreated down the hall to her bedroom and closed the door behind her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Enlisted

Roscoe's induction papers came through first, and as the days passed without a word for Benny, he started to worry. When it was time for his friend to go, they exchanged awkward goodbyes, neither of them saying what the other was thinking. All Benny's scheming had been for nothing, and now Roscoe was going without him.

"It's probably alphabetical or something," Cora said, "Roscoe Crane before Benny North," but Benny didn't buy that. It had to be that he'd failed the physical or the psych evaluation or some other test he hadn't known he was taking. He'd offered himself up to the army, and the army had said *No thanks*. Or so he thought.

Two days after Roscoe left, Benny's papers finally came, and as he read the notice, he felt relief flood through him, accented with joy and terror in equal parts. Momma wouldn't speak to him that whole day, but she thawed in the days leading up to his reporting for duty, and when he came down for breakfast the morning he was scheduled to leave, she'd put a pair of thick socks on his plate.

"Momma?" he asked, eyeing her.

"I hear it's cold over where you're going."

He pulled her into his arms for a hug. "I love you, Momma."

“You just come back to me, you hear? Ain’t nothing more important than that.”

After breakfast, he held out his car keys to Cora. “These are for you, on the condition that you drive me this morning.”

“Don’t give me your car,” she said. “That makes it seem like . . .” She pinched her lips.

“Oh, I’m not giving it to you. I’m letting you borrow it because I’m a nice brother, but if you put so much as a scratch on it, I’ll skin you alive when I get back.” He pressed the keys into her hand.

She looked at him hard and, blinking back tears, she flung her wiry arms around him, squeezing so hard it felt like she might bust his lungs. “If you don’t come back, I’m going to push it off a cliff,” she said into his chest.

“That’ll show me.”

They drove through town over the low bridge where they’d once dared each other to jump into the river until Cora had spotted a half-submerged alligator, and they ran shrieking to safety. They drove alongside the field where she’d timed his sprints, week after week, until he was fast enough to make the track team. They passed the drugstore where Benny first pretended to be white to buy an ice cream, and then went back to get one for Cora, too.

When they got to the recruitment office, only a few white families stood around, saying their goodbyes. He moved to get out of the car, but she put her hand on his arm. “I’m sorry I made this hard for you.”

He pulled her into a hug, and the weeks of fighting melted to nothing. “I’m gonna miss you, Cora. But we’ll be okay.”

She cupped his cheeks with cold hands and stared fiercely into his eyes. “Make sure you write,” she said. “Tell me everything.”

He nodded, his chest tightening, feeling the weight of his decision. “You write too. Let me know how you’re getting on.” He swiped at his eyes and

flashed her a smile. “The papers say we’ve got them on the run, so I’ll probably be home before you know it.”

She didn’t smile back. Instead, she whispered “Be safe” with the intensity of a general’s command.

The ball of emotions building in his throat made him not trust his voice, so he nodded and stepped out of the car, squaring his shoulders and straightening his spine. With counterfeit confidence, he strode to the recruitment center and gave his name to a man with a clipboard.

“Go around back and get on a bus,” he told Benny.

Three buses sat parked side by side, and Benny climbed on board the first one he came to. Passing a handful of white men spread out in the first few rows, he sat in the rear and watched as the bus filled up with would-be soldiers. When the driver climbed on board, closed the doors, and started the engine, not one other Negro soldier had boarded. Benny’s nerves tensed as he tried to scan the other buses for dark faces before they pulled out onto the road.

When they got to the army induction center and filed off the bus, someone handed Benny a duffel bag, and all the men traipsed from station to station stuffing their bags with army gear. Benny craned his neck, searching for more colored soldiers, but the army guys hurried him along until he could barely keep track of where he was supposed to be going. Bag full, he came to his final station, the clipper haircut, where they buzzed off his brown waves, leaving him with a thin layer of spiky fuzz.

The army guys herded the kitted-out soldiers onto a train and another bus, and four hours later, feeling edgy and nervous, Benny arrived at basic training camp, a sprawling settlement of cinder blocks in the middle of absolutely nowhere. Slouching and shuffling, the recruits stepped off the bus looking nothing like soldiers, despite their clothes and haircuts.

An army man motioned for Benny and the others to stand in line, and a middle-aged man with a chest full of pins stepped forward, introducing

himself as Captain Bale. He gave a clumsy speech about stamping out tyranny before handing the whole group over to a broad-chested sergeant with buck teeth who yelled at them to straighten up their three crooked rows and follow him, marching left-right army style, to their new barracks.

Benny's unease turned into a fist of panic squeezing his chest, and his stomach dropped to his toes. As the group marched off, he stepped out of line, eyes on Captain Bale, who frowned at him.

“What about me, sir?” Benny said, trying to keep his voice even and calm.

Annoyance flashed through the captain's eyes. “You looking for special treatment, Private? We don't mollycoddle in the army.” He flicked his chin at the rows of marching men already paces ahead, indicating that Benny should get back in line.

In the distance, men walked purposefully in twos and threes. A young soldier drove someone important-looking in an open-top jeep. A fleet of men in army green stood in neat rows, waiting for someone or something. Every single man, every last one of them, was white.

A tightness pulled at the back of Benny's scalp, and a rush of blood prickled his face. For the briefest moment, he considered letting their assumptions play out—he'd pretended whiteness a hundred times in the past—but this was more than getting gas or using a toilet or buying some ice cream.

“Did you see my paperwork, sir?”

The captain pursed his lips. The look he gave Benny was pure contempt. “What are you? Some kind of general's kid? Regular army not good enough for you?”

He cleared his throat, but the tightness remained. “I'm colored, sir.”

The captain's face clouded with confusion, followed by wariness, like suspecting a prank, then settled on a kind of angry disbelief. He squinted at

Benny, then barked, “Follow me,” turning on his heels and striding off toward the main network of buildings.

Benny scrambled after him, his duffel bag bouncing against his back as he hurried. Inside, Captain Bale stopped at a desk that looked to be guarding an office, then turned to glare at Benny. “Your name?”

“Benny North, sir.”

“Get North’s paperwork to me immediately,” the captain said to the man at the desk. Then he stormed into the office behind, Benny trailing after him.

“Close the door,” he barked at Benny, and strode to the chair behind the desk.

Benny moved to obey, feeling the man’s intense stare like a bug under a microscope or an animal at the zoo. The bag strap dug into his shoulder, and he adjusted it before standing in front of the desk. He fixed his gaze past the probing eyes of the officer to a picture on the back wall. The captain and three other military men smiled for the camera.

“Is this a joke?” Captain Bale said. “Someone put you up to this?”

“No, sir.”

“Was it Donaldson? Or Murphy?”

“No, sir.”

“Because if it’s a joke, I’m going to have you doing push-ups until your fucking arms fall off.”

In his Northern accent, it sounded like *ya fokinams* and it took Benny a moment to piece together what he must have said. He shook his head. “Not a joke, sir.”

He drummed his fingers on the table and stared at Benny until the desk sergeant brought the paperwork into the awkwardly silent room. Captain Bale dismissed him with an impatient wave of his hand and flipped through the pages to where the army asked about race. He ran his nails along the

stubble under his chin, making a scratching noise, staring at the small black X beside the word “colored.”

“How’d you wind up at this camp?” he mumbled, eyes glued to the papers in front of him. It didn’t seem like he was really asking Benny, but Benny answered anyway.

“They told me to get on the bus.”

He snorted and shook his head. “Nobody reads the fucking paperwork. Now, I’ve got this bullshit to deal with.” He drummed his fingers along his desk again, looking at Benny. “You don’t look like a Negro.” He said it like it was something to be blamed for. “I mean, what kind of Negro’s got brown hair and light eyes?”

Benny could have laughed in his face. Northerners had no idea how things were down South, where every second Negro he knew had some white in him, and no matter how much of it came to the surface, the one-drop rule made them all colored.

The captain picked up a pen and put it down again. “I could send you to a Negro camp, but some good ole boy colonel would blast my balls as soon as you stepped off the fucking bus.” Benny kept his mouth shut and his eyes averted, focusing on the picture on the wall. “They’ll say I’m a Yankee wiseass trying to desegregate things down here because”—he jabbed a finger at Benny’s file—“no one reads the fucking paperwork.”

The captain tapped his desk, staring at the form in front of him. Then he looked up at Benny and picked up the pen. “Not worth the fucking headache,” he said. He scratched out the black X and drew a new one beside the word “white.”

The air left Benny’s lungs. Every part of his body felt like he’d just been zapped with a live wire.

“Congratulations, Private,” Captain Bale said. “Now, get to your barracks with your bunkmates.”

“But, sir, I’m . . . that’s not—”

The captain held up his hand, silencing him. “I’m your commanding officer, giving you a direct order.”

Panic rose up his chest and into his throat as his protests died in his mouth. He went hot and then cold.

“You got that, Private?”

Benny felt numb. “Yes, sir,” he said, in barely more than a whisper.

“And, Private,” Captain Bale said, standing and shooting Benny a warning glare, “I know I don’t need to mention that this stays between us.”

The blood in Benny’s veins felt like lead, and his head was a swarm of bees. But still he saluted, and the captain dismissed him with a wave of his hand.

PART TWO

The nation cannot expect the colored people to feel that the US is worth defending if they continue to be treated as they are treated now.

—First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt,
shortly after the outset of the war

For us Germans, it is especially important to know and see how one of the biggest states in the world with Nordic stock already has race legislation which is quite comparable to that of the German Reich.

—Großdeutscher Pressedienst,
German press agency on USA
race laws during the Third Reich

CHAPTER ONE

Basic Training

In those first few weeks, Benny barely said a word, terrified of being found out. He ate on his own and wouldn't join in playing cards or dice in the evenings after training. At night, he climbed into bed and turned his face to the wall.

At least he slept as soon as his head hit the pillow. Basic training wiped him out, and he finished every single day exhausted. The army needed to turn a bunch of salesmen, plumbers, and factory workers into soldiers, and didn't have much time to do it. And even though the papers reported that the US campaign was effective and that the war would soon be won, the officers walked around with grim expressions and a perpetual sense of urgency.

Benny didn't much like the marching, but he hated the running. Running while carrying a weapon. Running with a pack. Running through shallow water. The army couldn't get enough of making them run. But worse than the running was the climbing and the crawling. Before he joined, he'd pictured himself facing down enemy lines, but he hadn't much considered how he'd get there. The army had. He'd march and run and crawl and climb.

It was a crawling day when he accepted that, if he wanted to make it through the war, he needed to talk to the other men. The sergeant had made

everyone jog to a field where barbed wire stretched over a mud pit. They'd dropped to their knees and crab-crawled on their bellies under the barbed wire, through the mud, with the sergeant shouting at them from the sidelines. Benny panted open-mouthed at the effort and spat out mud that splattered onto his tongue. To his right, a bear of a man called Parker grunted as he moved, and on his left, Adams from Virginia swore. When they got nearly halfway, the gunshots started.

Benny's instinct told him to jump up and run, but the barbed wire cut him and held him down as he tried to rise. Another shot rang out, and he flinched, covering his head with his hands, his face dipping into the mud. He lifted free and blew the mud from his nose.

"You men are going to war," the sergeant shouted. "That means the enemy will shoot at you. That's about the only thing I can guarantee you when you get over there. How you act under fire will determine if you live or die."

He said all this as he shot bullets above their heads.

"You don't get up. You don't stop. You stay low and you keep moving."

He traded his pistol for an automatic and let the bullets fly. Benny got moving, slithering and grappling, his heart hammering in his chest.

The gunfire made Parker panic. "I've got to get out, I've gotta get out of here." Eyes as wild as a spooked horse, he rose to all fours and tried to stand. The barbed wire held him down, but he struggled against it, reaching his hand through an opening. Gunshots exploded overhead, and Benny grabbed him, pulling him down.

"Move, Parker," he shouted, tugging him forward. "Move, move."

"I can't," the man said, but he did when Benny pulled at him, so he kept on pulling.

"Get your asses out of there," the sergeant shouted. "Do you think the enemy is going to stand there watching you crawl away? He's going to shoot you. You are the target. Move it. Move it."

Benny flinched with every shot, but he kept moving, tugging Parker along. A few men cried out like they'd been hit. Then Benny felt a sharp pain in his shoulder. He screamed and let go of Parker, feeling for the bullet wound. There wasn't one.

"It's just rocks," Adams said on his left. He held up a stone beside Benny's shoulder.

"Come on, keep moving."

Benny looked over at the sergeant firing his gun with one hand and throwing stones with the other.

"If you get hit, you don't stop and let the enemy finish you off. You go faster and get the hell out of there. A medic will fix you up later. You stop, and you're dead. Move!"

Benny pulled himself forward, on and on, until he got to the other side of the barbed wire mud patch and collapsed on the ground next to Parker and Adams. The sergeant shot his gun over their heads, and they flattened themselves to the ground.

"What the hell are you dumbasses doing? They're trying to kill you. Keep running."

Benny staggered to his feet and ran, keeping low, pushing himself on. His chest heaved as he dragged in noisy lungfuls of air, all the while making himself run faster and faster until, with a bullhorn, the sergeant called them all to a halt and sent them back to the barracks. That night in the mess hall, Benny sat with Adams and Parker.

As the weeks ticked by, as the training got tougher, as they all started to understand what they'd signed up for, a camaraderie formed. Benny never would have believed he could feel close to a bunch of whites, but knowing that, out there, they'd keep each other alive, stripped away all kinds of barriers.

They ran obstacle courses, scaling walls and jumping from ten feet high. They loaded weapons in the dark and shot while moving. Most of all, they

learned to obey orders—directly, quickly, and the first time.

That was why, when Cora sent Benny a photograph with her letter, and his team leader said, “Let me see that,” Benny handed it over without thinking.

“Who’s she?” Harrison asked.

Too late. Benny realized what he’d done. He lunged for the picture, snatched it out of the man’s hand, and slid it into his pocket.

“Woah,” Harrison said.

Benny held his gaze as sweat pooled under his arms and on his upper lip. The air felt heavy in his lungs, and his hair stood up on the back of his neck.

Harrison was from New Hampshire, and a New Hampshire man wouldn’t necessarily see that picture and guess Benny’s secret. Hell, he might not even know you could look white and still be colored. But Benny couldn’t explain why he had a colored woman’s picture, and if Harrison told Polk from Texas or Crawley from Alabama, one of them was sure to put two and two together.

Benny’s gut trembled and lurched, and his lungs tightened, but Harrison just snorted. “Holy shit.” He grinned stupidly. “You like dark meat.” He threw back his head and barked out a laugh. “It’s always the quiet ones,” he said, shoving Benny’s shoulder.

He walked away, leaving Benny trembling in his army-registered boots, pulling in shaky breaths while his heart jackhammered in his chest so hard, he could hear it in his ears.

CHAPTER TWO

Camp Tyson

It took one day of basic training for Roscoe to understand that he didn't much care for it. He spent most of his time doing menial labor around the camp: digging pits, laying planks, or mopping floors. When they went for exercises, the drills ranged from haphazard and ill-considered to downright cruel, and the officers treated them like vermin to be squashed, not soldiers to be trained. Complaining got you quarter rations or a beatdown or sent to the guardhouse. Roscoe learned to keep his mouth shut.

When he'd been there for over a month and hadn't so much as held a weapon in his hand, let alone trained with one, he worked up the nerve to ask Lieutenant Williams, the one colored officer mixed in with all the others, "When are we going to learn to fight, sir?"

He held Roscoe's gaze, as if weighing up his answer, before telling him, "The generals don't intend to train men who look like us to kill men who look like them."

"But we're at war," he stammered.

"Negro troops get service postings, not combat."

He searched the officer's face for signs of a joke but found only simmering frustration.

"But," Roscoe protested, because surely in a war you needed every man, "I signed up to fight." That had been the whole point. Otherwise, what

was he doing there?

The lieutenant shook his head, his mouth set in a grim line. “You signed up to serve,” he said, and walked off, leaving Roscoe reeling.

Now he understood the careless, lazy training that wasn’t training. Even in an army, someone needed to fetch supplies, wash the dishes, and clean the latrines. It was a kick in the teeth to think that he’d rushed to join the army to become a houseboy.

About a month after he’d spoken to Lieutenant Williams, the officer pulled him aside. “If you’re interested, there’s a barrage-balloon battalion the army’s putting together that I can put you forward for. It’s a chance for real training and soldiering.”

Roscoe barked out a bitter laugh and then pulled himself to attention. “I thought the army didn’t want to train us, sir.”

“They don’t,” Williams said. “But there’s pressure from the NAACP, the Negro press, some pro-integration congressmen, and the first lady, so they’ve had to give a little.”

“Would I fight?” He held himself still, tempering the hope growing in his belly.

“Your main role would be defensive barrage balloons, but you’d deploy to Europe, and you’d see action.”

That was all Roscoe needed to hear. He applied for the transfer and, a few weeks later, was on his way to training at Camp Tyson, Tennessee.

The officers at Camp Tyson set a grueling, relentless pace. On bad days, the men endured twenty-five-mile hikes through the woods, weighed down with full packs. On worse days, they suffered through bruising stamina tests of crawling through obstacles with rifles pressed against their bellies.

The first time he woke to shouts and gunfire at two in the morning, Roscoe thought the Germans or Japs had made it to America to attack them in their beds. It took a few seconds for his groggy brain to realize he’d been woken up for a night drill.

As hard as training was, he found he could take it, firstly because his commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Reed, was a fair, decent man who didn't resort to dirty tricks or racial slurs like other officers did, and secondly because no-nonsense British instructors trained the 320th on the balloons and told them "our side" was counting on them. It was the first time since the war started that he'd felt a part of it.

"Have a care how you go," one said, showing them how to inflate the blimp-sized balloons. "Otherwise, you'll spark the hydrogen and blow yourselves sky-high."

Another showed them how to release the built-up static electricity on the hanging cables. "If you forget," he warned, "the charge could jolly well knock you unconscious. And if you don't wear your double gloves, the cables will shred your hands like paper."

A third explained how to find the right height so the balloons would form a blockade. "Force the Jerry bombers too high for them to aim properly, up where our antiaircraft can shoot them out of the bloody sky. And if anyone tries to fly below your blockade," he said, "the dangling cables will stall his plane. Could even take off a wing."

A fourth showed them how to use TNT bombs that were released down the cables. "Just to be doubly sure that no one escapes."

This was the war effort Roscoe had signed up for. Now his letters to Cora were full of optimism and eagerness to ship out, and in November, he got the command. He wrote to her, telling her he'd make her proud and that he'd face whatever came with a soldier's honor.

CHAPTER THREE

The 76IST

Lee untied the piece of cloth from around his hand to see how his wound was healing. Not bad. If he was lucky, he wouldn't have much of a scar. He scoffed. Army luck was like a speck of good fortune in a sea of bad breaks.

The cut on his hand hadn't come from fighting or training but from a razor blade that an officer dropped into his cleaning bucket when he was on mopping duty. It sliced the length of his palm as he wrung out the mop, and three of those white devils looked on and roared with laughter. A big joke. The medic told him he was lucky it had missed any major tendons. Army luck.

The casual cruelties made his homesickness worse. He missed all of it: playing the clubs with Jasper, catching fast balls behind home plate, hanging out with the guys, Uncle Drew's lectures. And Cora. His longing for her curled through him like smoke, burning red-hot to his core.

She hadn't forgiven him. He'd written and written to her all that year, trying to explain why he'd enlisted—to stand up, to prove himself, to fight for what was right. He couldn't bring himself to tell his whole truth. That each time she recoiled from telling people about them being together was a stab in his heart, and under the tree in the park that last night, seeing her tense when he mentioned their future together had decided it for him. He knew he was asking too much of her to be with him as he was, with her

mother, her aunt, and the church gossips all convinced he had no business with a woman like Cora. He couldn't expect her to choose him over everybody else, but if he came home a hero, with a medal on his chest, they'd have to respect him, even if they didn't like him, and they'd accept her choice. It was the only chance he could see they had.

Maybe Cora sensed he wasn't telling her everything in his letters, or maybe she wanted to punish him for leaving her. Whatever the reason, she hadn't written back once in more than a year. In the barracks, the guys joked that he'd made her up, and some days it felt like he had.

He'd been army lucky a few months back, getting transferred out of the service corps and into a new Negro tank battalion down in Camp Claiborne, Louisiana. The War Department had been pressured into giving Negro troops a shot at real fighting. Unfortunately, Southern bigots ran the camp, and their training tended to cross the line from rigorous to sadistic. They enjoyed meting out excessive punishments for the most minor infractions, so a badly made bed could earn you two hundred push-ups, and a poorly polished boot might mean a thirty-mile run in the Louisiana heat.

Dirty boots were a particular problem, since they spent their days slogging through mud. Camp Claiborne sat on a swamp, so Lee became an expert in the entire palette of wet-earth possibilities, from the solid, baked-by-the-sun mud that left behind perfect footprints when he walked, to the dark, almost black sludge that was as thick as oatmeal and sucked at his boots, to the sloshy soup that was barely more than dirty water. He marched through it, crawled through it, and drove tanks through it.

After more than a year of skirmishes and exercises in the mud, there was still no talk of deploying, and morale for the 761st sank lower than low. And since you couldn't advance a career commanding soldiers who'd never fight, no officer wanted the 761st assignment, until Lieutenant Colonel Paul Bates rotated into Camp Claiborne.

The first thing he did that told them he was different was to take living quarters near the men, despite their post being beside the sewage treatment plant and always smelling like a latrine. He went on marches and runs with them, listened to them, got to know them, and he wouldn't let anybody mistreat them. No more razor blades in buckets or outlandish punishments for minor infractions.

Under Bates, they trained and learned, and they became excellent tankers, so when the battalion got word to transfer down to Fort Hood, Texas, where they'd run predeployment maneuvers, Lee assumed it meant they'd soon deploy. Once they got there, he was gutted to find out they'd be running the predeployment maneuvers for other battalions who'd ship out while they stayed behind. There was nothing Lieutenant Colonel Bates could do about it, although he tried. One man couldn't change the army, but at least they knew he'd go to bat for the men in his battalion.

Lee learned that beyond a shadow of a doubt after the bust-up with his tank commander, Second Lieutenant Jackie Robinson. He'd heard Bates shouting down the phone to someone, fuming mad, when he went to see him. He hovered in the doorway, not sure if he should approach, but when the lieutenant colonel looked up and saw him there, he covered the receiver and said to Lee, "Get Jones and bring his wife."

Lee saluted and hurried off to find Lieutenant Jones. He had no idea what he was going to do about the man's wife, but he figured that would be Jones's problem. It turned out his wife was visiting so he could bring both of them, as ordered.

Bates was off the phone, pacing, when they came in. "Some MPs arrested Second Lieutenant Robinson," he said.

Lee looked up, shocked. Jackie Robinson was a smart, likable guy with self-discipline coming out of his ears. Not the kind to get himself arrested.

"What for, sir?" he asked, but Jones and his wife exchanged a look, like they already knew.

“Mrs. Jones, I need you to tell me exactly what happened on that bus.” He turned to Lee and ordered, “Take notes, Corporal Peters.”

Lee grabbed a notebook and settled himself into a chair in the corner.

“Well,” Mrs. Jones said, “I got on the shuttle bus on my way to the base and sat four seats from the back, which I’ve always considered the rear of the bus. My husband”—she glanced at Lieutenant Jones—“had introduced me to Second Lieutenant Robinson before, so we recognized each other when he got on and he came and sat next to me. We got to talking and everything was fine, but then the bus driver looked back and saw us sitting together and told Jackie, Second Lieutenant Robinson, to move back.”

“He thought she was white,” her husband cut in. “It happens to us all the time. Nearly got arrested trying to check into a hotel one time.” He reached over and took her hand, and she leaned into him a little. “Being out together in public can be tricky.”

“So what happened with Robinson?” Bates pressed.

“He refused to move. Told the driver to go on and drive the bus. So the man stopped the bus and came back, telling him again to move, but Jackie still wouldn’t do it. He just said, ‘I’m not moving,’ with that bus driver glaring down at him.”

Lee’s pen flew over the notepad, taking it all down, but his stomach bunched tighter with each word. Colored soldiers who got involved in disputes turned up dead all the time, so his tank commander was shaking a rattlesnake.

“When we got to the next stop, the driver jumped out and got the military police on him. They got him off the bus, and we drove on. That’s all I know.”

“They can’t make that stick,” Lieutenant Jones said. “She’s colored, he’s colored, and they were sitting in the back, more or less. It’s the driver who was out of line. They can’t charge him.”

“Oh, they’ve charged him all right. Conduct unbecoming of an officer, plus failure to comply with a direct order and disrespect to a commanding officer, which both have something to do with what he said when they took him off the bus.”

Lee was furious on Jackie Robinson’s behalf, but so was Lieutenant Colonel Bates. The upshot of that bus ride was that the army wanted to court-martial Robinson, and they wanted Bates to sign off on it, but he wouldn’t do it. They pressured and prodded, but he flat-out refused, so in the end, they transferred Robinson out of the 761st into another battalion and let the other CO sign the court-martial papers.

As angry as everybody was about the whole thing, the men were in awe that Bates had their backs, even if he had to stand against the army to do it. Before Bates, Lee would have said he knew all about white men—pale devils with no regard for anyone but themselves. Selfish, cruel, and entitled. Bates made him reexamine what he thought he knew.

That’s why when word went around a year later that Bates had been offered a promotion, the men’s morale nosedived, and Lee had visions of going back to the days of razor blades in buckets.

After about a week of talk, Lieutenant Colonel Bates called the men together and told them the rumors were true. Lee could feel the weight of every man’s spirit sinking.

“I’ve written to army command,” he announced, “and I’ve told them I’ve decided to refuse the promotion.”

The crackling silence was like static electricity in the air. Lee would have bet money he was hearing things, except for the shift in the mood and the faces brightening up all around him.

“I’ve told them I choose, instead, to stay with my men.”

The cheer that rose lacked discipline or protocol, but it thundered and roiled with heart and soul.

CHAPTER FOUR

Pins and Needles

Cora sat in her kitchen with Patsy's nurse uniform spread out over the table. The dress hem wove up and down in a drunken stitch, zigzagging and puckering, making the material bunch and sag.

"You should have brought it to me in the first place," Cora said to Patsy, unpicking the gnarled stitches.

"I didn't want to bother you with it."

Cora rolled her eyes. "Next time, bother me straightaway. It'll be less work for me."

Patsy kissed her cheek in a playful thank you. "You're a lifesaver."

When Cora had taken the hem down, Patsy ducked into the bathroom to change while Cora found a needle and some navy-blue thread that would match the uniform. She threaded the needle and set it aside, then fished stray straight pins out of her sewing box and added them to her pincushion.

"Anybody home?" came the call from the front stoop, followed by a loud rapping on the doorframe. She looked up and smiled to see Jasper on the other side of her screen door.

"Jasper Monroe. Where have you been hiding yourself?" She hadn't seen him for months.

Seeing Jasper was like being reunited with part of her old life, back when everything still felt possible. She pulled him into a tight hug and led

him into the kitchen, peppering him with how-have-you-beens and what-are-you-up-tos, but the air between them felt strained. His easy manner seemed stiff, and Cora was glad when Patsy came back dressed in her nurse's uniform.

“Hey there, Patsy. I do believe you get prettier every time I see you.”

Patsy shrugged off his compliment with a wave of her hand since Jasper made it a point to flirt with every girl he saw. Cora's theory was that he did it to make up for not showing the slightest bit of true interest in any of them.

Patsy slapped his arm and told Cora to “get this man a soft drink.”

She got them all Cokes but made Patsy stand on the chair to drink hers so that she could fold and pin her hem into an even line. They caught each other up on work, church, and their mothers. It was Jasper who asked first about the subject they were avoiding.

“You hear from the guys?” He delivered the question with a light touch, like they were talking about the weather.

Cora kept her eyes on Patsy's hem. “Un-hun.” She spoke around the pins in her mouth and took her time to say, “Benny shipped out.” She folded the cloth and pinned it still. “And Roscoe's at a training camp in Tennessee.”

“Are you sure that's straight, Cora?” Patsy said. “I've got to wear this tomorrow.”

“Just keep still.”

“You hear from Lee?” Jasper said.

Cora felt her face flush. He'd sent so many letters trying to justify why he'd left, and although she couldn't agree with his reasons, he also assured her he loved her more than anything and asked for her understanding. Her heart had swelled with surprise and happiness when the first letter arrived and she'd read his words, but then it sank like a stone with the weight of her disloyalty. She had let herself be convinced that he'd been trifling with her

when she should have known that he'd been genuine. So far, she hadn't found the courage to write him back. She dreaded admitting she'd married Roscoe because she hadn't believed in him. When he found out, it would be over between them. Lee's moral code would never allow him to carry on with the wife of one of his best friends, no matter how much he cared for her. But as long as she didn't tell him, she could pretend she was still his, and he was hers.

She tucked her head down and pushed in another pin. "Lee's in training camp too," she said. "Texas."

Jasper rubbed his hand over his face, pulled out a chair, and sat. "You haven't told him." It wasn't a question, so she didn't answer it.

"Don't you think you ought to tell him?"

"Okay, Patsy. That should do it." She pushed in the last of the pins.

Jasper dug in his back pocket and pulled out a letter. "This isn't fair to Lee. He needs to know you're married."

Cora slumped into a seat, a headache playing at her temples. Jasper was right. Of course, he was right, but she just couldn't tell Lee. Her heart thudded in her chest. She should never have agreed to that stupid plan.

"If you don't write him, I'll tell him myself. But he should hear it from you."

Cora glared at him, and he stared right back.

"Wait," Patsy said, looking from Cora to Jasper. "You and Lee? When did that happen?" She sat across from Cora, arms folded, eyebrows raised.

Jasper waved the letter. "According to Lee, it was going on for a while and getting pretty serious."

Patsy gaped at Cora. "How come I don't know about this? And why did you marry Roscoe?"

An awkward, accusatory silence filled the room. "It's a long story," she said, not meeting Patsy's eye. "And, really, it's nobody's business but mine." She glared again at Jasper.

“No. It’s Lee’s business, too,” Jasper said. “You owe him an answer. He says he’s written you dozens of letters. He thinks you’re mad at him for leaving. He wants me to ask you to write,” he said, holding the letter up. “You need to tell him.”

Cora fought back the tears that pricked her eyes. She’d started at least fifty letters but wound up ripping each one to pieces. Instead, she wrote to Benny and Roscoe about Loretta threatening to quit Sunshine State Insurance, or about Mr. Waycote, the grocer, stepping out with Sister Candice, but never to Lee. She longed to tell him that she missed him and loved him, but somewhere in there, she’d have to confess about Roscoe, and she wasn’t ready for him to know what she’d done. She didn’t think she’d ever be ready for him to know.

“I’ll write to him,” she said, rolling the pincushion between her fingers.

Jasper tucked the letter back into his pocket. “He never should have gone. All this mess, and for what?”

“For our country,” Patsy said. “They’re fighting for what’s right.”

Jasper snorted.

“It’s better than sitting around here doing nothing.”

“I don’t want to fight with you, Patsy,” Jasper said.

“And it’s what I plan to do, too.”

Cora scrunched her brow and looked at her cousin. “You can’t join the army.”

“The Army Nurse Corps needs nurses,” she said. “Haven’t you seen the ads they’re running? You can’t hardly miss them.”

Cora glanced at Jasper, who looked back with worry and surprise in his eyes.

“You don’t want to do that,” Jasper said.

“Patsy, think about this.” Cora leaned across the table and took her hands. “You’ve read how they treat Negroes in the army. You don’t want that for yourself.”

“Benny doesn’t seem to have a problem,” she said.

“But Roscoe and Lee—”

“I’ve already put in my paperwork.”

Cora closed her mouth and let go of her hands.

“And I’m surprised at both of you,” Patsy said. “Haven’t you been reading about the Double V?”

“Victory abroad and victory at home.” Jasper crossed his arms. “Seems to me, we need victory at home before we go marching off to stand up to Hitler and Hirohito. Shoot, where do you think Hitler got his ideas on how to handle the Jews? It was from seeing how America handles colored folks, that’s how. Double V my ass.”

“Well, no one’s asking you to go. But we have men out there, good men like Benny and Roscoe and Lee, who need nurses. So, I’m gonna do my part.”

“But you’ll be working for the army,” Jasper said, banging the table with the flat of his hand. “What makes you think they’ll treat you any better?” He stood, and his anger and frustration filled the small kitchen, making it feel crowded with only the three of them. “You’ve got a big heart, Patsy, but America doesn’t love you back. And it’s not gonna start, no matter how many fools get themselves blown apart as cannon fodder.”

Cora’s breath caught, and a flash of fear drained the blood right out of her. Benny, Lee, and Roscoe were fine, she told herself for the millionth time, but her fingers and toes were ice.

Patsy jumped to her feet, hands balled into furious fists. “Shut up, Jasper.”

He backed away from them, hands spread open in apology, his face tinged with regret.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

Cora couldn’t speak. She wanted him to go. She squeezed the pincushion and felt the prick of a pin as it pierced her thumb. She squeezed

harder, wanting to be in control of her distress, to regulate her pain.

“Cora, they’re gonna be fine,” Jasper said, his hollow words echoing flatly through the kitchen.

CHAPTER FIVE

Africa

Benny worried about Harrison so much after the team leader saw Cora's picture that he almost threw it away to get rid of the evidence, but Harrison never mentioned it to anyone.

Instead, he made loud jokes about men who preferred colored girls, always with a side-eye to Benny. The ribbing, intended to rile Benny, finally made him relax, because if Harrison could see that picture and still not guess that Benny was colored, he knew his secret was safe.

In the spring, they got the call to ship out, and when Benny asked where they were going, his sergeant only said, "You'll know when you get there."

The guys took bets on whether it'd be Germany or Japan, but in the end, they went to Tunisia. Benny had never even heard of the place before, and when Harrison discovered it was in North Africa, there was no end to the colored-girl jokes.

The Tunisian campaign started in November, and already by December, Benny was dreaming of being back home. Real war was nothing like training. There was no way to simulate the chaos and carnage, or to prepare a man to see his friends gunned down beside him and still have to keep fighting. Africa taught Benny that men die with their eyes open.

In his letters home, he didn't know what to say. He wouldn't tell them the truth: that there was no fear like going to war. It lived day and night in

the pit of his belly, and he woke every morning knowing it might be his last. He fought alongside men who wouldn't have spoken two words to him before he enlisted, but now that he was here with them, he'd stopped thinking of them as different.

He couldn't say any of that to Momma and Cora, who didn't even know he was passing, so he wrote stiff, withdrawn letters about the weather or some thorn bushes growing nearby or a snake that got into the tents, and hoped that his paychecks home made up for what he didn't tell them.

On the battlefield, the 34th Infantry kept losing ground as seasoned German troops pushed and pushed, fighting all day long and straight through the nights. Benny's bone-weary exhaustion distracted him from his fear as he dodged bullets on nothing but adrenaline.

Word came down to stop retreating, and that reinforcements were on the way. They dug in amid total chaos, bullets flying overhead. Guys were hit up and down the line, and the casualties piled up. Then the Germans started tossing grenades into their trenches. Benny watched men pick them up with their bare hands and throw them back. One landed three feet away from Harrison, who took too long to notice. It exploded in his hand and took out Adams next to him, too. And then one landed at Benny's feet. *Today is the day I die*, he thought, but he had already grabbed it, and with all his strength, he flung it toward the Germans.

Benny didn't die. Instead, the reinforcements showed up like a hallelujah miracle and turned the Germans back.

They lost a third of the company holding on to that little bit of ground, but the army just reshuffled things and sent them out again. That winter was hell on earth. Benny stopped writing letters home altogether, but in the spring, General Patton stepped in to take charge, and the tide began to turn.

By April, they had Rommel's troops sandwiched between the Americans on one side and the Brits on the other, and in May, Rommel threw in the towel. And thank God, too, because the May heat in Africa was

already oppressive, and Benny didn't want to think what fighting through summer would have been like.

The 34th Infantry celebrated right through the night. They drank and sang and hugged, happy to be alive. And they remembered their fallen. They all understood, without saying it out loud, that they needed each other to survive, and that bonded them into something like brothers. With his secret buried deep, the men of the 34th embraced Benny as one of their own, but in the jovial aftermath of battle, a niggly voice wondered what they would do if they knew.

CHAPTER SIX

Blood Drive

It took six weeks for Patsy's Army Nurse Corps request to come back denied. They thanked her politely for her application but told her the nurse corps had no room for her.

"That can't be right," Cora said when Patsy told her about the rejection. "They're running ads in all the papers about a nursing shortage, asking nurses to enlist."

"There's a quota for Negro nurses," she said, sinking onto the couch. "They'll only take fifty-six for the Army Nurse Corps. They've got their fifty-six."

"But . . . but they need you."

Patsy flinched and turned away, while Cora tried and failed to tamp down her anger. Some days she thought she'd never understand this country, and every day she found it harder to forgive it. Was America trying to win a war or not?

"Are you still gonna work at the blood drive?" Cora asked.

Patsy looked up, surprised, like the one didn't have a thing to do with the other. "Of course."

The government wanted everyone to help out in any way they could, even if they couldn't enlist. Posters and ads told people to buy war bonds, plant victory gardens, and give blood. So, when the Red Cross put out a call

for people to pitch in with their nationwide blood drive, Patsy had immediately volunteered to lend a hand.

She badgered Cora and Jasper to bleed for the troops, jabbering on about scientific advancements and blood refrigeration, and she argued that giving blood was a way to help Lee, Benny, and Roscoe, not just Uncle Sam. According to their letters, Benny and Roscoe had both deployed, but Lee was still stuck in the mud in Texas. She'd written back to Roscoe and Benny, wishing them luck and promising prayers, but she tucked Lee's letters into her pillow and left them unanswered. She scolded herself for being a selfish, spineless coward, but she didn't write.

What she could do, at least, was give blood. So, on blood-drive day, she finished work early, slipping out of the small office she and Mr. Griffin had moved to when everyone else quit the sinking ship of wartime life insurance, which effectively left Cora promoted to every job Mr. Griffin couldn't get to, and picked up Jasper in Benny's blue Plymouth. She drove them to the bloodmobile parked over by city hall, where they found Patsy knee high in boxes and bottles, looking energized, as if she hadn't been working there since early morning.

"The whole truck is refrigerated," Patsy said in awe.

They knew that already, since the blood bank and new refrigeration process had been reported on in all the papers. They even knew the other part that only the Negro press printed: that the mastermind behind it all, Dr. Charles Drew, was a Negro doctor.

Jasper said that was the only reason he trusted the process. He didn't believe anything the government said about harmless procedures involving needles in his arm, but he trusted one of his own not to be running experiments on him or taking something out of him that he needed to be keeping inside.

Cora and Jasper went to the *colored* donor table, where Patsy waited on them right away. The line for white donors was six people deep, and Cora

rolled her eyes at them as Jasper took a seat. If they preferred to stand in line rather than let Patsy see to them, they deserved to wait. Jasper pushed up his sleeve, and Patsy swabbed his arm with disinfectant.

“You’ll just feel a little prick. That’s all.”

At the sight of the needle, Jasper gritted his teeth and turned away. Blood flowed from his arm to the bottle in a slow, steady stream.

“Does it hurt?” Cora asked.

“Course not,” he said, but he wore a grimace and refused to look at the bottle.

“Stop clowning around,” Patsy said. “You’re making Cora nervous.”

He closed his eyes.

“You’re not feeling lightheaded, are you? Did you eat today?”

“Not yet. I’ll get something later.”

“Good Lord, Jasper. You’re not supposed to do this on an empty stomach.” She removed the needle and stoppered the bottle. “Eat this,” she said, handing him an orange. “And take a minute before you get up. Cora doesn’t mind waiting, right, Cora?”

He peeled and ate the orange as Patsy filled out a label and attached it to Jasper’s bottle.

“What the hell, Patsy?” Jasper said, pointing to it, accusation in his voice.

Patsy set aside the bottle. “Your turn, Cora.”

He rolled his sleeve down in rough, jerky tugs. “I should have known.”

“What’s wrong?” Cora asked. “What’s on the label?”

Patsy busied herself with a new bottle, a needle, and some tubing. “Just your blood type,” she said. “The date it was taken. Stuff like that.” She didn’t look at Cora.

Jasper glared at her and puffed out a breath of disgust.

“I don’t make the rules, Jasper. We have to label it like this.”

Cora walked around the table to the box of bottles and picked up Jasper's blood donation. On the label, in her neat print, Patsy had written all that she'd said, along with the word *Negro*. Cora pressed her lips together to hold her temper, but the anger washed over her, like a wave. "So, they're segregating the blood?"

Patsy nodded.

Jasper stood, shoving his hands into his pockets. "This country makes every damn thing about race."

Cora felt a shaking start up in her stomach that lifted and spread to her hands, which trembled with pent-up anger. They were at war, for God's sake, and this kind of racist idiocy was bound to cost lives. She tucked her fingers under her arms and took in deep breaths to try to even herself out.

"That's why it's even more important that we give blood," Patsy said, leading her to the chair. "Our men need us to do it."

Cora clenched her hand into the fist Patsy made her form, but she doubted she needed to. Anger spiked her pulse, and her blood streamed into the glass. When it was full, Patsy fixed a label on the bottle.

Type A negative

June 12, 1943

Negro

CHAPTER SEVEN

Pontypool

The army wouldn't tell the men where they were going, but when they put them on a train to New York and then on a ship, Roscoe guessed Italy. He'd been reading the papers, and Italy was where the European action was.

They arrived at a place with rolling hills dusted with snow, which wasn't Italy, and were marched over to a station with signs reading Gourock, wherever that was, then herded onto trains. Where they were headed next was anybody's guess.

Roscoe spent hours looking out of the window, watching breathtaking scenery slip by. He passed some curious faces, but none of them hostile, which made a nice change from the US, where they'd kept the curtains closed on the trains because sometimes locals shot at the windows of colored servicemen.

They arrived at a place called Pontypool, Wales, where Lieutenant Colonel Reed handed each man *A Short Guide to Great Britain*, which explained things like soccer being called football and a pub being a folksy, social gathering place that doubled as a bar. It didn't mention that the British hadn't learned the knack of turning their backs on colored troops. Roscoe found that out for himself.

On his first night off, encouraged by the friendly locals, Roscoe and a couple of others tried out one of those pubs. They sat at the bar and waited

to see what would happen.

The barkeep came up to them with an “Evening, Yanks,” and asked their order. Roscoe looked left and right at the local men, wondering if someone would make a stink.

“How about three beers?” Roscoe said, speaking for all of them.

As the man drew the first beer, a local fellow walked in, but the barman didn’t stop what he was doing. He just nodded a greeting at the white man, who sat down at the bar and waited for his turn.

“Anything else?” the barkeep asked, tapping all three beers and placing them in front of Roscoe and his friends. The local man still sat waiting.

“No, sir,” said Roscoe, grinning. “Thank you, kindly.”

The barman moved on to his next customer, and the three friends slapped each other on the back and drank, nearly giddy. The beer was as warm and flat and weak as the guidebook said it would be, but it was the best beer Roscoe had ever had.

They stayed in the pub, ordering and drinking for hours. Eventually, Roscoe had to relieve himself, so he went to the back to search for the toilets. He found separate toilets for men and women, but that was all. As Roscoe stood there, one of the guys from the bar stepped out, and then held the door open for Roscoe to pass through.

Wales wasn’t just a different country for Roscoe. It was a whole new life. Every chance he got, he spent time in town with the locals. He loved the freedom of walking into any shop he liked and knowing he’d be served.

One Sunday afternoon, coming from his favorite pub, he heard a yelp and saw a young lady tumble forward, thrown from the seat of her bike. Roscoe rushed over, so comfortable now with his new home that he reached out and took her hand to help her up. Only after he’d done it did his Florida reflexes kick in, sending his heartbeat racing and his head swiveling around, checking if anyone had seen him. He almost yanked his hand away, but she wobbled, steadyng herself with his grasp.

“Oh, my goodness, how embarrassing.” She let go and brushed the road dust off her skirts. Then she looked up at him. Her soft brown eyes rooted him to the spot.

“Are you all right, miss?”

She nudged her bike with her foot. “Better than my bicycle.” The front tire sagged on the rim, flat, and she’d badly twisted the handlebars.

“Looks like you punctured it,” he said, pointing to the sharp rock she’d run over that had sent her flying.

Roscoe picked up the bicycle and put the front wheel between his legs, tugging at the handlebars to straighten the alignment, but without a patch there was nothing he could do for the tire.

She told him her name was Megan, and she didn’t live that far away. She’d push the bicycle home.

“I’ll walk you,” Roscoe said, taking the bike for her and rolling it beside him. It made a sad, dragging sound as they walked on the cobblestone road.

It turned out “not that far away” was actually across town on the other side of the park, but since he had time before he had to be back, he didn’t mind. In fact, he was enjoying her company so much that when they got to her house, he offered to stay and fix the tire for her if she had a patch.

“I don’t know if you’ve heard, soldier, but there’s a war on. We don’t happen to have spare bicycle patches in the cupboard.” She tucked her brown bobbed hair behind her ear and crinkled her freckled nose at him.

He liked her teasing him. It made him feel like they were already friends. As they stood on the threshold of her house, with Roscoe wondering how he might tease her back to let her know he wanted to be friends too, Megan’s mother came bustling out. She insisted Roscoe stay for tea, so he did, and found out that tea meant supper. She said she’d made cow, which he thought meant beef, but turned out to be cawl, a potato and vegetable soup with bits of lamb. He only ate a little, knowing Megan and her family had to ration food, while the US Army had plenty. He kept one

eye fixed on the clock, worried about making it back before curfew, and the other fixed on Megan, who had both eyes fixed on him. At the end of the evening, he had to run back at full tilt to make it in time.

The next day, he went back with a rubber patch he'd rustled up from the motor pool. He'd come, he said, to thank them for their hospitality by fixing the tire, and he accepted gratefully when they again invited him to stay.

The Davies family was a revelation for Roscoe, and Megan most of all. Beautiful and sweet, but also clever and funny, meeting her opened up a longing in him he'd never known. She filled his mind by day and his dreams by night, crowding out thoughts of Cora. He hadn't realized a person could feel like this for somebody. He'd certainly never felt anything close to it for Cora.

Roscoe tried and failed to turn off his longing for this woman he had absolutely no future with, staying away for two solid weeks, but then he ran into Megan's mother by the river, and she asked him to visit. It would have been rude to refuse. After that, he stopped trying to keep his distance. What was the point? He enjoyed their company, and it wasn't as if anything would happen between him and Megan.

He became a frequent, welcome visitor to the slate-gray house on St David's Close, bringing whatever presents he thought might ease the burden of living on rations. One week he'd turn up with a pound of ham, the next, half a pound of sugar, the next, tea or butter or chocolate. In wartime Wales, they were rich gifts.

Sometimes he'd take Megan out for the evening. He didn't think of these nights as dates. They were just two people going to the pub or out for a walk. One night as they strolled through the park, Megan tucked close to his side, she stopped to look at the moon shining fat and gibbous through the bare winter branches. She made a comment about the pull of the moon, just inches from his face, her breath tickling his lips.

In that moment, he became two people. The Roscoe who'd been taught a lifetime of Jim Crow lessons that he felt in his bones, and the Roscoe who dipped his head the few inches that separated them, reveling in the feel of Megan's lips and the press of her warm body against his.

It was only much later, lying alone in his bed, that he remembered his commitment to his last-minute, faraway bride.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Uncle Sam Wants You?

Standing in her kitchen, Cora boiled glass jars and lids to sterilize them. Loretta's tree had too many oranges to eat all at once, and since food rationing had started, no one wanted to waste the fruit that, in most years, fell to the ground to rot. Loretta didn't have the patience for canning, so Cora did it, and they split the preserved fruit. As the boiling jars knocked gently against the sides of Cora's large pot, she prepared the oranges, peeling and sectioning them, adding the wedges to her growing pile.

She heard her front door open and looked up to see Patsy bustling in, agitated. "You know how they turned me down for the nurse corps?" she said, without so much as a hello.

"Hello, Patsy," Cora said, raising her eyebrows at her cousin. "Come and sit down, why don't you?" she added when Patsy flopped into a kitchen chair.

"Have you seen this?" She waved a newspaper at Cora, ignoring her sass. "The army has started a new agency called the Cadet Nurse Corps to train new nurses because of the so-called nursing shortage. They're paying for nursing school, and they accelerate you through the program."

"After they turned you down?" Cora took the paper and read: *The army has taken this bold step due to the continuing need for trained nurses.* She looked at Patsy with a sick, familiar feeling climbing into her gut.

“It’s not just me. There are nine thousand nurses they decided they didn’t want, all qualified and ready to go.”

“This is insane. They’re begging for nurse trainees and turning away seasoned nurses at the same time.”

Patsy hopped up to stand beside her. “Read this.” She pointed at a paragraph and then, without waiting for Cora to read, said, “It says they won’t discriminate for the Cadet Nurse Corps. So then, why have quotas for the regular nurse corps? It makes no sense.”

Cora sat down and slowly read the article. It was a glowing piece in *The Florida Times-Union* that praised the army’s ingenuity in meeting wartime needs and spoke of what a great opportunity it would be for young women. It didn’t say a word about all the nurses they’d turned down.

Patsy crossed and uncrossed her arms as Cora read. Tapped her foot. Jiggled her leg. When Cora looked up from the paper, Patsy raised her eyebrows as if she expected Cora to have some kind of answer.

“I’m sorry,” she said, sickened, but not surprised.

“I think I want to apply again,” Patsy said. She bit her lip and looked at Cora. “But also, I don’t.”

Cora understood. There were only so many times a person could be degraded, humiliated, and told they weren’t wanted before giving up.

“The last thing I want is for you to put yourself in harm’s way,” she said. “But it’s wrong to stop you from being a part of this. You’re a good nurse, and they’d be lucky to have you. You should be allowed to join if you want to.”

Patsy slid into a seat and leaned back, slouching. “I keep thinking of Benny and Lee and Roscoe out there hurt or injured with not enough nurses to help them.” She exhaled a heavy breath. “And Lord knows this army would never have a white woman bandaging a colored man.” They both chuckled.

“Imagine a white woman giving a colored man a sponge bath,” Cora said. They laughed outright at that.

“Or changing his bedpan.” They sniggered and hooted until their eyes teared.

When they settled down, Cora took Patsy’s hands and looked her right in the eyes. “Apply again,” she said. “For Benny and Lee and Roscoe and all the others fighting for a country that doesn’t deserve them. We’ve got to look out for our own.”

“I’m so mad, Cora.” Her eyes welled up, and she blinked fiercely. “And I’m tired.”

“You’ve got every right to be both of those things,” Cora said, squeezing her cousin’s hands.

“When are they going to stop?”

Cora pulled her into a hug and rubbed her back. “America’s like a mother who beats her kids,” she said over Patsy’s shoulder. “She won’t stop. We love her because she’s ours, but she won’t stop until we make her.”

Patsy pulled back and swiped at her eyes. “So, how do we do that?”

“We have to force her to change,” Cora said. She picked up the newspaper and tapped the article. “We’re getting you into that nurse corps.”

Cora got a pen and her writing pad, with yet another abandoned letter to Lee sitting on top. She tore it out and folded it, slipping it into her pocket. She ignored the guilt and shame she felt every time she thought of writing to him and the self-loathing she felt every time she chickened out.

She sat with Patsy at the kitchen table, making a list of people who might be able to help. As they hunched over the paper, she heard Jasper holler, “Cora? You there?” He followed that up with some pounding on the doorframe.

“Just come in, Jasper,” she called. “Stop making all that noise.”

He pushed inside with tense shoulders and a drawn face. One look and Cora knew it was bad news. “What happened?”

Jasper held up a letter with an army seal. He looked shocked and angry, incredulous and afraid.

It had to be about Lee. If it were Benny or Roscoe, she would be the one with the letter. Her hands and feet prickled with pins and needles. She couldn't catch her breath.

Jasper sank heavily into a chair and shook his head.

A weight on her chest robbed her of breath. "Tell me."

He put the letter on the table and pushed it across to her. Tears blurred her vision as she scanned the page in a rushed panic, too quickly to make sense of it. She read it again. And then again. Lee wasn't dead. This was something else.

"Well, what is it?" Patsy said. "Are they okay? Are they hurt?"

Cora looked up at her, blinking through her disbelief. "Jasper's being drafted."

PART THREE

The general consensus of opinion seems to be that the only American soldiers with decent manners are the Negroes.

—George Orwell,
Tribune, December 1943

Mrs. Monk,

You have a son to treasure, and feel very proud of. We love him very dearly, and will do anything in the world for him, all we regret is we cannot have him home more, but duties won't allow, he does come as often as possible. We have told him he can look upon our home as his home while in our country, and I will try to fill your place, if only in a small way. But don't worry too much about him, while he is here, we shall take . . . every care of him, if ever he is ill, or in any way wanting us, we shall be there, we look upon him now as our own.

Mother to mother,
Very sincerely with loving thoughts,
Jessie Prior xxxxx

—Jessie Prior, (Pontypool wartime resident) referring to Wilson Monk (African American soldier of the 320th stationed in Pontypool, Wales) in a letter to his mother, as documented by Linda Hervieux in *Forgotten: The Untold Story of D-Day's Black Heroes*

CHAPTER ONE

Megan and the King's Head

Roscoe took Megan's hand and hurried her along the street. There was a rumor going around that the men would be shipping out soon, so everyone was eager to enjoy their last days of being safely tucked up in Wales. The pubs and dance halls were bustling with GIs drinking just a little bit more and dancing just a little bit harder, trying not to think about what was coming.

Roscoe and Megan pushed into the King's Head, a pub at the far end of town and up the hill, and threaded their way through the crowd of people. Roscoe spotted Dally and Thompson from the 320th at the bar, deep in conversation with the church vicar. Passing them with a nod, he found a table along the far wall, and they sat, shifting their chairs closer and leaning in to each other. Time, they knew, was in short supply, and they were desperate to make the most of every second.

"Mum said to pass on her thanks," Megan said, "for helping with the garden. She said the rhododendron never bloomed so full."

"I was glad to do it," he said. He threaded his fingers through hers and ran his thumb over the back of her hand. The closer he got to shipping out, the stronger his need to be near her grew.

"And Dad wanted me to ask if you fancied a kick around this weekend. He and some of the men from the factory are trying to get up a game.

Sunday, I think.”

Roscoe smiled. “Yeah. Sure. If he doesn’t mind having a player who doesn’t know what he’s doing.”

She laughed. “You’re getting better.”

He leaned in closer, enjoying the slight scent of lavender she always carried. “There’s a lot of room for improvement.”

She squeezed his hand. “You’re better than you give yourself credit for, Roscoe.”

He loved the way she said his name, round and light and flicked up at the end. It sounded like someone else, and he felt like someone else, too.

“I’ll go order,” he said.

He made his way to the bar as a loud whooping from the doorway stole his attention. He looked up to see a group of rowdy Americans, loud, brash, white, and uniformed, coming in, letting off a little too much steam. One walked in already holding a bottle of beer, but they’d clearly all been drinking. They moved through the pub like a feral pack.

“What can I get you?” the barman asked, pulling his focus back.

“Evening,” Roscoe said. “Can I get two—”

“Give us five of those so-called beers,” one of the feral GIs hollered, leaning across the bar.

Roscoe’s jaw clenched, and he saw the muscles tighten around the barkeep’s eyes. “I’ll be with you in a minute, mate,” he called, and nodded at Roscoe to continue.

“Two pints of beer, please.”

“Hold on a second,” the soldier bellowed, pushing his way closer. “Are you serving this coon before you serve me?”

“It’s first come, first served here, boyo, and I won’t have you insulting my customers.”

He turned back to Roscoe. “Sorry, friend. Two pints, did you say?”

“He shouldn’t even be a customer,” the GI said. “He shouldn’t be in here. None of them should.” He waved his hand at Dally and Thompson.

The vicar stood and came forward. “You’re being disruptive and rude, son, and interrupting a very nice conversation I’ve been having with these gentlemen.”

“They’re supposed to segregate. They’re not supposed to be where we are. Those are army rules.”

“Well, we’re in the country of Wales, in the town of Pontypool, in the King’s Head pub, and none of those, I’m happy to say, have anything to do with the United States Army or its rules.”

The customers around murmured their agreement.

“We have other rules here, though,” the barkeep said. “Here, we show each other courtesy and we mind our manners. And if you can’t abide by those rules, there’s the door.” He jabbed his finger in its direction and the whole pub cheered.

Roscoe saw the anger that pinched the soldier’s face into a scowl and the shift of tension in his shoulders that signaled he wanted to fight. Back home, he would win even if he lost, Jim Crow made sure of that, but his eyes had widened at the cheer that went around the pub, and Roscoe saw it dawn on him that he was far from home.

“Do we need to call your commanding officer and report you for disturbing the peace?” the vicar asked. “Or will you go quietly?”

The soldier shoved his empty beer bottle off the bar. It shattered on the stone floor.

“The beer here is lousy anyway,” he said, storming out, the four others following.

The pub erupted into more cheers and clapping as they crossed the threshold.

“He does make a point about segregating, though,” another man behind the bar said, “to keep a certain type out.” He got a square of cardboard and

a thick pen and wrote Locals and Colored Soldiers Only and held it up for the crowd, who cheered their approval as he went to slide it into the front window. For Roscoe, something clicked into place, like the feeling of finally coming home.

He made his way back to Megan, stunned. This town and these people, were more than he'd ever thought to hope for. And finding Megan here was like walking right into heaven.

They drank slowly, stretching out the night, swapping secrets and dreams. She wanted to see the Great Wall of China, the Egyptian pyramids, and the Taj Mahal; he fantasized about becoming a pilot. Dreams so crazy they hadn't dared tell anyone but each other. With their glasses twice refilled and emptied, and the night too quickly coming to an end, she asked tentatively, probingly, the thing they had avoided talking about.

“Will you come back when it’s all over?”

Roscoe’s heart sank. He was in no position to make her any promises. He might not survive whatever was coming, and if he did, there was Cora. His wife.

He hadn’t meant to fall for Megan. He should have stepped away as soon as he started to catch feelings, but staying away would have been like turning off the sun. He shoved aside his guilt and shame every time he answered one of Cora’s letters and neglected to mention her. And he told himself it was best not to tell Megan he was married, because it could distress her, or make her doubt his feelings. She might not understand that his marriage had been an impulsive, practical arrangement. A favor. A promise he never should have made.

“It’s a bad idea to make promises in a war,” he said to Megan. “All I know is that this is the happiest I’ve ever been, and I’d like nothing more than to come back here when it’s all over and be with you for the rest of my life.”

Her eyes welled up. “I’d like that too,” she said, beaming and blushing deep crimson. “Very much.”

She let her hand run up his thigh and leaned over to kiss him, and in that kiss, he understood that she believed he had just proposed. Roscoe said nothing. The time to explain about Cora had long passed, so instead he told her another truth. “I love you, Megan.” And he laid his hand on her thigh, as high and familiar as hers lay on his, and leaned in for another kiss.

CHAPTER TWO

Army Nurse Corps

With Jasper gone, everything seemed duller and quieter, and the loneliness Cora had felt since losing Lee, Benny, and Roscoe echoed even louder inside her, exposing all her emptiness. She threw herself into her work at Sunshine State Insurance, grateful to have something that shifted her focus from the constant worry.

Mr. Griffin had given her a raise to encourage her to stay, and while she appreciated the extra money, she also valued the more subtle gestures, like her full-sized desk by the window and the shared, unsegregated coffee pot. With just the two of them, there was no more navigating the color line all day long. She didn't realize how much it had weighed on her until she didn't have to do it anymore.

In her lunch break and before and after work, Cora wrote letters for Patsy. She hated the thought of her cousin leaving, too, but she'd promised to help, and she couldn't stand to see the nurse corps keep Patsy out for reasons that weren't even reasons. She started a letter-writing campaign to anyone and everyone with the power to do something: the surgeon general of the army, the head of the Red Cross, even First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. When she wrote to Mabel Staupers of the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses, she got a letter back telling Patsy that serving her country

was her right and responsibility as a citizen, and that she and others were already fighting for colored nurses like Patsy.

Every time Cora sat down to write a new letter, she felt a flare of guilt and grief over the one she still hadn't written. She owed Lee an explanation. His pleading, apologetic letters tore her in two. He wanted to hear from her, even if she was angry, he said. He asked her not to give up on them and promised he'd straighten everything out between them when he got home. He thought of her every day. He missed her like crazy. He loved her more than anything. She read the hurt and confusion in every line.

Keeping her marriage from him wasn't just selfish and cowardly, it was cruel. She had no right to hang on to him at any cost after doubting him when it mattered. And she was betraying Roscoe, who still didn't know the first thing about her and Lee. She wondered how he would react if he ever found out she'd let Lee write her love letters for nearly two years without mentioning she was married. When her shame threatened to overwhelm her, she finally sat down and penned a gut-wrenching confession of a letter, carrying it around in her purse for a week before she found the nerve to mail it.

The day she sent it off was the same day Patsy finally got her answer. With pressure mounting, the army raised the nurse quota from fifty-six to a few hundred, and Patsy was in. Cora didn't know how much her letter writing had helped, but she liked to think it had at least made a difference in getting Patsy chosen over the thousands of other Negro nurses trying to get a posting.

The Sunday before Patsy was to report for duty, Cora and Momma picked her and Aunt Teen up in the blue Plymouth and drove them to Saints of Mercy Baptist Church. Pastor Glen had promised a special blessing for Patsy, and all four women, decked in their Sunday best, linked arms and marched in over the buckled paving stones. They sat in the front row, the hard pine underneath them worn but polished, the finery of the altar faded

but clean. When Pastor Glen lifted Patsy in prayer, the whole congregation got to their feet, praying for safety and protection over her. They'd done the same for Benny, Roscoe, and Jasper, but not for Lee, who had never set foot in Saints of Mercy Baptist and swore he never would.

Cora bowed her head and raised her hand, asking God to protect Patsy, but also and especially Lee, who no one else on earth was praying for. She pleaded to God to let him forgive her when he got her letter. And let him not be too angry or too hurt. And let him not stop loving her, which was wrong to pray for, while being married to another man, but she did anyway.

When the singing and stomping died down, and Pastor Glen and the Holy Spirit decided to let the service end, the whole church crowded around Patsy, congratulating her, hugging her, and wishing her well. Pride showed in Sister Betty Hammond's glistening eyes and Deacon Gray's puffed chest and Brother Twiggs's straight back and Sister Nancy Jane's upturned chin. Out of thousands of colored nurses, the army had picked their very own Patsy to care for their brothers and husbands, cousins, and friends. In their smiles, Cora read the gratitude she felt as well. Patsy would go where they could not and look after their loved ones.

“My Anthony is out there with the supply troops in the Red Ball Express. They got a lot of our folks and a lot of casualties up that way. Is that where you’re going?” Sister Delores clasped Patsy’s hand with a hopeful look.

“I don’t know, ma’am. I don’t guess they’ll tell us until we get there.”

Cora and Patsy made their way outside to wait for Momma and Aunt Teen, standing next to the car under the shade of a hickory tree. As they waited, Patsy peeled back the flaky bark, unusually quiet.

“You okay?” Cora asked.

Patsy pulled off a strip and dropped it onto the hard-packed dirt. “I know I asked for this,” she said, “and I should feel honored they picked

me.” Her eyes drifted across the street to the trees lining the road and then up to the thin clouds streaking the sky. “But now that it’s real, I’m scared.”

Cora wrapped an arm around Patsy’s shoulders and drew her close. “Of course you’re scared. You’re going off to war like a damn fool.”

Patsy chuckled, snaking her own arm around Cora’s waist and holding tight to her side.

“Scared is good,” Cora said. “It’ll keep you safe.”

Patsy nodded, like she was trying to convince herself it was true.

“And remember, they don’t need you to fight. They need you tucked safely away from the enemy where you can patch up our men in peace.”

Patsy let out a shaky breath. “You’re right,” she said, releasing Cora’s waist. She pulled another strip of bark from the hickory tree, turned it over in her fingers, and let it fall to the ground. “I guess it just makes me nervous trusting the army when I don’t know what to expect.”

Cora put her hand on Patsy’s shoulder, turning her away from the tree and locking her in a stare. “You know I hate this war,” she said. “But I’m proud of you. I wish I could do something to help them, too. More than giving blood and planting a victory garden. I’m glad you’re going to be looking out for them.”

“I couldn’t have done it without your letters.”

“Well, then”—she said, a cocky smile curling her lips—“I guess I’m proud of me, too.”

CHAPTER THREE

Normandy, June 6, 1944

Roscoe felt like he was trapped in a nightmare as his boat approached Omaha Beach. Gunfire and explosives erupted from the shore, mixed with shouts and screams. His stomach flipped in somersaults. He'd already filled his puke bag. Now he threw up into his helmet and dumped it over the side of the ship.

The water wasn't blue. Instead, the blood of the soldiers who didn't make it onshore had tinged it red. Their heads bobbed in the sea like a gruesome warning.

Crouching on the floor of a landing craft, he flinched each time a slug hit the tank they crowded behind. The closer they got to the beach, the heavier the fire. It was madness. There was no way Roscoe was coming out from behind that tank. But then, the skipper ordered, "Get onshore," and the ramp fell with a bang. The tank came alive and rolled down the ramp.

Everything in Roscoe told him to stay on the boat. The beach was carnage, bullets, and bombs. He wet himself watching the tank roll down, then, gasping and wild-eyed, he followed it into the chest-high water, splashing toward the shore. He lost his footing, dunked under the surface, and scrambled to right himself again. The gray life belt around his waist helped to lift him up. When he got to his feet, he saw Thompson bobbing in the water ahead of him, blood seeping into the sea.

“Thompson!” Roscoe reached for him.

“Move! Move!” someone shouted and shoved him from behind. “Get onshore!”

He splashed onto the beach behind the tank as a land mine detonated farther down the coast, shaking the earth. Flinching, he dropped to the ground, hands over his head. “Come on,” Wilson shouted, pulling at his arm. Bullets sent the sand spitting beside him. He wanted to curl into a ball, but he forced himself up and on. Sand clung to his soggy clothes, chafing his legs as he ran, as he staggered toward a sloping embankment of sea-smoothed stones about ten yards from the high-water mark and angled just enough to act as a low wall. Roscoe slotted in among the men already taking cover there, lying low and flat. He looked back toward the shoreline and saw the tank’s turret in flames. Five men had been inside. None climbed out.

And still the boats kept coming. A shell hit a landing craft loaded with soldiers. Men were blown into the air, arms and legs blasted off their bodies, before plunging into the sea. On the beach, radios, gas masks, ration tins, and rifles lay strewn between the bodies of the wounded and the dead. Medics worked frantically, dragging the injured away from the shoreline, crouching in a ditch to bandage an arm or a leg. Roscoe watched a medic get shot in the head and fall on top of the man he was trying to save. His insides seized, and he heaved the dry nothing that was left in his stomach.

Remember your training, his CO had said that morning. Already, it seemed like days ago.

A shell was lobbed over the shingle stone embankment where he crouched. It blasted three men to Roscoe’s right, splattering him with blood and guts. He jumped up and ran, first in one direction, and when a shell went off in front of him, he turned and ran the other way. He didn’t know where he needed to be going or which direction made sense. All he could think to do was run.

A soldier stuck his head out of a foxhole and shouted, “Get in here!” Without considering if he should or shouldn’t, he dove for the hole and rolled in.

Roscoe sat in that foxhole, panting for who knew how long, catching his breath and coming back to himself. With trembling hands, he took stock. He had his helmet, he had his gun, he had his balloon still clipped to his belt. He’d lost his rations.

The man in the hole was part of the Big Red One, the 1st Infantry Division, identifiable by the large red number one on his arm. He looked frazzled and scared but not panicked. The 1st Infantry had fought in North Africa and Sicily. Those fellows knew their way around a battlefield. He’d said his name was Roger or maybe Rogers when Roscoe asked. After that, they sat in silence, crouched in the hole with the deafening noises of mortars and gunfire blasting above their heads.

When the shelling eased, Roger or Rogers turned to Roscoe and said, “You ready?”

“Ready for what?”

“To push through. We have to get off the beach.”

Roscoe shook his head. “I’m barrage balloon. I have to stay here. Get the balloons up.” He tapped the folded balloon clipped to his belt.

Rogers nodded and checked his weapon as Roscoe poked his head out of the foxhole. Five narrow ravines that weren’t much more than dirt tracks led from the beach over the bluffs to the roadways beyond. On the one farthest east, Roscoe saw US trucks trundling up, which meant they’d secured the track. That was where he needed to go to get his balloon up.

Down in the hole, Rogers was breathing hard, readying himself for his push over the bluffs.

“Where’s your helmet?” Roscoe asked, crouching next to him.

The man shook his head. “I’ll get one from . . . you know.” His eyes darted up to the surface, where the dead GIs littered the beach.

Roscoe took off his helmet and handed it to Rogers. He put it on and peered out of the hole, gun at the ready, body poised to leap out and run. A ping to his helmet startled them both and made him drop back into the hole, panting, with shock and terror in his eyes. The helmet was nicked where a bullet had hit it and slid off. Rogers looked up at Roscoe. “You just saved my life.”

“Yeah, well,” Roscoe said, “you saved mine.”

The soldier offered his hand, and Roscoe took it, but found himself being pulled into a hug and clapped on the back. When Rogers released him, the man readied his gun again and poised himself to climb out. With a last look, he saluted. Not some half-assed joke of a salute, but a real one that carried the weight of two lives saved in the heat of a battle that smelled of gunpowder, diesel fuel, burning flesh, and death.

“Give ‘em hell,” Roscoe said, saluting him back, and Rogers charged out of the hole.

The din of the fighting made it hard to hear, but after a while, Roscoe swore he could just make out a familiar voice shouting names: Gordon, Thompson, Cooper, Simmons, Monk.

All men of the 320th. It was a roll call coming from another foxhole.

“Crane!” He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, “Roscoe Crane’s here!”

“Crane, I hear you! It’s Reed! Lieutenant Colonel Reed! I’ve got Baker and Smith here, too!”

Three men. The balloons needed teams of five or at least four, but maybe it could be done with three. Roscoe shouted over to Reed about the secured ravine the trucks were using to the east, but Reed had already seen it and just needed enough men together to make up a team.

“We can do it with three!” Roscoe shouted to the lieutenant colonel. He hoped it was true.

“Then get over there, soldiers, and get those babies in the sky!”

CHAPTER FOUR

Come Out Fighting

Every battalion had a nickname and a motto, and the 761st was no different. The Germans had come up with a new tank, the Panther, which was rumored to be better than anything anyone had seen, so they decided to call themselves the Black Panthers to announce that they were a Negro tank battalion, and better than anything anyone had seen. Their motto came straight from Joe “The Brown Bomber” Louis, the heavyweight champion of the world. Before his 1938 fight with the German boxer Max Schmeling, reporters asked about his strategy for the match. Joe said, “I’m going to come out fighting,” then knocked out his challenger in the first round. The men of the 761st figured that if they ever got a chance on the battlefield, they’d do like Joe and come out fighting, so that became the motto, and that was what they did. Even when they weren’t fighting Germans.

As the war raged on and the months slipped by, Lee and the highly trained 761st Tank Battalion ran predeployment maneuvers in Texas, beating every team they came up against. The army had refused to deploy the Black Panthers for over two years, so they’d been training far longer than any battalion they faced, and it showed. They skirmished with just about every tank battalion before they shipped to the front, and the Black Panthers were better than all of them. But still, month after month, it was

those other troops who deployed while Lee and his company were forced to sit on the sidelines.

Lee had given up hope of ever joining the war when the miracle order finally came down to deploy. Uncle Sam had become desperate enough to use all the troops at his disposal, even the Negro ones.

Lee whooped and yelled, celebrating with the rest of them. Green George brought in the moonshine he'd been making behind the swamp, which tasted better than any swamp-grown moonshine had a right to taste, and the whole company got falling-down drunk.

It was finally happening. Lee's first thought was to write and tell Cora, but that was one letter he would not write. After all those months of silence, she'd written at last, and it was a bullet to the gut. He read her letter so many times that he memorized it, and he remembered snippets throughout the day like glass shards against his heart. *Dear Lee*, she had written, which was already a bad start. Not *My Darling* or *Beloved* or *My Dearest*. *Dear Lee* could have been anyone.

First of all, I need you to know that I still love you and I always will, she had written, and he knew he didn't want to read the rest.

He walked past the latrines, out of camp, and sat down on a muddy tree stump, bracing himself. *I'm grateful for every letter you've sent me, and I'm sorry that I've been too much of a coward to write you back*.

“Don’t do this,” he said aloud, as if Cora could hear him through the printed words, as if he could stop what she had already decided, written, and sent.

I have done something, and I hope you will be able to forgive me. He felt sick.

When you left, I was angry and hurt, and I stopped believing in us. I worried our love was all in my head because I didn't understand how you could have left if you loved me. So, I did something. Or let myself be talked into doing something.

I'm sorry I doubted you, but even though I was confused, I always loved you. I still love you. Lee, I don't know how to say this. I guess that's why it's taken me so long to write this letter.

I married Roscoe. I know you'll find that hard to understand. I don't half understand it myself. It was rushed and foolish, and I want to blame Benny, but really, I have only myself to blame. I'm so, so sorry. I still love you more than I can say.

I know everything's a mess and it's my fault. I've been dreading telling you. It's why I haven't written. I haven't known how to say it. I still don't. I'm afraid I'm doing this all wrong.

I'm sorry, Lee. Please forgive me. When the war is over, we'll figure out a way forward. I love you. I will always love you.

She was right that he couldn't understand her running to Roscoe, marrying Roscoe, after keeping him a secret for nearly a year. With one letter, his whole world had been spun around and flung into the sea, and he couldn't find his way to the surface.

That she still loved him made it worse. It was exactly what he feared. Even though she loved him, he wasn't enough for her. Joining the army was supposed to fix that, and instead, it had been the end of them.

Lee wrote back, telling her to give up Roscoe and give him another chance, that no one would love her like he did, but he burned the letters instead of sending them. He had no right to her. She'd made her choice, and even though he was still achingly in love, he had to leave her be.

He wrote to Uncle Drew that he'd be shipping out and tore up Cora's letter after months of reading it, as if that would stop the throbbing in his chest. On the train to New York, he sat with George Green, nicknamed Green George because he was young and inexperienced. He'd lied about his age to get in, but he knew whiskey better than men twice his age.

“It's because my grandfather taught me, and he was the best whiskey maker in the world,” he explained on the train.

When Lee laughed, he doubled down, saying, “He taught Jack Daniel everything he knows.”

The train ride to New York took three days, and on that first day, Green George told Lee all about his grandfather, Nearest Green, and how he came to teach Jack Daniel, and how Jack Daniel’s whiskey was really Nearest Green’s recipe. Lee wanted to know why Green George didn’t start his own business if he could make whiskey like that.

“My grandfather used to say you should know what you’re good at and know what you’re not good at. I couldn’t run a business to save my life. I’d be broke and bankrupt in a month.”

By the time the train pulled into New York two days later, Lee and Green George had their whole business planned out. They’d be partners fifty-fifty. Lee would run the show, and all Green George had to do was share his whiskey-making secrets.

In New York, they boarded a ship bound for England and spent weeks fine-tuning their plans. They’d call it Green’s Whiskey, which was only fair since the whole business would be built on a Green family recipe. All the way from England to France, Green George kept saying, “The trick is the charcoal,” and then he’d walk Lee through the steps again like reciting a prayer.

In France, some kind of major operation was in the works. The army gathered troops like crazy, but the gathering took months. While they waited for whatever was coming, Green George and Lee ironed out which grains to use. Barley and rye would need longer aging, but corn they could sell right away, and Lee planned the marketing and distribution. They’d start slow and build.

“This is gonna work,” they kept telling each other, refining their plans a little more every day.

Lee couldn’t stop thinking about Cora, wondering if she’d take him back if he told her about the business, and showed her he could be

somebody folks respected. He kept having to shut those thoughts down and remind himself it was too late. She was married, for God's sake, and had been for two whole years as he made a fool of himself gushing on about what he felt for her in letter after letter. He should have taken the hint when she didn't write back. It didn't matter that he still thought of her as his girl; she was Roscoe's wife.

And it made sense, really, if he thought about it. Roscoe had had a hard time just like Lee, with no father or mother, worse maybe, since his folks abandoned him by choice. But Roscoe didn't fall apart, lashing out at the world until he got in trouble with the law, needing Uncle Drew to rescue him and set him on the right path. He'd managed by himself.

Lee admired him for that, and Momma North and the church ladies did too, smiling whenever he came around. With Lee, they held their handbags tighter. Choosing Roscoe meant Cora wouldn't have to lie and hide. He was better for her. Lee knew that. He just couldn't get his heart to agree.

If the steady stream of troops entering France wasn't enough evidence that something big was coming, having General Patton show up took away any doubt. All talk of the whiskey business died when he came to camp, and even thoughts of Cora only simmered in the back of Lee's mind.

The day after the general came, Lieutenant Colonel Bates confirmed they'd been assigned to Patton's Third Army, which was positioning itself for a major counteroffensive through the Ardennes Forest.

Patton wasn't an especially tall man, but after his victories in North Africa and Sicily, he walked among the troops with the stature of a half giant. When he got to the area where the 761st were camped, Bates called the men to attention. General Patton looked them over and told them to stand at ease. He had something to say.

"Men," he began, letting his eyes roam over the battalion, "you're the first Negro tankers to ever fight in the American army."

Lee stood a little straighter against the weight of that responsibility.

“I would never have asked for you if you weren’t good. I have nothing but the best in my army.”

Lee couldn’t forget the years it had taken to get there, or that Patton had been against Negroes in the army, but he took the general’s words as an invitation to write a new story over old pain.

“I don’t care what color you are,” Patton continued, “as long as you go up there and kill those Kraut sons of bitches!”

The men cheered at that. They were more than ready to be let loose on the enemy.

“Everyone has their eyes on you and is expecting great things from you. Most of all, your race is looking forward to your success.” His gaze fell on Lee, and it was like he was speaking right to him. “Don’t let them down, and, damn you, don’t let me down!”

The Black Panthers cheered, and Lee cheered along with them. They would go out there and fight for themselves, for the folks back home, for the future. If all eyes were on them, the Black Panthers were ready to put on the show of their lives and come out fighting.

CHAPTER FIVE

Meeting at the Bulge

With Africa won, Benny and his battalion got on a ship and sailed to England. There, they drank beer and sang songs and tried to kiss girls. They were too boisterous, but they'd earned the right to be loud and happy. They'd fought and lived. That was something to celebrate.

The locals thought they were rowdy and vulgar, but the locals hadn't faced off with an MG 42 Buzzsaw and lived to tell about it. They hadn't had a live grenade land in their foxhole and thrown it back at the enemy, knowing that if they were too slow, it would rip them to pieces. Doing these things unleashed something in a man that made him need to howl at the moon, beat his chest, and drink too much. Such a man filled up on living, because he knew that the army would send him back to the "Screaming Mimi" rocket launchers and "Bouncing Betty" S-mines to let him try his luck at staying alive one more time.

Sure enough, the order soon came through. Benny and the 34th were sent to France, where they marched to the Ardennes Forest, where the Germans were dug in tight, holding a line they had no intention of moving. The raucous banter that had marked their trip all the way up to England gave way to bickering when they neared France, and the fear kicked in. By the time they approached the German line, no one spoke.

A chill bit at Benny's ears, nose, fingers, and toes, and every day seemed to get colder. Grass crunched hard and frozen underfoot as he marched until the snows came and covered everything with a blanket of white.

Ten guys died on the first day. Twenty-five on the second. Medics evacuated dozens. On the third day, Benny almost got himself killed when he dove away from a blast but toward machine gun fire. He didn't know why he was still alive.

They got their tank escort on day four when a tank battalion that had been long due to rotate off instead got reassigned to the 34th. When a few of the men climbed out of the tank, Benny's eyes bugged out of his head. They were a colored tank battalion. Benny had seen other Negro soldiers, but they'd been ditch diggers and mess servers and street builders and supply train workers. Always service corps, never infantry, and certainly never tankers. He felt an avalanche of pride for a battalion that wasn't even his.

The infantry and tank escort got about two miles through the woods when the assault came. Relentless blasts that shook the earth. Benny had to whack his numb fingers against his thighs to make them bend to the trigger of his weapon. All around, shells exploded and bullets flew. Crawley stepped forward and triggered a Bouncing Betty. Benny dove away from the blast, covering his head as he landed hard on his side. He looked back at Crawley. His stomach and chest had been ripped open. Benny could see the man's insides glistening with dirt-smeared blood. Steam rose from his warm body into the frigid air.

They stayed out there for two weeks, without winning even an inch of ground, and when they finally rotated off the front line, the tank company rotated off with them. They all pulled back behind US lines, and that was when Benny saw Lee with his tank mates, looking about ten years older, but alive and well.

“Lee,” Benny called, waving, surprised and thrilled to see him. After three years of homesickness, finding Lee in this carnage was like finding gold in the dirt. He was a living, breathing piece of home.

Benny started over to his friend.

“You know that guy?” Parker asked, and Benny stopped, remembering who he was now.

“I . . . I . . .” Benny stuttered. He could not tell Parker how he knew Lee.

Lee’s beaming, wide-open grin, which had spread across his face when he saw Benny, faltered. His expression shifted from joy to shocked understanding. His face closed down with a guarded expression, giving nothing away.

“As I live and breathe,” Lee said, casual words bright with tension. “Am I seeing a ghost or is this Benny North right in front of me?”

Benny wondered if he heard contempt in his voice. Was “ghost” a jab at him passing? Was he judging him?

“It’s good to see you,” Benny said, dragging out the words until they meant so much more. The slow words said, *Don’t tell them*, and asked, *Can I trust you? Are you glad to see me? Are we still friends?*

He felt eyes on them both and took a step back.

“It’s been a spell,” Lee said into the awkward silence.

Benny felt the flush of blood rushing to his face. He wished it were Roscoe he’d found in the middle of the war. Lee had always been so high-minded about passing, but Roscoe would have understood.

“I know Lee a little from back home,” Benny said to Parker and anyone else who was listening. “He’s a great ball player. A musician too.”

“And a hell of a tanker,” Parker said, his hand coming down on Lee’s shoulder. “That was some fighting out there. I can’t tell you how glad I was to have you with us.”

Lee shrugged and sidestepped Parker, slipping out from under his touch. “We all do what we’ve got to do,” he said, with a pointed look at Benny.

“Yeah. We do,” Benny said. He wanted to tell Lee that passing hadn’t been his idea, but there was no way to explain in front of the others. And he wasn’t sure Lee wanted to hear it anyway. “It’s been a hell of a war.”

Lee walked up to him, and Benny braced himself to be cursed out, to be slugged, to be exposed. His heart thumped so hard that blood rushed in his ears, but Lee offered his hand. Benny took it, and they shook. It was an ordinary handshake—not the complicated, grappling ritual of brotherhood they used back home—the handshake of strangers.

“Good luck to you,” Lee said, like any stranger might. His eyes burned into Benny’s, and Benny knew he didn’t just mean the fighting.

CHAPTER SIX

Nurse Patsy

It seemed like everybody was dropping out of Cora's life, one after another. First Lee, Benny, and Roscoe joined the war, then Loretta quit Sunshine State Insurance for a munitions factory job, then Jasper got drafted, and now Patsy was gone too. In her letters, Patsy wrote about friends she was making and a mangy dog that kept coming around camp, but she didn't talk about her work, and she never said a word about why she was still stateside. Cora could read the disappointment in her letters, though, in the curt way she talked about her posting and the army.

For Patsy's birthday, Cora had the bright idea to drive out to see her for the weekend. She was stationed right there in Florida, so Cora wanted to visit before the army shipped her off to wherever they'd been talking about needing all those nurses.

"Here are your sandwiches for along the way," Momma said, handing Cora too much food.

"I can't eat all this," Cora said, rolling her eyes behind her mother's back.

"And there's gas in the trunk."

Cora opened the back of Benny's sky-blue Plymouth and, sure enough, two gas canisters sat side by side.

"Momma," Cora said with a sigh.

“I just don’t want you to have to stop. You never know what you’re gonna run into out there.”

Cora hugged her momma and kissed her cheek. “Thanks for the gas and the sandwiches. Now, stop worrying. I’ll be fine.”

Her momma handed her *The Negro Motorist Green Book*. “That’s in case you do have to stop,” she said.

The book had been Benny’s, but he’d never used it. Instead, he’d stopped wherever he wanted, knowing he wouldn’t be challenged, passing easily wherever he went.

Cora tossed the book onto the back seat with her bag and settled herself behind the wheel.

“I’ll tell Patsy you said hi,” she said, starting the engine.

Momma nodded and backed up from the car. As Cora pulled away, she saw the anxious set of her momma’s mouth in the rearview mirror and the worried eyes that followed Cora until she turned the corner.

Civilians weren’t allowed to wander around Patsy’s camp, so they had arranged to meet in a nearby town. Cora hoped to take her somewhere nice, but there wasn’t a single sit-down restaurant that served Negroes. Just a run-down rib joint that had a few benches outside to sit on. So that was what they did.

It was great to see Patsy again, but Cora could tell something was wrong. Her eagerness for nursing had practically vanished, and she hinted that she regretted joining the nurse corps.

“Is it that bad?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she said.

Cora wondered how badly the soldiers could be wounded to make Patsy regret coming to help them. She imagined blown-off legs and burn-scared

faces. Silently, she said another prayer for Lee, Benny, Roscoe, and now Jasper.

After dinner, Cora and Patsy walked through town and passed a restaurant off-limits to them. It was the kind of place Cora had hoped to find for Patsy's birthday dinner. Cora took in the white tablecloths and white faces inside. Then she gasped. One of the men sitting at a table leaned forward, and she saw the large white letters printed on his back. PW. Prisoner of war. She grabbed Patsy's arm.

"Look." She pointed. She couldn't tear her eyes away. There was a whole table of them with dark shirts and white letters on their backs, just sitting there. A waiter came to their table and served them plates of food.

"Let's go," Patsy said, tugging at Cora to come away.

She didn't budge. "Aren't they supposed to be in some kind of prison?"

Patsy scoffed, eyeing the men through the window. "They don't get put in a prison like you think of a prison. They get passes for good behavior, and with a pass, they can come and go pretty much where they please. They just have to check back in at the end of the day and stay out of trouble. They can go to the movies or the shops or restaurants, just like any other white man, as long as they have that pass."

Cora blinked, slowly looking back at the men in the restaurant. A wobbly feeling ran up her legs, like the ground had suddenly buckled under her feet, and she felt the solid truth she thought she stood on crumble.

"But," Cora said, shaking her head. "They're the enemy."

Next door to the restaurant, two more men with PW on their shirts came out of a general store, each clutching a packet of cigarettes. One had his arm in a sling. Both looked relaxed and at ease.

"Ah, Nurse," the one with the sling said when he saw Patsy. He lifted his casted arm.

"It itches. Tomorrow you must fix it." His thick accent sounded unmistakably German.

Patsy's face set into a tight mask. Only the flare of her nostrils gave her away. "I don't know if I'll have time to help you tomorrow." Cora gaped at her.

The second prisoner of war stepped forward. "You," he pointed a finger at Patsy, "will find the time. You made it itch, so you will make it good."

"I'll have to see if I—"

"I will tell your major and he will tell you," the casted man said.

Patsy balled her hands into fists at her sides and turned, storming away, leaving Cora to scramble after her. "Patsy," she hissed, but Patsy just kept walking like the devil himself was following.

"Patsy, what was that? Why does he know you? What's going on?"

Patsy pounded on until she got to a quiet street. Out of breath and with rage tugging at her features, she glared at Cora like it was her fault.

"I fixed his stupid arm."

Cora stared, confused.

"That's what they have us doing down here. The war goes on and on and I'm stuck here patching up Nazis."

Words dried in Cora's mouth like dust. And then a prickling started in her palms and climbed up her spine.

"They're not even that hurt," Patsy said, eyes blazing. "They have to be well enough to be shipped all the way to America. And these people," she pointed back toward the POWs and the restaurant, "who just finished shooting at our men, get to prance around here, going where they won't even let us go." Her rush of words explained the silences in her letters and the bitterness Cora had sensed between the lines.

Cora wrapped her arms around Patsy, but couldn't say a thing to comfort her, because the truth was, this was all kinds of wrong.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jasper

According to the news, every day brought fresh victories, and the war seemed all but won, but Cora learned the true story from reading the letters the guys sent home. They talked about losing friends in bloody, frightening, deadly battles, and barely making it out alive. Her heart sank to think of any of them finding out about those German prisoners sashaying around town wherever they pleased, treated like some kind of long-lost cousins. It certainly wouldn't be Cora who told them. Instead, she wrote letters about planting tomatoes and about Sister Candice Harvey singing off-key just as loud as you please at church, and Pastor Glen complaining that she and Momma didn't come regularly enough when he knew Momma only had a few Sundays off.

She tried to write to all four of them every week. Even Lee, who'd stopped writing to her after she'd finally told him about marrying Roscoe. She longed to hear from him again.

Instead, she had to content herself with scraps of secondhand stories from his uncle Drew. She'd taken to checking in with him every month for news about Lee.

It was Jasper who wrote back the most. Reading his letters was like having him whisper his stories in her ear. She felt him in every word, just as rascally as he ever was. Lee's letters had been the same. He'd poured a

piece of himself into each line, till she almost felt he was sitting right beside her. Benny didn't write like that, and neither did Roscoe. With them, it was like they'd been warned so hard not to write anything that could give away army secrets that they could barely think to say anything at all. They wrote cramped, constipated notes, mostly about the weather, that sounded like they could have been written by anybody.

Cora sat on the couch with her latest treasure. A letter from Jasper. She drew her legs up to her side and flattened his letter on her lap, settling in to read. In his spiky scrawl, he wrote:

Dear Cora,

I can't tell you where I am exactly, except to say that I'm in Italy, and I can't tell you what I'm doing, except that it will involve fighting the Germans, since the Italians threw in the towel. I wish the Germans would, too, so we could end this mess and go home. What I wouldn't give for some home cooking. I dream about biscuits and gravy. Believe it or not, a few days ago we were in a kitchen in a village I can't tell you about, and this one cat, Smilie, made something that was almost grits, but yellow.

We're starting to thaw out from the cold I told you about. Smilie could handle it since he's from Detroit—even if he can cook down-home food, but the rest of us have been freezing our keisters off. They should have trained us on how to pull a trigger with frostbitten fingers. We could've hit more of them wily Jerries if they had.

After what went down in February, which I won't tell you about, Bull Man, me, and Creek started doing some shooting practice on the side. We were making decent progress, until our jackass of a CO ripped into us for wasting ammunition. Can you believe that? I'm on latrine duty now. I'd like to use his cracker ass for target practice,

but we're supposed to be on the same side. At least that's what they tell me.

We've had some new fellas join the Buffalo Soldiers 92nd. An all Japanese American regiment has shown up to fight alongside our Negro regiment. What you're thinking right now is exactly what all of us were thinking when we clapped eyes on them, and they clapped eyes on us. If they put us together, we've got some grade A bullshit coming our way. That's why I went for that extra practice with Bull Man and Creek.

The 442nd, that's the new guys, mostly keep to themselves and we keep to ourselves, but I met this one guy, Kenji, who's hot into jazz and especially Duke Ellington, and you know how I feel about the Duke, so we hit it off pretty good right from the start. Anyway, after Pearl Harbor, freedom-loving Uncle Sam stuffed him and his family in a camp for being from Japan. Did you know we did that? I'm telling you, America and the Nazis dance to the same band. And that cat still volunteered, even with his family stuck back in that stinking camp. He reminds me of Lee. Too optimistic for his own good.

Anyway, whatever plan they've got going, I hope it happens soon. Waiting around thinking about it is straining my nerves, and nothing good comes from that. Like that time Lee booked me to play the Oleander Club with him, and I got so worked up waiting on the day that by the time it came, I couldn't play to save my life, and I squeaked like a greenhorn amateur.

Man, oh man, what I wouldn't give to be squeaking at the Oleander.

Well, hug my momma for me and holler at all the folks back home. Take care of yourself, and I'll try to do the same.

—Jasper

Cora tucked the letter into her handbag and headed out to the car. Whenever she got one from Jasper, she drove straight over to share it with his momma, who was eager for every scrap of news.

At Momma Mae's apartment building, cars crowded the narrow parking lot, and when Cora started up the stairs, Sister Hammond stepped out and eyed Cora's empty hands. "I thought you might have brought your corn bread," she said as Cora approached.

Cora bunched her forehead in confusion and looked past her into the darkened room. Half a dozen church ladies buzzed around Momma Mae. Sister Candice tried to hand Jasper's momma a plate of food, but the woman shook her head and pushed it away.

"What's going on?"

"Your aunt Teen didn't tell you yet?" Sister Hammond said. "We couldn't call you cause you don't have a phone." She said it with a kind of defensiveness that was nearly an accusation. "We called your aunt Teen at the school instead, and she was going to tell you."

Cora looked back at Momma Mae, her slumping form, her head hung low. Sister Delores put her arms around her, and she saw from behind how Momma Mae's shoulders jerked and bounced. Cora's hand slipped to Jasper's letter in her bag as her mouth went dry.

"Poor Momma Mae," Sister Hammond said. "That woman gave birth to four babies, with Jasper the only one to survive growing up, and now this."

Cora took a step back, shook her head, and clutched the letter harder.

"You should let her know you're here," Sister Hammond said, reaching for Cora's arm and drawing her back in.

She had to fight the urge to turn and run. Her eyes pricked with tears, and a ringing started up in her ears, high-pitched and persistent. "I just got his letter," she said, trying to make it not true. She drew it out like proof of life.

“I’m sorry, Sugar. I know you two were close friends.” Sister Hammond slipped her thick arms around Cora and patted her back. The gesture of kindness felt suffocating.

Cora pushed away from her, holding the woman back at arm’s length.

“They sent a telegraph with some pretty words about how he went honorably and in the line of duty,” she said. “Near about broke her.” She sized up Cora’s growing distress and leaned in close to tell her in a firm whisper, “She needs us to be strong for her, you hear me?”

A lump in Cora’s throat grew to a ball that crushed her voice, keeping her mute. She swiped at teary eyes as Sister Hammond took her arm and guided her over to face Momma Mae.

Jasper’s momma’s eyes were red-rimmed and puffy, and the smile she always wore for Cora was gone. Cora took her hands, and the woman gripped her back so tight that Cora thought she might leave a bruise.

“I’m so sorry,” Cora said.

Momma Mae’s face scrunched up in pain and anger as her lips trembled. Her voice, when she spoke, was a battered shell, twisted with heartache and agony like only a mother knows.

“They done killed my son.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Blue Discharge

Most tank battalions fought for a week or two before they returned from the front to rest for a spell. Lee and the 761st Black Panthers stayed on the front line for seventy days. Exhaustion pressed into every part of Lee's being, slowing his reflexes, clouding his judgment. But he pushed on, first in the mud and then the snow, letting the muscle memory of two years of training carry him when he was too spent to think straight. When they came off the line after ten weeks, they were unspeakably relieved to be getting some rest, to take a bath and have some hot food.

Back behind the lines, away from the endless shelling and constant fear, the Black Panthers could get a good look at who they'd been fighting with. When Benny called his name, Lee thought he was hearing things—hallucinating from exhaustion. His excitement at seeing his friend standing there died in an instant when he realized who Benny was standing with. As his mind caught up with his eyes, and he fit together what it meant, he expected to feel betrayed, but he'd been through too much not to understand. If war had taught him anything, it was that a man did what he felt he needed to do to survive.

For three nights, Lee slept in a bed with a pillow and a blanket pulled over him. He could have slept for a solid week, but after only a few days off, the Black Panthers got orders to get back to the front. Fighting like the

devil for the honor of the Negro race had made them invaluable to General Patton. Either that or they were just more expendable.

In January, the Germans retreated. That little bit of ground had cost thousands of lives, including Green George's: a man who could make swamp moonshine taste like Jack Daniel's finest. Armor-piercing artillery had sliced through his tank five days before the German retreat, skewering him like a hog on a stick.

As the Krauts retreated, Patton's army pushed on, through the snow and the frostbite and a winter unlike anything Lee had ever known, with nowhere near enough warm clothes. By March, when things started to thaw, they'd fought halfway through Germany and kept going until they came out the other side into Austria.

All in all, Lee and the Black Panthers endured six months of near-constant fighting, and were rewarded with armfuls of Silver Stars, Bronze Stars, and Purple Hearts.

On May 7, the day Germany surrendered, relief washed through Lee straight to his bones. His first thought, as ever, was of Cora. He longed to go home and see her. He couldn't help his fantasies of the two of them together again, the way they once were, and had to keep reminding himself that it was impossible.

The postwar cleanup was a completely different pace of work, and gradually Lee's tense shoulders learned to relax, but as they rolled up to the camp at Gunskirchen, a sixth sense wound him up again. A sick, anxious prickle crept down his spine and settled in his gut, like the feeling he'd get approaching a clearing where he knew the enemy was hiding unseen. He tried to shake it off, told himself the danger was over, but when he looked at his tank mates, he could tell they felt it too. As they got closer, he saw why he'd felt the wrongness of the place. Ghostlike creatures, gray and thin, walked like living skeletons. It didn't seem possible that human beings could look that way and still be alive. The stench was incredible, even in

the open air, and when they stepped out of the tank into ankle-deep mud mixed with human waste, Lee gagged. Beside him, Cooper threw up.

Inside, in a room with space for maybe three hundred, over a thousand people lay on top of each other, flesh to flesh. Not all of them were alive, but the living hadn't been strong enough to pull out the dead and bury them, or even strong enough to move away from the rotting corpses.

From the floor, an old woman stared at Lee. When he approached her, he saw she wasn't that old, but the sagging skin, thin hair, and dead eyes made her seem ancient. In his pocket, Lee had a Clark Bar that he handed to her. She shoved it into her mouth, wolfing it down like a wild thing. A man shuffled over, having seen Lee give the woman food, and held out his hand in a begging gesture. Lee had no more food, but he checked his pockets and found a cigarette that he'd won from Cooper playing cards. A smoke wasn't food, but it was something.

"I'll see if I can find you a light," he said, handing it over.

The man shoved the cigarette into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. These people had gone past hunger and hardship. This was full-on starvation.

Lee had heard of these concentration camps, but no matter how gruesome the descriptions were, nothing compared to seeing this place for himself. The Black Panthers had captured three thousand enemy soldiers since November, and while he knew those men had nothing to do with this camp, if he'd seen this place in November, he wasn't sure what he would have done with them. A part of him wished the Germans hadn't surrendered the week before, so he'd have an excuse to shoot, bomb, blast, and destroy.

The ride back to base was somber. When they got there, Lee wanted to find somewhere quiet where he could be alone to process what he'd seen and what he'd felt. Deep in thought as he passed the officers' club, he overheard two men talking.

“They say,” one said, his foot propped against the wall, a cigarette dangling from his fingers, “Hitler got his playbook on how to handle the Jews by looking at how we handle our coloreds, but he sure did us one better with those camps.”

The other took a drag of his cigarette. “That’s what we need back home.” His thick accent sounded pure Mississippi. “Stick them coons in a camp and let ‘em rot out. Problem solved.”

Lee didn’t think about reacting. He just pivoted mid-stride and headed for the men, picking up speed as he approached so that when he slammed his fist into the Mississippian’s face, it hit with the force of his momentum. He flattened him with one punch like a Joe Louis knockout. The other man backed away from Lee, yelling for help. Nearly instantly, soldiers wrenched his arms behind his back and pushed him to the ground. MPs hauled him off and locked him up in the guardhouse.

The army wanted to court-martial him, but Bates refused to go along with it, and then a major who’d been part of liberating Gunskirchen and who’d heard what Mississippi said spoke in Lee’s defense.

That presented the army with a problem. They could transfer him out from under Bates to court-martial him, but the trial that would go along with it could blow up into a PR disaster. Lee was a sergeant, with a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart and two high ranking officers willing to vouch for him. Mississippi had recently been demoted from first to second lieutenant and had spoken in public about wanting Nazi death camps in America. But there was no way the army would condone a colored soldier striking a white officer.

They could have thrown him out with a dishonorable discharge, but if he appealed the decision, the whole thing might still become public and just as much of a PR nightmare. They found a solution in the blue discharge. Neither honorable nor dishonorable, the blue discharge could weed out

undesirables, like homosexuals and troublesome Negroes. It didn't need to be explained, couldn't be appealed, and was nonnegotiable.

They released Lee from the guardhouse and showed him into the office. When he saw the blue paper, he knew what was coming. His army career would be summed up with four colors: the Black Panthers, the Purple Heart, the Bronze Star, and the blue discharge.

PART FOUR

There is a separation of colored people from white people in the United States. That separation is not a disease of colored people. It is a disease of white people. I do not intend to be quiet about it.

—Albert Einstein,
speaking at Lincoln University, 1946

It must be pointed out time and again that the exclusion of a large part of the colored population from active civil rights by the common practices is a slap in the face of the Constitution of the nation.

—Albert Einstein,
to the National Urban League, 1946

CHAPTER ONE

Home

Lee was furious at being discharged but, if he was honest with himself, a part of him was also relieved. He'd joined the army to secure a future with Cora, and now that that had been lost, he'd seen enough, done enough, and wanted to go home.

On the ship to New York and on the train down South, he couldn't help but think of the reverse journey when they'd headed for Europe: he and Green George had been full of plans for the future. Green's Whiskey would have made a great business, the two of them distilling side by side. Lee knew he could have sold to the music clubs he used to play at, and Negro League players would have made distribution easy, jumping at the chance for a side income on the road. With the Negro press on their side, they'd have been off and running.

Lee didn't go straight home to Florida. He needed to see Green George's momma first. He owed her that. At the Greens' place in Tennessee, he got a hero's welcome, and the family's strong appreciation for taking the time to come out there to pay his respects. They knew all about the whiskey business plans; Green George had written to them abuzz with the idea nearly the whole of last year, barely mentioning the war, but full of whiskey ideas. His momma said it was a shame it wouldn't happen now and wondered if Lee might still do it, to honor her son. It hadn't

occurred to him to go solo with it, but by the time he'd traveled on to Florida, he'd started truly considering it.

Uncle Drew met his train with tears in his eyes, and he embraced Lee with a vise grip that said more than words. At home, Lee asked him about Cora.

Not writing to her when he was thousands of miles away was one thing, but now, back in Mangrove Bay where everything reminded him of her, the longing to be with her was stronger than ever. He wanted to fight for her and win her back, but she wasn't a prize to be won. She was a woman who had made a choice, and although it shredded him from head to toe, she'd picked Roscoe. Lee needed to see for himself that she was happy without him and that she'd moved on. If he saw that, he might be able to get over her.

So, the day after he got back, he went to her house and, with his nerves dancing in his gut and his pulse pounding in his ears, knocked on her door. He took deep, steady breaths, waiting for her to answer. When she opened the door, his heart stopped. She looked beautiful. She'd grown her hair and lost a few pounds. It suited her. So did the wash-worn apron and the tiredness pulling at her eyes. Everything suited her.

She gasped when she saw him. Then she covered her mouth with her hands as tears pooled in her eyes.

He smiled. "Hello, Cora."

She made a noise somewhere between a squeal and a sob and rushed at him, barreling into his chest, squeezing her arms tight around him.

His chest clenched, and his throat caught as his arms circled her, and he couldn't help feeling he was finally home.

Quickly, he schooled his thoughts. She was Roscoe's wife now.

"I'm sorry." She spoke the muffled words into his chest between the rise and fall of her crying. "I'm so sorry."

He kissed the top of her head as a friend, but let his lips linger over the silk of her hair. “I’m sorry, too.” She felt so good in his arms, as if a piece of himself was fitting back together. He squeezed her tighter to keep his hands from wandering down her back. “If I had to do it again . . .”

She lifted her face to his and put a finger to his lips. “No. You’re alive. You’re back. That’s what counts.”

The softness of her eyes melted his heart. He felt himself bend toward her, stopping inches away from her lips, which parted at his approach. Her warm breath touched his hot skin. She was married to Roscoe. This was a line he must not cross.

He closed his eyes and breathed her in. She smelled of cocoa butter and mint. Even as he told himself not to, he leaned in closer.

“Roscoe?” came an excited shout from inside.

Lee and Cora jumped apart. From the hallway, Cora’s momma glared at them, seeing that the man with his head bent to Cora’s wasn’t who she’d thought. He let his arms fall and stepped back.

“Oh. Lee. For a minute there, I thought you were Cora’s husband.” Cora’s cheeks flushed, and Lee felt the blood rush to his own face.

“Good afternoon, ma’am.” He ducked his head in a greeting.

“It’s good you made it back in one piece.” She sounded genuine, her anger dissipating.

“Thank you.” He clasped his hands to his front. Then, feeling awkward, he let them drop to his sides. “It’s good to be back.”

“Our Benny and Cora’s Roscoe aren’t home yet. I guess if you’re here, the others won’t be far behind.”

It didn’t seem the time to explain why that wasn’t necessarily so.

“Have you been to see Mae? To pay your respects for Jasper?”

“Not yet.” He glanced at Cora. “I came here first.”

“Well, come on in, soldier man,” she said, smiling at him, the warmth and welcome full in her voice. “Cora’s got some yams and greens cooking

that'll stretch for one more. You hungry?"

"I could eat." His stomach rumbled at the smell of Cora's home cooking, then flipped and spun at the feel of her hand slipping into his to pull him inside.

One evening with Cora reminded him why he'd fallen so hard all those years ago, and in a matter of hours, his plan to walk away began to fizzle and fade. He felt happier around her, more focused, more carefree, more alert, more alive, and not having her in his life seemed like an unnecessary hardship. Surely, they could just be friends. There'd be no harm in that.

Despite Cora's prodding, he wouldn't talk about what happened between them and didn't want to hear about how she and Roscoe wound up together, or anything about their marriage. Losing Cora was a wound that would never fully heal, and he didn't have the strength to go poking around at the particulars of what went wrong, or when and why she turned to Roscoe. That was a pain best ignored.

As the months went on, Uncle Drew questioned whether a friendship with Cora was healthy for him, but Lee decided he didn't care. He found himself falling for her again and again, and he just wanted to be near her, even if sometimes it felt like torture.

CHAPTER TWO

The End and the Beginning

After Omaha Beach, Roscoe stayed in France for five more months, securing French coastlines. Then, with Allied troops amassed in Europe, the army decided he was needed elsewhere. Roscoe and the 320th shipped back to England, stopping for only a few days before they'd board a freighter in Southampton headed for New York. From there, they'd go on to the fight in the Pacific.

Roscoe wasted no time. He caught a train to Wales and hitchhiked, then walked to Megan's, arriving just after ten o'clock at night, far too late to knock on someone's door, but he did it anyway.

"I'm sorry to come so late, sir," he said to Megan's father, who opened the door. "I just got back from France. Today. I ship out again the day after tomorrow. To the Pacific. And I didn't want to leave without . . . I just wanted to . . ."

"Roscoe?" Megan called from the top of the narrow flight of stairs. She raced down and flew into his embrace.

"I had to see you," he said.

She pulled his face to hers and pressed her forehead to his as her parents looked on.

"Let the young people have a minute to themselves," her mother said.

"Alone? But—"

“They’re engaged, Colin.”

Roscoe looked down, shamefaced.

“And he’s going back to the war. Let them have a little time to themselves.” She hugged Roscoe and kissed him lightly on his cheek. “We’re so glad you’re back. Even for a day.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

She smiled at him. “Always so respectful.” She kissed her daughter’s cheek, took her husband’s hand, and tugged him out of the room.

As soon as they left, he pressed his lips to hers and drank her in. She ran her hand over his face, his neck, his chest. “I can’t believe you’re here.”

“I couldn’t stay away.”

They made him a bed on the sofa, his feet dangling over the end, but sometime in the night, Megan came to sneak him out to the shed. She moved hoes and rakes and laid blankets on the ground. Then she undressed in front of him, shivering in the cold air.

“Are you sure?” he asked, although his body was already responding, and he moved to her, running his hands along her soft, smooth skin, dipping his head for a kiss.

“Tell me you love me,” she said against his mouth.

“I do. I love you like crazy.”

“What else?” She pulled his shirt off and pressed herself against him.

“You’re so beautiful.” He kissed her shoulders, her collarbone, her chest. “You have no idea how beautiful you are.”

“What else?” She pushed against him, and he moaned.

He eased her to the blanket on the ground. “I don’t want to get on that boat.” He pulled his boxers off and fitted himself to her. “If I could quit the army and stay here with you, I’d do it in a heartbeat.”

“Roscoe,” she cried as he pushed into her.

“I love you, baby. I love you.”

It was all true. He hoped it was enough.

They spent the next day clinging to each other like drowning people, and when he left, he left her five months of his army pay and promises he didn't know how to keep.

The crossing was quiet, but Roscoe became more out of sorts with every mile he put between himself and Wales. In two weeks, they landed in New York, and instead of feeling glad to be back on American soil, Roscoe felt sick.

While the others took leave in the Big Apple, he stayed behind and wrote letters to Pontypool. He told Megan that he missed her more than he thought possible, and that he thought of her every day and night. He told her he'd like nothing better than to board the next ship bound for Britain and come back to her, and that the days he spent with her were the happiest of his life. All true. Just not the whole truth.

He didn't write to Cora. He didn't know what to say.

Two days after Christmas, Roscoe arrived at Camp Stewart, Georgia. There, his training included lessons on jungle living and tropical diseases, and he was reintroduced to the degradation of living in the American South. He hated every minute of it.

He should have tried to see Cora while he was stationed in Georgia, or at least let her know he was so close by, but he couldn't bear to think of her when missing Megan hollowed him out.

Eventually, they deployed to Hawaii, stepping onto the island of Oahu on May 6.

The next day, Germany surrendered, but Japan fought on.

If you ignored the sunken tankers poking half submerged out of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii was a paradise, with white sand beaches, palm trees, dolphins, and seals.

Roscoe waited on Oahu for his deployment until, one fine summer's day in early August, America dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, and then, three days later, dropped another on Nagasaki. The destruction was beyond

horrific. Japan surrendered, and the army returned Roscoe to a place he no longer considered home.

On the journey back, he could feel himself tensing. He took a segregated train to a segregated bus that dropped him off at Mangrove Bay, his gut knotting into an ever tighter fist.

He'd given up his room at the boarding house when he joined the army, so he went to the place his paperwork said he belonged. He walked in an unhurried plod, trying to force Megan out of his mind. Before the war, he believed the crush he felt for Cora would do for a marriage. Now he knew better, and the fact that he felt like a cheater by going to see his legal wife was no one's fault but his own.

He told himself it was just as well that he couldn't afford a ticket back to Wales. In wartime, people threw caution to the wind and lived in the moment, but now that the war was over, Megan would find a respectable Welsh man, back from the front, and forget all about him.

Megan was a dream, but Cora was right here. He had to at least try to do right by her.

Roscoe stood for a solid minute in front of Cora's door, taking long, steadyng breaths before he knocked. She opened it and gaped at him in a kind of disbelieving shock. She did not fling her arms around his neck or bury her face into his chest.

"Evening, Cora," he said.

"Roscoe." She reached for him, held his shoulders, and kissed his cheek, like Megan's mother had done, and led him into the house.

Lee poked his head out from the kitchen where something sizzled in a pan. He wore an apron matching Cora's. He looked completely at home.

Lee pulled Roscoe into a bear hug. "Welcome back," he said, thwacking him on his back. "Good to see you safe."

Roscoe should have felt happy, not empty. He looked at Cora, willing himself to want her the way he used to want her.

“I can’t believe it,” Cora said, clutching herself around her stomach. “None of your letters have been getting through for over a year now, and there’s been no news from the army either. We thought you might be injured. Are you all right?”

Roscoe’s skin felt too tight. “I’m fine. It just got to be a lot over there.”

She nodded, as if she could possibly understand what he meant, and patted his back.

“Well, you’re home safe now.”

“I want to hear everything,” Lee said, taking a seat on the sofa. Then he perked his head up. “Oh, hell.” He hopped up and dashed to the kitchen. Roscoe heard pans shifting from the stove.

Cora followed Lee, leaving Roscoe standing alone in the living room.

“Just add some of the sauce and mix it like this,” she was telling Lee.

“What about this one?” he asked.

“You put that in at the end.”

There was a familiarity to the way they spoke to each other that put Roscoe on edge and made him remember how comfortable he’d once been in this house. Now, he didn’t belong but had nowhere else to go. When he walked into the kitchen, they stood close to each other, peering into three pots on the stove with a bowl of chopped herbs to the side.

Lee looked up and noticed Roscoe standing at an awkward distance. “I should probably go,” he said. “Leave you two to catch up.”

“No, of course not,” Cora said. “We all need to catch up, and you made the dinner, Lee.”

Lee chuckled and shook his head. “That’s giving me way too much credit. I just followed orders.”

“You’re the one she meant to feed tonight,” Roscoe said. “I’m the unexpected guest.”

“A little more than a guest, I hear,” Lee said. “It all happened so fast after I left, I wasn’t around to congratulate you.” He stepped up to Roscoe

and stuck out his hand. “You’re a lucky man.”

Roscoe thought he registered a hard-edged stiffness under Lee’s ease, and when his friend glanced back at Cora, he thought he read desire in his eyes.

“When did you get back?” he asked.

“End of May,” Lee said, sticking his nose back in the pot.

A man could catch feelings in four months. It had taken him far less with Megan, but Lee would never make a play for a friend’s wife. Just because Roscoe had stumbled didn’t mean that everybody else had. Being here with Cora felt all kinds of confusing, making him invent looks and crushes where there was only friendship and goodwill. Feeling wrong-footed translated into a surly gruffness he carried throughout the meal. He wished Benny was home to help him get things back on track.

Momma North came in as they were finishing up eating and let out a shriek of excitement to see him sitting there. She wrapped her short arms around him with a “Praise Jesus,” and had him turn around for her with a “Let me look at you.”

She wanted him to tell her about being over there, so he repeated the same safe stories he’d just told Cora and Lee.

“I’d better get going,” Lee said as Roscoe started in again on a story about a misunderstanding over cookies being called biscuits. He and Roscoe performed their old, elaborate, buddy handshake as naturally as if they’d just done it yesterday. It seemed strange to Roscoe that they could fall back so easily into their life from before, as if nothing had changed when everything had.

When he left, Cora excused herself to go make up the bed. The comment sat heavily in the room. They had never talked about their expectations for this marriage. They’d just rushed blindly into everything, figuring they’d work the rest out later. Now it was later, and nothing was clear.

He stumbled through his biscuit story, and when she came back out, she told him it was all set.

“Whenever you’re ready,” she said, “I’ve made up Benny’s bed for you. You must be worn out.”

He went into the bedroom and sure enough, she’d put fresh sheets on Benny’s bed as well as on her own, and she’d hung a fresh curtain between them down the middle of the room.

CHAPTER THREE

A Soldier Returns

Despite the food and the cramped quarters, a relaxed euphoria settled over Benny as he watched the ship churn white waves behind as it sped across the Atlantic. He lingered on deck, with the peaceful confidence that there were no German U-boats lurking beneath, waiting to blast them out of the water. He felt lucky to be standing there, headed home, when other men, good men, hadn't been so fortunate.

When they docked in New York, a crowd waved and cheered like they were conquering heroes, and Benny basked in it along with everyone else. Joy spilled from people's faces, with smiles and whoops directed at the returning soldiers. It sent Benny's insides buzzing with pleasure and pride.

From New York, they boarded crowded trains for home, with soldiers huddled together, swapping war stories. When they got to the South, the conductors came through the cars to make the Negro passengers move to a segregated section. Benny's skin prickled and tingled as the conductor passed him by, only to stop farther along in the train car, to tell a deep ebony man it was time for him to move on back. "We've crossed the Mason-Dixon," he said. "You've got to get to your place."

Benny recognized the look of quiet fury in the dark man's expression. He felt sick watching the soldier take his bag from the luggage rack above and shuffle down the train aisle, limping from some unhealed injury.

The rest of the way home, Benny's anger grew inside him like a solid thing that he could taste in his mouth and feel under his skin. For the last leg of his trip, he changed from the train to a bus, and when he climbed on board, he stopped at the front of the aisle, staring at the signs segregating the bus into white and colored sections. Benny froze, as if he'd heard the click of a land mine underfoot and the smallest shift of weight would blow everything sky-high, except *he* was the land mine trying not to explode. His armpits began to sweat, and his breathing went heavy. He was back home, but he wasn't the same Benny.

Behind him, someone poked between his shoulder blades, and when he turned around, an older lady, speckled with sunspots, stood there looking expectant. "Are you getting on, young man?"

Beside her, a man about her age smiled at him. "Do you need help finding your bus?"

Benny shook his head and started down the aisle. He sat in an empty seat toward the front, blood rushing through his ears. As the couple passed him, the man leaned in. Benny's gut clenched as he braced for a challenge, but the old man said, "Thank you for your service, son. Welcome home."

Benny nodded and turned his face to the window. He ignored the shuffle of feet that passed by and the sigh of a plump woman who lowered herself into the aisle seat next to him.

By the time the bus driver closed the doors, every seat was taken, and two colored men stood in the back. The engine started and the bus sighed as the brakes released, setting the wheels slowly rolling. They hadn't made it two feet when a man rushed up and banged on the doors.

"Is this the 54 bus?" he called through the closed flaps.

The driver swung the doors open, waving him on with a nod of his head. "You almost missed us."

"Thanks for stopping." He climbed on board, out of breath.

They waited for him to find a seat, but with the white section full, he stood hovering where the colored section started, looking expectantly at the driver.

“No more seats?” The bus driver got up from behind the wheel and came down the aisle. He motioned to the first row of the colored section. “Y’all get on up out of there and let this man sit down.”

Two women sat on one side of the aisle, and an older man and a uniformed army vet sat on the other. The two women and the elderly man moved. The soldier seemed to sink in his seat and stilled, like he’d turned to lead.

“You heard me,” the driver said. “Go on, now. Get.”

Benny’s hands pricked. He rubbed them against his thighs and craned his head around to get a better look at the man. Right away, he spotted the two silver bars on his crisp uniform, showing he was a captain. An officer who outranked Benny.

The officer looked at the driver and shook his head. “No more.”

The bus driver’s mouth twisted into a scowl. “That’s why we shouldn’t have let you people fight. It makes you forget your place.” He pointed his finger inches away from the captain. “No white man will stand while you sit on this bus.”

“But there’s room for him to sit now,” said a young white woman in the row ahead of Benny. “They don’t all have to get up for one man.” Her blue eyes blazed, and she looked like she wanted to say more, but she held her tongue. Someone at the front of the bus grunted in agreement, and the bus driver’s face speckled with red blotches.

“Well, they can’t sit in the same row,” said the man who’d thanked Benny for his service. “That wouldn’t be right.”

The army officer sat stone-faced as the driver stormed off the bus. Minutes later, he returned with four policemen.

“Get off this bus, boy,” one of them shouted as soon as he stepped on board. All four had their clubs drawn.

Benny read the fear in the captain’s eyes, but there was also determination in the set of his mouth and the tightness of his shoulders. He recognized that look from a thousand soldiers on the brink of battle, not wanting the fight but ready for it.

The eager policeman brought his billy club down on the captain, who caught it and twisted, wrenching it from his grasp as the second policeman struck at his arms. A third rammed his stick into the soldier’s chest.

Shouts of protest rose from the back of the bus, and before he thought about it, Benny stood. “Stop that. Stop it right now.” The authority in his voice cut through the mayhem and made the police look back.

They hesitated, then the fourth policeman said, “Sir, we’re just trying to restore order.”

“Arrest him, if that’s what you’re here to do, but put away those clubs. You’ve got no cause for that kind of treatment.” The blood rushed in his ears as his heart pounded in his throat.

Two policemen took hold of the captain’s arms. His once-tidy uniform had its buttons ripped off, and his hat lay on the floor. Benny stood mute as they dragged the officer out of his seat.

“Sorry to disturb, folks,” the fourth policeman said, passing through the front section.

The captain fixed Benny with a knowing look as he passed, like he could see every drop of Negro blood that ran in his veins.

There was some shuffling of seats at the back of the bus as young men got up to let the two women and the old man sit. In front of them, the white man sat down, and the bus driver made his way to his place behind the wheel. Benny sat back down and turned his face to the window in time to see one of the policemen knock the soldier to the ground. The fourth one

who'd told Benny they were trying to restore order kicked at his body. The bus pulled away as another struck his back with a billy club.

Benny's heart thudded and stuttered as horror and outrage swirled inside him. A sheen of sweat covered his face as the bus bumped down the road.

“Mangrove Bay,” the driver eventually announced. The bus had emptied to half full, although Benny had hardly noticed. He stood, but as he did, he saw the segregated water fountains outside the town hall, and then beside them the movie theater with its separate entrances for whites in the main theater and coloreds in the cramped balcony. His mouth went dry, and needles pricked the back of his throat. He could not return to the life he'd left. He couldn't make himself small enough.

“Are you all right?” the woman beside him asked. She'd stood to make room for him to get off. “Is this your stop?”

Benny shook his head and sank into his seat, ducking low, hiding his face, hoping not to be recognized.

“You look like you've had a fright,” she said, sitting back down and laying her hand on his arm. “I can't imagine what you all saw over there, but don't you worry.” She patted his arm. “You're home safe now.”

Her words curdled in his stomach, and he turned away from her to the window, watching his old hometown disappear in the distance.

CHAPTER FOUR

Shifting Over

Cora drove to the office distracted and spent all day with only half her mind on the work in front of her. Worry for Roscoe filled the other half. It was the four-year anniversary of their icy cold February wedding day, and neither of them mentioned it. Cora didn't feel married, and she couldn't imagine Roscoe did either. He was more like a surrogate brother, slipping into Benny's role in the family while they waited for him to return. She didn't want her marriage to drag on now that the war was over, even if Lee didn't seem interested in rekindling what they had, or even talking about it. But with Roscoe struggling to find his feet, asking for a divorce seemed selfish and heartless, especially when marrying her had been such a generous thing. She decided she had to be patient, biting her tongue every time she was tempted to bring it up. Now that the shoe was on the other foot, she couldn't turn her back on him.

His main problem was America itself. He didn't have a single good word to say about it since he'd gotten back, but Europe seemed, near about, the greatest place on earth to hear Roscoe tell it, even with a war going on. And Great Britain was like a slice of heaven.

“If this were Britain, I could walk in there right now and sit down and order whatever I like,” he'd said when they passed a soda shop. And again,

when they passed a restaurant, a drugstore lunch counter, and an ice cream parlor.

It got to where he'd make a comment at every public toilet and water fountain. "In Britain, I could use that, no problem."

"You told me," Cora snapped one day when she'd heard it one too many times.

He stopped and looked at her. "Yeah?" His eyes flared, like an electric surge. "Did I tell you in Wales I danced with white girls?"

Cora didn't know what to do with a statement like that. And, no. He hadn't told her.

As distracted as she was, she still had work to do, and she welcomed the busyness of her tasks that helped to keep her from dwelling on her problems. With her mind in two places at once, she didn't notice Mr. Griffin hovering until he practically stood over her. Cora smiled at him extra sweetly. "Is there something you needed, Mr. Griffin?"

"I . . . uh," he stammered. He shook his head and went back to his desk.

At five o'clock, Cora gathered her things and called good night to Mr. Griffin, her frazzled mind glad to be done for the day.

"One minute, Cora," he said as she slipped on her coat. "I need to speak to you about something."

His desk sat in the middle of the smaller space they'd moved to when everyone but Cora quit, seeking out better-paid factory jobs or going off to fight. In front of his desk, he'd positioned two armchairs for the few clients who came in. Recently, though, there'd been more than a few. With people starting to think of the future again, business was picking up.

Cora stepped over to his desk, and he motioned for her to sit. She unbuttoned her coat but left it on, visually reminding him that she wanted to go home.

Now that she drove Benny's car to work, she didn't have the excuse of having to leave on time to catch the bus, which Mr. Griffin sometimes used

to his advantage, keeping her working later and later. She considered telling him that Benny had come back for his car and she'd need to dash for the bus, but of course, he hadn't. She hadn't heard a word from Benny since before Lee came home nine months ago. In the last days of war, there had been pockets of bad fighting, and her stomach was in knots with worry that Benny had gotten caught up in it. It was too bitter to think that after making it through to the end, he should be taken from them in the last pointless days of fighting, but as the days dragged on and they heard no word from him, Cora's heart sank and toughened, bracing for the news that was sure to come.

“I’m sorry to do this, Cora,” Mr. Griffin began, when she’d sat down.

Cora sighed. He was keeping her late again. She wished she had the gumption to tell him no. That she was tired and couldn’t think straight anymore, and that whatever it was could wait until tomorrow. That she’d put in a full day’s work, and she needed to go home and see about her husband, who was sinking into some kind of depression, and Momma, whose nerves were even more frayed than hers, worrying about Benny. Instead, she took off her coat.

“What do you need me to do, Mr. Griffin?”

“You’re a great worker, Cora.”

Inwardly, she rolled her eyes. Outwardly, she held her tongue and tried on a smile that felt more like a grimace.

“We’ve made a great team these last few years.”

Her grimace tightened. She’d never thought of them as a team when he was the one who gave the orders, but they’d worked well together, and the business had done better than expected.

“That’s why I think it’s a shame. A real shame,” he repeated for emphasis, “that I have to let you go.”

Cora sat up, suddenly alert. “You mean fire me?” She said it a little too loud, her shock taking the smoothness from her words. His expression

clouded at her outburst, so she quieted her voice, and lowered her tone. “Mr. Griffin, why would you . . . how could you—”

She felt her anger mounting, so she stopped, took a breath, and tried again. “Is there something about my work that you’re not satisfied with?”

“No, no, nothing like that.” He folded his hands over his desk and leaned closer, as if taking her into his confidence. “It’s just, now that the war is over, some of my clients are wondering why the only employee I have is a colored woman.”

She stilled and blinked. She didn’t need to hear the rest, but he pushed on. “I got away with it during the war when there weren’t enough workers to go around, but now folks are looking for any kind of job they can find, and here I am with you for my secretary. It doesn’t look good, and people have noticed.”

“I see,” Cora said, the sharp clip of her words piercing the air. Her hard stare made him shift uncomfortably.

“Some of the old secretaries came to me asking for their jobs back when they had to make room in their factory jobs for the men coming home.”

“You mean the secretaries who quit on you?”

He straightened the pens on his desk. Then the notepad. Then a folder. “Everybody’s shifting over, Cora. That’s just the way it is.”

She ground her teeth together as the blood throbbed in her neck.

“I’d keep you on if I could, but what can I do?”

She stood and put her coat on. “I understand, Mr. Griffin.” Her clipped voice was rock hard and ice cold.

The Hoffman letter had to go out tomorrow, and the Maguire account was overdue on payment and needed to be chased up. She didn’t tell him either of those things, or that she’d been speaking to the printers about a discount, and that he should talk to Mr. Palmer and not Mr. Nelson about it. The outrage whirling in her gut kept her mouth clamped shut.

“I’m sorry, Cora,” Mr. Griffin repeated. “But I need to do what’s right for the business. Besides, you’re a top-rate secretary. I’m sure you’ll find something else.”

Cora walked to her desk, not trusting herself to speak. She collected her few photos and tucked them into her bag.

“If it were up to me . . .” He shrugged, leaving the thought incomplete.

She wanted to point out that it was up to him, and that this was what he’d chosen. She took two slow, steady breaths.

“Good luck, Cora.” He thrust out his hand for her to shake, but she turned quickly, pretending not to see it, and hurried to the door.

“Goodbye, Mr. Griffin.”

She hadn’t taken more than ten steps before she lost the fight to hold herself together. She put up her collar and ducked her head so that no one would see her face streaked with salty tears.

CHAPTER FIVE

Veterans Affairs

Roscoe woke up to the sound of women's voices. For a few precious seconds, he thought he was back in Pontypool. Then he smelled the bacon frying and saw that he lay on Benny's narrow bed with the curtain drawn to Cora's side of the room.

He deflated. It took him a moment to shake off the disappointment and swing his legs to the floor. Pulling on some clothes, he made his way to the kitchen.

"Good morning," Momma North beamed. She fussed like a mother hen, setting a plate of grits in front of him and a glass of juice squeezed fresh from Loretta's oranges.

With Benny still not returned, even though the army confirmed he'd been discharged months ago, Momma North channeled her anxiety into doting on Roscoe, which only made him feel smothered. For his part, Roscoe alternated between being furious that Benny had gone straight off on an adventure without saying a word to anyone, and being terrified that he'd gotten attacked on his way home and his body lay in a ditch somewhere being pecked at by turkey vultures.

And Lee had been a letdown. After a few months of Benny not showing up, he'd stopped coming around, as if without Jasper and Benny in the equation, their friendship wasn't worth the effort.

While Momma North hovered, Cora stood back from him and leaned against the counter furthest away from where he sat. Guilt pawed at him as he wondered if she could somehow tell he'd woken up thinking about another woman.

"I'd better get going," she said. "I've got an interview to get to."

Shame settled over him like a blanket as his failures stacked up. First as a husband, then as a provider. With Cora having lost her job last month, he really needed to pull his load now. He ducked his head and rubbed the back of his neck.

"Don't you worry," Momma North said, guessing his thoughts. "You'll find something soon enough."

Considering all the noise the government had made about the help available through the GI Bill, Roscoe had expected to find work right away, but after six months of going to the Veterans Affairs office, there'd been nothing for him.

When Momma North left for work, he made his way, once again, to the VA office, where he filled out more forms and waited three and a half hours to see someone.

"Righty-ho," the VA administrator said when Roscoe was finally seen to. "You have a question about your unemployment check."

The GI checks made Roscoe feel like even more of a failure, taking a handout from the government, but there was no question they needed the money.

"Yeah, I didn't get the check this month."

"Yes," the man said, looking through Roscoe's paperwork. "That's correct."

"Why didn't I get it?"

"That'll be because of the janitor job you turned down last month."

After months of insisting there were no suitable jobs available for him, last month they had offered him a janitorial position. It was night work, and

it paid less than the unemployment check.

“I have aeronautics training,” he had told them. “I flew barrage balloons. Don’t you have something more appropriate? Maybe something at the airport?”

They insisted they didn’t, so Roscoe decided to turn the job down and keep looking.

“Righty-ho, well, if you turn down a job, the unemployment money stops,” the VA man informed him, sheepfaced. “It’s the rules of the system.”

The wispy threads of outrage that had been building formed into thick cords that twisted through his muscles. His skin prickled, and he clenched his teeth against the outburst that threatened at the back of his tongue.

“Look, I know it feels unfair, but there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Roscoe took a moment to breathe away the anger, let his muscles relax, and let his throat unclench. “I’ll take the janitor job,” he said.

“I’m afraid that’s been taken now.”

His frustration spiked. “So, no job and no unemployment?”

“Well,” the VA worker rifled through some files. “I do have something else. It’s in agriculture.” He handed Roscoe the job description.

“Picking oranges?”

“An honest day’s work.”

Roscoe checked the particulars. It paid less than the janitor job. “Isn’t there supposed to be a minimum wage? How can they pay so little?”

“Ah, well, most jobs are subject to minimum wage protection, but a few are not. Agriculture for one. Domestic work for another. But a job’s a job, right?” The VA man trilled a disingenuous laugh that tapered away to a sigh. The sound reminded Roscoe of a defective balloon.

He gnawed at the inside of his cheek, steadyng the flare of his temper. When he could trust his tone and temperament, he said, “I’ll take the job,”

and as he spoke the words, he felt himself shrivel, growing small, just the way America demanded he should.

CHAPTER SIX

GI Benefits

The GI Bill was a godsend for Benny, with opportunities for war vets there for the taking. The country owed a debt of gratitude to the men who risked all to fight tyranny and fascism and uphold democracy, and the grateful nation meant to pay. Not only did the VA find him a place to stay and set him up with unemployment money until a job came through, they also paid for his classes in automotive engineering. He figured, if he could fix cars, why not learn to make them?

Benny chose to take evening classes since he could sign up for them without providing his high school records from his Negro high school, like he'd have to do for a college degree.

Even though his army papers declared him white, it was a chance he couldn't take.

He was on his way, which should have felt good, but he missed his life. He missed cookouts at Aunt Teen's, and arguing with Cora, and belly laughing with Roscoe, and dinners with Momma. In the army, they all felt homesick together, but here it was a lonely, isolating experience, especially when home was just down the road.

After a few weeks in his new place, Benny met his next-door neighbor, Will, a navy man who'd survived Pearl Harbor and fought in the Pacific. He and Will went from speaking on the doorstep to having beers after work

sometimes, until one day when Benny knocked, beers in hand, and found his neighbor in a sea of boxes.

“I’m moving,” Will explained, out of the blue and just like that. “I was going to come by this weekend to say goodbye.”

Benny felt a stab of sadness. Will wasn’t exactly a friend, but he was the closest thing to it that he had. Now he’d have no one. The fingers of his loneliness gripped tighter.

Will said he was headed to the new Levittown development north of the bay. There had to be at least four hundred homes going up over there.

“The best part is,” Will said, taking a beer, “my GI mortgage works out to be less than what I’m paying in rent. You should look into it.”

In Benny’s experience, when something sounded too good to be true, it usually was, but he checked on the GI mortgage situation, and it turned out Will was right. He didn’t even need a down payment. Benny couldn’t sign up fast enough, and a few weeks later, he was packing up for his own move.

In Levittown, Benny had room for friends and family to visit and a back garden for cookouts, but he couldn’t invite the people he longed to see. Dark faces visiting a whites-only neighborhood might bring rocks through his windows, or worse, shotguns at midnight, so he moped about his new home feeling restless and alone.

His new neighbors liked to greet each other with friendly waves and sidewalk chats about lawn care. The family to his left brought him cookies when he moved in, and the couple to his right brought a casserole. About two weeks after the casserole, the husband, Ed, asked Benny’s help to carry a brand-new television set into the house. They set it up with Benny bending the antenna this way and that until the picture came through. Then he and Ed sat on the sofa watching first a commercial for Kellogg’s Corn Flakes, and then one for washing powder.

“They’re showing the fight tonight,” Ed said, which Benny already knew. The June 19 Joe Louis vs. Billy Conn rematch would be the first-ever

televised World Heavyweight Championship. Hell, even Benny had considered buying himself a television set to see it.

“You want to stay and watch?” Ed asked when they’d flicked through each network channel twice.

“You don’t mind?”

“Heck no,” he said. “Alice’s brothers are coming over, and my sister and a couple from the old neighborhood. You should stay. Alice has hot dogs and everything.”

By the time the others arrived, Benny had helped Alice make popcorn and lemonade to go with her hot dogs, and had helped Ed drag chairs in from the dining room so everyone could sit.

Ed and Alice’s friends and family seemed nice enough. Most of them backed Billy “The Pittsburgh Kid” Conn, who had almost beaten Louis five years ago back in ’41.

“You gotta root for the underdog,” Ed said.

“Not me,” said Benny. “Joe Louis, all the way.”

Ed’s sister, Gloria, joined Benny on Team Joe, and they hooted and high-fived when the Brown Bomber delivered his knockout punch in the eighth round.

“So, are you a boxing fan?” Benny asked her when they’d calmed down from their victory high.

“Absolutely not,” she laughed, a tinkling sound, like crystal leaves in a breeze. “I came to see the television set.”

She reminded him of Cora, and he forced a smile as a fresh pang of homesickness jolted him.

They got hot dogs and lemonade and stepped outside. With the start of summer, the humidity was rising faster than the heat, and they fanned themselves uselessly, stirring up the sticky air.

She asked about his time in the war, and he told her sanitized stories of adventure and travel, glossing over the actual fighting. When she asked

about his family, he hesitated, trying to gauge if there was anything he could safely share.

“Truth is, I haven’t seen them since I’ve been back.”

“What? Why ever not? Nobody’s that busy,” she laughed.

The shame he’d been ignoring came rushing back, and he could tell it showed on his face because her expression softened from playful to serious as she touched his arm. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by that. Just ignore me. I talk sometimes before I think.”

He tried to brush it off, but the homesickness and the guilt gripped him. He felt lost.

“I’d like to see them but . . . it’s complicated.”

“Well,” she said slowly, this time choosing her words with care, “I don’t know what happened, but family is family. I bet if you reached out, they’d be glad to hear from you.”

When he went home that night, her words played on in his mind, keeping him awake and staring at his ceiling. In the small hours of the morning, he finally rose from his bed and found pen and paper. He sat down at his kitchen table and wrote a long overdue letter.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Letters

In her first few days at home, Cora made lists of all the offices she could ask about a job. Then she spent the next two months knocking on doors and being turned down. Frustrated and fed up, she stopped by Loretta's to ask if she'd put in a good word at her factory, but Loretta had been fired as well.

“It’s all those soldiers they’ve got coming back,” she said. “They don’t need us anymore.”

Loretta had started selling homemade orange jam and lemon curd on the roadside to make ends meet, thanking her lucky stars for her trees.

After months of almost nobody being interested in so much as an interview, Cora shifted her sights. She wasn’t much of a cleaner, not like Momma, but that was one thing a colored woman could almost always find work in. Except she couldn’t. None of the hotels were hiring, and she didn’t even know how to begin to look for a private cleaning job.

So, Cora took her frustration out on her home with a spring clean the likes of which the place had never seen. She scrubbed sinks and windows, washed kitchen cupboards and drawers, pounded sofa cushions, and laundered the covers. No corner was safe as the weeks passed, and she found new hidden crevices to clean.

Under the dresser in Roscoe’s half of the room, she found an old sock, a matchbook, and four crumpled, unfinished letters all addressed to someone

named Megan. Cora smoothed them out to read the few lines on each. They ranged from casual—*How are you and your family?*—to apologetic—I’m sorry I haven’t written sooner—to accusatory—I thought I would have heard something from you by now—to almost wistful—*Today I saw a bicycle and it made me think of you.*

Cora’s breath caught in her throat. She had never even heard of this woman. But if Roscoe had someone else, why had he come home to her, forcing their pretend marriage to become real? All this time, she’d thought that his venom had been directed at America. Holding these letters, it seemed possible that some of it might be directed at her. Maybe he felt as trapped by her as she felt by him. With a start, she remembered how Roscoe had said he’d danced with white girls, with his eyes blazing hot, looking angry and defiant.

“Impossible,” she told herself, but her hands shook a little as she crumpled the letters up again and tossed them back under the dresser.

That night, she made corn bread and collard greens, his favorite, and asked Momma to go visiting with Aunt Teen. Cora and Roscoe needed to air out the truth, and if neither one of them wanted this marriage, they could stop dancing around each other and call it quits. Cora fussed over dinner, keeping it warm as he was first half an hour, then an hour, then three hours late. When he finally did come home smelling of beer and slurring his words, the corn bread was stone dry and the collards turned to mush.

“Just where have you been?” She hadn’t planned to sound like an old fishwife.

“Leave me alone.” He pushed past her into the kitchen and lifted the lid on the greens.

He dipped up some food and ate from the stirring spoon.

“Look at you,” she said, accusation clear in her tone. “Coming in here, drunk as a skunk.” Ever since starting his job picking oranges, he’d taken a

turn for the worse. He hated every minute of that job, and he muted his bitter disappointment with too much alcohol and a surly temper.

He shoveled another spoonful into his mouth. Collard greens dribbled down his chin and onto his shirt. He wiped it with the back of his hand.

“I’ve been waiting here with dinner for three whole hours. If you want something to eat, you sit in a chair and eat off a plate.”

“Woman,” he roared, rounding on her, pointing the stirring spoon at her chest. “I am the man in this house, and you’re gonna respect me.”

She was so shocked she didn’t know what to say. He’d never raised his voice to her.

“It’s only so much a man can take on disrespect, and I won’t take no more. You hear me?” He closed the distance to her and grabbed her arm, leaning his face close to hers. “You are going to respect me.” Heart thudding, she winced from his breath that caught in her nose and from the cloud of anger that swirled around him. There was a danger to him that she had never seen before.

“Okay, Roscoe,” she said soothingly, trying to make him calm with a quiet response.

“Cause you’re my wife. A wife’s got to respect her man.”

She laid a tentative hand on his shoulder. “Do you want to lie down, Roscoe?” All she could think to do was get him to go to bed and sleep it off. “You look like you had a hard day.”

He slumped at her words. “They don’t know how to respect a man.”

“I know,” she said, wondering what had happened to set him off. She slipped her arm around his waist and fitted her shoulder under his armpit.

“I’m not a boy. I’m a man. I fought for my country.” She led him down the hall. “I earned my respect.” Her heart softened as her temper flared at whatever he’d had to endure that made him need to say that out loud.

“You did.” She sat him on Benny’s bed and took off his shoes. “You earned your respect.” She lay him back on the bed, saying, “You rest now.

You earned a rest, too.”

She pulled a cover over him and slipped out of the room, shaken. This drunk, snarling man was a far cry from the sweet, caring friend who'd married her just in case she'd need the support. She didn't know this hostile Roscoe, and she didn't want to stay married to him.

She resolved to speak with him in the morning, but when she woke, Roscoe had disappeared again. Straightaway, she threw on some clothes and went looking for him, hoping to find him before he'd had a chance to drink too much. She circled the neighborhood for hours but finally gave up in frustration.

When she got home, she found Momma at the kitchen table, staring at a letter. Cora came closer and recognized her brother's block lettering spelling out her name and Momma's.

Her heart raced as she reached for it. Her momma turned her face away.

Cora yanked the pages out of the open envelope and read what her momma had already learned. Benny was fine. He was back in Florida.

She felt relief wash over her and relaxed into a chair to read the rest, but every new sentence brought shock and confusion. He'd passed for white throughout the whole war. He wasn't coming home. He lived instead over at Levittown as a white man. He wouldn't go back to living as a Negro, but he wanted to see them.

Beside her, Momma's pursed lips trembled.

Cora gripped the paper so hard that it crumpled in her hand. She wanted to gather her brother up in her arms, but she also wanted to shake him for what he'd done.

Momma got up and walked to her bedroom, shutting the door behind her.

She smoothed the letter back out on the table and read it again, tracing her fingertips over the lines, searching for signs of the brother she knew. The Benny who'd shared a room with her until he'd gone to war, who

brought her Cokes and candy bars from all the places he snuck into that she couldn't follow.

He'd asked to meet with them somewhere out of the way where they wouldn't be disturbed. He meant somewhere they wouldn't be seen.

Cora knocked on her momma's door and pushed it aside to find her curled up on her bed. "I'm gonna meet him," Cora said. Momma didn't respond. "You'll come, won't you?"

Momma propped herself up, tears streaking her cheeks. Her eyes were so hollow, someone seeing her might have thought the letter was from the army with the news they'd been dreading, instead of from her son, alive and well.

"They got me sneaking around to see my own son."

"Momma—"

"That's my son, Cora. My boy." She sucked her teeth, sounding just like Aunt Teen on a bad day.

Cora sat next to her and took her hand. "He's not trying to get away from us, Momma. You know that. He's just trying to get ahead."

"I know that," she said, slumping against Cora's side. "But his world won't mix with ours, no way, no how. We've lost him, just as surely as if he'd never come home."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Green's Whiskey

Uncle Drew had been right about Lee's friendship with Cora being a bad idea. It had been hard enough to be close to her before Roscoe got back, but once he moved in with her, Lee couldn't take it. The sight of Roscoe opening Cora's front door, or washing breakfast dishes, or going into Cora's bedroom ripped him in two. He had to stay away, or something was going to happen. She was too far under his skin.

Staying away from Cora meant not seeing Roscoe either, and with Jasper and Benny gone, the loss was a huge blow.

Lee heard through the grapevine that Roscoe had taken a job picking oranges under a foreman who didn't like colored vets. Lee could well imagine what Roscoe had to deal with every day, and he thought he had just the solution.

After a solid year of twelve-hour days, seven days a week, and a big loan from Uncle Drew, Lee set up Green's Whiskey like he and Green George said they would. He had his charcoal-filtered barley and rye liquor aging in barrels in a barn he rented out by the river, and a nice mellow corn whiskey that he could sell right away. Orders were pouring in for the corn, and in a couple years, he could mix Green George's special blend from his barrel stores.

He'd hammered some boards together and built himself a lean-to on the side of the barn. After all those nights sleeping cramped in a tank, it felt like luxury quarters, and with every last dime going into Green's Whiskey, living where he worked cut costs and gave him more time in the business. Lately, his twelve-hour day had crept up to fourteen, but it still wasn't enough. He needed help.

Lee rapped on Cora's door, and when she opened it, he stepped back, reminding himself to be cool. It made no difference; he still softened and hardened at the sight of her.

"Cora." Her name rose from deep in his chest, riding up his baritone voice, like a knot uncoiling.

"Lee." His name rushed from her lips in a whispered gush of air, the way she used to say it when they'd be pressed up against each other, all hands and skin and need.

Lee lowered his eyes to the ground and took another step back, hoping this wasn't a mistake.

He cleared his throat. "I came to see Roscoe."

"Oh." The disappointment he heard in that made him look up at her in time to see an embarrassed half smile flash and fade. "He's . . ." She looked behind her and opened the door wider. "Come on in."

As Lee stepped past her, he turned his face her way and breathed in deeply. Cocoa butter and mint, just like he remembered.

Roscoe sat on the sofa with a flimsy card table pulled in front of him where he laid cards out in a game of solitaire. He paused mid-play when Lee walked in. "Look what the cat dragged in," he said. "I thought you might have forgotten where we live."

Lee ignored the dig. "Hey, man. How're you doing?"

Roscoe set the deck down, got up, and clapped Lee in a rough hug. "I've been better. I've been worse."

"I feel you," Lee said.

“You want a drink?” Cora asked from the door. “I’ve got two beers in the icebox.”

“No. I drank those this morning,” Roscoe said.

The echo of exasperation drifted over her face, almost there but not really, like the heat shimmering off a tar road.

“Well, you want some ice water then?”

“Thank you, Cora. That’d be just fine.” The softness edging his voice had no business being there. He cleared his throat.

“Come sit down,” Roscoe said. “We can play a hand while you tell me what you’ve been up to.” He collected his cards from the solitaire game and shuffled the deck. “Five hand draw,” he called out, placing five cards on the table in front of Lee and five in front of himself.

Lee fanned his cards in his hand. “So, how’re you keeping?”

Roscoe snorted and tossed two of his cards to the side. Then pulled two more from the deck. “The same old same old. You?”

Lee looked at his cards and tossed four away. Drew four more. “I started a business. Oh, I almost forgot.” He fished a small bottle of corn whiskey out of his jacket pocket. “Thought you might like to try.”

Roscoe raised his eyebrows. “You making hooch?” He took a sip. “Not bad, Lee.”

“The secret’s in the filtration. It’s something I learned from a guy I served with. His family used to—”

“Pair of twos. What do you have?”

“Oh, uh,” Lee looked down at his hand. “Ace high.”

“I knew we should have bet,” Roscoe said.

Cora brought the ice waters in and set them on the table. “Did I hear you say you started a business?”

Lee pointed to the bottle on the table. “Green’s Whiskey.”

Roscoe laid the cards without looking up.

“That’s wonderful,” she said. “Your own business.”

He swelled a little at the awe in her voice.

“I always said if you put your mind to it, you could do just about anything.”

Lee felt his face warm. “Well, you haven’t tasted it yet.”

She waved at his words like swatting a fly. “I don’t even have to, but you know what?” She picked up the bottle. “I think I will.” She poured a thimbleful into three glasses, and they drank together, with Roscoe keeping one eye on his cards and Lee keeping both eyes on Cora.

“Ooh, that’s good, Lee,” she said. “That’s real smooth.”

He warmed from the corn and from her words. “It’s the filtration,” he said. “The charcoal filtration takes out the—”

“Don’t nobody want to hear about your charcoal, Mr. Businessman. Pick up your cards and let’s play.”

“Roscoe,” Cora chided.

“What?” His tone spiked acid sharp. She raised her eyebrows and set her mouth like she wanted to say something, but then she smoothed her face into a smile.

“Deal me in.”

Lee hopped up to give her his place on the sofa and carried in a chair from the kitchen for himself.

Cora shuffled through her cards and asked about his business. He sorted through his own cards as he told her about his charred oak barrels and cold spring water cooling.

“Pair of fives,” Roscoe said. Lee and Cora folded. “You got some money on you? Let’s play for real.”

Lee checked his pockets and came up with a few coins.

“Did you get started with a GI business loan?” Cora asked.

He shook his head. “I don’t qualify for a GI loan.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Roscoe said, a bitter undertone lacing his words.

Lee's eyes flicked to Roscoe and then settled back on Cora. "Uncle Drew lent me something to start me off, and I found an old barn to rent cheap over by Turner Creek. I can distill and store it there. I've been working like a dog for months getting it off the ground."

"So that's why we haven't seen you," Roscoe said, shuffling the cards.

Lee flushed a little and turned his head away from Roscoe to hide his fluster. "That's where I've been." He took a sip of the ice water, feeling it run cool down his throat. "In fact, I've gotten so busy, I can't keep up anymore." He turned to Roscoe. "So, how about it. You want a job?"

Roscoe snorted, fingering the cards in his hands. "You trying to give me a handout?" His disdain was razor sharp.

"No one said anything about a handout," Lee said. "I need to hire somebody. I don't see why it shouldn't be you."

"You think I don't know what this is?" He stabbed a dirty look at Cora and then Lee, and tossed the deck of cards onto the table, where they spread and spilled. "Coming in here, talking about hiring me after you haven't said boo to me all year? You're not better than me. You think you are, but you're not." He knocked the cards to the floor and got up. "I don't need your charity, Lee. I have a job."

Cora reached out to grab his arm and hold him back. "Roscoe—"

"Don't," he said, pointing a finger at Cora, silencing her. "Just don't."

He walked out the front door, letting the screen bang closed behind him.

"I'm sorry," Lee said to Cora, floored by Roscoe's reaction. This bitter, thorny person wasn't the same man he'd known. "I didn't mean anything by it. I just thought—"

"Hire me," Cora said, turning to pin him with steel eyes.

"I . . ." He felt like she could see right into the pulsing, yearning center of him. "I don't . . ." Working next to her every day was not a good idea.

"I need a job. I've been looking since February, but I can't find a thing."

"Cora—"

“It’s been five months, Lee. I’m an excellent secretary, and I can help with the distilling if you show me what to do. I’m a fast learner.”

“I know, Cora, but I . . .” Just sitting here alone with her was too much temptation. He wiped his palms along his thighs. Hiring her would be like throwing the doors wide open for Trouble to walk right in.

“Just give me a chance for a few weeks. If you still don’t want me after that, then fire me, no hard feelings.”

He let out a dry bark of a laugh. “If I don’t want you?” He shook his head. “Cora, I can’t.”

“Please, Lee. I need this job.”

He swallowed hard, feeling himself flush with heat. “I just—”

“Please.” Her pull was like gravity.

A stronger man would have stood firm. Lee let himself fall. “Okay,” he said.

She beamed with a smile so bright it lit up the room. “Thank you.”

She reached out to him with both hands, and as they touched, a spark of static electricity zapped. Cora laughed it off, but Lee’s gut clenched at the snap of the charged air bristling between them.

CHAPTER NINE

Crabbing

Benny drove up the lonely road that ran along the far side of Grasshead Beach half an hour early, then spent the next twenty minutes pacing beside his sleek black Pontiac. When he saw his old sky-blue Plymouth easing toward him, his heart stuttered and his chest squeezed, and before Cora could park the car, he'd rushed up to the passenger side.

“Momma.” The word dripped with longing. It was a plea folded into an apology.

He opened her door and crouched down in front of her.

“My Benny.” She laid her hand on the side of his face, her eyes softening to pools. “My son.”

He helped her out of the car and pulled her into an embrace, his arms wrapped tightly around her, his head buried in her hair. He stayed there, clinging on, lingering in the at-home feel of her.

When Cora came around the car to where they stood, Benny hooked her with one arm, pulling her into his embrace. “My two favorite people.”

They held each other for a long time, letting the missing ease out of them and drop from their shoulders like an unwanted coat.

“You look good.” Cora rubbed his hair, cropped too short to show the waves that formed when he let it grow.

“So do you,” he said, but what he meant was that it did him a world of good to see her, that seeing her felt like being home. She didn’t actually look good. She looked off. A hardness pinched at her eyes and mouth.

Benny dragged crabbing gear and folding chairs from his trunk, and they trudged toward the shoreline through a beach too deserted to bother labeling colored or white, hidden beside clusters of mangroves.

Grasshead was nowhere you’d normally think to go for a day at the beach. Full of jumping sand flies, it lived up to its name with sand grass growing thigh-high and thick, but it was a good spot for crabbing.

Benny set the chairs up, and while Momma rested, he and Cora picked their way to a rocky outcropping and fished up the scurrying creatures, dropping them into a deep bucket. It felt good to be doing something familiar with his sister.

Crabbing, like fishing, is done quietly, so Benny and Cora spoke only about where to search and when to quit. When they’d collected enough, Benny made a fire and set a pot to boiling with seawater. The easy silence that felt natural while crabbing stiffened into an awkward, brittle stillness as they all waited for the water to boil. They swatted at sand flies, trying not to be strangers.

“You comfortable, Momma?” Benny asked.

“I’m just fine,” she said, but her mouth pulled tight, like she was keeping her words in check. “Aren’t we just fine, Cora?”

“Yes, Momma.” Cora smacked her shins and her calves and rubbed at a small bite.

The soft rustle of the long grass and the rhythmic slap of the waves filled the silence. Benny tapped at the crabs trying to escape the bucket. “I’ve missed you,” he said, even though they all knew that was his own fault.

“Are you sure this is worth it?” Cora blurted, coming right to it. Thank God for Cora.

“No,” he told her honestly. “And yes.” He shrugged. This wasn’t the kind of thing you could give a straight answer to.

“You know, just because you crossed over,” Momma said, “it don’t mean you can’t cross back.”

“I know, but . . .” He looked down at his feet and sighed, swatting at the sand flies. “I’ve seen a different kind of world.” He lifted his head and looked at them. “Not just a different life, a whole different world. Going on four and a half years now.” His voice rose and strengthened. “I learned to take up space in the world and own my manhood. I can’t go back to boy and coon and the back of the bus.”

Momma bit her lip and looked out at the ocean.

“We know why you did it,” Cora said. “It’s no secret why. We just . . .”

She reached out and touched Momma’s hand. “We’re your family, is all. How are we gonna still be your family?”

Benny looked down at his feet, burrowing into the sand. “Nothing has to change between us.”

“Stop that now,” Momma said, sharp and fierce. “Don’t be talking foolishness. You got to be careful now.”

“I am, Momma.”

“I mean it, Benny. This, right here,” she waved her hand at the three of them, “is not careful. Someone could walk by anytime.”

“They wouldn’t come way out here.”

“You don’t know that. You’re playing with fire and you’re not even wearing gloves.”

With a long stick, Benny poked the wood scraps under the pot, making the flames lick higher. Then he dropped the crabs into the hot seawater.

“I didn’t try to pass,” he said, watching the crabs claw at the sides as they cooked. “They looked at me and assumed. And then it was too late to change it. The only time anyone knew anything was when—” He looked over at Cora. “Did Lee tell you he saw me?”

Cora's eyes went wide. "Lee saw you?"

"On the battlefield. I couldn't believe my eyes when he got out of that tank."

"He knew all this time?" Her voice was weak with disbelief.

"Now calm down. I appreciate that he didn't say anything, that he let me build up to doing it myself, and you should, too."

"Except, we thought you were dead!"

Benny flinched. "I wanted to tell you." He looked from Cora to Momma.

"But you didn't." Momma said.

"I'm sorry, Momma."

"Benny," Momma said, "you found a way to claim a little piece of something for yourself, and that's fine. That's nothing to feel bad about." She leaned forward and put her hands on his knees. "But there's more to this life than getting yours. They can always take that away, but they can't take who you are, unless you let them. You remember that."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And who you are is my son," she reached for his hand and pulled it to her lap. "No matter what you seem like on the outside."

Benny squeezed her hand, choking up. "Thank you, Momma." He blinked hard as Cora tipped the pot with the long stick and let the water drain out.

While the crabs cooled, Cora told him about Lee's whiskey business, and about Patsy coming back from her army posting to work at the Negro hospital, and how Momma Mae was getting on without Jasper, and about Roscoe being sad and angry all the time.

"He didn't want to come see you," she said. "He says you made your choice, and we should leave you to it."

Benny felt a prickle of shame rise in his throat, and disappointment gripped his chest.

“And when Lee offered him a job, he turned it down to keep picking oranges over on the Eastman farm.”

“The Eastman farm?” Benny frowned. “If he doesn’t want to work for Lee, can’t the GI people help him find something better?”

Cora shook her head. “That’s what they found for him.”

Benny’s heart sank with understanding. Maybe it was better that Roscoe hadn’t come. It would be hard to face him knowing he had a future full of opportunities while Roscoe picked oranges.

He reached for a crab and broke the legs off at the joints, sucking out the sweet white meat, seasoned with salt from the sea.

“They helped me a lot,” he said, and explained about his job and his free training, because he wanted them to know just how much this choice had made possible. That the stakes were so much higher than whether he could or could not get a burger at a lunch counter. “I even bought a house with GI help.”

Cora’s eyes went wide, and she covered her mouth with her hand.

“You bought a house?” Momma said, barely a whisper.

Momma talked about their Rosewood house like a dream from another life. It had been two stories high with a wide staircase and a wraparound porch built with Daddy’s own two hands and the help of the community. They lost it in that terrible massacre in 1923 that took Daddy and so many others, with Momma barely managing to escape with five-year-old Benny and three-year-old Cora. Daddy’s death had filled every part of her, till there was nothing left in her to mourn a house with, but Benny knew how that burned-down house haunted her like a restless ghost.

“They’ve got a good deal for vets,” Benny said. “You don’t need a down payment, and the mortgage works out less than my rent.”

“Must be nice,” Cora said, with a bite to her words. She flushed and shook her head.

“Sorry. I’m happy for you. It’s just,” she shook her head. “I’m happy for you.”

“Roscoe could try for one,” he said.

Cora rolled her eyes.

“The law says it’s for all vets. Isn’t it worth a try? All you have to do is find a house.”

When the sun inched west, they brushed the crab shells from their laps and collected their things, traipsing through the sand and tall grass back to the cars up on the road. Benny packed away the folding chairs and supplies at snail speed, adjusting and readjusting the positioning in the trunk, dragging out their time together.

“Did I tell you Lee’s renting a barn out by Turner Creek?”

“No.” He closed the trunk, and the heavy thud of it sounded much too final.

“Have you ever been out Turner Creek way?”

He looked up at her from the trunk. “No,” he said, drawing out the word, a question hanging in the length of it.

“It’s pretty isolated out there,” she said. “The kind of place where someone could drive up and no one would even see them.” He straightened and turned to face her. “And if someone did see, well, they’d probably just figure that person, white or colored, was ordering some whiskey. It’s good whiskey.”

A smile spread across his face as he pulled her into a hug. Thank God for Cora. “Come to think of it, I’ve got a powerful taste for some whiskey.”

“Well then, you know where to find us.”

His chest squeezed, and he lay his forehead against hers. Momma draped her arms around them both.

“I wish your father could see you.”

Benny tensed, the shame building in his chest again, but Momma cupped his cheeks in both hands.

“He would have loved to see you beating them at their own game. Clayton North’s son, right up under their lily-white noses. My God, he would have laughed.”

She kissed his cheek and said, “I’ll be seeing you, son,” like she was delivering a prophecy.

“I’ll be seeing you,” he said, his heart lighter than it had been in years. He wanted to say something more, but didn’t have the words, so Momma and Cora climbed into his old blue Plymouth, and he watched them drive off, his hand raised in a frozen wave.

CHAPTER TEN

A Home of One's Own

It did Cora a world of good to see Benny, even though she couldn't stop worrying about him. She used to feel a kind of satisfaction when he'd pass and get away with it, bringing her back little soda pop trophies from stores that were off-limits. This life he'd chosen was a whole nother level of dangerous.

Ever since she'd seen him, she'd been thinking about Benny's GI mortgage, and the more she considered it, the more she felt sure it was the answer. She still hadn't spoken to Roscoe about the divorce. She'd wanted to catch him in a good mood, but he seemed irritated all the time. He acted like everyone was against him, and she didn't know how to ask for a divorce without making him think she was against him, too. But if he had a home, something of his own to be proud of, a place he belonged, he might be okay to let her go.

When she told Roscoe about Benny's new house, he snorted. "Good for him." He didn't look up from his cards, searching the piles, trying to finish off his round of solitaire.

She pressed on, explaining the GI-guaranteed mortgage he'd gotten without needing a down payment and the rock-bottom interest rate they'd offered him just for being a vet.

"Like I said, good for him."

She sat a little closer to him on the couch and said, “I think we should buy a house.” He gave her a look that told her he thought she was crazy or just plain dumb.

“We could get that mortgage,” she said.

He gathered the cards and shuffled them. “Haven’t you seen what’s happening with that GI Bill? It’s not for us. I thought you’d figured that out by now. Benny sure has.”

“I want to try,” she persisted. “I’ll find the house. All you need to do is come with me to get the mortgage.”

He laid the deck out in seven neat piles, top card face up. “How many times does it take for you to get it? They’re never going to let us have a thing.”

“It’s the law, Roscoe. They can’t stop us if it’s the law.”

He placed his cards, running them down in order, laying his aces out. “Did you know the colored water fountain is broken downtown? It’s been broken since I got back from the war. The white one works just fine, though. You can believe that.”

“Roscoe—”

“They’re not interested in letting us have what they have. It doesn’t matter what the law says.”

She watched him place his cards, draw three from the stack, and close up a row.

“Momma hasn’t had her own place since Rosewood,” she said, trying a new tactic.

He glanced at her and looked back at his playing cards.

“But, now, here’s a chance, after all these years, to own a home again.” Momma was his soft spot.

“And all you need to do is come with me to sign some papers.” He placed a nine of clubs down with a snap.

“Don’t you think it’s worth a try if we could do this for her?” He looked at her then, a gentleness around his eyes.

“It would mean so much, Roscoe. And you’re the only one who can make it happen.” She held his gaze as she plowed on, her voice low and strong. “If I find a place, will you please come with me to get the loan?”

Roscoe rubbed his hand over his face and leaned away from her into the cushions.

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll do it for her.”

Cora thanked him in a burst of relief. She felt like she should hug him, but he held himself so stiff, she settled for patting his leg in a way she hoped showed gratitude and affection. “I’ll start looking right away.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mortgage

When she wasn't working at Green's Whiskey, Cora focused her energy on house hunting. By September, she had found a small row house not far from where they were living. She made an appointment with the bank, and after nagging Roscoe to keep his promise, they drove downtown to get their mortgage.

In the bank's lobby, they gave their names and appointment details and then stood to the side, waiting with their backs turned to the spacious reception area with its plush sofa and stylish coffee table, all meant for other customers' use. The longer Roscoe pretended not to notice the waiting area, the more Cora could feel his mood souring, so that by the time Mr. McAllister came to collect them, Roscoe set the man on edge with his stone-faced gruffness.

"So, what can I do for you today?" he asked before they even sat.

Cora laid her hand across Roscoe's arm, hoping to calm him. With the state he was in, she was afraid he'd end their chances before they began.

"We're here about a GI mortgage." She smiled brightly, trying to outshine Roscoe's stormy moodiness. "So we can buy a house."

"Ah, yes, the serviceman's loan scheme. They've been very popular. It's not government issued, you know, just government backed. The bank issues the loan, but the government backing means we can give you low interest

rates and favorable conditions, because if you default, the government steps in.”

“We know that,” Roscoe said. “That’s why we’re at a bank and not the municipal building.” Cora slipped her hand back onto his arm and squeezed.

“We’ve found a place we’re interested in,” she said, sweet as sunshine. She pulled out a folder and laid it on the desk. “And we’ve brought my husband’s discharge papers if you need to see those too.” She laid another folder beside the first.

“I’ll just have a quick look at these,” he said, gathering up the folders. “If you folks would like to go sit in the waiting room while I check this over, I’ll come and collect you when I’m ready.”

“In the waiting room?” Cora’s voice went flat.

“Man, are you trying to be funny?” Roscoe said.

“Oh. Of course,” he said, blushing. “Not the waiting room. You can just stay here.” He smiled a tight, nervous smile. “I’ll only need a few minutes to read everything through. Why don’t I have some coffee brought in while you wait?”

He pushed a button on an intercom on his desk and told the woman who answered to please bring in three cups of coffee. “Milk and sugar?” he asked, and they both nodded. “Milk and sugar, all three, Samantha.” He released the button.

Mr. McAllister pulled Roscoe’s discharge papers from the envelope. The *honorable* was bold and unmissable. He scanned the sheet, put it back, and opened the other envelope to review the property Cora had chosen.

As they waited, a secretary hustled in holding a tray with three coffees. Her bright smile fell the second she saw Cora and Roscoe, and she hesitated at the door, looking confused until Mr. McAllister waved her in. She set down the cups with a rough thud, sloshing the coffee over the rim and onto the saucers, and scuttled out the door. Mr. McAllister pretended not to have

noticed anything, but his face went red. At least he was embarrassed, Cora thought. When she glanced at Roscoe, she saw his temples pulsing, and she put her hand on his arm again. He brushed it away.

Mr. McAllister gathered the real estate details of the house and stood. “I’ll be right back. I just have to check something.”

He slipped out of the room, leaving Roscoe and Cora with their coffee. Roscoe didn’t touch his. Instead, he stared straight ahead, lips pressed together in a tight line. He blamed her, she knew, for making him endure the waiting room, the coffee, all of it. And, as he so often did when America showed this side of itself, he withdrew further into himself and away from her.

When Mr. McAllister came back in, somber and not meeting their eyes, she knew. He sat down and handed back the folders.

“I’m sorry, folks. I really am. I’d like to be able to offer you a loan, but I’m afraid I can’t.”

Roscoe slid his eyes over to Cora, his face clouding.

“What do you mean?” Cora said, her heart racing. “We have everything we need.” She tapped the paperwork, trying to control her frustration and anger. “You have to give us the loan. It’s in the GI Bill.”

“Personally, I’d be happy to give it to you. You seem like nice folks.” He flashed a weak smile at Cora. “And since you served,” he tipped his head at Roscoe, whose face had twisted into a scowl, “you’re certainly entitled to it.” Mr. McAllister took back the folder and pointed to the address of the house. “It’s the location that’s the problem. I checked with my supervisor to see if we could make an exception, but it’s ironclad. The zoning comes from the VA and the FHA, not from us, and you can’t argue with the government. The area is redlined.” He shrugged. “The government won’t back a loan to this address.”

“But why?” Cora asked.

“Redlined properties are high risk.”

Cora felt Roscoe's I-told-you-so stare boring holes into her. "What if we bought a property on Grove Ridge?" she asked.

"Well, that would be fine. I had a couple in yesterday who got a loan approved for Grove Ridge."

"Or something over by Maison's Way?"

"That's fine too." He brightened. "Or Bay View or Sea Crest or Thompson Place. Most places are fine. It's just a few that the government has marked as high-risk areas that we can't make loans for."

Cora and Roscoe exchanged a look.

"What about Jackson Hole?" Roscoe asked.

"Well, that's redlined too, I'm afraid."

"What about New Rosewood?"

"Where's that?"

"South of the swamp."

"Oh. You mean Beggar's Valley. No. That's also high risk."

"You call it Beggar's Valley?" Cora cut in, appalled.

"Let's go, Cora. I think we get the picture."

"No, wait a minute." Her skin was starting to prickle. "Mr. McAllister, you're saying that every Negro neighborhood is high risk. You're only loaning to white neighborhoods."

"It's not about race, folks. The loans are for everybody."

Roscoe stood. "Cora, let's go."

"If you could just find something outside of those high-risk neighborhoods, I could approve the loan for you."

Roscoe walked to the door. "Cora," he said, his voice low and dangerous.

She didn't budge. She'd been so close. "But couldn't the bank approve a loan without the serviceman's scheme?"

McAllister shook his head. "If the government considers the loan too risky, the bank will too."

Roscoe wrenched open the door and stormed out.

Hastily, she gathered the folders and stood.

“I’m very sorry,” Mr. McAllister said. “Come back if you find something suitable.”

Cora nodded and trailed after Roscoe, who was already halfway down the hall. To their left, a popping sound made Roscoe nearly jump out of his skin. His shoulders sprang up to his ears, and his head ducked down as his hands went to cover his head. Cora caught up to him and looked through the open door beside him. Inside, a couple smiled as a loan officer poured out champagne.

PART FIVE

Re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul.

—Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

I can't believe what you say, because I see what you do.

—James Baldwin,
“A Report from Occupied Territory”

CHAPTER ONE

House Hunting

Cora stood alone outside the Mangrove Bay real estate office, calming her jittery nerves. Roscoe had refused to come. He wouldn't even pretend to think about coming, so when Cora called ahead to make the appointment, she'd lied and said Roscoe's war injuries made it difficult for him to get around, and that she'd come first without her husband and then bring him by later if she saw anything she liked.

"Well, that all sounds fine." The woman had said. "What time on Saturday would you like to come by, ma'am?"

It was the *ma'am* that kept her standing on the sidewalk, hesitating. She needed a real estate agency like this one to get access to a house in a loan-approved neighborhood, but Cora knew she wasn't what the woman was expecting, and it was bound to be unpleasant when she found out. Just how unpleasant, Cora didn't know, but her heart raced with the thought of it. She took a deep breath, shook out her hands that were clenching into nervous balls, straightened her back, tipped up her chin, and marched inside.

The receptionist watched her as she opened the door and strode up to the desk, tracking her progress across the floor like she was eyeing a snake.

"I'm Cora Crane. I have an appointment this morning."

"But you're . . . well, goodness . . . I see. Listen, the thing is, I didn't realize. I mean if I had known, I wouldn't have . . . what I mean is, I don't

think we can help you.”

“Don’t you sell houses?” Cora asked with false innocence, her heart beating a mile a minute, both hands clutching her purse, squeezing it tight.

“Well, we do, but they tend to be in certain areas.”

“Then I’ll have a look at those.”

The young woman swallowed. “Let me get my . . .” She turned her head and called out to the closed door behind her. “Reg. Can you come out here, please?”

A portly, middle-aged man came out of a back room wearing a double-breasted blue suit, his brown hair combed back like Bing Crosby. When he saw Cora, his face fell, and he stopped ten feet away like she might be contagious.

“Is there a problem here?” He used a chastising tone, as if Cora had been called to the principal’s office.

“No problem at all,” Cora said, sweet but firm. “I’d like to buy a house.”

He raised his eyebrows and stared at her like she’d just spoken Japanese. Then he looked around the room, as if the right response might be written on the wall behind her.

“We . . . uh . . . we don’t . . . uh . . . have anything in your price range.” He gave a little shrug.

“Well now, that’s interesting,” Cora said, “since you don’t know what my price range is.”

“Well, I . . . I just mean we don’t really have much to show at the moment.”

“What about those two right there?” Cora said, pointing to two house listings on the receptionist’s desk, with a photo printout and the asking price along the bottom.

“Well, these are . . . uh . . . they’re actually under offer, I’m afraid. So they’re just being taken off the market.” He gathered up the papers and

handed them to the secretary with a nod of his head to get rid of them. She clutched them to her chest and disappeared into the back room.

Cora felt her face flush hot and her scalp prickle. “What about a property over on the Levittown development? I hear they have quite a few new houses.”

Benny’s development had grown into a cookie-cutter neighborhood of thousands of homes, with new houses ready every week.

“The Levittown development?” He scratched his head. For a minute, Cora thought he was about to deny that he’d ever heard of it, but instead he rummaged through a shelf and produced a brochure. He turned to a description of the development, three pages in, and handed it to her to read:

This restricted residential suburb is within easy reach of the warm waters of the Gulf and the shops of downtown.

Cora smoothed her face to blank, like she didn’t know what restricted was code for.

“Sounds very nice.”

He reddened. “Come on now, don’t be difficult. You know I can’t sell you a house there.”

Cora pulled herself as tall as she could and lifted her chin. “If I have the money, I should be able to buy a house wherever I like.” She looked him dead in the eyes, challenging him to say otherwise.

“There’s a race covenant,” he said, pointing to the brochure in her hand. “My hands are tied.”

Her jaw clenched so tightly that it made her teeth ache.

“And as for whatever else we’ve got listed,” he shrugged. “If it were up to me, I’d sell you one of these houses.” His head tipped toward the file cabinets behind them. “But, look, if people found out I tried to sell to you, I’d be ruined. It’s that simple. There’s just nothing I can do.”

CHAPTER TWO

Distractions

Lee tested his latest batch of corn whiskey, keeping one ear out for the sound of Cora's car rumbling up his drive. In the few months she'd been with him, she had become indispensable. She'd organized his files, come up with a better way to track payments and accounts, and had taken to using the telephone like a fish to water, unlike Lee, who didn't like talking to people he couldn't see.

Despite her efforts, the overall productivity at Green's Whiskey hadn't improved much. Having her there was exactly as much of a distraction as he knew it would be, and although they gained in efficiency through her efforts, they lost whiskey-making time through his diverted attention. He'd catch himself watching her bite her lip as she figured through the accounts, or listening to the lilt of her voice as she spoke on the telephone. When he passed her, he'd linger in her scent, and where before he'd hurriedly eat scraps from last night's leftovers for his lunch break, now he lingered with her over cheese sandwiches and watermelon slices.

But if Lee's productivity had dipped, his mood had soared. He woke in the morning with a smile on his face at the thought of seeing Cora, and walked around with a cheery bounce he didn't know he was capable of.

"Good morning," he said when she came through the door. It took him twenty minutes to get back to work.

Most days, Cora was all business, powering through her tasks with the targeted focus of a conquering army, but today something was distracting her. He saw her get up from her desk, only to forget what she'd meant to go do. He heard her telephone the same customer twice and had to make up an excuse for calling again. And at one point, Lee caught her staring at the wall with her pencil still poised over her paper.

"Is something on your mind?" he finally asked during their lunch break, sitting at their makeshift table of old crates.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I've just noticed you seem a little absent-minded today."

Her eyes widened. "Please don't fire me. I'll make up the time working late, or I'll come in on the weekend, or I could—"

"Cora, I'm not going to fire you." He shook his head, wondering how she could be so clever and so clueless at the same time. This place had become unimaginable without her, and the fact that she couldn't see how utterly essential she was took his breath away. "I'm not ever going to fire you," he said, giving her an earnest stare meant to reassure her, but that soon softened and stretched into something weighted with heat.

The stillness between them crackled with energy. Lee cleared his throat and leaned back. "So, what's going on?"

Her shoulders sagged. "Remember when I went to see Benny?"

Lee tensed, fearing a repeat of the argument they'd had when she found out he'd known about her brother and hadn't told her. *How could you keep that from me?* she'd accused. In the end, she made him promise never to keep anything from her ever again. It was a crazy, impossible promise, but he liked the ring of permanence it had, the assumption that she'd always be there to hear his secrets.

"I remember," he said, trying to sound neutral.

"Well, when he told me about his house, I decided to try for a GI mortgage too."

Lee's head nodded, but his body clenched. She could only get at GI money through Roscoe, which meant she wanted to buy a house with Roscoe. That shouldn't be a surprise; he was her husband. But Lee had still thought, or at least he'd hoped, that after spending so much time together, Cora might start thinking of him the way she used to. Which was wrong. She was married. But still, right or wrong, he had hoped.

"GI or not, we're not going to get the house," she said.

He was upset for her sake but relieved for his, which made him ashamed and kept him quiet. So, she talked on about the bank and the real estate agent and how Roscoe was fuming mad at her for dragging him out to be humiliated.

That loosened his tongue. "Roscoe has no business being angry with you about all this. You're not the one keeping him down." Since coming home, Roscoe had let his frustration and disappointment fester into an ugly bile that had changed his personality for the worse.

"He's not like you, Lee. He came home from overseas and just, I don't know, gave up."

"Not like me? What am I like?" He was fishing, aching to hear a good word from her.

"You're . . . alive. You have vision, and drive, and passion. And you're not waiting on anybody's permission to make your mark. You're a man who rolls up his sleeves and . . . and does things."

Lee couldn't help his smile. "Okay. I'll take that." A lightness spread through him, and he buzzed with pleasure. "Well," he shifted in his chair, inching closer to her. "Let's see if we can't get something done for you."

She raised her eyebrows at him, and the sparkling tension between them was back.

"Uncle Drew is as good a lawyer as they come," he said. "Why don't you meet with him and see if there's any way to get what you're entitled to?"

She slumped, crestfallen. “I don’t have money for a lawyer.”

“Uncle Drew will hear you out for free if I ask him to. Then we can decide what to do next.”

“Really?” She brightened and rose a good two inches in her chair.

“Sure,” he said, enjoying the transformation.

“Oh, Lee, thank you.” Reaching for him with both hands, she slid her palms over his cheeks, cupping his face.

Lee froze. How many times had she cupped his face like that to demand his kisses, pulling him to her until they sank into an oblivion of sighs and moans and screams? He wanted to lean in. He knew he should pull away. Long seconds dragged as his blood rushed faster.

With a start, she let him go, hands hovering beside his head before lowering them to his shoulders and pulling him toward her for a hug, patting his back in a gesture of casual friendship. But while her right hand tapped with a carefree calm, her left fingers dug into his shoulder, telling him all he needed to know.

CHAPTER THREE

Sugar

Benny sat at his kitchen table, hunched over *Elements of Automobile Engineering*, his notes scattered across the table, when a strong knocking startled him out of his concentration. He opened his door to find Gloria. He hadn't seen her since the night of the Joe Louis fight. She wore a yellow dress and a bright smile and held an empty cup.

"Hi," he said, smoothing his hair, tucking his shirt in.

"Hi, yourself." She held up the cup. "I've come for sugar. Half a cup exactly. Do you have any?"

He remembered how refreshingly direct she was and felt pleased she'd come to him when they were surrounded by neighbors with sugar. "I think so. Come on in. I'll take a look."

"Alice is making a Key lime pie," she said, stepping inside. "And wouldn't you know it, we're short of sugar." She followed him into the kitchen. "Alice makes the best pies. I can never get the crust to work out right. But I bake a mean cake." She raised her eyebrows at Benny. "Are you a pie man or a cake man?"

"Me? I like, well, both, but I mean, I think I prefer cake."

This, too, Benny remembered. He felt off-kilter in her presence, and he liked the feeling. He rummaged in his cupboard and pulled out a paper sack of sugar folded over and clipped shut with a clothespin.

“Goodness, this looks complicated,” she said, flipping through the book he’d left open on the table.

“It’s not so bad.”

“Are you on one of those training courses?”

He nodded, filling her half cup with sugar.

“I told Ed he should go on one of those, but nothing doing. Daddy wants to give him the business, but he says he just doesn’t have a head for figures. Daddy says I should have been the boy since numbers come so easily to me. During the war, I practically ran his office.”

“Why not give it to you?”

She fluffed her skirts. “I’m a girl, Benny. He’s not going to give his big, manly business to his little girl.” She laughed, but he heard the frustration underneath it. “I could do it, but he doesn’t see me that way.”

“I’m sorry. It’s a heck of a thing when you know you’ve got more in you than other people see,” Benny said.

She tilted her head at him and squinted her eyes like she was trying to peel back the layers of him. “Ed would say, I don’t know how easy I’ve got it.”

Benny shook his head. “If you have wings to fly, it’s not easier to crawl.” He handed her back the half cup, but she didn’t move to go.

“You are the first man who gets that. Why don’t other people get that?”

Benny reddened, cautious now, careful not to give too much away. “I guess I just have a different perspective.” He dug his hands in his pockets.

“I never studied accounting properly, but I learned everything from my father, and I’m good at it. I’m really good at it.”

“Somehow, that doesn’t surprise me,” he said.

“It doesn’t?”

When he shook his head, she beamed.

“Come to dinner,” she said. “Alice is making meat loaf and mashed potatoes.”

He bit his lip. "Thanks, but I don't think—"

"It's not like you have anything on the stove," she said, waving her hand around his kitchen. "Besides, it's Key lime pie for dessert, and you like pie almost as much as you like cake." She held up the sugar. "Plus, you contributed to the meal."

Half an hour later, when he'd changed his shirt four times, Ed knocked on his door to get him for dinner.

"You sure I'm not intruding?" Benny said.

"No backing out now. Alice has already set a place for you, and Glory would kill me if I came back empty-handed."

Benny shut off his lights and followed Ed out.

"Listen, before we go over there, I just want to be straight with you," Ed said, stopping them on Benny's front lawn. "My sister's a great girl with a big heart, and it looks like she's taken a shine to you. Now, I'm not saying that if you have dinner with us, you're going to have to marry her or anything, but I am saying, don't lead her on. I don't want to see her getting hurt."

Benny stepped back and put his hands up in a gesture of surrender. "I just met her, Ed. I barely know her. All I can say is, she seems, I don't know, special?"

Ed nodded. "Special's good. And I didn't mean to put you on the spot. I just need you to know she has people who are watching out for her."

"Okay," Benny said, a sinking feeling in his gut.

"Come on." Ed slung an arm around his shoulder. "Let's eat some meat loaf."

CHAPTER FOUR

Uncle Drew

In Uncle Drew's book-lined office, Cora sat in front of the desk, crossing and uncrossing her legs. The worn brown leather of the low-slung chair creaked with the shift of her weight as she adjusted herself in the seat. Lee sat beside her in a second chair, strength radiating from him like the sun. Roscoe had refused to come.

From behind the desk, Uncle Drew took notes as Cora talked, telling him about what had happened with the real estate agent and before that at the bank.

“Officially, you should have access to the GI mortgage scheme. Unfortunately, the way they block you from it is completely legal.” He sat forward and folded his fingers together. “The problem is that the benefits are administered locally, so even if the federal government really did mean for you to have access, the local government can legally exclude you with their high-risk zoning nonsense. And even though racial zoning has been illegal for nearly thirty years, it’s alive and well in every real estate agency in the state, so you’re unlikely to get someone to sell you something in the low-risk white areas.”

Cora was glad Roscoe hadn’t come. She would have gotten an earful after this if he had.

“So that’s it?” Lee said. “There’s got to be something we can do.”

Uncle Drew glanced between Cora and Lee, tapping his fingers on the desk, drumming out a pattern. “Governments derive their power from the people.” Tap, tap, tap. “So, if the people speak up loudly enough”—tap, tap—“the government must act.”

“I like it,” Lee said.

“But how do we get enough people to speak up?” Cora asked.

“With a little thing called the free press.” He took out a notebook and began jotting down names: *The Pittsburgh Courier*, *The Chicago Defender*, *The Baltimore Afro-American*, and *The Norfolk Journal and Guide*. “The white press won’t touch this unless it becomes a big story in the colored papers, so that’s where we’ll start.” He spoke as he wrote, adding names until the list ran the length of the page. “But we’ll need your husband. He’s the vet. The story doesn’t work without him.”

Cora thought of the way Roscoe looked at her when they were turned down at the bank. And how he’d barely spoken to her since. How would she ever get him to agree to speak to a newspaper?

She looked over at Lee. “Maybe you could do it. You don’t have to really want to buy a house. If you just ask, they’ll turn you down, and then it’s your story.”

“No, Cora, I can’t,” Lee said. “Officially, I can’t get a GI anything.”

“But you served. Longer than most others. You volunteered straightaway and fought and got shot at and everything.”

“I have a blue discharge, which means I’m locked out of all the benefit programs.” He explained what happened in his final army days and how he was kicked out, with no chance of appeal. “But I’d do it again,” he said. “Especially knowing that the GI Bill doesn’t do much good for an honorable discharge either.”

He said it casually, but she knew him well enough to know it hurt him.

“Now that’s an idea,” Uncle Drew said. “We should broaden the story. Make it about all the Negro soldiers getting left behind on all the different

GI benefits, not just you and the mortgage.”

“A wider base for a bigger story,” Lee said.

“I have a few contacts at some of these,” he tapped the page with the newspaper names. “But I want to start with the bigger papers. The smaller ones will follow their lead, and if we have any chance of getting this to cross over into the white press, we need the big names to be leading the charge with it.”

Cora was getting nervous. She’d come in for legal advice and suddenly they were planning a national news campaign. “Are you sure this is a good idea? Our names in the paper like that? Printing all this won’t change anything anyway.”

“We need public opinion on our side if we want to pressure politicians to make legal changes. Doing this could make a real difference. But I don’t want to force you into anything. If you’re not comfortable taking this forward, let me know now.”

Lee leaned in and took her hand. “We could keep her name out of it, though, right? She could be anonymous. Or have a fake name for the paper.”

“Of course. That shouldn’t be a problem. And if we expand the story, hers would just be one of many voices.”

Cora looked over at Lee, who smiled encouragement at her and squeezed her hand. He believed in her and made her feel brave. She could do this. With his support, she could do anything.

“Okay, let’s call them.” She felt a rush of excitement that she could be part of something so important. She’d worry about what to tell Roscoe later.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Pittsburgh Courier

Lee's green Ford hugged the road as he drove. Beside him, Cora sat silent, fiddling with her purse strap. Uncle Drew had managed to get a reporter from *The Pittsburgh Courier* to come down to interview her and Roscoe. As the largest Negro paper in America, with two hundred thousand readers, it was a chance to speak to the whole country.

"You okay?" Lee asked as the minutes stretched in stillness.

"Yeah. Uh-huh." She nodded, squeezing her purse.

"Because you look a little nervous."

She let out a long breath and looked over at Lee. "Are we doing the right thing?"

"If you want to call it off, we'll call it off. But, yeah. I think talking to him and telling your story is the right thing."

Cora bit her lip and nodded.

"But say the word and I'll turn this car around right now."

"No," she said.

He reached over to take her hand, feeling the tension in her grip, and only let go to shift gears when they got to the turnoff for Uncle Drew's.

When Cora and Lee walked into Uncle Drew's office, the reporter already sat waiting, notepad and pen at the ready. He had the look of the

North about him with his pinstriped zoot suit and his side-parted Afro. When he saw them, he stood and vigorously shook Cora's hand.

"Charlie Preston. Pleasure to meet you. And you must be the husband," he said, shaking Lee's hand. "The war vet."

"I'm a vet, but unfortunately, I'm not the husband." He flashed a half smile, but then regretted his wisecrack when the newspaper man looked back and forth between them, his assumptions written all over his face, and Cora blushed, embarrassed.

"I'm just a friend," Lee amended in stiff, clipped tones that didn't leave room for questions.

"Right. Okay. Fine." He turned to Cora. "So, where's your husband?"

"He's not coming," Cora said. "I'm sorry, but he doesn't think talking to you will do any good. He's kind of frustrated with everything."

The reporter raised his eyebrows at Uncle Drew, who was struggling not to look annoyed. Lee shrugged at him in apology. He and Cora had tried to get Roscoe to agree to talk, but there was no budging him.

"The story is the same with or without the husband," Uncle Drew said. "And Cora takes a better photo."

"Photo?" Cora asked.

Lee frowned. No one had mentioned a photo.

"Mr. Preston thought it would add interest to the story."

"But the husband's the veteran," Preston said. "I came all this way to interview a vet."

"Lee's a veteran, too." Uncle Drew laid his hand on Lee's shoulder. "He'd be happy to give you a quote or two."

Lee raised his eyebrows in surprise. He thought the blue discharge would only complicate things, but he nodded just the same. "If it'll help Cora."

"This story will help more than just Mrs. Crane," the reporter said, nodding at Cora.

“I’d still like to talk to your husband, but let’s get started with what we have.”

They all sat down, and Charlie Preston laid a pad of yellow paper across his lap, his pencil poised, ready to write. “First of all, thank you for coming forward. This is an important story.” He looked at each of them, eagerness in his eyes. “This kind of discrimination is happening all over the country, and what we need are more people talking about it. Sharing their experiences.”

The man directed an excited, greedy expression at Cora that made Lee nervous. He wondered if they were being reckless, agreeing to this. He scooted his chair closer to her.

Cora fingered the pleats of her dress as she told Charlie Preston about the bank refusing the GI mortgage because the government labeled colored neighborhoods too risky, and she explained that nobody would sell her a house in the parts of town that could get a GI loan.

“They turned it into a white folks’ program,” she said, her frustration loosening her tongue. “And the worst part is, they pretend like they’re helping everybody, but they know they’re not. And we know they’re not. I don’t know who they think they’re fooling.”

“That’s just it, Mrs. Crane. You’d be surprised at how many folks outside the community think that you and your husband have the same chance as everybody else,” Preston said. “That’s what they were told, so that’s what they believe.”

He pushed his glasses back up his nose and made a few more notes before turning to Lee.

“And how do you fit into this?” he asked.

He shook his head. “I don’t. I’m here for moral support.”

Cora reached over and clasped Lee’s arm. “He’s a war hero,” she said. “He has a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star.”

“Is that true?” When Preston looked at Lee, the eager excitement was back.

“It’s true.” He slid his hand over Cora’s, savoring the soft, warm feel of her. “But I also have a blue discharge.”

“That he didn’t deserve,” Cora said, her fingers squeezing for emphasis.

“Well, none of us can get the benefits anyway,” Lee said. “This country talks a good game about democracy, but it’s not really interested in it. The last thing America wants is equality.”

The story ran the following week in *The Pittsburgh Courier* as a two-page spread. Roscoe and Cora’s story was one of several showing how Negroes were cut out of GI benefits across the country. There was even a sidebar about decorated war heroes getting blue discharges at the eleventh hour under questionable circumstances, disqualifying them from GI opportunities altogether. Lee and Cora were both photographed with quotes below their faces, and they got a thrill seeing themselves in the paper.

The reporter never got to speak to Roscoe. He drove out to Cora’s place twice before he had to fly home, hoping to convince him in person. He waited for him until late both times, but Roscoe stayed out, who knew where, doing who knew what. It embarrassed Cora and angered Lee on her behalf. He might not have wanted them married, but since they were, Roscoe should have been there for her. It burned him up to discover he wasn’t. Cora deserved the best of everything, and now Lee knew Roscoe wasn’t giving it to her.

CHAPTER SIX

Roscoe's Letter

After eight months at his job, Roscoe was dying to throw in the towel. The orange picking was bad enough, but the daily abuse from his hateful foreman crushed his spirit, and every time he got his meager paycheck, he sank further into a gloom.

On payday, Roscoe walked through the back roads of Mangrove Bay, relishing a crisp winter breeze that reminded him of late spring in Wales and the time he and Megan stood on a barren hillside, leaning into the wind. His memories surfaced randomly like that, triggered by nothing at all, and his mood would swing just as unpredictably.

He would be okay, but then he'd think of his dead-end job with his sadistic boss, or his frigid marriage to a woman who barely cared for him, and his resentment would peak. Postwar life had turned out just fine for Benny, with his white job and white house, and for Lee, with his new business bankrolled by his personal guardian angel—Drew Brooks. But Roscoe had nothing, and to make it worse, he knew where to find everything he wanted. But even if he could get back to Wales, he doubted Megan would still be waiting for him. And if he abandoned Cora to find out, he'd be no better than his feckless father, whose leaving kick-started a disastrous ripple effect for Roscoe that left him homeless at sixteen. Good

men stayed, and Roscoe was determined to be a good man, but his bitterness swelled to an outrage he found hard to contain.

He stopped into Fred's Bar on his way home to take the edge off. Three bourbons later, he began to level out. He needed to get back for dinner, but he ordered a fourth to keep him loose. Cora would be furious. She'd say he drank away his paycheck. She didn't understand that without a few drinks to smooth his corners, there would be no paycheck.

By the time he pushed back from the bar and stepped outside, nice and easy, he could smile again. Who cared about that damn job, or that Benny had abandoned them to live large as a white man, or that Lee had turned into a fat cat who could hire people instead of picking oranges for peanuts, or that Cora had become a nag. In moments like these, Roscoe missed Jasper more than ever. If he'd been there, Jasper would have understood. He'd known about living a frustrated life.

Roscoe breathed in a lungful of air so clean it made him dizzy, and he took a minute to sit on a bench. He tipped his head up to a sky full of stars. He'd always liked stars. He liked how they were the same in Florida and in France. Or in Wales. Megan had called them by their fancy names like old friends. Roscoe leaned back and found Cassiopeia and Ursa Major and Orion, and then swiped at his eyes and blamed the water in them on the wind.

He didn't think he was getting home more than an hour or so later than usual, but time must have slipped away from him somewhere, because when he got back to the house, Cora and Momma North had already eaten and had washed and dried the dishes.

“Where've you been, Roscoe?” Cora asked when he'd barely stepped into the house.

“Just made a pit stop on my way back.” He tried to flash her a smile that felt droopy and stale. “I wanted to look at the stars.”

Cora folded her arms across her chest. “It’s not stars I’m smelling on your breath.”

“Oh, here we go,” he grumbled. “I’m a grown man, Cora. I can have a drink if I like.”

Momma North sucked her teeth and gave him a hard look that slumped his shoulders.

“Cora held dinner for you.” Momma North said. “We waited a whole hour before we gave up and ate.”

His eyes darted to the wall clock that showed it was already past ten, and he hung his head. He’d thought it was closer to seven.

“I’m not trying to tell you what to do,” Cora said. “But you can’t just”—she splayed her hands wide—“do this.”

Momma North’s face was lined with disappointment as she left the kitchen, announcing she was going to bed.

“I know it’s been tough for you since you’ve been back,” Cora said once they were alone. She pressed her lips together, blinking fast like she was fighting back tears. “Roscoe, I won’t hold dinner for you no more. Whatever you’re doing or not doing that’s keeping you back, that’s your business, but I’m not gonna wait no more.”

She pinned him with a look that made it clear this was about more than dinner.

“Okay,” he said, feeling two feet tall, knowing she deserved better. He needed to pull himself together.

“Your plate’s by the stove.”

He glanced over to see that she’d cooked rice and beans with fried tomatoes and a gravy that had cooled to a lumpy glop.

“I’m going to bed,” she said.

“Aren’t you going to heat it up for me?”

Cora’s eyes flared. “No, Roscoe. I’m not.” She turned and marched into their bedroom, slamming the door.

Roscoe sighed. He picked up the plate and saw that beside it, she'd tucked a letter. His chest clenched when he noticed the bold, loopy handwriting spelling out the address in Hawaii where he'd been based after Europe. Those lines had been crossed out, and above them, someone had written Cora's address in block letters. He put the plate of food down, his heart racing, and picked up the envelope, running his fingers over her writing.

He'd told himself that his time with Megan was wartime life, a temporary and crazy place where normal rules didn't apply, and that with the war over, she'd forget all about him and he'd move on too, but just seeing her handwriting made the longing echo in his bones, until his whole body rang with its hollowness.

Roscoe lowered himself into a creaking kitchen chair and read. Her words transported him to happy days in Pontypool, a place that had welcomed him like he belonged, where a woman he loved with his whole soul still waited.

The air felt heavy in his lungs as he closed his eyes, remembering. Sweet, sweet Megan. She wanted to know why he hadn't returned to her once the Pacific War ended. She was praying that he was safe and well, but said that even if he'd been injured or disfigured in the last days of the war, he shouldn't stay away. They could face it together if he'd just come back.

He felt a buzzing climbing up his chest and ringing through his ears. God almighty, the things she must have thought happened to him to keep him away. Keep him from writing for all this time. How could he ever explain?

“Roscoe?”

Cora's voice startled him. He hadn't heard her come back in. She stood in the doorway in a thin nightgown.

“It's nearly midnight,” she said, eyeing the letter in his hand and the untouched food on the counter. “Aren't you going to go to sleep?”

Roscoe's nerves frayed. He couldn't be around Cora just then. "No." He got to his feet, folding the letter into a square. "I'm going out."

"Now? That's crazy."

The tight grip he tried to keep on his emotions slipped. "No, you know what's crazy? This." He spread out his arms. "And this." He held up the paper clutched in his hand. "And this." He bounced his finger between the two of them.

"Quiet down," she hissed, glancing back at her momma's bedroom door.

His breath labored, and his head pounded. The grief and rage that festered and boiled inside him wanted an outlet. If he stayed, he might lose control. "I need to go."

"I think you should sleep it off."

He took a step toward her, balling his fists. "Don't tell me what to do." It shocked him how much he wanted to lash out and let his pain become her pain. He had to get away before he did something he couldn't undo. He shoved past her, pushing Megan's letter deep inside his pocket, and stormed outside, desperate to distance himself from Cora and this house and everything he'd let his life become.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Date

Benny drove to Gloria's house and rang the bell. His insides churned. He liked Gloria, and after spending time with her for the past six months at Ed's, it should have been the most natural thing in the world for him to ask her out. He felt so comfortable with her and enjoyed her company so much that the last time he saw her, he asked her to go to the pictures with him before his brain caught up with his mouth to stop him. Once he'd put the invitation out there, he couldn't take it back.

"You must be Benny," a nicely dressed woman said, opening the door wide for him.

"Gloria will be down in a minute. Why don't you come in while you wait?"

She phrased it like a question, and said it so sweetly, you could almost miss that it was a nonnegotiable command.

"So, I hear you're Ed's neighbor."

"Yes, ma'am," Benny said. "Next door." She sized him up from head to toe. He shuffled his feet, then stopped when he realized she'd noticed. "I'm the neighbor on the left. Well, facing the street on the left but facing the house on the right." Shut up, Benny.

"So, you fought in the war as well? I hear you're all vets out that way."

“Yes, ma’am. Army.” He slipped his hands in his pockets. “I enlisted right after Pearl Harbor.” He checked behind him, hoping he’d heard Gloria coming. He hadn’t.

“Why not navy? If it was Pearl Harbor that made you enlist?”

“I . . . it’s . . .” Because they wouldn’t take colored sailors, only stewards and cooks. “I just . . .” He folded and unfolded his arms over his chest. “. . . thought it might be a better fit.”

She smiled at his fluster. “Ed can’t swim. That’s why he joined the army instead of the navy.”

“Neither can I,” he said. He’d have to remember that answer for the next time.

“There she is,” Mrs. Meyers said, looking past him over his shoulder.

He turned to find Gloria in a pale-blue dress and her brown hair done up in a twist. She looked like a picture. “Wow,” he said, and both Gloria and her mother smiled.

“Don’t have her home too late.”

“No ma’am.” He held his elbow out for his date.

“And take care how you drive. You’ve got precious cargo.” She straightened Gloria’s necklace, a gold heart, to sit squarely between her collarbones.

“Mother, stop,” Gloria hissed.

“I’ll take good care of her, Mrs. Meyers.”

Gloria tugged at his arm, and he was more than happy to take the hint and go.

They parked around the block from the movie theater, both of them relaxing the farther they got from Mrs. Meyers. When they climbed out of the car and Benny took Gloria’s hand, she smiled up at him with so much trust and affection, he wanted to kiss her right then and there.

He bought two tickets to a film called *A Double Life* with Ronald Colman and Shelley Winters. The title put him on edge, distracting him so

much that when he took Gloria's hand again, he headed for the colored section in the balcony.

"Where are you going?" Gloria said as he led her toward the stairs.

Benny looked up and flushed. "I . . . don't know," he stammered. His heart rate spiked. "I guess I'm nervous." He released her hand and wiped his, now flooding with sweat, on his trousers.

"Look at you," she said, and he flushed harder. "I like that I make you nervous." She looped her arm in his. "Come on, soldier. Let's sit up front."

Benny nodded, lightheaded, and walked with his date to the whites-only section of the theater. He spent the first half of the film scolding himself for his stupidity. He couldn't afford to make mistakes. In his mind, he heard Momma saying *You're playing with fire and not even wearing gloves*.

When Gloria shrieked at the murder scene and leaned into him, he put his arm around her shoulder, and she snuggled closer to him. He could do this, he told himself. Piece of cake. It turned out that the movie had nothing to do with his kind of double life. If anything, it confirmed how easily a person could change from one life to another.

They walked back to the car with his arm draped around Gloria's shoulder. As they rounded the corner, she looked up at him.

"I need a nickname."

"You do?" He was getting used to not being able to keep up with the way she thought.

She nodded. "I think we've reached the nickname stage."

He laughed. "Okay." The idea pleased and terrified him. "Well, let's see."

"Not Glory," she said before he could suggest anything. "My family calls me that and I can't stand it."

"Oh," he frowned. "Then why do they call you that?"

"Because they think it fits."

He cocked his head at her. "But if you don't like it—"

“My family has a very specific image of who they think I am. To them, I’m a Glory. But not to me. You see?”

Benny got the feeling the name he chose meant more to her than she let on. He didn’t want to get it wrong. “How about if you come up with something, and I’ll call you that?”

“No chance,” she said. “You’re not getting out of this. I want to see what you say.”

Benny blew out a long breath, thinking. “Okay, how about G?”

“Just G?”

“Yeah, unless . . . do you have a middle name?”

“Elizabeth.”

“Well, that would make GE.”

“Like the light bulb?” She made a face.

“It would fit, because you shine bright.”

She laughed. “Sweet.”

“But I prefer just G. The way Zorro is Z. It’s mysterious but direct, like there’s always more to G but you have to bother looking.”

“I could get a mask,” she smirked.

“And a cape.”

“And a sword.”

“Hold on,” he said. “Maybe not a sword. Maybe this is a bad idea.”

“No. I like it. G. And you have to be B.”

He chuckled. “I like Benny just fine.”

“So do I.” She bumped him with her hip. “But you still have to be B. We’re in this together.”

He tightened his arm around her shoulder. “You got it, G.”

Benny drove her home and walked her to the porch, and then stood there hesitating.

“Better kiss me quick,” she said. “My mother’s going to open this door in about ten seconds.”

He smiled and reached for her, leaning in for a kiss that was over too soon. They jumped apart when they heard the latch on the door.

“You two have a nice time?” Mrs. Meyers asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “At least I did.” He slid his eyes to Gloria.

“I did too,” Gloria said, tucking her head, suddenly shy in front of her mother.

“Well, well,” the woman said. “In that case, why don’t you come to dinner next Sunday, Benny?”

Gloria groaned. “Isn’t it a little soon for the Inquisition?”

Mrs. Meyers waved Gloria’s words away. “I’m sure Mr. Meyers would like to meet the man who has finally turned his daughter’s head.”

“Mother!” Gloria flushed red.

“Let’s say seven sharp,” Mrs. Meyers said, as if it were up for discussion.

Gloria gave him a wide-eyed, apologetic stare.

“It’d be my pleasure,” Benny said, feeling the sweat return to his palms and wiping them on his thighs.

Gloria mouthed *Sorry* to him before she ducked inside.

“Good night, G,” he called after her.

Mrs. Meyers raised her eyebrows at him, but Gloria flashed a smile so warm he felt himself melting.

“See you soon, B.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Unexpected Attention

After the *Pittsburgh Courier* story ran, other Negro presses picked it up. A few months later, Uncle Drew stopped by Cora's place with news: a reporter from *The Chicago Tribune* wanted to run the story.

"But that's a white paper." She took a steady breath as a buzzing excitement washed over her. People all the way up in Chicago were sitting up and listening. "Well, would you look at that."

"He called to let us know it'll be in the paper on Friday."

She felt flustered by the news, like her story had sprouted legs and started running on its own. "But I . . . that's so . . . fast."

"I'm having a paper sent down so we can read what he's written, and then we can think about next steps. This is big, Cora. A white paper reporting on this is exactly what we were hoping for."

In the kitchen, Momma slammed a pot onto the counter.

"You all right, Momma?"

She crashed a cupboard door shut.

Cora stepped into the kitchen. "If you've got something to say about all this, I wish you'd just say it instead of tearing the kitchen to pieces."

"You don't know what you're doing," she said. "You don't remember what they did to John Evans or Sam Carter or Fulton Smith or your own father."

Tucked up under Momma's blazing anger was a deep reservoir of fear. Cora looked to Uncle Drew for reassurance that they were doing the right thing.

"It's a Chicago paper," Uncle Drew said. "Chances are, nobody in Mangrove Bay will read it."

"But you're not the one they'd come after if somebody does."

"We need the coverage, Janie. It's the only way we'll get the government to listen. This could mean so much to so many people, and they won't even use her real name."

Momma leaned her hip against the counter and folded her arms tightly across her chest. "What do you think's gonna happen? That reporter prints his story, and Cora gets to buy her house?" She sucked her teeth and glared at them side-eyed.

"I had to speak up, Momma. Nothing'll ever change if we don't."

"Cora, baby." She studied her daughter's face with frustration dancing in her eyes. "You speaking up could lose me my job. And what if they find out about Benny with you stirring things up like this? You could bring a whole world of trouble down on all of us."

"You know I don't want that, but you can't ask me to stay quiet." Cora drew back from Momma. "There are people on the other side of the country wanting to hear what I have to say. I finally have a voice, Momma. I mean to use it."

When the story ran on Friday, it took a week for Uncle Drew's copy to arrive. The article was factually true, if a little sensationalist. Two weeks after that, a Florida paper got wind of it and wrote their own piece, painting Cora as a meddling gossip and Roscoe as a lazy bum. *The Gator Gazette* reported that if anyone in Florida didn't get their benefits, it was because they didn't deserve them.

The Pittsburgh Courier and *The Chicago Tribune* hadn't used real names, but the Florida reporter promised his readers he'd track down the

identity of the troublemakers. For two weeks, letters to the editor flooded in, speculating on who they could be.

Roscoe raged at Cora for putting a target on their backs, and Momma took to locking herself in her room. Cora told them that no one knew who they were, but the situation had her worried. She felt calmer at work, away from the two of them and close to Lee, who praised her for being brave and said he was proud of her.

Then one Monday, when she drove to Lee's, she found a clump of reporters huddled outside. They'd traced her to Green's Whiskey. They rushed toward her as she stepped out of her car. One shoved a camera in her face, and a light bulb flashed.

“There is no discrimination, is there?” someone shouted.

“Aren’t you just playing the system for benefits?” another voice called out.

Alarmed and overwhelmed, she tried to push past them. “Let me through. Please, leave me alone.”

“Who’s to blame for cutting the Negro out of the GI Bill?” another reporter called.

“Is the Negro too lazy to take advantage of the opportunities?”

Pulse surging, she clenched her teeth, determined not to let them get to her.

Another flashbulb went off in her face, momentarily blinding her. She blinked, trying to get her vision to settle back into her eyes, wondering if she should say something, but with her thoughts scuttling around like crabs running from the cook pot, she had no idea what. “No,” Lee said, suddenly at her side. “The Negro is not too lazy, he is too naive for thinking that bleeding and dying for America will get this country to treat us with the respect and decency that’s our God-given right, declared in the Declaration of Independence and promised in the Constitution.”

That brought on a new wave of questions and flashing light bulbs pointed at Lee.

“Do you blame the president?”

“Are you anti-American?”

“Look this way.” Flash. Flash.

“Do you think coloreds are equal to whites?”

“Are you a communist?”

Lee stood with his shoulders back and his chest high, like he was about to salute somebody. Then he spoke in a quiet voice, low and measured, making the whole group of them hush up to hear him. “We saved the Jews from the Germans. So now, I ask you, who’s going to save the Negro from America?”

Some of the reporters gasped, some shouted in a flood of angry questions.

“If America’s so terrible, why don’t you get out?”

“Do you hate America?”

“Are you an anarchist?”

Flashbulbs exploded as Lee tugged Cora back to his lean-to beside the whiskey barn, pulse racing.

Inside, Cora drew the curtains with shaking hands.

“Can you believe them?” Lee said.

She wrapped her arms around herself, her panic rising. “They know where to find us, Lee. They weren’t supposed to know who we are.”

“Anti-American? I fought a war for this country.”

“You can’t rile them like that when they know who we are.” She paced in tight circles.

“I bet you not one of those cowards served. Not one.”

“Momma was right. Roscoe was right. We should never have spoken up.” She was starting to hyperventilate.

He came up to her, calmer than she thought he had a right to be, and held her shoulders to stop her pacing. “We still did the right thing.”

She shook her head. “But—”

“Knowing who we are makes us targets,” he said, “but it also protects us. When these articles come out, they’ll want to try to prove us wrong. How will it look if they come after us? It’ll prove we were right all along.”

“But they still might.”

“They won’t.”

“You don’t know that. There are plenty of ways they can get at us. I should never have done this.”

“Cora,” he said, taking her face in his hands, his nose nearly touching hers. “This is how we get things to change. Not by brooding in your living room.” Cora bristled. He meant Roscoe. “Not by taking your own good advantage and ignoring the rest of us.” She closed her eyes at the sting of his words, aimed at Benny, but somehow touching her just the same.

Lee wrapped his arms around her and pulled her trembling frame close. “It’s going to be all right.” He rubbed her back slowly until her quivering eased. “We’re in this together.”

She leaned into him, resting in the warmth of his chest and the curve of his arms. There was an ease to the way she fit with him that made them both linger like that, holding on to each other close. Lee caressed her back, kissed the top of her head, and dipped his head to brush his lips over her ear.

“I almost forgot how good you feel pressed up against me,” he said.

She stiffened and pulled away from him.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.” He reached for her hands.

She shook her head. “I can’t.”

“Can’t let me comfort you when you’re scared?”

“Roscoe,” she said.

Lee ran his hand over his face and looked at her with tired eyes. “How did we get here, Cora? I watch you two together, and I don’t get it.”

“It is what it is.”

“No.” He shook his head. “We had something real going. And then you just . . .” He drew his lips together, his jaw tightening, his breath shortening. “I thought you’d wait for me.” He stepped in close and dropped his voice. “I loved you.” He pinned her with a demanding stare. “But you married him two months after I left. Do you have any idea what that feels like?”

She looked away from him to the window, covered with a gray-green curtain.

He took her chin and turned her head back to face him. “Why did you marry him?”

She felt the tears welling up in her eyes. She blinked them away and swallowed the lump building in her throat. “Because you left when I begged you to stay.”

A flash of pain shot across his handsome features.

“And because he cared enough to try to protect me.”

“I would have protected you.”

“How, Lee? You left.”

“I was going to come back for you.”

“You had no way of knowing if you would ever make it back.”

“Neither did he.”

“That was the point.”

Lee’s eyes went wide, and he took a step back.

Cora worked to keep her voice from wavering. “He and Benny thought it would be like insurance in case anything happened.” It sounded so stupid now. So shortsighted and cold.

Lee opened his mouth to say something, but seconds passed and the words didn’t come.

“I was so afraid you would all . . . that you wouldn’t,” she leaned against the wall. Exhaustion overwhelmed her, and she sank to the floor, her knees tucked up to her chest.

Lee knelt in front of her, laying his hands on her feet. “I left for you.”

Cora shook her head. “How can you say that when I wanted you to stay?”

He reached up to cradle her knees. “What could I have been to you if I’d stayed? The hooligan with the rough past you saw in secret?”

She winced, ashamed that she had insisted on hiding him.

“Your momma and the rest were never going to approve of me. And I saw a chance to go from hooligan to war hero. To acceptance. To you. I wanted to be good enough for you.”

She let her tears fall freely as she reached out to cup his face. “You are, Lee. You’re the best man I’ve ever known, and you are more than good enough.”

Lee leaned in, his lips hovering over hers. When she didn’t push him away, he kissed her, gentle and searching, hungry and yearning. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her onto his lap. She gripped the back of his neck, pressing her mouth tightly against his. She let her mind go blank, erasing the wrongness of what she was doing with the rightness of Lee.

“I still want you, Cora,” he said. Hands sliding down her back, nestling over her rear, pulling her closer up his thighs until she could feel the proof of his words. He brushed his lips along her jaw up to her ear. “I still love you,” he said.

She smiled with her whole body, a whizzing energy lighting her up from the inside.

“Tell me.” He rubbed into her, and she gasped. “Tell me if you still want me.”

“I do,” she said. “You know I do.”

It was wrong to let him lift her into his arms. It was a mistake to let him carry her into his bedroom. She knew she should tell him to stop. Instead, she buried her face into his neck and breathed him in. She wrapped her legs around his waist. She arched her back and called out his name. She did not tell him no.

PART SIX

If you are silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it.

—Zora Neale Hurston

I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed.

—Booker T. Washington

CHAPTER ONE

News

Cora hadn't noticed how little she and Roscoe had been seeing each other until she started trying to avoid him and found it so easy. He was barely home these days, and she spent every hour she could at Green's Whiskey. When he did come home, Roscoe sat reading and rereading his overseas letter that he never spoke about but carried around with him everywhere he went.

When she came home from work as late as she reasonably could, and found Momma gone to her prayer meeting and Roscoe out who knew where, she felt grateful to have a few minutes to herself in the house. Then she saw Roscoe's jacket hanging on the peg with his letter peeking out of his pocket, and her curiosity got the better of her. She slid the letter out and read.

It was a love letter from a woman in a place called Pontypool. The air rushed out of her as Cora realized Roscoe had gone off to Europe and had an affair. Roscoe. And the woman wanted him to come back. Her brain raced so hard she felt like her head would burst. This was the woman he'd tried to write to in those crumpled letters under the dresser.

Ever since he'd returned a year and a half ago, Cora felt paralyzed, unable to ask for a divorce or ask him to leave. She couldn't turn her back on him after what he'd been willing to do for her, but she couldn't love him

either. It made her sick to think of the time they'd wasted trying to honor a marriage that had only ever been a sham. She should have been beside herself, but she felt relieved.

Cora sat perched on the couch when Roscoe came home, the letter tucked back in his coat pocket. She'd waited over an hour to speak to him, but a dark storm played across his features, making her bite back the careful sentences she'd crafted, telling him she knew about Megan and admitting about Lee. The important thing, she'd planned to say, was that now they could both be free.

"What the hell are you trying to do?" he growled when he saw her sitting there. The strength of his fury surprised and confused her. She wondered if he'd been drinking again.

"What is this?" He waved a newspaper in his hand.

"I don't know."

But she did. It was one of the articles that had come out that week. She and Lee had pored over all of them. She hadn't told Roscoe about them and had hoped he wouldn't see.

"*Greedy Negro Vets Blame America for Woes.*" He stabbed at the article. "With a picture of you and Lee."

He threw the paper at her, but it landed short, falling to her feet with her photo staring back. In it, she looked shocked and scared, swarmed by reporters, with Lee looking ready to fight.

"They just showed up taking pictures," she said.

"I told you not to talk to that Pittsburgh reporter, but you had to go running your mouth off."

He took a step closer to her. His whole body seemed to vibrate with tension. "You couldn't leave it alone." He clenched and unclenched his hands by his sides.

"I only wanted to—"

"You should have listened to me."

“But—”

“Now look what you’ve done. Did you think you could say your piece and that would be the end of it?”

Cora slumped in her seat. She *had* thought that. She’d spoken anonymously to an out-of-state Negro newspaper. She didn’t know it would lead to her picture in the local Florida press.

She swallowed down the anxiety building in her throat and said, “You don’t change things if you don’t speak up.”

“You sound like Lee,” he spat. “And this,” he pointed to the photo of the two of them, “makes me look like a damn fool.”

Her anger spiked. “Well, Lee makes a lot of sense. And he’s been helpful and supportive.”

“Not like me? Is that what you’re saying?” He almost snarled. He was nothing like the sweet man she’d known.

“I asked you to do the interview with me, and you said no.”

“Of course, I said no. Any sane man would say no. Unless,” he glared at Lee’s picture and then back up at Cora. “Are you sleeping with him?” Her stomach sank. She couldn’t answer.

“Are you?” he repeated, his voice cold.

The air soured in her throat and swirled with guilt in the pit of her belly. She breathed it out slowly, and he read the truth in her silence.

“Son of a bitch! I’m killing myself trying to do right by you, and this is what you do? You put a curtain between us, and then open your legs for that two-bit punk!”

A few hours ago, Cora would have flinched at his words. She would have blamed herself and begged his forgiveness, but her eyes flicked to his coat, where his lover’s letter sat tucked in his pocket.

She stood to face him, faking a calmness she didn’t feel. “Don’t pretend that you’re some kind of saint.”

“After everything I did for you,” he shouted, “that’s what you say to me?”

“I appreciate what you did, Roscoe, but how long”—she said with a trembling that shook her body and voice—“am I supposed to stay grateful? Thank you, Roscoe. Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Do you expect me to say it for the rest of my life?”

“I made sacrifices for you.” He thumped his chest with his fist. “I honored my commitment.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“I’m here. I came back. I could have walked away from you, but I didn’t.”

“I know about her!”

She rushed to his hanging coat and dug in the pocket for the letter. “You gave up on commitment long before you ever made it home.”

She waved the envelope at him, and he drew back like she’d pulled out a rattlesnake.

Then, eyes furious, he lunged forward and snatched it from her.

“You have no right to judge me and Lee, after you spent the whole war with your British whore.”

She saw the blow coming and flinched away from him, but it still connected with her jaw and flung her sideways, sending her sprawling onto the floor. The pain radiated from her ear down to her neck, and her teeth cut the inside of her cheek. She tasted blood.

Shock and pain pinned her to the floor while above her, Roscoe shouted in a frenzy.

She blinked to clear her head, but it hurt too much to concentrate.

She peered up at her husband, towering over her. His eyes blazed like a stranger’s, and she realized he might hit her again. Her instinct told her to curl into a ball, but a fierceness in her had taken root and refused to let her.

She spat out the blood pooling in her mouth, lifted her chin, and looked him in the eye. She was done cowering.

CHAPTER TWO

Fallout

Roscoe didn't consider what he was doing as he raised his arm and curled his hand into a loose fist, backhanding Cora across her mouth. He only knew he wanted her mouth to stop, and so he stopped it. The blow sent her sprawling to the floor.

"Shut up, Cora," he shouted. "Don't talk about her." He leaned over his wife, hot with rage. "You have nothing to say about it. Do you hear me? Not ever." He wouldn't let her soil the most beautiful thing he'd ever known.

"She's none of your business. None of it is."

Cora had pulled back the layers on his pain, exposing his raw vulnerability, and instead of understanding, she'd sneered.

"And don't touch my things. Stay out of my pockets and stay out of my way."

Cora spat blood onto the floor. She tipped her chin and glared up at him with a fierce defiance, like facing an enemy. That look brought him up short because it meant that he was the enemy.

He felt himself being pulled back to his senses. He had hit Cora. He, Roscoe, had hit her. After trying so hard not to become that kind of man, it was unthinkable. Like watching someone else take control of his life.

His hand showed no sign of what he'd done, but her face was already bruising. Roscoe panted as he backed away from her, shocked. He grabbed his coat and fled to Fred's Bar. He needed a few drinks to even out, so he could think things through.

He downed the first three shots one after the other and took his time on the fourth. Sipping slowly, he let himself think about what had happened. He'd gone home angry, but he'd been right to be angry. Cora hadn't even bothered mentioning those articles, and they were going to mean trouble. She should have stayed away from the reporters in the first place, like he'd said. But somehow she'd turned the whole thing over, making it about him, bringing up Megan, calling her a whore, when Cora was the one sleeping with Lee. His temper spiked afresh when he thought of it. She'd poked him in places she had no right to prod, pushing him too far, until he'd snapped. Now he was the one in the wrong.

Ironic, after he'd spent so much energy trying to do the right thing. He went to war because it was the right thing to do. He married Cora because it was the right thing to do. He stayed with her because it was the right thing to do. In the middle of all that duty, there was one thing he had wanted for himself, and Cora had made it ugly.

He pulled Megan's letter out and flattened it on the bar, rereading her final lines once again. *I do not believe you went home and forgot about me. Forgot about us. So, whatever is keeping you from me, whatever you think we can't face together, know that we can. Come back and we will.*

It hadn't been ugly. It had been perfect.

He stared into his glass, wishing he could turn the clock back to when he'd been that Roscoe. Her Roscoe. The kind of man a woman like Megan wanted, no matter what.

America was toxic for him. He was trying to be a man in a world that called him boy, and he was failing. He wondered what Megan would think of him if she could see him now.

By his fifth drink, he'd stilled the rage that snapped and snarled in his head like a rabid dog. He was calm enough to feel shame, guilt, and regret. With a jolt, he remembered the blood he had barely registered, and realized he hadn't checked to see if Cora was all right. He put his head in his hands. How had he become this person?

"I'm sorry," he said, and he didn't know who he was apologizing to. Cora, Megan, or himself.

CHAPTER THREE

Second Try

It was late in the evening when Lee heard a car pull up outside. Despite everything he'd said to Cora about not being a target, he grabbed his baseball bat before peeking out of the window.

Cora climbed out of her blue Plymouth, and he tucked his bat behind the door. He came out to meet her, surprised but pleased until he saw her face.

“Who did this?” He brushed her cheek gently with his thumb.

“I’m all right.”

“Is this because of the article?” A cold dread pierced him through that he had led her to danger and hadn’t been there to protect her when it struck.

“No. It was—” she stopped herself. “It looks worse than it is.”

The side of her face had bloomed into a dark bruise, and the swelling in her jaw made her words slur.

Lee settled her into his chair and brought her a whiskey and soda. Her hand trembled as she brought it to her lips, and she drank it down in one. He made her another, pulled up a crate beside her to sit on, and took her hand. “Tell me what happened.”

Cora shrugged. “We had a fight.”

Lee’s muscles tightened as he realized what she was saying. “Roscoe?” he sputtered.

Not strangers. Not someone who'd read the article. Not the Klan. "Roscoe did this?"

The tips of his ears throbbed. He rose and in two fluid strides was at the door, grasping for the baseball bat.

"No, Lee."

He barely heard her. He was going to kill Roscoe.

"I need you to be with me right now."

Lee hesitated at the door. He had to stay for her, but he had to go for her as well.

"Please, stay."

It was like being sliced in two. He couldn't sit here and leave this unanswered, but he couldn't leave her. Her words jogged a memory; their last night before he enlisted. *Please stay*, she'd said, and he'd left and ruined everything.

He looked back at her, gripping the bat like he might strangle the sap out of it.

Cora got up and stood in front of him.

He blinked and breathed and slowly let the bat drop from his fingers. He reached for her and folded her into his arms. She was air, sunlight, and everything good, and it was against the laws of nature that this should have happened to her.

She pressed herself against him, tilting her head onto his shoulder. "Could I stay here tonight?"

He wanted her to stay with him every night, but the fact that she was asking because of what Roscoe had done hollowed out his joy. This was not the way he was supposed to win her back, with Cora paying the price.

"Of course," he said, and brushed a kiss, whisper soft, over her swollen cheek. He could feel the heat radiating off it. "You don't ever need to go back there again."

She smiled a half smile and winced.

“How about you lie down,” Lee said, “and I’ll bring you some ice?”

He settled her on his bed and went to the kitchen, where he wrapped ice in a towel. He eased himself beside her on the bed and held the towel gently against her bruised and swollen face.

“So, I guess he knows about us,” Lee said.

“He does,” she said, making a wry face. “But now I know about him, too.”

“What do you mean?”

She sighed. “Roscoe’s been in love with some woman in Great Britain all this time.”

Lee propped himself up on his elbow and squinted down at her. “When you say, *all this time* . . .”

“Ever since he first posted to Wales. She wrote him a letter asking him to come back. It sounds like he promised he would.”

“When he’d already married you.” Lee’s nostrils flared.

She looked at him with soft eyes. “I never should have married him.”

“I never should have rushed off like I did.”

“We’re a mess,” she said.

“Maybe we made mistakes, but we don’t have to keep on making them.” He ran a gentle finger along her unbruised cheek. “Don’t stay with him.” She wrapped her fingers around his forearm.

“Give me another chance.” His voice was hoarse with feeling.

She drew him to her, tipping her mouth a little to the side to kiss him. He knew it must hurt, but when he tried to pull back, she wouldn’t let go. Instead, she tugged him close, wrapping one leg around him and sliding her hands under his shirt, a silent command to make up for their lost years and fumbled chances. He groaned, unashamed of his transparent need for her that threatened to consume him.

“Tell me if I hurt you,” he said, hovering over her. “I can stop if it’s too much.” He said it, and he meant it, but the last thing he wanted to do was

stop.

“Shut up, Lee,” Cora said, pulling him down, chest to chest. Beside them, the towel of ice crashed to the floor.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sunday Dinner

Benny arrived twenty minutes early at Gloria's on Sunday evening. He should have made up an excuse not to come and stopped this before it went too far. Three times he circled her block, counting down the clock and listing all the reasons he should go home. Then, with a bouquet of flowers in one hand and a bottle of Green's Whiskey in the other, he rang the doorbell.

“I'll get it,” he heard Gloria yell from inside, but when the door opened, a stone-faced man stood in front of him.

“Good evening, sir. I'm Benny.” He tried to sound casual but confident, friendly but not pushy or too eager.

“Uh-huh. I guessed that.” He looked Benny up and down, frowning, and Benny's pulse hitched.

“Don't mind him,” said Gloria, running up behind her father. “He's always a grump.” She kissed Mr. Meyers on his cheek and pulled Benny inside.

He relaxed a little with Gloria there and handed her father the bottle. “This is for you.”

“Welcome, Benny,” said Gloria's mother, coming out of the kitchen, an apron tied around her waist. “You're right on time.”

“Nice to see you again, Mrs. Meyers.” He gave her the flowers. “Thanks for having me to dinner.”

She winked at Gloria as she took the bouquet. “Well, aren’t you a sweetheart. Hon, put these in a vase for me.” She handed them to her daughter and tugged at Benny’s hand. “Now, come in here and let us get to know you.”

He followed her into the living room with his stomach fluttering at the idea of Mr. and Mrs. Meyers getting to know him.

“So, Benny, tell us all about yourself,” Mrs. Meyers said when they’d settled themselves on the sofa and chairs.

“Well, I work at a car factory.” He rubbed the sweat from his palms along his thighs. “But I’m training to be an automotive engineer.”

“Oh, good for you. That sounds nice, doesn’t it, Earl?” Mr. Meyers grunted.

“And you own that house next to our son’s.” She said it more as a statement seeking confirmation than as a question.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“A nice place to raise a family,” Mrs. Meyers declared. She patted Benny’s hand as she rose. “I’m going to check on dinner. Won’t be a minute.”

With just Gloria’s father as a conversation partner, the room fell quiet. He could hear Gloria and her mother in the kitchen, but couldn’t make out what they were saying, though he figured Gloria’s bright laughter was a good sign.

He cleared his throat. “How long have you lived here, sir?”

Mr. Meyers looked to the ceiling like the answer might be in the paint. Then he leaned back and hollered, “Shirley, how long have we lived here?”

“Eighteen years,” she called from the kitchen.

“Eighteen years,” he confirmed to Benny.

Benny nodded, and they fell into another silence until, thankfully, mercifully, Gloria came into the living room and took a seat on the couch beside Benny.

“You know, for someone who works with numbers, you can never remember the year of things,” she teased her father.

“Of course, I can.”

“Oh really? How old am I?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Twenty-three.”

“Same difference.”

“You see what I mean?” she said to Benny. “He’s hopeless. I guarantee you he doesn’t know how old Ed is, or when he and Alice got married. Daddy, do you even remember what year you and Mother got married?”

“Your mother reminds me.”

She rolled her eyes with such expert sarcasm that she could have been Cora.

“We don’t both have to remember,” Mr. Meyers said. “I bet Benny’s mother reminds his father, too, like in every other marriage in America. Am I right?”

“My father passed away when I was little, sir, so I don’t know if she did.”

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear that. What did he die of so young?”

“Daddy! You can’t go asking stuff like that.”

“Why not?”

“It could be sensitive. Or sad.”

“Pfft,” he huffed.

“How would you like it if people asked me how you died?”

“I’m not dead, Glory.”

“That’s not the point. It’s rude to be so nosy.”

Their back-and-forth gave Benny time to come up with a cause of death other than murdered-by-a-violent-white-mob-during-a-town-massacre. “Heart attack,” he said. “It was very sad.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Gloria glared at her father. “Very sad. Now, no more third degree.”

“All right, you three, come on through for dinner,” Mrs. Meyers announced from the doorway, taking off her apron.

“That wasn’t even the first degree,” Gloria’s father grumbled, heaving himself up from the chair.

They ate mashed potatoes, carrots, and chicken, and Benny used so much salt and pepper on it that he worried he was being rude. What it needed was some hot sauce.

“Delicious,” he said to Mrs. Meyers, who smiled back at him.

“So, Benny,” she said, “Ed tells me you have the greenest lawn on your block. Personally, I think he’s jealous, but don’t tell him I told you that.” She smiled warmly. “So, what’s your secret?”

“I use a fertilizer a friend once mentioned.”

Benny had driven to four different stores searching for the fertilizer Jasper talked about at Aunt Teen’s cookout before everything changed. He would have driven to fifty stores to find it. Now, every time he looked at his lawn, he thought of Jasper and felt like he was still with him in some small way.

“Well, your friend’s garden must be spectacular. Does he live in Levittown too?”

“No, ma’am. He died in the war.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. That must be awful for you.”

“We lost a lot of good people,” Mr. Meyers said. “But you boys did your country proud.”

Benny’s war memories began to stir, rising from where he kept them locked away, like shadows taking shape in the corners of his mind. They’d

left so many men on the battlefield, and it had taken him months to stop hearing the cries for help from soldiers he couldn't get to, or worse, the silence after the screams. It'd been two years since he'd seen a buddy get gunned down or blown apart, but the ghosts of the fallen still lurked around the edges of a spring day in Florida. He shook his head to banish the shadows, burying them under his greener grass.

"Mr. Meyers, Gloria tells me you have an accounting business," Benny said, firmly changing the subject.

"That's right, son. Meyers Accountancy. If you know anybody who needs help with their books, you send them my way," he joked, but with enough earnestness to mean it.

"I'll remember that, sir." He pushed the food around on his plate and reached for the pepper. "Gloria said she helped out during the war when you were short-staffed."

"She certainly did." Mr. Meyers speared a piece of chicken and pointed it at his daughter. "She was a godsend, weren't you, sweetheart?"

"I still am, Daddy."

"That you are, Pumpkin."

"I mean, I could still be working in the business. I have the same brain I had two years ago."

He reached over and patted her hand. "I said it then and I'll say it now. Glory, you should have been a boy."

Benny could tell he meant it as a compliment, but Gloria shrank in her seat a little, her shine dimming.

"I don't know about that, sir," Benny said. "I'm mighty glad she's not a boy."

Her parents laughed and smiled, pleased, but more importantly, Gloria brightened and lifted her eyes to his.

Thank you, she mouthed as her foot tapped him under the table.

Anytime, G, he mouthed back.

CHAPTER FIVE

Governor Millard Fillmore Caldwell

Cora wore makeup to hide the bruising and took to wearing big sunglasses, like some Hollywood movie star, whenever she had to venture away from Lee's. And after having her picture printed in no less than eight Florida newspapers, she'd become jumpy around strangers, especially when she thought their eyes lingered too long.

The one good thing that came of all the newspaper attention was that Uncle Drew got Governor Caldwell to agree to meet with her and her husband. She brought Lee instead. After all, he was just as much a veteran as Roscoe. Besides, bringing Roscoe was out of the question. They hadn't spoken since he'd hit her.

Uncle Drew drove them the four hours to the governor's office in Tallahassee in his wide gray Buick, but even with the windows down, Cora's backside beaded with sweat. At Governor Caldwell's office, the freckled receptionist showed them past the spacious waiting area to a windowless closet room across the hall. The still air smelled of old rags and bleach, and Cora's once-starched dress moistened and sagged in the heat as time dragged on.

An hour and a half after their appointment time, they were shown to the governor's office, where only one visitor chair had been positioned in front of the wide mahogany desk. The governor motioned to it, and Lee and

Uncle Drew stood back to let Cora sit while they stood. Instead, she stretched her hand across the desk for Governor Caldwell to shake. His startled expression smoothed into something that looked more like a frog grimace than a smile as he clasped and shook it.

“Well, if it isn’t the famous Cora we’ve all been reading about in the papers.” He wiped his palm on his shirt. An unconscious gesture that he seemed unaware of.

“And who do we have here? You got two husbands, gal?”

Uncle Drew stepped forward, extending his hand. “I’m not the husband. Just an advisor and a friend.” Caldwell looked at the proffered hand a second too long before shaking it.

Next, Lee reached over, saying, “Good afternoon,” and left his introduction at that.

Caldwell could assume what he liked.

“So, who’d you serve with, boy?”

Lee froze mid-handshake and withdrew his hand. “The 761st Tank Battalion. The Black Panthers. Some of the bravest men in the army.”

The governor’s mouth twitched in a smirk. “Everybody’s brave now that the fighting’s over.” His chair creaked as he leaned back in it. “And I don’t guess you saw much action. I heard all you boys did was beef out our supply lines.”

“Actually, I fought under General Patton.”

Caldwell snorted out a laugh. “Sure, you did.”

“Governor Caldwell,” Cora said, gesturing to the sofa and two cozy chairs across the room, trying to distract from the hostile scowl that was hardening across Lee’s face. “What a nice office you have here.”

She walked to the sofa, feeling their eyes on her, and, in a flash of inspiration, she sat down, smiling at the three men who stared open-mouthed. She settled into the cushions and crossed her legs, her defiance gentle as a lamb. “Thank you for seeing us, Governor. I know you must be

busy with it being an election year.” It took everything in her not to draw out those last two words.

Lee coughed over his chuckle as he crossed the room and sat by her side, pride and love streaming from his eyes.

Uncle Drew frowned at them, silently chastising them for antagonizing a man they wanted to take up their cause. Lee stared right back with a piercing glare in a challenge so clear, Cora could read the unspoken words in the lift of his brow and the set of his jaw. *Don't soft shoe, jive, and Sambo yourself for this man*, his look said. *Don't trade your dignity for a handful of beads.*

Uncle Drew straightened his back and crossed the room to the chair beside the sofa.

“Yes,” he said as he sat. “We’re glad you could find the time after all.”

Governor Caldwell looked at the three of them sitting across the room and turned red, but only a little. He stood up and joined them, a rigid smile in place with ice gathering behind his eyes. “I always meet with my constituents when I can afford the time. Now, what brings you to my office?”

With a lawyer’s precision, Uncle Drew explained how the GI Bill had failed Negro veterans, and their wish that he take up their cause.

Governor Caldwell listened quietly, his head tilted in a posture of attention and concentration. When Uncle Drew finished, Caldwell steepled his fingers and leaned back in his chair. For a moment, Cora dared to hope.

“I have heard your comments, and I must say I find it doubtful that you are indeed being treated unfairly. This GI Bill is a landmark piece of legislation, addressing the specific needs of every US veteran. You may have come across some bad luck in your applications, but you can’t blame the whole system for that. And I, for one, am truly tired of you people hooting and hollering that folks are out to get you every time you don’t get your own way.”

“But that’s not—” Cora said.

He held up his hand and plowed on, speaking over her. “The fact that I’m sitting here listening to all this horse manure proves that you’re getting a fair shake. We can’t be giving you special treatment.”

“Fair treatment is not special treatment,” Lee said. “And we’re after a lot more than just sitting here talking to you.”

Caldwell leaned forward and pointed at Lee. “That’s the problem we have with your kind. We give you a little finger and you want the whole hand.” He shook his head. “Why can’t you be grateful for what you’ve got?”

Uncle Drew stood. “You’ve made your position clear, Governor, so we’ll be going. We have to get to another newspaper interview this evening. I believe it’s with *The Washington Post* this time. We scheduled it for after this meeting, hoping to have something positive to report.” He brushed imaginary lint from his sleeves. “Pity.”

The governor reddened, his face drawing to a scowl that he quickly smoothed out flat.

He cleared his throat. “Look, lay off the interviews for a while, and I’ll broach this whole thing with some of my colleagues. Kick it around the Florida Congress. See if anything can be done.” He spread his lips into his frog-like grimace.

“How generous,” Uncle Drew said. “In that case, we’ll hold off on this one interview for now and see how your conversations go. We’ll be in touch.”

Their shoes echoed on the marble as they made their way down the hall and out the double doors of the entrance.

“Well, I guess you better call and cancel that interview,” Cora said with a smirk.

Uncle Drew groaned. “It was the best I could come up with. I had to say something to that pompous cockroach.”

“I don’t know why I expected anything different.” Lee drew his arm around Cora’s shoulders and pulled her close. The stiffness of his body mirrored the stony set of his face, and she threaded her arm around his waist, fearing for all that hardness in him, wishing she could shield him with her softness. Without something to cushion life’s blows, a man could shatter.

“What do we do now?” she asked.

“Now, we write letters,” said Uncle Drew. “Lots and lots of letters. To congressmen and senators. To the attorney general. Even to the president. We’ll write to every single person who can influence national legislation, because, frankly, I don’t think the good ole boys of the Florida Senate will see things any differently than Caldwell. We need to make Washington see what American democracy looks like for the American Negro.”

CHAPTER SIX

The Lawbreakers

Benny eased his car along the potholed path beside Turner Creek, looking for the road to Green's Whiskey. He found it just past where the trees thickened to a wood, but only because of a Green's Whiskey sign hammered to a tree.

His wheels crunched up the drive, announcing his arrival, and Lee's face appeared in the window of a weathered, wooden barn. Before Benny could even get out of the car, his old friend came out to greet him, half walking, half jogging, with a large grin across his face.

"Benny," Lee boomed. "It's good to see you." Lee pulled Benny into a hug and clapped his back once, twice, three times.

Relief and pleasure flooded through Benny. There were so many ways Lee could have greeted him, especially after the awkward shock of the last time he saw Lee, back in the Ardennes Forest at what they were now calling the Battle of the Bulge. Such an innocent name for so much carnage.

"It's been a long time," Lee said.

"Yeah." Benny tried to read his face for an accusation behind the smile. "The last time was . . ."

"Belgium," said Lee.

Benny's gut clenched against the embarrassment and shame at having Lee find him like that. "Listen, about that—"

Lee shook his head. “You don’t have to explain. Who knows if I would have done the same thing in your shoes.”

Except, they both knew he wouldn’t have. They’d had enough blowups about Benny’s casual passing before the war, to buy ice cream or entry to a fair, to know that Lee thought denying who you were to get along was a form of defeat. *If they don’t want your money as a colored man, then don’t give it to them any kind of way*, he used to tell Benny. But he accepted the words as the olive branch they were meant to be.

“Thank you for letting me be the one to tell Cora,” Benny said.

Lee waved his words away. “I figured it was your news to tell.”

“Benny?” came Cora’s voice from the doorway of the lean-to beside the barn.

“Oh my God, Benny!” She rushed out to him with a shriek and threw her arms around his neck, laughing. “It’s about time you made it out here to see us.”

“I know,” he said, pulling back from her. “I wanted to come earlier but —” He saw her face and the words died in his throat as he shot an accusing, dangerous look at Lee.

“It wasn’t him.” Cora shifted to block him from Lee, hands out to ward him off.

Lee slipped an arm around her waist. “She’s safe here with me now.”

“What the hell’s going on?” He felt the blood tapping at his temples.

Cora and Lee looked at each other, speaking in silent conversation, with his raised eyebrows asking a question, and Cora’s tilted head giving a mute response.

Benny grabbed the newspaper from the passenger seat and held it out to them. “I came out here because of this.”

He knew about Cora’s trouble getting the GI house loan. She had written all about that, but she hadn’t said a thing about talking to the papers. His eyes just about fell out of his head when he saw her picture next to Lee

in *The Gator Gazette*. The Cora he knew did not make waves, let alone start a whole firestorm talking to reporters.

“And now I find,” he gestured to her face and to the two of them together, “all this.”

“Why don’t you come inside, and we can fill you in,” Lee said.

Benny watched him take Cora’s hand as he led the way to the lean-to. Inside, cut flowers sat arranged in a mason jar, which had to be Cora’s doing. And if that wasn’t enough proof that she was spending time there, the dress hanging on the line out back surely was.

Cora set three glasses and a pitcher of sweet tea on the table, and Lee pulled over an upturned crate, positioning it across from the only chair. The lone chair probably meant she hadn’t been there long, but she went straight to the glasses and the pitcher in the icebox, more than comfortable in his space.

“Take a seat and I’ll get another crate for me,” Lee said, going back out the door.

Benny hovered beside Cora until he’d gone, and then, leaning close to her ear and lowering his voice, asked, “This really wasn’t Lee?”

Cora stiffened and stepped away from him. “No.” She sat in the chair, back rigid.

He lowered himself onto the crate across from her. “You can tell me if it was.”

“It absolutely wasn’t Lee.”

“Then who?”

She poured out the tea and Benny noticed she’d taken off her thin gold wedding band.

“Roscoe was angry,” she said. “I was angry too.” She reached for her glass, took a small sip. “We don’t communicate well. In fact, there’s not much we do well together.”

“Wait a minute. You’re saying Roscoe did this?” Benny scoffed. “Roscoe would never touch you.”

She wiped her thumb over the condensation forming on the glass. “Roscoe’s not who he used to be.”

Over her shoulder, his gaze fell on the flowers in the jar. “From the looks of things, neither are you.”

She pinned him with a hard stare. “I guess none of us are.”

Benny felt his pale face flush with heat. He scooted his crate back from the small table and crossed his arms. “Why don’t I talk to him? We can straighten this out.” He dropped his voice. “But no more Lee, okay? That has to stop.”

She pressed her lips together and turned her head.

“Christ, Cora. What is the matter with you?”

She slid her hands from the table and tucked them onto her lap. “Roscoe and I don’t fit together.”

“You’re married, Cora.” His voice climbed high, straining with frustration. “That’s about as much as two people can fit together.”

She shook her head. “No, Benny. It’s not.”

They went silent at the sound of footsteps. Lee came back to frosty glares chilling the September heat, and a tension thickening the humid air to cement. He put his crate next to Cora’s chair.

“Everything all right here?”

“Benny thinks I should work it out with Roscoe.”

Lee’s face hardened to a mask, and he grasped Cora’s hand on her lap. “No,” he said, in a tone that wasn’t interested in a discussion.

Benny tried anyway. “He shouldn’t have hit her. I’ll deal with him for that. But she shouldn’t be shacked up with another man.” He aimed the accusation straight at Lee.

“We’re not the problem,” Lee said, without a lick of shame.

“You’re sleeping with his wife, Lee. What did you think would happen? As far as I’m concerned, that shiner has your name all over it.”

“Stop it,” Cora said, her voice tight. “You don’t know what’s going on.”

Her words stiffened in the air, like a wall going up between them. He didn’t know because he hadn’t been around because he lived in Levittown, where they couldn’t follow. He dragged his hand through his close-cropped hair, eyeing Lee and Cora, waiting for one of them to say something that made sense.

“Roscoe’s in love with some woman in Wales,” Lee said, drawing Cora a little closer. “Has been since he stationed there during the war.”

“He wouldn’t do that,” Benny shot back. “He’s not the type.”

“He got a letter from her,” Cora said.

“They were probably just friends. The war threw people together like that.” He looked to Lee for support.

“I read the letter,” Cora said. “They’re definitely in love.”

Lee lifted their clasped hands to the table. “And so are we.”

Benny felt a heaviness dragging at him as Lee told him how they’d been together before the war, and how they’d hidden the relationship and been about to tell everyone when Pearl Harbor happened and Lee joined up.

“But if that’s true,” he said to Cora, “why’d you go along with marrying Roscoe?”

She looked down at her hand clasped in Lee’s. “That was a mistake.”

Benny remembered when Roscoe proposed and how happy she’d been. Except, thinking back on it now, it was Benny who was happy. And Roscoe. Cora had cried. But surely, they’d been tears of joy. Or if they were sad, wouldn’t that have been because he and Roscoe were leaving after the ceremony? To his shame, he didn’t remember thinking about what Cora was feeling. The only thing on his mind back then was getting himself enlisted and making sure Momma and Cora would be taken care of. The marriage to Roscoe had been the perfect solution. For him.

“So, you’re saying,” he pinched the bridge of his nose, and closed his eyes. “All this time?” How could he not have seen it?

“Everything was happening so fast. I was scared and sad and too upset to think straight. But I should never have done it. I lost sight of myself.”

“I just wanted you to be okay,” Benny said, guilt tightening his throat.

“I know, and I love you for that.”

Lee draped an arm around Cora’s shoulders, and she leaned into him. “You meant well, but nobody can know what’s best for someone else.”

“Jesus.” Benny rubbed his hands over his short hair. “So, what now? You don’t plan to keep living out here together, do you?”

Lee nodded. “Pretty much. Yeah.”

“You know that’s illegal, right? Adultery, cohabitation, all of it.”

Cora raised her eyebrows at him. “It’s no more illegal than what you’re doing. And a lot less dangerous.”

Benny rubbed his palms along his thighs, feeling anxious and regretting the part he’d played in making this mess.

“We’ll be okay,” Cora said, leaning into Lee. She picked up her glass of sweet tea and a mischievous smile spread across her face. “To the lawbreakers,” she said, holding out her glass.

Benny shook his head. “God help us.” The three of them clinked glasses in a toast, and Benny drained his drink empty.

“Now, tell me how come I’m reading about you in the paper.”

They filled him in on what they were trying to do, how it had started as Cora’s fight, but how Lee had come up alongside her with encouragement and support. He didn’t recognize his mild-mannered, nonconfrontational sister in their description. The Cora he grew up with would go out of her way to avoid a fight. It was one reason he’d always felt such a strong need to protect her.

When he hugged his sister goodbye, he asked Lee to walk him out to his car. He waited until they were well out of earshot to say, “You know you

have to let her go, right?”

Lee stepped back like the words were a blow, his face painted with shock.

“I’m sorry all this happened,” Benny said. “I wish I’d known about you two beforehand, but she’s a married woman now. If you keep this up with her, you’ll destroy her reputation, you’ll make her a pariah in the community, and I don’t even want to think about what it’ll do to Momma.”

Cora was living in the moment, not thinking about her future, and Benny wasn’t going to let one impulsive decision ruin her life. Lee made to protest, but Benny spoke over him. “She won’t leave you, and she won’t say no to you, even if she loses everything because of you, so you have to be the one to call it off. You have to bring her home.”

Lee’s eyes widened. “No. No way.”

“I’ll deal with Roscoe,” Benny said. “But if you love her—”

“Of course I love her.”

“Then you’ll do the right thing for her.”

“I am the right thing for her,” Lee said, full of defiance.

“Maybe it seems that way right now, wrapped up in your little love nest rebellion, but what about next week? Next month? Next year? When people turn their backs on her and call her a whore? I can’t believe you’d want that for her.”

Benny could see him considering that. “You know I’m right. A married woman shacking up with a bachelor? She’s gonna catch hell for this. Don’t do this to her.”

Lee wrapped his arms around his stomach like he’d been sucker-punched. The long breath he exhaled shook and stuttered. “There’s got to be a way.”

“I don’t know. Maybe there is,” Benny said. “But it’s not like this.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Visitors

Lee lay awake, watching Cora nestle up against his chest. She looked peaceful with her mouth slightly open, her back rising and falling with her short breaths. He ran featherlight fingers across her face, avoiding her yellowing bruise.

He'd thought nonstop about what Benny said, and as much as Lee hated it, he knew Benny was right. Before the war, Cora had hidden their relationship for nearly a year, worried about what people would say. This situation was so much worse.

Cutting into the stillness, a car rumbled up the drive, engine roaring, wheels crunching stone.

Cora jerked awake.

"I'm right here. You're okay." His arm tightened around her protectively.

It had to be Roscoe, coming to drag her away, and the white-hot anger he'd felt when he'd first seen her hurt came rushing back. She blinked away the sleepiness as she clutched at his arm. "Lee?"

"I hear him. I've got this." He planted a kiss on her forehead. "Stay here."

She might have to leave his bed, but not like this, plucked out of his arms in the dead of night by an abuser. Lee climbed out and pulled on his

clothes as she sat up and tugged the covers over her chest. “I’m sorry I dragged you into the middle of this.”

He looked at her, naked in his bed, with the smell of last night’s lovemaking still lingering in the air, and even with Roscoe outside ready to burst in and cause trouble, he felt a wave of tenderness wash over him. “From now on, your fights are my fights.” Whether she stayed under his roof or not. He leaned over her and brushed his lips across hers.

The shattering crash of breaking glass from his business next door made her jump. Lee straightened, adrenaline surging, pulse flaring.

“Son of a—”

Another crash.

He dashed out of the bedroom shouting. “Roscoe, if you don’t get the hell away from my windows—”

Lee stepped outside and staggered back. It wasn’t Roscoe. Two white men holding rocks and beer bottles stood in front of Green’s Whiskey. It took a few seconds for Lee to find his voice. “What’s this about? You all are trespassing.”

“You Lee Peters?”

“Who’s asking?”

“That’s him all right. We’re gonna teach you not to go running your mouth to the papers. Get him.”

With the scrunched-up face of a drunken man concentrating, the man closest to him threw his rock at Lee. His catcher’s instinct took over, and Lee stepped in to pluck it from the air, ignoring the sting and burn in his hands as he did. He reared back and, with the throw of a Negro League pro player, sent the rock into the man’s chest, knocking him to the ground.

The other one dropped his rock and picked up a tire iron that lay at his feet. He charged, aiming it at Lee’s head. Lee sidestepped the swing and used the man’s momentum to knock it out of his hand. He turned on Lee

and landed a weak punch, all arm and no follow-through. Lee swung back and sent the man toppling.

“Get out of here,” Lee shouted, picking up and brandishing the fallen tire iron.

They scooted backward away from him, clearly not fighters, not soldiers, not even athletes. When they were a good distance from him, they scrambled to their feet. “You’re gonna pay for this,” one shouted as they scuttled into their truck. “This ain’t over.”

Lee’s head was reeling as the truck sped away, leaving a trail of dust behind. He looked over to the house and saw Cora standing in the doorway, a look of terror on her face. “You just beat up two white men.”

He walked to the lean-to in a daze and took her in his arms. “I know.”

“What are we gonna do?”

Lee thought of his father and mother, killed for so much less. He pulled Cora in closer and felt the rapid thumping of her heart. “I’ll talk to Uncle Drew. See if we can come up with a plan.”

He rubbed her back, hiding the trembling of his hands.

“Do you think we should call the police? Tell them our side?”

He pulled back to look at her to make sure he heard that right, because there was no way she could have meant that. She took one look at his expression and fell out laughing, setting him off laughing, too, a needed release from the weighted tension.

“Okay. Yes. That was dumb,” she said. “We obviously can’t do that.”

There wasn’t a police officer in all of Florida who’d lift a finger for the likes of Lee and Cora, especially if they were accusing whites. Going to the police was the surest way to get thrown in jail. Their best hope was that the men would be too drunk to remember what they’d done in the morning or too embarrassed to tell anyone about it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Dinner Date

Benny pulled up to Gloria's house and walked up her front porch, only half aware of himself. The sight of Cora's yellowing bruise had haunted him all week, and worry for her ran through him like rain through a dry field, pooling in his belly. Now, with her photo in the paper, she and Lee were bound to attract all manner of evil. And if she didn't leave Lee's place soon, the gossip in the community would be vicious, and there'd be no going back.

When he rang the bell, he was thinking about how they should have left well enough alone, and had a scowl on his face when Mrs. Meyers opened the door.

"Goodness, Benny. You look like you just lost your best friend. Is everything all right?"

"Sorry, Mrs. Meyers." He softened his expression. "I have a lot on my mind."

She stroked his cheek in a motherly gesture and pulled him inside. "Wait till you see. Mr. Meyers has a new toy."

"Come on in here, son." Mr. Meyers boomed from the living room. "Let me show you something."

Benny followed his voice into the living room, where the furniture had been rearranged to face a television set. Across from it, Mr. Meyers sat

grinning like a kid on Christmas morning.

“Well, look at that,” Benny said, taking in the fish tank screen nearly twice as big as Ed’s.

“A top-of-the-range RCA.” Mr. Meyers stood and sauntered over to his new television, running his hand over the wood-clad box.

“It’s like having our own personal movie theater,” Mrs. Meyers said.

Benny looked at it from all sides, not daring to touch it. “She’s a beauty.”

“I watched the Pirates game on her and, I tell you, it’s better than being there.”

“If that’s true,” Gloria said, sweeping into the room, “it’s only because you had Mother waiting on you hand and foot through the whole thing.”

He swatted away his daughter’s words and said, “This year the World Series will be playing in my living room. Who do you pick for the pennant?”

Gloria stepped around the sofa to stand at Benny’s side. “I’m ready to go,” she said, smelling of flowers and sunshine.

“My money’s on the Pirates,” Mr. Meyers said, speaking over her. “Maybe the Yankees.”

Benny smiled at Gloria and took her hand as he answered her father’s question. “I have a good feeling about the Dodgers, sir. They have a secret weapon.”

“You mean Jackie Robinson? Son, he’s the most opposite thing to a secret there is. Even people who don’t know a thing about baseball know about Jackie Robinson.” He turned to Gloria. “You know who that is, don’t you, sweetheart?”

“Of course,” she said, rolling her eyes, Cora style.

“Well, maybe he’s not a secret weapon,” Benny laughed, “but he’s gonna lead them to the World Series. It’s already a big year for them.”

“We should get going, Daddy.” She kissed his cheek. “I’ll see you later.”

“You know, back in my day, I had a pretty good arm.” Mr. Meyers motioned a pitcher’s throw.

Benny glanced at Gloria and gave a small, helpless shrug. “I didn’t know that, sir.”

“The problem was, I couldn’t run to save my life.”

“I can see how that’d be a problem,” he said. Gloria squeezed his fingers. “Well, I guess we’ll get out of your hair—”

“Do you play, Benny?”

“I . . . uh . . . sure. I mean, I could never have gone pro, but I’m not bad. I upped my game playing a friend who had the whole package. An incredible player.”

Mr. Meyers perked up. “Did he try for the majors?”

Gloria sighed beside him.

“No, he . . .” Benny caught himself before he blurted out that Lee had played for the Negro League. “He never tried for the majors, but he was better than half their players.”

“I know what you mean,” Mr. Meyers said. “I once knew a guy—”

“Earl, you are positively hijacking your daughter’s date,” Mrs. Meyers said from the doorway. She walked to her husband and slipped her arm around his waist. “Let them go,” she laughed as Gloria mouthed thank you. “And maybe you’d like to come over to watch the World Series on the television set,” she said to Benny.

“Thank you, ma’am. I’d sure love to.”

Gloria pulled closer to his side and wrapped her arm around his. As soon as they’d stepped outside, she whispered, “He’s sure warmed up to you. I almost think he likes you more than me.”

“So, you like me, do you?” he grinned at her.

She flushed red. “You know what I meant. He doesn’t know what to do with a daughter.” When they got to the car and her back was turned to him, she said, “But to answer your question, yes, I do.”

Benny wished he could bottle the lightness he felt when he was with her—the sense of just being happy to be alive that overpowered him the moment she was by his side. Speeding up West Shore Drive, it hit him like a puzzle piece slotting into place that he was falling for this girl. The thought of building a life with her made him happy and hopeful.

He’d meant to take her to a little place on Main Street he’d heard about, but drove past it, wanting to mark this night with something more than a burger and fries.

Ed had mentioned a swanky restaurant he’d been to with Alice for their anniversary. A romantic-type place on the water. He headed up the shore until he saw its lights winking by the pier.

They were seated at a small table in the middle of the room, and a suited waiter recited the specials as he filled their water glasses. Gloria asked the fish of the day, and he handed Benny the wine list, telling him it was grouper and pointing out a few bottles that might pair nicely.

When he left, Gloria glared after him. “I’m sick of being overlooked,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

She tucked her hair behind her ears with angry energy. “My father talks over me and ignores me, and I take it because he’s my father, but I’m not taking this from a waiter.”

Benny blinked at her, thoroughly confused. “Did the waiter talk over you?” He hadn’t, Benny was sure, but it didn’t seem the right moment to point that out.

“I asked about the fish, but he turned to you to answer.”

The gesture hadn’t registered as dismissive, but thinking about it now, of course, it was. He felt surprised to have missed it, being so used to the

boxes he'd once been put into and that his friends and family still struggled with. No wonder so many people thought things were fine the way they were. They didn't see the slights any more than he'd noticed the waiter.

"I'm sorry that keeps happening to you, G. I know how much it bothers me when I'm ignored like that."

"When does it happen to you?"

Another question he couldn't answer truthfully. "Not lately, but it used to happen a lot."

"When you were younger," she nodded in understanding. "Young people are overlooked all the time, too. It's like you only count in this world when your voice is deep enough."

And your skin is light enough, Benny thought.

"My father thinks I'm headstrong."

He tapped her toe with his foot under the table. "So what if you are?" he said, pleased to have brought a smile back into her eyes. "It just means you know what you want, and you're not afraid to make a little noise to get it."

Across the restaurant, someone slammed a glass down on a table. Benny and Gloria started in surprise and looked over to see a puffed-up man, red-faced and scowling.

"Don't, Rick," the woman across from him said, trying to shush him.

"I'm just saying," the man's voice grew louder, as if he was eager for everyone to hear. "It's a whites-only restaurant, so what the hell is he doing in here?"

Benny's blood froze. He turned to face the man, his palms and pits sweating with a panic he took care not to show. The man glowered at a dark-skinned busboy with thinning gray hair clearing the table next to him, pretending not to hear.

"What are you doing in here, boy?" the customer said, raising his voice louder.

The waiter came hurrying over to take control of the situation. “Sir, our whites-only designation applies to our guests and the waitstaff, but we do have some Negro busboys and dishwashers.”

“Well, that’s false advertising for one thing, plus you shouldn’t have him out here next to my table. In plain sight.”

“Sorry, sir, but we don’t have enough waitstaff for waiters to bus tables, too.”

“Well, that’s your problem, isn’t it? And no cause to make a mockery of having a whites-only restaurant.”

All the ruckus brought the manager out, who apologized for making the customer feel uncomfortable and offered desserts on the house.

Benny dragged his attention back to his own table, pinpricks running up his arms, his heartbeat rushing through his ears.

“Unbelievable,” Gloria said in a huff, shaking her head.

Benny tensed, bracing for her to agree with the customer or the policy or even the apology.

“The man was doing his job, for goodness’ sake,” she said in a hiss. “Who did he think was back there doing the dishes? And that waiter and that manager just encourage people like that. They should have tossed him out for disturbing the rest of us, not rewarded him with cake.”

Benny’s eyes widened as he listened to her, and his heart swelled.

“If every whites-only space was truly whites only, he’d soon be begging for them to come back. And it would serve him right if they didn’t. The way we treat them is just plain wrong.”

Benny leaned back in his seat and opened his mouth to say something, but the moment seemed to demand more than the clumsy words he could conjure, so his primed mouth hung slack and dumb.

“I’ve shocked you, haven’t I?” she said, coloring. “Daddy says I’m too opinionated, in addition to being headstrong.” She glanced down at her hands. “I guess you might as well know right off what you’d be getting

yourself into with me.” She lifted her eyes to give him a steely look, like she was expecting a challenge. “I’m afraid I’m not going to change my mind on that point. I’ve thought long and hard about it, and I’m just not.”

Benny reached over and took her hand and pulled it to his mouth, kissing her fingers, her palm, the back of her hand. She had shocked him, all right. In the best possible way. If he’d felt light before, now he was flying, on the wings of the angel Gloria.

When the waiter brought their orders, he set the plates down quickly. “Just so you know,” he said, lowering his voice and directing his concerns to Benny, “we heard on the radio that the hurricane headed for Louisiana has changed direction. It’s headed for us now, so we’re closing the restaurant early.”

“Do we have time to eat?” Gloria asked.

“Of course. But if you’d prefer, we can pack up your dinner to take away with you.”

Benny glanced around, noticing that the previously crowded restaurant was half empty.

They ate quickly, barely tasting their food. After ten minutes, the manager came over and offered to pack away the remainder of their dinner for them to take home.

“It must be moving fast,” she said as he scurried away with their plates.

Benny reached for her hand. “I’ll get you home. Don’t worry.”

The waiter was back in no time with their leftovers and two pieces of cake wrapped in aluminum foil for good measure. Only one other couple was left, and they were also being hurried to the door.

“When will it hit?” Benny asked on his way out.

“We have a few hours if it stays on course.” Time enough to get home and get ready.

They stepped outside to the wind whipping at their hair and tearing at their clothes. Benny took Gloria’s hand and hurried her to his car, bustling

her inside. When he jogged around to the driver's side and slipped in beside her, she was laughing, peering into her compact mirror. "If you knew how long I spent fixing my hair tonight," she said, "and look at me." Her hair stuck up every which way.

"You look beautiful," he said. "You always look beautiful."

He leaned toward her, and she closed her eyes. Outside, the wind howled, throwing debris across the road and stirring up the bay. Instead of soft rolling waves, the water had grown restless, slapping noisily against the rocks on the pier. He brushed his lips against hers, so soft and supple. They should get going, he knew, but then Gloria's lips parted for him and her warm hand rested on his cheek, tugging him closer. They had hours until the hurricane arrived. They had time for this.

CHAPTER NINE

The Battle at Home

Cora jerked awake, her heart spluttering, disoriented to find herself not at home. The scent settled her nerves before her brain could catch up and remember. She was with Lee.

She smiled down at his sprawling form beside her, his breath coming in slow, rhythmic pulls. There was something deliciously sensual about the unguarded expression of his sleeping face. She traced the muscles of his chest with her fingertips before easing herself back down next to him. She snuggled in close and closed her eyes, relaxing into the feel of him next to her, skin to skin. Before she could even begin to drift off, she heard a noise outside and realized that this was what had woken her. She blinked, trying to adjust her sight to the dark, and shook Lee, who woke instantly alert, like an ever-ready soldier.

“I heard something,” she said.

He rolled over and held aside the gray-green curtain covering the window. A white pickup truck sat not twenty yards away. Its tire tracks ran through the scrub grass alongside the gravel drive.

After the two men came making trouble, they had asked Uncle Drew for advice on what to do. Together, they decided to move valuables and anything irreplaceable over to Uncle Drew’s so that they could run at a moment’s notice, and to take down the sign to Green’s Whiskey so they’d

be hard to find. They also dragged fallen branches over the drive, disguising it and blocking it off, or so they thought. It seemed that the last precaution had backfired. The gravel drive would have noisily announced the truck approaching.

Lee took one look outside and sprang out of bed, throwing on heavy jeans and his workman boots in the time it took Cora to swing her feet to the floor. Her hands trembled as she nudged the curtain away to peek again out of the window. Two men got out of the cab of the truck, and three more hopped out of the back. Lee already had his T-shirt on and rummaged under his bed as Cora pulled a dress over her head. He dragged out his old baseball bat and catcher's chest guard, and she realized the men were too close for them to run, and that Lee meant to fight.

Her heart hammered so loudly it rang in her ears. "Don't go out there," she breathed, fear strangling her voice.

"If I don't go out, then they'll come in, and that will be worse." He kissed her and held her for only a moment, then he was strapping on his old catcher's gear. He struck his stomach, testing the protection.

"They'll just bash at your head if they see that." Cora's whisper squeaked under the strain of her panic.

Searching his room, Lee grabbed his army jacket, putting it on over the chest protector and zipping it closed. "I'll be all right," he said as she shook her head at him.

"Lee!" She grabbed his arm, tears stinging her eyes.

He pulled her close and kissed her hard, mashing his lips against hers. "Lock the door behind me. Don't let them know you're here. Hide if you have to and don't come out no matter what."

He let her go, but she held on tight. "Lee, no."

"I love you," he said. Then he picked up the baseball bat and went out to meet the danger.

With the door locked behind him, she scampered over to the window, crouching below the sill and drawing back an inch of the curtain corner. Lee stood, head high, chest out, with the bat swung over his shoulder, facing five men gripping crowbars and tire irons. One had a hammer.

An almost full moon bathed them in a ghostly light, and a strong wind up from nowhere pulled at the trees.

“You fellas looking for something?” Lee kept his voice nice and easy, like he might be on his way to a ball game in the middle of the night.

“Is that him?” one asked.

“Yeah. That’s him, all right,” another said. She recognized the man from the last time, less drunk now, looking even meaner sober.

Cora prayed under her breath, “Jesus, God help him.” She bargained and bartered that if He’d make those men go away and never come back, she would give Lee up. Go back to her husband. Never break another commandment.

She dropped the curtain and sank to the floor clenching her hands, her teeth, listening to the grunting and cursing and sounds of metal hitting wood. She clamped her hand over her mouth to hold in her scream. The loud crack of breaking wood made her blood go cold. She scrambled back to the window, lifting the cover of the curtain. The swirling wind had ripped a branch from a dead tree too far from the barn to worry about cutting it down. It dangled limp and crooked like a broken limb. On the ground, the five men spread out, trying to circle Lee.

Cora let the curtain fall and backed away from the window. She had to help him. She knew she couldn’t go out there and fight, but if she could just get over to the whiskey barn, she could use the telephone to call for help. The lean-to door opened to the front, so she crept to the back window and eased it open. Her stomach knotted tighter hearing the grunting and scuffling and taunting insults coming from the front as she lowered herself

out. When her bare feet hit the ground, she landed on a sharp rock and nearly cried out. She should have thought of shoes.

With her foot stinging and smarting, she limped to the side of the lean-to and peeked around the corner to make sure no one was looking. They weren't. The men were all focused on Lee. They had circled him, attacking from every side. Lee swung as they surged, fighting back the three in front of him. Behind him, one of them struck his back with a lead pipe while another took a club to his legs. He staggered and stumbled, and Cora mashed her hand against her mouth to keep herself from screaming.

She ran to the warehouse, left foot exploding in pain with every step. The back door was locked, and she picked up a rock, striking it again and again against the lock, not caring about the noise and the risk. She had to get Lee help before they killed him.

The screws holding the lock in place on the door strained against the worn wooden frame, but the metal lock barely had a scratch. She pulled at the screws, trying to dig them loose, but they held firm.

From the front of the warehouse came the sound of glass smashing. She squinted through the slats of the wooden door and saw flames licking at the desk and spreading to the papers stacked neatly to one side. *Water*, she thought as she attacked the lock again. First call for help, then get water.

“Fire,” she heard Lee shout from out front. “Fire, fire.”

The men laughed. “Yeah, we know.”

He was warning her, thinking she was still in the lean-to and wanting her to get out before the blaze spread.

With a final crack, Cora smashed the screws from the weathered wood. The metal lock still held, but the door opened when she shoved at it.

The fire was spreading up the front wall and creeping sideways toward a neat row of stacked whiskey barrels and jugs. Sixty percent alcohol and flammable as hell.

Through the broken window, she could see Lee on the ground, his arms raised to protect his head, his legs flailing and kicking at the men.

She rushed past the window, picking her way through the glass, whimpering each time a shard sliced into her feet. When she got to the telephone, she grabbed the receiver and pressed it to her ear. She heard nothing but the crackling and popping of the fire behind her. “Hello?” She pressed the call lever once, twice, three times. “Operator, are you there? Can you hear me?”

Outside, an engine revved, and the men whooped. She turned her head to look, and the air rushed out of her in a shriek.

“No.” She could form no other thought. “No, no, no, no.”

Lee lay on his stomach behind the truck. They’d bound his hands together and strapped them to the back bumper. His head hung limp between his arms.

The last of the men hopped into the truck bed, and they pulled away, whooping and dragging Lee behind them.

“No,” Cora screamed as she sped out the front door, her whole body going numb.

They picked up speed as they cleared the driveway and turned onto the road. Cora ran after them on shredded feet, stumbling, falling, running again until she could no longer see them in the distance. Then, from behind her, came an explosion that shook the ground. A column of flames shot into the air as Green’s Whiskey burned.

CHAPTER TEN

Hurricane

When Benny dropped Gloria off at her house, her mother and father were already looking for her, worrying at the door.

“You shouldn’t get back on the road,” her mother told Benny. “Stay here and we’ll make a bed for you on the couch. They say it’s coming in quick.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Meyers, but I don’t have far to go. I’ll be home in no time, and I want to make sure everything is shut tight.”

“Good man. Batten down the hatches.” Mr. Meyers gave a lame salute.

Benny hurried to his car and drove to Levittown. The wind had already started kicking up dust and shimmying the trees. At home, Benny turned on the radio for the latest update while he closed and locked the windows and brought in the flowerpot on his doorstep that Ed and Alice had given him, and the barbecue he kept out back.

Authorities have expressed concern over residents in the floodplain who may be unaware that the hurricane has changed course or that they might be in danger, the radio man said. Residents in the floodplain are strongly advised to evacuate. All others are urged to stay indoors.

Benny’s stomach dropped. Cora and Lee over at Turner Creek were about as much in the floodplain as anyone could be, with no television or radio to tell them the hurricane was headed to Mangrove Bay. He picked up

his telephone to call Green's Whiskey, hoping one of them might hear the late-night ringing from the lean-to next door.

“One moment please,” the operator said in a toneless drone.

She came back to him a few seconds later. “I’m sorry, sir, I can’t get through.”

“You mean they’re not answering?”

“No, sir. The connection’s broken. That can happen if a branch falls on the line. A technician will have to be called out to have a look.”

Benny heard the crack of thunder followed by a distant stuttering flash of light. Then the rain started in a steady patter. A minute later, it drummed down in a blanket of noise.

Most likely, Cora and Lee didn’t know what was about to hit them.

“Damn it.” He grabbed his keys and raced to his car, driving as fast as he dared. The wind swept over the slick pavement, pushing into the side of his car, threatening to nudge him off the road.

He knew it was a bad idea to be out in this, but he didn’t have a better one, so he kept driving, fighting to see through the sideways rain. The wind threw leaves and debris against his windshield that his wipers pushed away.

When he got down by Turner Creek, the road was already hidden under the rising water. His wheel hit a deep pothole, which he struggled to drive out of.

He rolled down his window, searching for the Green’s Whiskey sign. There was nothing. When he started thinking he’d missed it and gone too far, he saw his sister, crouched on the ground and soaked to the bone.

He leaped from the car and ran to her. “What happened?”

Cora grabbed his arms and heaved herself up with so much force it made him nearly stumble. “Lee,” she shouted. “They took Lee.”

With her weight on Benny, she limped to the car. “Go. That way. Go. Drive.” She was nearly hysterical.

Benny did as she told him, shooting questions at her that she only gave partial answers to, but he eventually got the general picture. He sped up on the road and felt the car slipping under him. They weaved through the streets searching, with the thunder and lightning getting louder and brighter overhead as the storm inched closer. They needed to get inside.

“There,” Cora cried, pointing to a white truck on a lonely road. It had slipped off the street and tipped into a ditch, its back wheel lifted clear off the ground. Next to the wheel, on the back bumper, Lee lay tied to the truck. Benny swallowed down bile.

When they drove closer, he saw that the men who’d tied him had all scattered to find shelter. The second he brought the car to a stop, Cora sprang out. She collapsed as soon as she put her feet on the ground, but heaved herself back up and took a few steps. When she fell again, she crawled to him, screaming his name.

Benny ran to his trunk and found his fishing knives before rushing over to Lee, where Cora clawed at the rope binding his arms. He pushed her aside to slice through the rope, and then gathered Lee up and carried him to the car. The army had trained him to focus on what needed to be done, block out the carnage, and keep going. So, Benny registered the battered face, swollen hands, and bloody, shredded legs, but he kept his mind on moving forward.

He settled Lee in the back with Cora and got behind the wheel.

Hospital was the command he gave himself, and his sleek black Pontiac flew through the streets, skidding and sliding, nearly off the road, dodging fallen branches and fighting the wind. At one point, the car fishtailed and hit a lamppost. He heard the crunch of metal on metal, but even more worrying was the fact that Lee didn’t make a sound. He gunned his engine, lurching forward, squinting to see through the sheets of rain, speeding through stop signs and red lights, confident that no one else was crazy enough to be driving in this. It still took far too long to get there.

He abandoned the car in front of the hospital doors and carried Lee inside, barking orders like a sergeant. Lee's blood soaked through Benny's wet shirt, smelling of rotting roses and rust. In the commotion, a dark-skinned nurse took him for someone important and left a woman cradling her arm to rush over. It all happened quickly after that. Someone rolled a gurney out, and two more helped him lay Lee on it. They wheeled him away while someone else ran alongside, shining a light in Lee's eyes and shouting out instructions.

Benny turned to Cora in time to see her collapse to the floor with bloody footprints trailing behind her.

PART SEVEN

Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.

—Frederick Douglass

CHAPTER ONE

Hospital

The hurricane didn't pass until early morning. Roscoe checked the state of things when it was safe to go out, and apart from fallen branches and the power lines being knocked out, it hadn't done much damage. He reported back to Momma North that everything was fine and made sure she didn't need him to do anything before collapsing into his bed for a rest.

Ever since Cora left, things between him and Momma North had become strained. She never asked what happened, but she let him know she blamed him for not going out and getting Cora to come back. If she knew the truth, she'd probably throw him out on his ear.

He drifted off to sleep and woke later to someone knocking on the door. He pulled the pillow over his head, and seconds later heard an excited cry from Momma North. He was up in an instant and out of his room. When he rounded the corner, he saw Benny stepping inside.

"You shouldn't be here," Momma North said, flinging her arms around his neck and holding on to him like she meant to keep him there forever.

"No one's going to notice me after that hurricane. Folks are worrying about themselves today."

Roscoe crossed his arms and leaned against the wall. "Look who's come to slum it with the colored folks. I'm surprised you remember how to get here, all the way from your neighborhood."

“Cut that out,” Momma North said. “Benny’s my son. He’s always welcome in my home.”

Roscoe felt the dig. This place wasn’t his. It was hers. He flushed but didn’t back down.

“Better be careful no one spots you. People might start thinking you’re one of us.”

“I’m not here to fight with you, Roscoe,” Benny said. “I did what I did. It had nothing to do with you.”

“No, you just let me marry your sister for security so that you’d be free to desert everybody.”

He pinned Roscoe with a hard stare. “You may have married her, but you stepped away just as fast.”

Roscoe’s eyes widened in surprise. If he knew that, he’d been talking to Cora and probably knew why she’d left. He straightened from the wall.

“What do you mean, he stepped away?” Momma North said.

Benny shook off her question. “That’s not why I came here,” he said, looking at Roscoe. He turned to his momma. “Cora’s in the hospital.”

Her shocked pause gave way to action. “What happened?” she said, already dashing to the kitchen for her handbag.

“She had glass in her feet. She’s going to be fine.”

“Glass?” She tucked her bag under her arm and plucked her coat from the hook.

“It’s Lee who’s in bad shape. Some crackers got hold of him and dragged him through the streets until the storm stopped them.”

She clutched her bag and her coat, looking fragile, like the years were catching up with her. “What do you mean dragged?”

Roscoe had a sick feeling that *dragged* meant what it sounded like.

“They tied him to their truck.”

“Bastards,” Roscoe said.

“White folks are the devil himself,” Momma North said.

Benny turned red. "Momma, it's not everyone who's like that," he said, his voice quiet. "There are good—"

"Your sister is in the hospital," she said through gritted teeth. "Your daddy is dead. They dragged your friend through the street, and they burned down our house. Don't you stand here and defend them."

Benny kept his face rigid and guarded as they piled into his car and sped to the hospital. There, they found Patsy in her nurse's uniform talking to Cora and Uncle Drew, sitting beside each other in waiting room chairs, Cora's feet wrapped in bandages.

"Shouldn't you be in bed?" Roscoe said, when he saw the state of her. He didn't mean for it to come out so harsh.

She broke off her conversation and looked over at the three of them.

"They're discharging me," she said, which answered his question, but she directed her words at Momma North, not even acknowledging him. "We're worried about Lee, though. They operated, but he's not waking up."

She looked a mess, with haunted eyes and wild hair. Her nervous energy made Roscoe want to shake her still.

"He protected his vital organs with his catcher's guard," Patsy explained, "but the dragging dislocated his shoulders, shattered his hip and knees, and scraped through skin and muscle down to the bone."

Cora's red eyes welled up as she spoke, and Benny sat beside her, sliding his arm around her for comfort.

"Now would be a good time for you and your church friends to pray," Uncle Drew said to Momma North.

"You should go home," Patsy said to Benny. "You know you shouldn't be at the colored hospital, and there's nothing you can do for him anyway."

"Okay," Benny said. He rose and turned to Cora. "If you're checked out, I can take you home to rest."

Cora shook her head. "The lean-to burned down. Besides, I'm not leaving Lee." Tension simmered in the air.

“That’s not your home,” Momma North said. “You need to come back where you belong now.”

Cora shook her head and looked to Benny for support, who glared at Roscoe.

“You can stay with Patsy and Aunt Teen,” Benny said. He turned to Patsy. “She can, can’t she?”

No one said the obvious—that she couldn’t stay with him.

Patsy looked confused. “Well, sure, she can, but—” She glanced from Benny to Cora to Momma North to Roscoe, asking with her eyes why Cora wouldn’t just go home, and getting blank, stony faces for an answer. “We could make up a bed on the couch.”

“This has gone on long enough,” Momma North said. “It’s time for you to get home, Cora.”

“Momma, give her time,” Benny said.

“No, Benny. There’s a price for what she’s been doing. First, those articles, then staying out day and night, running wild in the streets. That reckless, godless man has landed her in the hospital, and we can thank God it isn’t worse for her.”

“Now hang on, Janie. I’m not going to let you lay this at Lee’s feet,” Uncle Drew said.

“Just come home and let’s talk about it,” Roscoe said to Cora.

“You think I’m coming back after what you did?”

He didn’t know if she meant Megan or losing his temper. Either way, her eyes blazed with a fire that told him more than weeks of her absence did.

“What did he do?” Momma North asked.

“What’s going on?” Patsy said.

“After what I did? Look at where we are because of you,” Roscoe said, ignoring them. “Lee might not even make it.” He stepped in closer and lowered his voice. “And people are going to start to talk.”

“Then let them talk,” she said. “I worried over what folks would say about me and Lee for way too long.”

“Hush now,” Momma said, trying to shush her. “You’re a married woman. You can’t be talking like that.”

“I am not leaving Lee, and I don’t care what anyone thinks about it.”

“Maybe you should just go home,” Benny said. “Talk it through.”

Cora whipped around to him and lashed out with a venomous force. “You don’t get to dip in and out of this whenever you want with your two cents like Moses coming off his mountain. You lost your say when you left.”

“Damn it, Cora. If those men had gotten their hands on you, that’d be you in there, but worse.” He turned on Roscoe, his finger jabbing. “I can’t believe you let this happen. I trusted her to you.”

Roscoe took in his jabbing finger and his entitled face, twisted in self-righteous outrage, looking every bit the white man. “Tell me, Benny,” Roscoe said with iron-hard anger, “what else do you want me to do for your family, now that you’re living over in Levittown?”

“Be quiet,” Momma hissed.

“Oh no,” Benny said. “I want to hear this, because last I checked, you’re living in my momma’s house, not taking care of anybody.”

“And who are you looking out for, Benny? Cause it’s not your momma. It’s not your sister. And it sure isn’t me.”

“You?” Benny spat, incredulous.

Roscoe felt it like the sting of a sapling switch on bare legs. He stepped back and put his hand out to touch a chair to feel something solid. “You were like a brother to me,” Roscoe said. “I would have done anything for you.” He pointed to Cora. “I did this for you.”

“That was your idea. I didn’t make you do it.”

Roscoe barked out a dry, angry laugh. “When you turn your back, you turn it good and hard,” he said. “You had me fooled, but I can see the real,

bright-white Benny now.”

“What I did can help all of us. Just think of what I could do for you like this.”

“Living over in Levittown in your cotton-wool life? What have you done for any of us since you’ve been back?” He flung his words at Benny, razor sharp and rock hard, and Benny flinched like he felt the blow.

“Man, they already have you brainwashed,” Roscoe said, pushing too far and not far enough. “Thinking *your* cushy life is better for *us*.”

“I just meant—”

“Nobody wants your white-man handouts. Tell your new friends to get off my neck and I’ll do for myself.”

Roscoe turned and strode away, walking the fifteen miles back to a place that definitely wasn’t home.

CHAPTER TWO

Honesty

It was late afternoon by the time Benny pulled into his driveway. He'd barely turned the car off when Gloria came rushing out of her brother's house next door. He wasn't ready to see her and felt himself stiffening, knowing he'd have to lie about where he'd been.

"Hi," he said as she approached. He felt so tired.

She threw her arms around him when he climbed out of the car, hugging him. "I was so worried you'd been blown off the road driving back yesterday. Ed said you never made it home."

"No, I came back and secured everything," he said, draping his arms around her waist. "And then I went to check on a friend."

She raised her eyebrows as her mouth dropped open. "In a hurricane? That's very considerate, but extremely foolish." She jabbed at his back. "And dangerous." Another jab. "You could have gotten yourself killed."

"I know," he said, but if he hadn't gone, Lee would have died. That part he couldn't say, so he stroked her back and eased into the feel of her arms around him.

"I'm glad you're safe," she said.

He looked down at her warm and ready smile and pulled her closer. When he kissed her, she relaxed into him, so trusting and open that it made

him want to tell her everything, which he couldn't, of course, and the reality of that carved a hole in his chest like a crater.

He hadn't considered how lonely passing would be, or that to build something new with Gloria, or anyone else, he had to give up Cora and Momma and Lee and Aunt Teen and Patsy and all of them, cutting them out of his life for good. But the thought of doing that was like cutting out his own heart.

Gloria told him that with the phone lines down, she'd decided to drive over, dodging fallen tree branches all over the roads on her way.

"I brought candles," she said, flicking the light switch on and off in the darkened room. They weren't likely to get power back for days.

"Thanks." He unzipped his jacket and draped it over the back of a chair as he watched her light the candles. One she put on the kitchen table. The other she placed on the counter. She moved around his space with a confidence that reminded him of the way Cora acted at Lee's, and he ached with a loneliness that threatened to swallow him up.

"Come here," he said, reaching for her. He could imagine her as a permanent fixture. He could make a life with this girl, the contented years stretching out in front of them like a river. He would come home at the end of the day to Gloria in the kitchen, ready with a pot roast and an apple pie. Ed next door. Sunday dinner at her parents'. It could all be so easy.

She wrapped her arms around his waist, but pulled back with a gasp. "Your shirt. Is that blood?"

With his jacket off, Lee's dried blood was unmissable. "It's not mine. I'm okay."

"But whose is it? What happened?" She clutched herself and stood three paces away.

The truth danced on the tip of his tongue. He could tell her. Hadn't she said that she didn't agree with segregation or the way Negroes were treated? And if she knew, he wouldn't have to give up his family. It could be their

secret, the burden of it shared. He opened his mouth, hesitating, deciding. The way she held back from him, gaping at the blood stain, made him feel exposed. And made him lose his nerve.

“Someone hit a dog, and I had to carry it off the road.” He hated how easily the lie came.

“That’s terrible.” She took a step closer. “But where is it now? You didn’t just leave it, did you?”

“No, I . . .” Falseness was like quicksand. Every time he moved, he sank deeper in. “Well, that is, I brought it to my friend.”

“Oh, right. Your friend.” Her expression softened. “And is your friend okay?”

That Lee might never wake up was another truth he couldn’t tell. “He’s fine,” Benny said, his throat closing around his words.

This was no way to live. He needed to tell her. That was the only way forward with Gloria. But it was a lot of truth to lay on someone and trust them with. And if she kept his secret, she would have this knowledge she could never speak about wedged like a glass wall between her and her family. Could he do that to her?

His stomach churned. “Gloria, if a person”—he glanced at her and pushed on—“wasn’t telling someone the whole truth about . . . something”—he sighed, frustrated at his own tangled words—“but the truth would be hard to take”—he hesitated at her worried expression and almost faltered—“do you think you would . . . I mean, someone would . . . a person would want to hear it anyway?”

She gaped at him. “What kind of truth?”

“Just in general. Any truth.” He smoothed the back of his jacket on top of the chair.

He should have thought of how to say this before opening his mouth.

“If you have something to tell me, then just tell me.”

This was a mistake. “No. Never mind.”

“Are you seeing someone else?”

“What? Of course not.”

“Is that where you were? Is the friend you rushed off to help a woman?”

“Gloria, no. I swear, I’m not seeing anyone else.”

“Well, then I don’t understand why you’re asking that question. But the answer is, any man I’m seeing should know better than to sneak around behind my back.” She leveled a look at him that was all daggers. “If a man can’t be honest about what he’s doing, he shouldn’t be doing it.”

“Forget I asked.”

He looked away, and she grabbed his arm. “I want the truth, Benny. Is there someone else?”

“No. There isn’t anybody.” At least not in the way she meant. He took her hands. “It was a dumb question. I’m sorry it sounded like something it wasn’t.”

She stared hard at him, squinting, like she was trying to read in his face the words he wouldn’t say. “Please be honest with me, Benny. More than anything, I want the truth.”

She had no idea what she was asking for. He searched her eyes, wondering what he dared to tell her, and saw the innocence of a girl who couldn’t imagine a bigger transgression than him stepping out to see another woman. She would crumble under the weight of his reality. He hesitated, the wanting to tell her replaced by knowing he never could, and his hesitation turned to resolve. When he said, “There’s no one but you,” with a harder edge to his voice than he’d intended, he saw the doubt creep into her. She drew back her hands and tucked them into the pockets of her skirt.

CHAPTER THREE

Goodbye

Cora sat beside Lee's hospital bed and gently touched his hand where it lay folded across his chest. There was no reaction.

"Hey there, handsome," she said, struggling to make her voice even and light. "You feel like getting up today?"

She searched his eyelids and fingers and lips for signs of movement. It had been three long weeks since he'd been brought in. Dr. George kept telling her to be patient, and Patsy assured her that Lee was in great hands, but seeing him lying there helpless, week after week, tore her into a thousand pieces that she could barely hold on to. It scared her to realize how badly she wanted him back.

She placed one of his hands in hers and massaged his fingers. The bruising on his knuckles had healed, and the lacerations around his wrists had quieted to angry red stripes.

"You missed Momma's fish fry last night," she said. She kneaded the length of each finger and then the palm of his hand. "I know how you love fried mullet." Not even his rhythmic breathing fluttered. "But don't you worry. I'll make some special for you when you get out of here. All you got to do is wake up."

Her voice quivered, and she stopped talking for a minute until she could speak again with a steady cheerfulness. The doctor couldn't say if he heard

her or not, so she made sure not to talk about anything that might worry him. Not his business up in flames with his landlord trying to blame him for the damages, or the men who attacked him bragging across town about what they'd done, knowing they'd never serve a day in prison for it. She wouldn't mention that without her job, she couldn't help Momma and Roscoe with the rent money, or that the landlord had threatened to boot them out if they didn't come up with it soon. Not a word about staying at Aunt Teen's to avoid being in the same house as Roscoe, or the talks from Momma about her sinful choices, or how Benny wanted her to stop talking to the papers, afraid she'd wind up in the hospital with Lee, or worse.

"Do you remember that nice reporter we talked to? From *The Pittsburgh Courier*?" she said to Lee's still form. "I wrote to him and told him what happened to you." She worked his wrist back and forth like Patsy told her to, trying to get the blood circulating. "He said he'd see about doing a follow-up piece on the repercussions of speaking out and Jim Crow justice."

She massaged up and down his arm. "He said he'd run it by his editor."

As she kneaded and stroked, Roscoe walked in and hovered by the door. He watched her, eyes tight, mouth pressed into a tight line. Cora turned her back to him.

"I thought I'd find you here," he said.

She inched her chair closer to the bed and rubbed Lee's shoulder, refusing to look up as Roscoe crossed the room and perched on the window ledge.

"This has to stop," he said.

She felt his eyes on her as she massaged.

"All of it. Right now." His voice was a gathering storm.

Cora let her hands slide down Lee's arm to his hand. She curled her fingers around his, squeezing gently.

“Look at him.” Roscoe motioned to Lee’s fragile body stretched out on the bed. “He could stay like that forever.”

Her throat closed. She couldn’t have spoken if she wanted to. Instead, she listened for Lee’s steady breathing, her assurance that he was still with her.

“I won’t wait around for him to open his eyes, just to watch you run back to him.” His voice weighed heavily with hurt, and for the first time since letting Lee carry her to his bed, Cora felt shame. It had been cruel to marry Roscoe, because the truth was, she could never have stayed with him. She was Lee’s. She always had been.

“I’m trying to do the right thing by you, woman, but you don’t make it easy.” A caustic edge tinged his voice. She inhaled a slow, steady breath, wondering if Lee could hear. “No more reporters. No more interviews. No more Green’s Whiskey. No more trouble.”

She kept her eyes fixed on Lee. He anchored her in a world where she might otherwise float away to nothing. “I can’t do that,” she said, so quiet it was more sigh than sentence.

He stood from his perch on the windowsill, squaring his shoulders, and pulled himself to his full height. “Damn it, Cora,” he snarled, bristling with fury. “That’s enough!” He jabbed his finger into the air, into the nothing between them. “I’m your husband, and I’m telling you to stop.”

She looked up at him, this earnest, irate man she didn’t love and never would. When he took a step toward her, she flinched.

His face fell when he saw her fear, and he seemed to slump where he stood. “This isn’t working.” His eyes burrowed into hers. “I swore I’d never be like my father, giving up and walking away, but if you won’t stop with all this”—he squeezed the back of his neck and looked over at Lee—“there’s nothing to stay for.” His words rushed out like air seeping from a tire, fast and unconsidered and impossible to stop.

Beneath the rotten crust of their broken marriage were years of tender moments, and knowing they'd tarnished all those memories bruised Cora's heart. Roscoe had been a comfort and a friend for so much longer than he'd been what he was now. She should have told him that. And she should have thanked him for what he'd done for her, and said she was sorry she never gave him a chance, and told him that she hoped he'd be happy, but there was Lee, lying between the two of them, as he had always been. She pressed her lips shut and stroked her lover's hand.

Roscoe shuffled to the door and stopped, the pain in his voice was mirrored in his face.

“I tried to do right by you.”

Cora recognized his words for what they were: a truth, an apology, a goodbye. In her mind, she wished him well, but in the hospital room, she leaned closer to Lee and waited for him to go.

CHAPTER FOUR

Claude Pepper

When Cora heard from Uncle Drew that Senator Pepper would be down from Washington, DC, touring his constituency and had agreed to meet with her, Cora was ecstatic. While Governor Caldwell was a known bigot, Senator Pepper was maligned in the press because he was not. Nicknamed Red Pepper for his support of the egalitarian ideas of communism, Cora hoped for a more sympathetic ear, and with President Truman demanding real change after commissioning his *To Secure These Rights* race report, she felt the timing couldn't have been better.

The meeting he'd agreed to was about Negro access to GI benefits, but the meeting she intended to have with him would be about getting justice for Lee. With every day that passed without him waking or even moving, a little crumb of hope flaked away. She had this idea that if those men could be arrested, sentenced, tried, and jailed, she would whisper it in his ear and the news of justice served would pull him back to her.

She sat beside Uncle Drew in his wide, gray Buick, dangling her hand out of the window for air. A sky streaked with clouds promised rain, but not quite yet. When they arrived, they gave Cora's name to the receptionist, who told them the senator would come out and meet them in the garden. She led them through the building and out the back to where the beautifully manicured grounds spilled over with roses.

They stood alone, admiring the blooms, waiting. Uncle Drew leaned close and said under his breath, “Do you think we’re outside because he doesn’t have a spare closet for us?”

Cora rolled her eyes and looked away from him. “Let’s just enjoy the fresh air.” She wanted this to be a good meeting, and flooding her mind with suspected slights wouldn’t be helpful. It was a beautiful garden. She would focus on that.

Not ten minutes later, the senator came striding out across the lawn toward them.

“Mrs. Crane,” he said, extending his hand. “I’m Senator Pepper.”

She smiled and side-eyed Uncle Drew. “Thank you for meeting us. You have a wonderful garden here.”

“Mr. Crane, pleasure to meet you,” he said, shaking Uncle Drew’s hand.

“Actually, it’s Drew Brooks. Friend and advisor.”

He looked expectantly at Cora. “So, where’s your husband?”

“I’m afraid he couldn’t make it today.” He’d left two weeks ago, selling everything he had and a few things he didn’t, like Benny’s bed and dresser, to buy passage to Britain on the first freighter he could get.

The senator’s face pulled into a frown. “But he’s the veteran.”

“He hoped I would speak for the both of us,” she said, sending a nervous glance to Uncle Drew.

“Well now,” he said, adjusting his glasses. “This is a disappointment.”

“He’s not much of a talker,” Uncle Drew said, coming to her aid. “More of a doer. But his plight is Cora’s plight. The injustice against him is hers to bear, too. That’s why he wanted her to speak for him.”

Behind the senator, a squat, suited man hurried toward them. He held a large camera in both hands.

Cora spoke quickly, fearing the senator was about to be pulled away. “Sir, we’ve come to ask you to right a wrong. The GI Bill isn’t the only

thing failing patriotic veterans. There can be no true justice when Negroes in this state are not protected by the—”

He held up a hand, cutting her off, his face serious, his voice appeasing. “I know why you’re here.”

“Actually, sir, there is a case I’d like you to consider,” she said. “A veteran, Lee Peters, was attacked—”

The stout man reached the senator’s side.

“There you are, Charlie. Good,” Pepper said.

“Senator Pepper,” Uncle Drew said, “the GI Bill, and indeed the laws of this country, are not being applied equally. By allowing local, historically racist players to take on all authority over federal mandates, Washington has allowed—”

Again, the senator held up his hand for silence. “I had expected your husband, Mrs. Crane, considering we didn’t pass the bill for wives and friends.” He nodded to Uncle Drew. “But as I have only you, you will have to do.”

Cora glanced at Uncle Drew, her confusion mirrored in his eyes.

Pepper turned to the man with the camera. “Where do you want us?”

The photographer stepped forward. “If you could stand closer.” He pulled Cora’s arm, positioning her beside Senator Pepper. “Right here.” Then he waved Uncle Drew nearer with an impatient hand gesture. “And you as well.” He looked through the viewfinder of his camera. “Another step in.” He made an adjustment to his lens. “And another step.” He snapped the shot. “One more. Smile this time.”

Cora’s mouth twisted in an awkward grimace that might have been mistaken for a smile, and the photographer’s camera clicked.

“Mrs. Crane,” Senator Pepper said, stepping away from them. “I understand your concerns. America is a great nation, and we need to be a great nation for everybody.” He turned to the photographer. “Get a shot of

me talking to them.” He stood more erect and gestured with his right hand as he spoke.

Cora felt blood coloring her face and frustration coiling in her belly.

“The dignity of a nation is only as great as the dignity of the least of its people. And a good program that was meant to afford opportunities to Americans of every race is falling short.”

She tried to ignore the photographer circling around them as he spoke.

“Rest assured that I am very interested in finding a solution to the race problem. I advise you to have patience and to trust in the democratic process.” He clasped Cora’s hand, turned to look at the camera, and smiled. Then he shook Uncle Drew’s hand, angling him to the camera.

“Could you step back for this shot?” the photographer said to Cora, shooing her away.

She wanted to rip the camera out of his hands and hurl it to the ground.

“This democracy is failing us,” she said to his smiling profile, her voice inching higher and growing louder.

“I agree that America needs a truer democracy, like the Soviet Union,” he said. “A nation which has recognized the dignity of all people, and where discrimination against anybody on account of race is a crime. They’re in fundamental sympathy with the progress of mankind.”

“You’re talking about the communists,” Cora said, doubting that anyone who talked like that would have the political clout to help. “People call them un-American.” She felt weighed down by the pointlessness of coming to him for help.

“Nowhere in the world is there so little friction between minority and majority groups. We would do well to imitate and emulate.”

“Maybe, Senator, but this is America,” Uncle Drew said in a slow, calm voice that warned Cora to keep herself under control. “We need to work with what we’ve got.”

The camera clicked twice, and the photographer gave the senator a thumbs-up.

Pepper loosened his tie and let his frame droop into a relaxed slouch. “Look, there’s no appetite in Congress to revisit racial legislation right now.” A brown-suited aide strode purposefully toward them. “But I take note of your grievances and if I secure the Democratic nomination for president and the presidency in November, I will make redressing this a priority of my administration.”

“Wait, you’re running for president?”

“I haven’t announced yet, but let’s just say, it’s looking likely.”

The aide leaned in close to the senator and said in a low voice, “Mr. Henderson’s here.”

Pepper nodded and straightened. “Thank you both for coming by. My regards to your husband.”

“But—” Cora said as he turned from her and headed back inside. He was three strides away when she heard him tell the aide, “Now, that only goes in the colored press. Nothing mainstream.”

Uncle Drew raised his eyebrows at her. “No closet this time,” he said. “Just a real pretty photo booth.”

CHAPTER FIVE

October 6, 1947

Benny had his mechanical engineering books spread out over the table. He should have been studying, but his eyes slid over the words, barely seeing them. Lately, a restlessness had taken hold of him, and he knew what caused it. He needed to choose. His old life or his new.

A thumping on his front door made him jump, and when he opened it, he found Ed on his doorstep.

“Hey, neighbor,” Ed said, stepping inside without invitation. He glanced at the books on the table. “Your brains are going to fall out of your head with all that studying.”

Benny rubbed the back of his neck. “Just trying to make it stick.”

“So, I hear you’re headed over to my parents’ soon, right?” There was a bristling gruffness to him as he shifted his weight from foot to foot. “Gloria says you’re watching the World Series with them.”

“Yeah.” Benny checked his watch. The day had slipped away from him. “I was just finishing up.” He closed the book that had been open to the same page for the last hour.

“Right. So, listen. Before you go, I have to ask. Why does my sister want to know if I’ve seen other women coming in and out of your house?” Ed looked ready to punch him.

“She . . . misunderstood something.”

Rocking back on his heels, Ed let out a slow breath. “I told you from the start, if you weren’t serious, you should move on.”

“It’s not like that. I like your sister. I hope you told her there’s no one coming in and out of here.”

“I told her I haven’t seen anyone, but I haven’t been looking.” He crossed his arms. “Should I start looking?”

“No. There’s no one. I swear.” The last thing he needed was for Ed to start nosing around in his life.

“Well,” Ed drummed his fingers against his bicep, “if you’re not chasing skirts, what is it you’re actually hiding?”

Benny paled. He shut his eyes, feeling the walls close in. He needed a secret.

Something bad, but acceptable. Definitely not the truth. “I . . . have a lot of debt.” He opened his eyes to see a concerned expression settle over Ed’s face.

“How much is a lot?”

“Enough,” Benny hedged. “I really like your sister, but before I, you know, make any kind of commitment, I need to straighten some things out in my life.”

Ed pulled out a chair and sat. “Is it gambling? How much do you owe?”

“It’s not gambling.” He leaned against the wall, arms crossed. “And I’m not talking about this with you.”

“Look, I’m not trying to put you on the spot. I just don’t want to see Glory get hurt.”

“Neither do I.” He looked pointedly at the clock. “I should get going. I don’t want to miss the first pitch.”

For the first time ever, the World Series would be televised, with just about every set in America tuned in to watch the Yankees and the Dodgers go head-to-head. Benny would have liked to watch the game with Lee, who not only could have played for the major leagues if he’d been allowed, but

who knew the Brooklyn Dodgers superstar, Jackie Robinson, from the war. It seemed wrong that he, of all people, would miss it.

When Benny got to the Meyers' house, Gloria opened the door and smiled at him, but there was a reservedness to her now, like she was careful not to give too much of herself away. He bent to kiss her cheek, and she turned her head even farther from him so that the kiss landed on her ear.

She and her mother were finishing making potato skins and deviled crabs for the game, so Benny sat with her father talking batting averages and home run stats until they came in with the food.

"So, which teams are playing today?" Mrs. Meyers asked, settling herself on the couch.

"Women," Mr. Meyers sighed, giving Benny a look that made Gloria stiffen beside him.

"It's the Dodgers against the Yankees," Benny told her.

As the teams filed onto the field, Mrs. Meyers pointed at the screen. "Look, it's that colored player."

"Yep," Mr. Meyers said, popping the P and shaking his head.

"They say he's very good."

"He's great," said Benny.

"Yeah, but that's not the issue," Mr. Meyers said. "Now every Dodgers game is about integration instead of baseball."

"Come on, Daddy," Gloria said. "He's stealing third, not starting a picket line on center field. If all the teams were integrated, you wouldn't even think about it."

He barked out a laugh. "That's what you get when you talk to women about sports," he said with a smirk to Benny. "Just integrate every team in every sport and you won't notice the integration," he said in a high-pitched voice meant to be a poor imitation of his daughter's and laughed again.

Gloria blushed and turned away.

“There’re tons of women who know a whole lot about sports,” Benny said, trying to come to her defense.

“Name one,” Mr. Meyers drawled.

“Sure,” he hesitated and came up blank. “Well, my sister knows more about baseball than most men,” he lied. They would never meet his sister to find out otherwise. He turned to Gloria and winked, hoping to draw her back out.

“She must be watching the game too, then,” Mrs. Meyers said. “Do they have a television?” And then, without waiting for a response, “We should telephone after the game. They have a telephone, don’t they?”

The back of Benny’s skull began to throb, and his forehead felt tight with tension. He shook his head, searching for a reason that they couldn’t call his baseball-loving sister.

“It’s long distance,” Gloria said at the same time Benny blurted out, “She’s in the hospital.”

Gloria sat up straight, shock pinching her features. “What happened?”

“Uh,” he said, remembering too late that he’d said his family lived up North. He was kicking himself for not coming up with the long-distance excuse.

“Is she all right?” Mrs. Meyers asked.

“She’s fine, she’s just . . . uh,” he was making it worse, because why would she be in the hospital if she was fine? And during the World Series. “Visiting . . . my mother.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

He swallowed the spit pooling in his mouth. “Her heart, I think. I mean, the doctors think.”

“Don’t they know?”

“Well, she collapsed, so it could have been anything, but now they think it’s her heart. They’re pretty sure. It’s probably the heart.”

Gloria put her hand on his arm. “Oh, Benny, I’m so sorry. If you want”—she slid closer to him—“I could drive up with you to see her.”

“No,” he said, a little too quickly. “She’s very weak and can’t have visitors. Just my sister. And I can’t get the time off right now to drive all the way—” He was going to say *to Chicago* but stopped himself in case he’d told her another Northern city. “All the way up there.” Lie. Lie. Lie. “So, we can’t call her or see her.”

“Oh, Benny,” she said.

Mrs. Meyers offered him a deviled crab and a sympathetic look. “I hope she recovers soon,” she said.

“Sorry to hear about that,” Mr. Meyers said as President Truman came onto the television screen, weighing up the baseball in his hand. Their focus shifted to the president winding up for the ceremonial first pitch that would start the game.

Gloria leaned in and whispered, “I knew you were keeping something from me. I wish you’d just told me.”

Benny kissed her forehead and sat back, eyes toward the screen. He had to think. He’d told Ed he’d been worried about debts, not a sick mother. As soon as they talked to each other, they’d all know he’d been lying. Unless the debts were hospital bills. That might work. A heart problem could definitely send a person into debt. His stomach twisted into knots as he smoothed out his story.

He’d been looking forward to watching the game, but now he could barely follow it. When the Dodgers scored a home run, and he half-heartedly cheered a beat too late, Gloria rubbed his arm, and Mrs. Meyers offered him a potato skin with a sad smile.

“You poor thing,” she said, watching him eat. The potato sat in his stomach like a stone, and Jackie Robinson stole home.

CHAPTER SIX

Notice Served

Cora moved back home after Roscoe left, but without his paycheck, and with Cora's job going up in smoke alongside Green's Whiskey, they only had Momma's salary to make ends meet. They cut back on essentials, like food, gas, and paying the rent.

The landlord made it clear he was done waiting for his money, threatening to put them out on the street if they didn't pay everything they owed. With only days left to scrape the money together, Cora sold the living room furniture. It still wasn't enough.

She went to bed with worry knotting her stomach, taking ages to settle into sleep. It felt like she'd barely drifted off when a persistent knocking shook her awake. She rubbed her eyes and glanced at the clock. Not yet six in the morning.

Her thoughts flew to Lee. A visit this early had to be very good news or very bad news. *Please, God*, she thought as she stumbled out of bed, *let it be good news*. She flung the door open, hoping to find Patsy or Uncle Drew or even Benny on her front stoop, telling her that Lee had woken up. It took her a second to recognize the determined face of her landlord.

“Mr. Harvey?”

“It’s the end of the month,” he said, his gray eyes bulging like a toad. “You need to pay me what you owe me.”

Standing in front of him in her flimsy nightdress, Cora swung the door closer to shut and tucked herself behind it. "It's barely morning," she complained. "I was sleeping."

"I didn't want to miss you. Now, do you have my money or not?" His gruff tone bordered on hostile, and the look on his sallow face told her she couldn't say no.

"I'll go get it," she said, leaving him standing on the stoop while she went to her room to collect the furniture money.

She came back to find him craning his neck, looking around the room. "Kind of bare in here, isn't it?"

She moved to block his view and handed him the cash.

"You weren't planning on skipping out on my rent, were you?" he asked, narrowing his toad eyes at her.

She laughed. It hadn't occurred to her, but now that he mentioned it, it might have been a good plan.

He counted the money in front of her and scowled when he came up short. "Where's the rest of it?"

"I'll get it to you later."

"I'm out of laters with you."

"Today," she said. "Later today. And if you'd come at a decent hour, I might have had it all together. Who comes knocking on a person's door at six in the morning expecting anything to be ready?"

He made a face, skeptical but sheepish.

"Later today is still the end of the month," she said.

Old Man Harvey dragged his hand over his face, and the angry vein marks on his pale cheeks disappeared for a second and then reappeared even stronger. He told her how glad she should be that he'd been so patient, how easily he could rent this place out to somebody who could pay on time, and how he wasn't running a charity.

She gritted her teeth and nodded. “I understand,” she said. “We’ll get you the money.”

He grunted and pocketed the cash. When he left, Cora shook Momma awake and told her what had happened.

“Maybe Benny can give us the rest,” Cora said. If he knew how desperate they were, he’d want to help.

“Don’t you dare,” said Momma, sharp as a slap. “Are you trying to get your brother lynched?”

“No one would have to know he gave it to us.”

“You mean, you hope no one would find out. But what if they did? And then figured out why this white man was so generous to two colored women. Do you want to risk his life like that? For rent?”

“Old Man Harvey’s coming back, Momma, and we need to have the money.”

“And you thought you’d waltz into his neighborhood and knock on his door asking?”

“I’d find a way,” she grumbled.

“You’re not going near that neighborhood,” Momma said, final as the grave. “We’re not asking Benny.”

Cora stormed out of Momma’s room and stomped into her own. She got dressed in an angry haze, ticking through the people she thought might be in a position to help and landed on Uncle Drew. She stormed out the door, not five minutes later.

At Uncle Drew’s place, she picked her way through the Green’s Whiskey boxes and barrels that Lee had stacked in every available inch of his living room for safekeeping. He led her into the kitchen and offered her a glass of water.

She noticed, for the first time, that he’d started to gray at his temples and had bags under his eyes. He looked worn down, and she felt a pang of guilt for coming here to ask even more of him.

She took a sip of water and then rushed through the details about Old Man Harvey and the rent. “I’ll pay you back as soon as I find a job,” she promised.

He dragged in a long, heavy breath and let it out heavier. “I wish I could help you, Cora.”

All these weeks, he’d been the one paying Lee’s hospital bills, and it had taken a toll. He’d eaten through his spending money, his savings, and even his emergency rainy-day money. “There’s nothing left,” he said. “I’m flat broke.”

Cora felt ashamed. She hadn’t even considered how the hospital was getting paid. She hadn’t thought past wanting Lee back. Now she knew that even hope had a price.

“But if you can’t pay them anymore . . .”

He set his glass on the counter and twirled it in a circle, watching the water ripple as it turned. “I’m going to have to come up with something.” The way he said it told her he’d tried already and run up against nothing but brick walls.

When she left Uncle Drew’s, she drove straight to Lee. She slipped into his room and took up his hand, kissing his forehead, his cheek. He didn’t move.

“Please come back, Lee,” she whispered to him. “I need you.” She rubbed his hands in hers, first the right and then the left. “I know you’re tired, but you have to fight now, you hear?” She squeezed his hand as hard as she could. “It’s got to be now.”

She didn’t want to think about what might happen when Uncle Drew had to admit to the hospital that he couldn’t keep paying. Worry and fear bubbled over and rushed out of her in a flood of tears. She hurried from Lee’s room, back to her car, where she sat for a full ten minutes crying herself out before she could drive herself home.

When she got there, she found Momma dragging the kitchen table out the front door to where she'd already set out the kitchen chairs in an impromptu yard sale. She put Cora in charge, saying, "You watch over all this, I'm going to get the Lord to help."

Cora thought that if the Lord had a mind to help, He would have done it by now, and He certainly didn't need a special invitation, but she bit her tongue and watched Momma march off in search of divine intervention.

She stayed out there for hours, and it wasn't until the evening that a couple Cora didn't recognize came by, possibly new to the neighborhood, possibly from farther afield. They haggled over the prices Cora suggested, her clear desperation making them stubborn and thrifty, and they walked away with a bargain.

She went inside and sat on the floor where the couch had been and counted out her money. It was almost enough. Almost. She pulled her legs into her chest and rested her head on her knees, fighting tears, and tried to think. He'd be coming back, and she couldn't come up short again.

When the sun began to tuck itself away, she heard the knock. It was the end of the day.

Cora didn't move. She barely breathed, praying he'd go away.

"It's me," her momma's voice called from the other side of the door. "I forgot my key." Relieved, Cora sprang up to let her in.

"Did you sell them?" Momma asked as soon as she stepped inside.

"Yes, but it wasn't enough."

Momma pulled a handful of notes out of her bag. "That's okay, cause the Lord helped us," she announced. "Through His flock at Saints of Mercy. Pastor Glen has an emergency fund."

Together, they sat on Momma's bed with the money between them and counted it out. It was all there, plus a little extra. A head start on next month. They grinned at each other, the relief making them giddy, and Cora counted it again, just to be sure, and to calm her nerves.

“You see?” Momma said, watching her count. “There’s no need to ask Benny.” She hugged Cora, messing up her counting and making her have to start all over again.

That night, when Old Man Harvey still hadn’t come by for the rest of his rent, Cora tucked the stack of bills under her mattress and slept on them. In the morning, she checked on the money before she washed. After she dressed, she put the bills on the kitchen counter, guarding them while she and Momma ate toast.

The pounding started just after Momma left for work. Not a knock, but a sharp, metallic banging that echoed through the house like a curse. Cora gathered the money and made her way to the door. When she opened it, she came face-to-face with a sheriff and froze.

He held a hammer and sized her up from her bare feet to her tousled hair, and then glanced behind her into the empty room.

“Good luck to you,” he said.

Her heart kicked up its tempo as her muscles seized. The sheriff stepped off the porch, got into his car, and pulled away.

She clutched the wad of bills in her hand and looked at the door, where he’d nailed up a pink sheet of paper. She reached up and tore it from the nail, ripping through the bold, black lettering, but she could still read it easily enough. Eviction Notice. They had three days to get out.

PART EIGHT

I Too

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
“Eat in the kitchen,”
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

—Langston Hughes, 1926

CHAPTER ONE

Relocating

Cora and Momma settled the question of where to go by process of elimination. Between the fire and the hurricane, Lee's place was a sodden mess of charred remains, and staying with Benny was beyond out of the question. Momma didn't even want him to know they'd lost the house. "Nothing he can do about it anyway, and he'll only get himself caught trying to help," she'd said.

In the end, they crammed the blue Plymouth full to bursting and set out for Aunt Teen's. She'd never turn them away, but it wasn't like she and Patsy had space for them either. When she'd stayed with them before Roscoe left, Cora had slept on the couch. Now Momma took the couch, and she squeezed into the bed with Patsy, the two of them staying up half the night like schoolgirls at a sleepover.

"Tell me honestly," Cora whispered to her cousin one night, after they'd slept in the same bed for over a week. "Do you think he'll get better?" Dr. George had warned her that the longer it took him to wake up, the less of a chance he had.

"Nobody can answer that."

"But as a nurse," she insisted, "when you look at him, do you think he will?"

Patsy reached out to her and found her hand in the dark. “He went through a lot, but he’s still fighting. I say, as long as he’s fighting, he has a chance.”

It wasn’t the answer she’d hoped for. She wanted Patsy to say yes. That he was young and strong, and he just needed a little more time. “Can’t you give him something to help him heal?” Her optimistic patience was turning into desperation.

“If there was, you know we already would have. Dr. George has done everything he can. Trust me. I made sure of it.” She nestled in closer to Cora. “It’s up to Lee now. He’ll wake up or he won’t.”

Patsy lay still for a long time, and just when Cora thought she might have drifted off to sleep, she said, “Let him know you’ve made your choice, and you chose him. Tell him Roscoe’s gone. He might hear you. It might help.”

Tears pooled in Cora’s eyes and ran sideways across her face, seeping into her pillow. “I already did,” she said.

“Have you”—Patsy hesitated, then stammered out the rest of her question—“heard from Roscoe?”

“No.” Cora closed her eyes. She didn’t want to think about Roscoe.

“I’m so mad at him for leaving.”

“I’m not,” Cora said. “It’s better this way. He should be with the person he loves.”

“I don’t mean because of his woman. I mean, because he let America drive him out. He let them win.”

Cora propped herself up on her elbow and looked at Patsy. “How can you say that? He saw a better way to live over there and went to live it. Isn’t that winning?”

Patsy snorted and rolled onto her back. “Giving up isn’t winning. Not when there are thousands still struggling. We can’t all move to Wales.” She looked at Cora. “Or Levittown.”

“So, you think Benny’s giving up too?”

“Has he helped anybody but himself?”

Cora felt a flush of shame for her brother. He had helped no one. Not even her and Momma. “He’d have done something if he knew,” she said feebly.

“He’d have known if he’d been here.”

Cora turned away from her. The night had grown clammy and warm, and she kicked the sheets from her legs.

“You need to tell him,” Patsy said, poking her back. “He should know you got evicted.”

“Momma’d have a fit.”

“Probably, but think how Benny will feel when he finds out you kept this from him.”

“I know, I know. I almost wrote him about five times, but then I thought, what if he gets caught trying to help like Momma said. I couldn’t live with that.”

“Someone needs to tell him. He might agree it’s too dangerous for him to do anything for you, but that should be his decision.”

Her words startled Cora, like being splashed with ice water on an August afternoon. She’d never considered that Benny might choose to do nothing. The Benny she knew would fall over himself trying to help, but that was the old Benny. This new, white, Levittown Benny, with his house and his job and his shiny new life, might have too much to lose. With a jolt, Cora realized Momma didn’t just worry that he’d help. She also feared that he wouldn’t. And as long as he didn’t know, she could hold on to believing he was still the old Benny. Her Benny.

The bedroom air tasted stale and spent as Cora breathed it in and out in a steady stream, trying to quiet the tremors building from deep in her bones.

“Momma’s right,” she said, too loud in the quiet room. “There’s no reason for Benny to have to hear about this. We’ll be back on our feet soon

enough.”

CHAPTER TWO

Reconnecting

Benny's lie about his mother in the hospital and his debts won him a boatload of sympathy. Alice started dropping off casseroles every few days, and Ed offered to mow his lawn for him so he could use his time to deal with *other things*. When he came calling on Gloria, Mr. Meyers pulled him aside to tell him he knew how expensive hospitals could be and that he shouldn't be ashamed of looking after family.

He felt like more of a fraud than ever.

"I'm sorry I jumped to conclusions," Gloria said, slipping her hand in his as they stood in the garden, away from her parents. "You were trying to tell me, and I let my imagination get the better of me. I should have listened."

"No. I'm sorry, G. There's so much I should have told you." He looked over his shoulder. "I want you to know everything." The confession sat on the tip of his tongue. His palms pricked with sweat. "I don't know how to say it all."

She looked into his eyes and smiled, open, trusting. "It's okay. You'll find the words when you're ready. I'm just glad you're the kind of man who sticks up for his family, no matter the price."

He slipped his hand from hers and dug it into his pocket.

“I know you want to get your momma’s hospital debt sorted out before you think about”—she paused—“the future.” A shy blush colored her face. “I understand. I can wait.”

His confession dissolved to nothing in his mouth. After that, he took steps to avoid her, coming home too late to visit and sending her chopped-short messages through Ed.

Gloria wrote notes full of forgiveness and understanding that she left on plates of peanut butter cookies and blueberry muffins that she dropped off while he was out. *Thinking of you* and *Let me know if I can help* with X’s for kisses.

When he came home to a handwritten card in his mailbox, his stomach sank. He had to do something about Gloria. He pulled the card out, but the handwriting wasn’t hers. Glancing at the return address, he recognized it as Aunt Teen’s. Benny’s breath caught, and he hurried inside, tearing the envelope open and checking the signature.

Patsy.

He smiled and sat with it at his table, eager for news of home and wanting to feel connected to people he had no secrets from. Then he read the letter.

Momma and Cora couldn’t make rent, had been kicked out, had sold nearly everything, and moved in with Patsy and Aunt Teen. She reminded him that Cora hadn’t found work since Green’s Whiskey burned down, and that without Roscoe, their income dropped to his momma’s pay alone. The letter dripped with accusation, all but saying he should have known this would happen, and he should have.

Blanketed by the night, he got in his car and drove straight over to Aunt Teen’s. He parked a block away and hurried to their door. When no one answered his quiet knocking, he thumped his fist against the wood, his anxiety spoiling his caution.

Patsy opened it and glared at him before pulling him inside and closing the door behind him.

“What are you doing here?” Cora said, stepping out from the kitchen.

“Benny?” Momma said, coming from behind her.

So, it was true.

“You should have told me what was going on,” he said. His fear and concern for them made his words come out exasperated and impatient.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Patsy said. “You don’t come to my house pounding on my door, all riled up, acting like you’re the one with a bone to pick. No, you don’t.” He deflated, not sure what to do with himself.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Momma said, but she opened her arms for him, and he came to her, hugging her tightly, dipping his head to her neck and taking in the scent that was pure Momma.

“How did you know?” Aunt Teen asked.

He glanced at Patsy, who ducked her head.

“You told him?” Momma said, pulling away from him to focus her temper on Patsy. “After I said not to.”

“And you came,” Cora said, like that surprised her, as if she thought he might not.

Guilt folded over him like a blanket.

“Are you out of your mind, Patsy Louise Johnson?” Momma thundered.

“Don’t blame her,” he said. “She did right to tell me.” He would have known if he’d come home, and he smarted at needing to be kept informed. “Didn’t you think I’d want to know?”

Momma reached up and cupped his cheek. “Oh, my Benny.”

“It’s not like they could have come and stayed with you,” Aunt Teen said.

“Maybe not, but he came straight over when he heard,” Cora said. “Even living in Levittown.” She stepped forward to hug him, and he

crumpled a little inside, realizing how far they thought he'd stepped away from them.

"Of course, I came. We're family, aren't we? I'll always come." When he said it, he knew with a certainty that it was true. A powerful regret settled over him as he saw what that meant for him and Gloria.

"Have you eaten?" Momma said, fixing another place at the table before he even answered.

They fed him collard greens, yellow rice, and black-eyed peas, and it tasted like home.

Sitting with his family, he felt rooted in a way that only happened when folks truly knew you. He thought of Gloria and her family, with their cookies and casseroles, kindhearted and good-natured, and he knew it wouldn't work. It would never be this.

Eating his fill, listening to the back-and-forth of their rich, round voices, he felt a longing build in him that closed his throat. He wanted his nice house, his good job, his future prospects. He wanted the easy life he had across town. He wanted Gloria. But he would never be able to walk away from his family.

CHAPTER THREE

Awake

Cora came home to Aunt Teen's, feeling worn out and defeated. The Snow Crop company had advertised that they were expanding their frozen orange juice business and urgently needed secretaries and distribution managers. When she'd written to apply, she listed her secretarial experience with Sunshine State Insurance and her client accounts and distribution experience with Green's Whiskey. They'd written back to say she looked like a great fit for the company and to please come in for a meeting. She'd been hopeful, right up until she saw the shocked look on the receptionist's face when she walked in. Immediately, she knew she wasn't getting that job. The meeting lasted less than three minutes. Long enough for oily voices to tell her that she wouldn't be a good fit after all, and that all the positions had just been filled. She thought bitterly of Mr. Griffin telling her she'd easily find another job, with her top-rate skills and talents, and felt like screaming.

Cora unlocked Aunt Teen's front door, wishing she were in her own home and could go to her own room and curl up in her own bed. She was grateful to have a place to stay, but yearned for a place to belong.

Swinging the door open, she found a slip of paper had been shoved underneath.

Scrawled in pencil were the words *Lee hospital*.

Her stomach dropped. Everyone knew Lee was at the hospital, so *Lee hospital* had to mean something happened to him at the hospital. Cold dread swept through her.

Lee hospital. Lee hospital. The words seared her eyes and stole her breath. She couldn't lose him.

“You got my note.”

Cora spun around to find a man behind her pointing to the paper.

“What happened to Lee?” She started to shake.

“It says in the note.”

She clutched the paper like she might choke the truth out of it. “What happened?”

He scratched the back of his head. “Well, Teen called me because she knew I had a telephone put in a few months ago,” the man said, “so she called from the school, because Patsy phoned from the hospital.”

As he spoke, Cora recognized him as Aunt Teen's neighbor.

“And she wanted me to put you on the telephone, but you weren't home, so I took a message.” He pointed to the paper in her hand.

A panic was building inside her, and she struggled to breathe. “Is he okay?” she demanded. Her voice didn't sound like her own.

“I couldn't rightly say. All I know is, I heard the ringing and dashed right in, and it was Teen wanting to talk to you, but when you weren't in, she wanted me to let you know that Lee's asking to see you at the hospital, so I wrote you a message.”

Cora looked up at him. She felt like she might pass out “Wait. He's asking for me?”

“Like I wrote in the note.”

She gasped out a sob of relief and clutched the paper to her chest. *Lee hospital.* She rushed to her car, tearing out onto the street and driving much too fast. When she got to the hospital, disheveled and panting, she raced to his room and burst through the door.

Lee lay propped up with pillows, eyes wide open. He turned his head toward the racket she made coming in, and a wave of joy rushed from her in the form of an ugly, gulping sob.

His mouth tipped up into a faint smile that pulled her across the room to his side, hiccupping. She touched his face with both hands, needing to prove to herself that this wasn't a dream. Then she leaned in close and gently touched her forehead to his. His breath, soft as feathers, caressed her face.

“Hey,” he croaked out, and she wept, making horrible mewling noises. He started to cry too, and she knew for sure that this was real, because Lee crying was something she'd never imagined.

“I'll leave you two alone,” Uncle Drew's voice said from the foot of the bed. She looked over and saw him making his way out the door. Had he been there all along?

When he left, she climbed into the bed beside Lee, melding her body to his, and for the first time in such a long, long time, she was home.

CHAPTER FOUR

A New Deal

Benny sat in his car beside the charred remains of Green's Whiskey, waiting. The roof and side of the barn were missing, and the burned planks of the lean-to had fallen in on themselves.

From the road by the creek, he heard the rumble of an engine he knew well: his old Plymouth.

He got out of his car as Cora pulled up and parked beside him.

“Good to see you,” he said, hugging her hello.

“You too,” she said. “Thanks for meeting me.”

“Of course. Anytime. You know that, right?”

“Sure,” she said. Then with a wink, added, “We’re family, after all.” It stung. Family shouldn’t have to meet this way.

“Okay, tell me everything. How are you and Momma doing? Did you find a job?” He hopped up to sit on the trunk of his car, and she hopped up beside him, shaking her head.

“I sent the note to meet here because I wanted to tell you something in person, because some things”—she scrunched up her nose—“you just shouldn’t tell people in a note.” She adjusted herself on the trunk, angling her body toward him.

“Is it Momma?” he asked.

Momma had been through so much in her life, and there was a limit as to how much a body could take. She'd looked so tired at Aunt Teen's. He knew he should be doing more for her, after everything she'd done for him. Now, when she needed him, he wasn't there.

"Not Momma," Cora said. "Lee's awake."

Only then did he notice the brightness in her eyes and the way she couldn't sit still, shifting and fiddling and seeming to want to spring out of herself. He jumped off the car, and it was like the energy that was bubbling inside of her transferred to him. He swooped her up and spun her around, laughing. Then set her down and hugged her.

"Thank God," he said. "Thank you, God."

He felt lighter, and with a cheery grin on his face, he demanded details. "When? How? I want to hear all of it. Is he doing okay? When can he come home?"

She gave him the rundown. And there was no talk of sending him home just yet, wherever that might be. With the lean-to caved in behind them, and with Cora squished in with Patsy and Aunt Teen, Lee would probably have to go back to Uncle Drew's.

Benny thought of his Levittown home, with its two empty bedrooms, and felt his temper rising. His anger, normally aimed squarely at *white folks*, doubled back and smacked him in the face. What was the point of getting ahead if he couldn't be there for the people he cared about?

Cora's excited chatter washed over him, talking about exercises to build Lee's strength back and foods to get up his appetite, and then she stopped mid-sentence and turned her head. When she did, he heard it too. The rumble of a car engine and the crunch of tires on the stone-studded road.

"Did you tell someone to meet us here?" he asked. "Patsy, maybe?" She shook her head.

A rusted Buick pickup pulled into the drive and parked twenty yards away from them. The engine idled as the man inside glared at them. Then

he cut the engine and got out. “What’s your business here?” he said, aggression lacing his words.

Benny looked at Cora to see if she recognized him, but she shrugged.

“That’s no concern of yours,” he said. “You should move on, friend.”

“Friend, huh?” The man took a few steps toward them, chest puffed like a pigeon. “I think you should tell me what you’re doing on my land.” He nodded at Cora. “With your friend.”

Benny’s mouth went dry. He had no legitimate reason to be here, and especially not with a colored woman. He’d passed in the army for four and a half years and then for two and a half more back home, and the thought of this Mr. Nobody coming along and blowing everything made his tongue stick in his throat. What was it Momma had said? If you keep playing with fire, you’re asking to get burned.

“Mr. Mitchell?” Cora called out.

The man squinted at her. “Who are you?”

“I work for Lee Peters. For Green’s Whiskey. I’ve seen your name on the rent checks.”

“Not lately, you haven’t,” he said. “Not since that fire. I haven’t seen a dime for this place since that fire.”

“Well, that’s . . . you know Mr. Peters is in the hospital, right?”

“Still? That boy ain’t dead yet?”

“No, sir.”

Benny heard the indignation under her polite words.

“Well, he ain’t renting this property no more, which means you’re trespassing.” He rounded on Benny. “So, what are you doing here?”

“I’m just . . . I’m here because,” he stammered and glanced at Cora.

“Mr. North wanted to see it,” she said with conviction. “Right?”

She turned to Benny, who glared back at her. She widened her eyes, telling him to play along, and he hoped she knew what she was doing.

“Yes.” His palms were sweaty, but he kept his voice steady. “Yes, I did.”

“And why is that?”

“Well,” he drew out the word, stalling for time.

“He’s in the market to buy some land,” Cora said.

Benny plastered on a broad, salesman smile and let her do the talking, nodding as if he knew something about any of this.

“As I mentioned,” Cora said, pointing, “the barn is beyond repair, but you could clear that away and start fresh.”

“Hmm,” he said, looking around like he was considering it.

“Wouldn’t need much clearing,” the landlord said helpfully, his tone changing. “The fire did most of the work for you.”

“Hmm,” Benny said with a *what now* glance to Cora. “I suppose it did.” There was an awkward silence where he just kept nodding, wishing them away from there. “Well,” he finally said into the quiet, “thanks for your time. I’ll think about—”

“What’s the insurance offering?” Cora interrupted, bold as brass.

Benny looked away to hide his surprise. What was she doing? They needed to go.

“What insurance?” Mitchell scoffed. “Who the hell insures an old barn?”

“So, you’d be willing to sell?” she asked. She had a determined look on her face, layered over the excitement she was trying to hide.

“For the right price,” he said.

She turned to Benny. “The creek can flood, so you can’t build too close, and when you go too far south, the land gets swampy, you could get gators down that way. You’d have to put up a fence to keep them out. And as you saw, Mr. North, there’s nothing but a dirt road leading here, so you’d have to do something about that, too.”

“Hmm.” Benny nodded, at a loss as to why she was keeping them there, talking to this man. “Yes.” Were they still acting, or was she really thinking

about buying the place? She was broke, but the excitement strumming in her was unmissable.

“There’s work to be done, but the land is good,” Mitchell said.

“Mr. North,” she said expectantly, and the expression on her face was as clear as if she’d whispered in his ear. She wanted this land, and somehow, she thought she could actually buy it.

Benny took in the man’s worn overalls, battered shoes, and rusted truck, and saw what she saw. He needed to sell. He leaned against his new car, hoping to give the impression of someone who goes around buying up land, and asked, in as casual a tone as he could manage, “How much?”

CHAPTER FIVE

The Plan

Cora paced the floor of Lee's hospital room, her insides flip-flopping and buzzing like a swarm of June bugs. "He's selling it cheap because he'd have to invest too much into it to get it rentable again, and he just wants to get rid of it."

Lee lay still in his bed and watched her pace.

"It'd be the land from the river to Green's Whiskey, plus the side lot to the east."

"You just got evicted," Lee said, his speech heavy and labored. "I lost everything in the fire that we didn't bring to Uncle Drew's, and he's spent his entire savings on my hospital bills. Where are we supposed to come up with the money?"

"Benny could get a loan."

"He already has a mortgage. They won't give him another one."

"No," Cora said, coming up to his bedside. "A GI business loan. He can start a company and build twenty houses. Thirty, even. For all of us."

Lee rolled onto his side to face her, wincing. "They'll never give him money to build colored houses, no matter how white he looks."

"So, we don't tell them," she said, pacing again. "They won't know who they're for until it's too late."

He held out his hand to her, and she went to him, weaving her fingers into his. “You’re beautiful, Cora May North.”

“Now you’re just trying to get on my good side after pooh-poohing my idea.”

“You light up when you get excited. Did you know that?”

“Okay, fine. You’re forgiven.” She leaned down and kissed his cheek and then climbed into the bed behind him, slipping her arm around his waist. “This is gonna work, Lee. I know it will.”

“Talk to Uncle Drew before you do anything. I mean, if the city suddenly declares it a white neighborhood, it would all be for nothing.”

“I already talked to him.” As she spoke, she stroked his arm, his shoulder, his chest. “The government can’t zone us out of neighborhoods anymore. There was a Supreme Court case to decide it. Now, it’s only private covenants and people’s prejudices that keep us out.”

She traced his scars with a featherlight touch. “This could work, Lee.”

He squeezed her hand and brought it to his lips, kissing her fingers. “I’m proud of you.”

Snuggling against his back, she breathed him in, finding his scent underneath the hospital’s medicine and disinfectant smells. His scent made her believe in impossible things.

“Don’t be proud yet,” she said. “I haven’t done anything yet.”

“Yes, you have,” he said. “You’ve set your mind to it. That’s a bigger step than most ever take.”

The next day, she called a meeting at Aunt Teen’s and asked Uncle Drew to be there. When she told them the plan, Momma, Patsy, and Aunt Teen all looked at her like she’d lost her marbles.

“This is a fool crazy idea,” Momma said. “I swear your brother’s recklessness is rubbing off on you.”

“Momma, it’s a good idea that could work,” Cora said. “That’s why Uncle Drew’s here. He’s checked out a few things for us, and he thinks we can pull this off.”

“In theory, those loans are for everybody,” Uncle Drew said. “So, since the local good ole boys don’t give them out fairly, the idea is to make justice colorblind for once. The law is on our side.”

Momma sucked her teeth hard. “This is crazy. And dangerous. And what’s the point if they’re just gonna keep taking everything away?”

“I hear you, Janie,” Uncle Drew said. “But you may as well ask what’s the point of breathing if one of these days you’re just gonna die. Our life is the point, and how we mean to live it. We are worth the fight.”

“You’re not the one they’ll be dragging from his bed one night.”

“Are you sure about that?”

With the newspaper articles, Uncle Drew stayed behind the scenes, but when word got out about this, he’d need to step into the ring, fight them with the law, his name alongside Benny’s in the papers.

“Benny thinks we should do it,” Cora said. “Lee thinks we should do it. Uncle Drew and I think we should do it.”

“I think we should do it, too,” Patsy said.

“You don’t need to get mixed up in this,” said Aunt Teen.

“Momma, we’re all mixed up in all of it, whether we want to be or not. The only question is, do you want to do something about it?”

“Are you trying to wind up in that hospital next to Lee?” Aunt Teen hissed.

“We’re supposed to be equal citizens under the law with equal chances,” Cora said. “But every one of us knows that’s never been true. We need to make them play by their own rules.”

“There’s a heavy price for having principles,” Momma said. “And this family done paid enough prices.”

“I understand how you feel, Momma. It’s not wrong for you to want some peace. Lord knows you deserve it. But me, Patsy, Benny, Uncle Drew, and even Lee, we’re ready for this fight.”

Momma stared hard at Cora, arms crossed and shoulders hunched, then she sat back in her chair, her mouth drawn into a tight line. Aunt Teen turned her face to the wall. It was as much agreement as Cora could hope for.

“Well, now that that’s settled”—Uncle Drew said, clearing his throat—“the first thing we need in here is a telephone.”

CHAPTER SIX

Gloria

Dressed in his suit and tie with his wavy hair combed and waxed flat, Benny searched for his dress shoes, looking under the bed, under the table, beside the sofa. He couldn't wear his old boots to the bank interview, or his sneakers, or his house shoes. They had to be here somewhere.

The doorbell sounded and his temper flared. The last thing he needed was Ed coming by again asking if he was okay, or when he was finally going to call his sister.

He peeked out of the side window, and his heart sank to see Gloria standing on the front stoop. He glanced at his watch. He needed to go. And he still hadn't found his shoes.

"Hi there, stranger." A bright smile flooded her face when he opened the door.

"Hi, G," he said in a small voice weighed down with guilt. She deserved better than being caught up in his web of lies. "I'm sorry I haven't been by."

"Don't be silly. I know what you're dealing with. That's why I came to see you. I have an idea how I can help."

He pinched his lips. Not this again. Gloria had come up with plan after plan for his hospitalized mother and his mounting hospital debts, and it would have been sweet or possibly even useful if he'd had a hospitalized mother or debts. None of her ideas could fix the fact that he'd lied to her

and couldn't come clean, or that he couldn't marry someone he could never be himself with. She was the kindest, funniest, prettiest, smartest, most interesting, and generous girl he'd ever known, and in a world where race didn't matter, he'd have asked her to marry him months ago. But he couldn't. And he couldn't even tell her why.

"I know you can't get away to see your mother, and that you work every hour God sends to make money for those bills, so here's my new plan. My cousin's best friend, Maisie, is a nurse, and she owes me a big favor. She reckons that after this much time, your mother doesn't need a hospital, per se, she'd just need constant professional care, meaning a nurse looking after her day and night, monitoring her, administering medicine, changing bandages. If she and I go to Chicago, we can care for your mother with your sister at home. Maisie said a lot of people recover better at home anyway, and she'll get more care with us looking after her full-time. She can stay for three weeks and train me and Cora to take care of your mother, and after that, we'll know what to do, which will stop the hospital bills from piling up. I know we're not professionals, but she reckons—"

Benny imagined Gloria and Cora taking care of Momma. The idea made him smile. Cora and G would get on like a house on fire, and Momma would love her. Would have loved her, that is, if they could have met.

He shook his head, clearing the daydream and stopping her words. "Thanks, G. Really, thank you. I appreciate that you're trying to help. I really, really do, but I need you to stop."

Her bright, earnest expression faltered and slipped into confusion. He should tell her to stay away. He should tell her they were through.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She looked up at him with big brown eyes and an open, vulnerable expression. She wore her heart right on her sleeve for him to trample all over.

"It's just, I have to go to the bank right now and I can't find my shoes."

Her face relaxed into a smile, and she looked around the shoeless room. “Under your bed?” she suggested.

“I already checked. I have a loan appointment, and I can’t show up in my socks.”

She set her purse down on the table and bent to check underneath. “Let me have a look around. You finish getting ready.”

“I am ready.”

She gave him an affectionate, amused look. “I think you want to retie that tie,” she said. “It should sit about here.” She lifted it a good five inches to sit by his belt buckle. He hadn’t noticed how low he’d tied it.

He loosened it from around his neck and she headed toward the bedroom. At the door, she glanced at him over her shoulder, almost like an invitation, and slipped inside. He knew he should stay in the kitchen and tie his tie, but he followed her to the room. She searched with confidence behind the door and beside the dresser, and then folded back his covers to look in his bed, between his sheets. She got down on her hands and knees to peek under the bed frame, her bottom thrust in the air as her skirt tightened around it. He told himself to go back to the kitchen.

He didn’t listen. As she inched farther under the bed, her skirt rose higher up her thigh. He wanted her so much, he couldn’t think.

Gloria stood back up and smoothed her skirt, running her hands over her thighs and her rear, face flushed and hair tousled from tipping upside down. He reached for her and pulled her to him.

“Gloria,” he moaned into her mouth as he kissed her. It was like relieving an ache and making it worse. The more he kissed, the more he wanted to kiss. Her hands slipped under his suit jacket, and his snaked behind her neck and around her waist and lower.

“Oh, Benny. I’ve missed you.”

He’d missed her, too, but he remembered why he’d missed her, and the spell was broken.

“No,” he said, pulling away and standing back, catching his breath. “I can’t.”

“No,” she agreed. “Of course. Your loan meeting. We need to find your shoes.” She reached up and tied his tie for him, adjusting it at his neck so that it fell to his waist, to exactly the right spot. She smoothed it, running her hand down his chest. He closed his eyes. He would not pull her to him. He would not lie her down on the bed. He would not undress her and trail tender kisses down her body and show her, with this mouth, with his fingers, with everything he had to offer, how he felt about her.

“I can’t see you anymore,” he said.

She looked at him startled, and then gave a forced little laugh, like she was hearing a joke she didn’t quite understand. “What are you talking about?”

The words he needed to say stuck in his throat. “I have to see the bank manager.”

“What do you mean, you can’t see me anymore? Why would you say that?”

“Because I can’t.” He made the words as soft as he could, but they still ripped like fangs through flesh. “I can’t do this. I’m sorry.” He felt like he was choking.

She held herself erect as quiet tears pooled and spilled.

“I’m sorry.” To his horror, he realized he was crying, too.

Her eyes dropped to the tip of his tie, and her breath grew to a labored pant. “I don’t understand.” Her long vowels trembled.

“I’m sorry,” was all he could offer.

She ducked into the bathroom and closed the door. He heard her run the water and then heard the deep sob she’d tried to hide from him. It wrenched his heart in two.

“I’m sorry,” he said to the closed door. Already, he regretted what he’d done. Maybe he should have asked her to marry him. Maybe it would have

been all right. Maybe they could have moved to California or Maine or somewhere no one knew them and started over. Just the two of them. Could he have asked that of her? Would she have thought he was worth it?

“I’m sorry.”

She came out of the bathroom, face dried but blotchy, eyes red and puffy. She handed him his dress shoes that he now remembered kicking off after work when he went to the toilet and marched past him, head high, out the door and out of his life.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Returning

When his boat pulled into the Port of Southampton, Roscoe could barely contain his excitement. He'd dreamed of being in Britain ever since he'd left, and now it felt unreal that he'd actually arrived, and that Megan was only a few hours away.

He disembarked and made his way through the city, sensing a change in the country. He didn't remember the gray shabbiness that seemed to press in on him, but knew, vaguely, that the Brits found rebuilding after the war slow going. There'd been too much destruction and not enough people left to fix it.

The grayness seeped into the people and their mood. During the war, wherever he went, people had kept up a fighting spirit and had directed general good wishes toward him as a US soldier that felt a lot like gratitude. Being here without a uniform, with the country busy trying to piece itself back together, made for a less friendly welcome. Now people looked at him with a cautious suspicion.

Roscoe made his way to Pontypool with a bus and a train and a bus. When he arrived at Megan's door, Mr. Davies opened it, and for a second, Roscoe didn't know if he would let him in. He had a right to act cool toward him, and Roscoe told him so.

“I wasn’t straight with you about everything I had going on and the commitments tying me to America,” he said. “I understand you’re disappointed and probably cross. I get that. But I’m here now.”

Mr. Davies stuck his chin in the air and clamped his mouth shut.

Roscoe looked over his shoulder and raised his voice, hoping for Megan to hear. “I wrapped up my life in America and came all this way to be with your daughter. If she wants to toss me out on my ear, I’ll go.” He dug in his pocket and pulled out the letter she’d sent him, holding it in both hands and running his finger across the fold. “But I don’t think she wants me to go.”

Mrs. Davies heard him and came down, flinging the door open and throwing her husband off-balance. “Come in, Roscoe dear. It’s good to see you safely back.” She hugged him, but with less enthusiasm than in past days. “We’ll talk about your slow return another time.”

She made her husband step aside so he could come on through and they left him alone in the living room waiting for Megan. When she came in and found him sitting there, she burst into tears, smacked him hard, and then kissed him till he thought his lungs would burst along with his heart.

Those first few weeks, her parents stayed frosty, but Megan was still Megan, which made everything all right.

He got a job earning good money at a factory where they made cable sleeves, and the very first thing he did with his first paycheck was contact a lawyer about getting divorce papers drawn up. Pontypool didn’t have a divorce lawyer, but he wouldn’t have wanted to hire someone so close to home, anyway. The last thing he needed was to get the gossip wheel spinning harder. He already had *American* and *Negro* to make him stand out; he didn’t need to add *divorced*. So, he decided to travel down to Bristol, a big enough city set far enough away that his business wouldn’t follow him home in whispers.

He wrote in advance and explained the situation to Matthew J. Simpson, Esquire, who wrote back, assuring Roscoe that his situation could be dealt

with and set an appointment for him to come to the office. Roscoe took a day off work, rising early to make his way to Bristol and found the building easily.

When the lawyer came out to collect him from the waiting area, with a “Good morning, Mr. Crane,” he stumbled over his words, stuttering the R in Crane. He blinked four times before recovering himself and inviting Roscoe into the office to sit.

After that, Matthew J. Simpson, Esquire, was all efficiency, clarifying what needed to be done and assuring him he’d have divorce papers for Cora to sign as soon as possible. It would take a little while, but at the end of it, he’d be free to marry Megan.

Feeling light with optimism, and with a growing rumbling in his stomach, he decided to stop into a pub for some lunch before heading back to Pontypool. He wandered down the street and found the Bay Horse Pub on a corner. He walked up to the door, grabbed the handle, and froze.

On the window beside the door, someone had hung a tidy sign, taped on four sides. It read, No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs. Roscoe felt like he had been electrocuted.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Business Loan

Benny sat in front of the loan officer's desk and slid his hand down his thigh, wiping away the sweat pooling on his palm and holding down his jiggling knee.

"Well," the loan officer said, drawing Benny's attention away from the nameplate on his desk with Martin Florentine spelled out in golden letters. "Your business plan looks pretty thorough." The papers Uncle Drew and Cora had put together lay strewn across the desk, and Florentine shuffled them together. "Did you have professional help with this?"

Benny cleared his throat. "Yes. I had a lawyer look everything over."

"It's good to see the effort you put into your application. It helps the bank to have confidence."

Benny took a deep, slow breath to quiet his nerves and focused on the small details in front of him, like the blue veins under the man's thin, wrinkled skin, the sunspots on his forearms, and the thin gray hairs that sprouted a good two inches back from where his natural hairline must have once been.

"And it's nice to see a vet take advantage of the GI opportunities like you have. GI training, GI house mortgage, and now a GI business loan. Good for you, son." He flicked through more papers. "You've obviously thought a lot about this and you're very well prepared."

“Thank you, sir.” Benny’s leg began to bounce again, and he shifted his weight and crossed and uncrossed his ankles.

“You definitely qualify for the loan, but with a housebuilding scheme, there are some parameters that you have to work within.”

Benny leaned forward, his fingertips drumming on the armrests. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing to be concerned about. It’s just that the FHA—”

“The who?”

“The Federal Housing Administration. The people who back the GI house mortgages.”

“Okay.”

“So, the FHA stipulates that once you’ve built your housing development, you don’t sell the houses to *inharmonious racial groups*.”

Anger pricked his blood. “Inharmonious?”

“Their words, not mine.” He tapped a book on his desk, a copy of the FHA’s *Underwriting Manual*, to emphasize his point. “They won’t back a high-risk development.”

“But why does mixing the neighborhood make it high risk?” He focused on pronouncing the words and controlling his temper.

“Because they say so,” the bank manager said. “All Negro developments are considered high risk. And high risk means no loans.”

Benny pursed his lips and bit his tongue. He thought he’d hid his disgust, but Martin Florentine leaned back and held up his hands in appeasement, telling him he had not.

“Look, there’s nothing you, me, or the bank can do about it. We can’t loan you the money if you can’t sell your houses, and you can’t sell your houses if no one can get a mortgage. All I can say is, if you’re thinking about letting the coloreds in, don’t. It’s just not worth the trouble.”

Benny felt blood flood his face. “I thought it was illegal to zone for color now.”

“Well, this isn’t exactly zoning. It’s just stipulating the terms of a loan. And when you make it whites only, you’re not zoning either. You’re just using a private covenant to restrict the community.”

“Zoning without zoning.”

He shrugged. “It’s how it’s done.”

Martin Florentine went over the rest of the terms, the repayment scheme, the government guarantees, but it was all white noise to Benny.

“What if I get the loan and something goes wrong?” he asked. “Like, I can’t keep to one of these terms?”

“Repayment terms?”

“Any terms.”

“Well, that’s the beauty of the GI loan. Government backed. It’s like having Uncle Sam cosign this for you.”

He handed Benny the paperwork and showed him where to sign.

Benny’s mouth went dry. What good was this loan if they couldn’t live in the houses? “Do you mind if I take these with me and have a lawyer look them over? No offense, it’s just a big commitment.”

Florentine smiled. “Of course. Be my guest.” He collected the papers and laid them in a manila folder that he handed to Benny. “It’s this level of care and seriousness that gives me faith in your business. I wish all my applicants were so conscientious.”

Benny drove straight to Uncle Drew’s, ignoring the raised eyebrows of the boys on the street who watched him storm inside.

“I need a restrictive covenant to get a loan,” he said before Uncle Drew could ask him how it went. He flung the unsigned documents onto the desk. “If we do this, it’ll all be for nothing.”

Uncle Drew’s face clouded over, and without a word, he sifted through the papers.

“Every single time,” said Benny through gritted teeth, blood pumping. “Those sneaky SOBs have all the bases covered.”

Uncle Drew reached for his glasses and read.

“They don’t even need the zoning laws to keep us out. The developers couldn’t integrate even if they wanted to.”

When Gloria had spoken so hotly against segregation, he’d thought she was unique. Now he wondered how many more were out there like her, hating it but not able to help. His chest squeezed at the thought of her, and he ran his hand through his hair, pushing her from his mind. Anger was an easier pain to navigate. “It’s the government doing this to us.”

Uncle Drew looked up from the loan paperwork. “*Inharmonious racial groups*,” he said over his reading glasses.

“Exactly. Code for whites only,” Benny spat.

“Yes, but it doesn’t say whites only. It says *inharmonious racial groups*.”

“So?”

“So, words matter in the law. Not what’s implied, but what’s actually written down, and a *Negro only* development would be a *harmonious racial group*. You’d be complying.”

The back of Benny’s neck began to tingle. “But . . . but I won’t get a loan for a Negro development. They’ll say it’s high risk.”

Uncle Drew shook his head. “You already have the loan. In a few months’ time, you’ll decide which harmonious racial group to sell to.”

“But won’t I have to give the money back?”

“Not according to this.” He held up the loan agreement. “You will have followed this to the letter of the law.” He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “Officially, they can’t declare all non-white neighborhoods high risk. They’re supposed to judge them on their individual merits. And they can’t call in your loan because you sell houses to lawyers and doctors and veterans and the like who happen to be colored. The folks buying won’t get a mortgage, but we knew that anyway.”

“Lawyers?” Benny said, raising his eyebrows.

“That’s right, neighbor. You better be reserving one for me.”

The red-hot anger that scorched through Benny when he left the bank had settled and cooled to a chill of excitement. He looked at Uncle Drew, whose mouth tipped up into a shrewd smile. “If they want a *harmonious racial group*, then that’s what they’ll get.”

Benny picked up a pen and twirled it around his fingers, adrenaline surging, heart thudding. There was progress that you won in court or on a protest line, loud and public, and then there was this. Take a stand, write your name, and quietly turn a tide. “So, where do I sign?”

CHAPTER NINE

Liberty Heights

Cora filed away the last of the day's paperwork and made a list of what she needed to get done the next morning. She always worked that way. It helped keep her organized, and right now, she needed to be more organized than ever before.

Not having a job meant that she was the one with time to devote to managing Liberty Heights, the name they'd given to the housing development, and once she got to running it, everyone quickly realized she was the perfect choice. Cora enjoyed handling suppliers and contracts, and organizing delivery logistics and work crews. She pushed her dresses to the back of Patsy's closet and instead wore dungarees every day, managing the build from a secondhand trailer on-site.

It wasn't just the determination to get the houses built that drove her. It was also the thrill of being in charge, a position life had taught her she should never hope to have, but one that suited her. She kept her building costs low by finding out-of-work vets and exchanging labor for land. Men like Roscoe, who'd work their tail off for a chance at something better, driven by a purpose greater than a paycheck. The other plots she sold outright for cash to doctors, lawyers, teachers, and pastors who wanted to get out of the cramped ghettos they lived in and buy into the American Dream, but who couldn't find a neighborhood willing to take them.

Word spread in the community like hot cakes, and people came flocking.

Every night, she telephoned her brother to check in, since it was his name on the paperwork, and his risk if she failed. He rarely came by, so she was surprised to see his black Pontiac pull up as she gathered her things to leave.

“What are you doing here?” she asked him when he stepped inside, shoulders twitching, fingers tapping. She read the worry on him like ink on a page.

“I came to check on things.”

She gave him a look meant to show him she didn’t believe him, and when he didn’t say anything, she said, “I call you every day. You didn’t come all the way out here for that.”

He sat down and his knee bounced with nerves before he quieted it with his hand.

“Maybe I missed my little sister.”

She pulled up a chair next to him and leaned in close. “What’s wrong, Benny?”

He pressed his lips into a line and pushed them left and right before opening his mouth to speak. “I had this idea that I could go between this life and my Levittown one, darting in and out like a spring dragon fly, without anyone noticing anything, but it doesn’t work.” He didn’t meet her eye. “And I’ve lied to good people.”

“You had your reasons,” Cora said, hoping he wasn’t about to tell her he’d betrayed her and lied to them all. Her brother wouldn’t do that, but this man in front of her made her nervous. He wasn’t the cocksure Benny she’d always known, one step ahead of everyone else and laughing at anyone who couldn’t keep up.

He dug his toe into the rough wood of the trailer floor. “I think it’s time to sell my house.”

“We don’t need you to do that,” she said, slowly and carefully. “The build is under budget. And I’ve been selling off the whiskey Lee stashed at Uncle Drew’s for extra cash.”

“I’m not selling it for Liberty Heights, Cora. I can’t live there anymore.”

She held herself still. “Did something happen?”

Benny bit his lip and stared at her for a few long minutes. “I saw my neighbor.”

“The one with the television next door?” He’d told her about going over to see Joe Louis knock out Billy Conn.

He nodded. “I never mentioned his sister.”

Cora’s eyebrows shot up. If they found out a passing Negro had been involved with a white woman, it’d be a miracle if all they did was arrest him. “You didn’t,” she breathed.

His sad smile near about broke her heart. “You would have liked her.”

“Oh, Benny, if they catch you, they’ll bring the law down on your head.”

“Well, it shouldn’t be illegal. I’m not the problem, the law is the problem.”

“Does she know?”

“I ended it. They think my momma’s sick in a hospital in Chicago.”

“What?”

“And now Ed thinks I broke up with his sister because I’m in trouble with a loan shark, who I borrowed money from for the hospital.”

“I don’t understand. Do you owe money to a loan shark for something else? Have you been gambling?”

“There’s no loan shark, Cora. There’s no debt. It’s all just lies because I can’t tell them the truth.”

“No. You definitely cannot.”

“They’re good people. Really good people, and I’m so sick of the lies.”

“You took up with a white girl, Benny. You can’t ever tell them the truth, or you’ll find out how quickly good people can turn.”

“She was different. She was special. She . . . I wish I could have shown her who I really am.”

“Who you are isn’t a color. If you let her see how sweet you are, how funny you are, how annoying you are”—she thumped his shin with her foot and smirked at him—“if you were yourself with her, then she knows who you really are. That other part is just skin.”

He laced his hands together and dug at his palm with his thumb. “I think I might have made a mistake breaking it off with her. I just keep making mistakes.”

She drew her chair closer until their knees touched. “You are a good person, Benny. You’re not supposed to be perfect. And look at what you’ve made possible here.” She tipped her chin around the trailer, meaning the whole of Liberty Heights. “We wouldn’t be here without you.”

“First, I messed up you and Lee, then I messed up me and Gloria. And Roscoe flat-out hates me.”

“That’s not how I see it. You tried to protect me. And Roscoe came back hating everyone and everything because we weren’t there and we weren’t her.”

He snorted in skepticism, but he stopped digging his thumb into his palm.

“I heard from him by the way,” she said. “He sent divorce papers. He wants to marry her. Says he can do that over there.”

“Maybe I should have gone with him.”

Cora looked at him, trying to gauge if he meant it.

“Except I couldn’t do that to you and Momma. I couldn’t leave you again.”

“Hey, stop that,” she said, her voice firm as granite. “I won’t have you thinking like that. You’re a grown man, and we are grown women. You

can't live your life for Momma and me. If you need to go, then you go, and that's all there is to it."

"Go where? This is a black-and-white world. There's no place for being in between."

She squeezed his shoulder. "Roscoe found one, maybe you will too."

"Maybe I will, but it won't be in Levittown. That's for sure."

"Where will you go when you sell your house?"

Benny shrugged. "Here."

She glanced out the trailer window at the balloon-framed houses in rough planked wood. "The first houses won't be ready for months."

He tipped his head toward the floor beside him. "There's room for a cot right here."

"In my trailer?"

"*Our* trailer. On *our* land. On *our* building development."

"Yes, but *my* office."

"You don't need it at night."

She rolled her eyes at him and sighed. "Fine. But don't start leaving your things around here for me to pick up."

He saluted her. "Got it, Captain."

"I'm serious. I don't want to come to work feeling like I'm walking into your bedroom."

"You've missed sharing a bedroom with me, haven't you?"

"Not even for one day," she said, but the chuckle running under her words ruined her seriousness.

"See there." He pointed to her grin. "I knew you did. You missed my unmade bed."

"No, I didn't."

"And my stinky socks."

"You better not start leaving your—"

"And my dirty underwear on the floor."

“I swear to God, Benny, if you—”

“You know, I forgot how much fun it is sharing with you.”

“We’re not sharing, we’re dividing. You get it at night and I get it during the day. And you leave it like you find it.”

“Roger that.” He saluted again, and then in a smooth easy motion, he stood and slid on his coat, no sign of the jitters he’d come in with. “You know, I really have missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too, Benny. I’m glad you’re back.”

“Yeah.” He paused at the door. “I guess I am back.” A somber wistfulness filled his voice, like he was already missing the pieces of his life that couldn’t come with him.

CHAPTER TEN

The FHA

Every night, when Benny came back to his cot in the trailer, he saw the progress Cora had made with the development and felt a swell of pride. She'd sold all thirty plots, with half the houses nearing completion, putting his loan repayment way ahead of schedule.

He and Cora had agreed that the first house finished would be Momma's. He couldn't wait for her to own her own home again all these years after losing the Rosewood house. Cora's would be finished next, giving her a place of her own where she and Lee could settle down. Maybe start a family. He'd be out of the hospital in a few weeks and Benny had no doubt he and Cora would marry as soon as the divorce from Roscoe came through.

Aunt Teen and Patsy's place would be done soon after, and then Uncle Drew's, then Pastor Glen's, then Mrs. Hammond's. He wasn't sure who came after that, but all thirty houses would be built and moved into by year's end.

With everyone settling down at Liberty Heights, Benny felt more adrift than ever. A beautiful life had been his for the taking and he'd thrown it away to sleep on a cot in a trailer. He hadn't asked Cora to save a house for him because he didn't know yet where he belonged. His heart told him to go to Gloria and beg her to take him back, and his head told him not to be

an idiot. Some days, he felt sure he'd made a mistake not to tell her everything. Other times, he knew he'd done the right thing, and that telling her would have meant losing her anyway, and would have brought her father with a shotgun or her brother with a rope.

He avoided thinking about it by throwing himself into his work, coming in earlier and leaving later, which his boss mistook for diligence. On his way home most nights, he'd take a detour to Gloria's neighborhood on the chance she'd be walking down the street or out watering her geraniums by the front porch. He never saw her, but it felt good to be close, to know she might be sitting right behind the living room curtains or that it might be her who turned on the upstairs light.

After his Gloria detour, he drove to Liberty Heights. Usually, the site was empty when he got back with even Cora gone for the night, but as he pulled up, he saw lights on in the trailer. He went inside and found Cora still there, looking frazzled.

“You okay?” he asked her.

She handed him a letter. “Uncle Drew’s on his way.”

As he read, Benny felt the blood drain from his face. They'd found out. The FHA had opened an investigation into a breach of loan conditions. They accused Benny of defrauding the government and threatened criminal proceedings.

His heart spluttered in his chest, and he heard the anxiety in his own voice when he said, “What are we going to do?”

Cora stood by the window of the trailer, looking out over the field of homes. She tightened her arms around herself like coiled steel. “I’ll tell you what we’re not going to do.” Her words bounced with the taut twang of strained wire. “We’re not going to throw in the towel and give up Liberty Heights because some agency pencil pusher wrote a letter. Not when we’re so close.”

When Uncle Drew got there, he seemed more mad than worried, which calmed Benny some. He told them to sit tight and that he'd take care of it. "You followed your contract to the letter," he said. "Everything here is technically legal."

Benny's stomach twisted. "Technically?"

"It's legal," he said.

Benny sat down and put his head in his hands. Liberty Heights might technically be legal, but Benny wasn't. Passing was still a crime in the state of Florida, and it wouldn't take much for them to shift the fraud charges from the loan to Benny himself. He felt dizzy, and the deep lungfuls he drew in seemed to empty his lungs instead of filling them.

Uncle Drew slipped the letter into his briefcase. "I'll start working on this right away," he said, patting Benny's shoulder. "In the meantime, don't mention this to anyone. You don't want to spook your buyers."

After two weeks of letters and phone calls to the FHA, Uncle Drew secured them an appointment with the local representatives.

"Don't say anything," he warned Benny when they got to the Jacksonville office.

"Leave all the talking to me."

A put-out-looking secretary led them to a stuffy office full of filing cabinets where a gray man sat behind a gray desk.

"This is Benny North," Uncle Drew said, standing, as there were no chairs for them to sit. "I'm his lawyer, Drew Brooks. You sent my client this letter." He laid it on the desk in front of the agent.

"Mitch, you want to get in here?" the FHA office worker called past them through the open door.

An older man came in, stiffening when he saw Uncle Drew. “What’s going on here?”

“Mr. North and his lawyer,” the first agent said, drawing the last word out with a mocking slur.

“My client obtained an FHA-backed loan to build a housing development. He has clearly done that, and the first residents will be moving into their homes in the next few weeks. There was no fraud.”

“You sold those houses to coloreds,” the agent behind the desk said, looking past Uncle Drew and speaking to Benny.

Benny wondered how they knew. Had someone bragged about the Negro development they’d bought into until the FHA got wind of it? Or had someone they’d turned away when they ran out of plots reported them out of spite? He’d probably never find out, but knowing how it happened wouldn’t change anything now. He pressed his lips together, staying silent, and looked to Uncle Drew for a response.

“It’s not illegal to sell a house to a colored man,” Uncle Drew said.

“You know damn well it’s supposed to be a white community,” said the older agent, Mitch, also to Benny. “Those were the terms of your loan.”

“Actually, they weren’t.” Uncle Drew fished in his briefcase and pulled out a copy of the loan.

“Say, what’s wrong with you, anyway, bringing this guy in here?” the younger man said to Benny. “Don’t you think you’re in enough hot water as it is?”

“You’re not one of those . . .” Mitch trailed off and came around the desk, lowering his voice. “Did you check?”

The younger man looked confused. “Check what?”

“That he’s white, Fletcher. With some of them you can’t tell.”

Benny’s pulse raced. His instinct told him to run for the door, but he forced himself not to move.

“I checked all that,” Fletcher said, rifling through a file. “It’s in his discharge papers. See?”

“Hmm,” Mitch grunted, begrudgingly appeased.

“The terms of my client’s loan don’t say it must be a white development,” Uncle Drew cut in. “Or that loans will not be given for colored developments. That would violate the Fourteenth Amendment, the Plessy v. Ferguson decision of separate but equal, and the stated principles of the GI Bill of Rights meant to benefit all veterans regardless of race, color, or creed.” He forced a strained chuckle. “It’s not every day you set yourself against the Constitution, the Supreme Court and the president, all with one little letter.”

Mitch’s face reddened. “The FHA decides which loans can be backed,” he said, “and we say you pulled a bait and switch.” He pointed at Benny, eyes bugged wide. “We say you knew it was meant to be white, and that you were told to put in a whites-only restrictive covenant.”

“Well, that’s true,” Uncle Drew said. “But on further consideration, he decided not to.”

“And that’s fraud.”

“Well, actually, gentlemen, Buchanan v. Warley determined that racial zoning ordinances interfered with the right of property owners to sell to whomever they pleased, so neighborhood zoning has been unconstitutional since 1917, which leaves the ever-popular private restrictive covenants that you recommended.”

“Stipulated.”

“You may not be aware, but the Supreme Court just finished ruling on May 3, in Shelley v. Kraemer, that the enforcement of restrictive covenants by the state is unconstitutional, so even if he had agreed to a whites-only restriction, there’s no longer anything you can do if he changes his mind.”

The younger looked to the elder, “Is that true?”

“But the fact is, my client’s loan stipulated that in order to”—he pointed to the words as he read—“achieve compatibility among the neighborhood occupants, he shouldn’t sell to *inharmonious racial groups*.” Uncle Drew smiled, sharklike. “By selling only to Negroes, he has fulfilled those terms.”

“Wait . . . But—”

Their spluttering anger relaxed Benny and loosened his tongue. “We know you like to deny loans for anything that will benefit Negro Americans, but you did all your checks and backed the loan as a good investment, so now, after the fact, you don’t have a legal leg to stand on.” He glanced at Uncle Drew, conscious he’d disobeyed the no-talking rule, but Uncle Drew stifled a smile, so Benny straightened his spine and in a tone that would make even General Patton sit up and listen, he said, “Gentlemen, I think we’re done here,” nodding to each of them and making for the door.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Homecoming

Lee sat propped up in his hospital bed, reading *The Florida Times-Union* as he waited for Cora. The front page ran an article about Florida's senator, Claude Pepper, announcing his bid for the presidency, but Lee doubted he could beat President Truman in the primaries. His mind wandered as he scanned the article, too preoccupied with news closer to home.

Cora had told him about the FHA's threats. He had a lot of faith in Uncle Drew, but not much in Florida justice. And then there was his own news, delivered by a somber-faced Dr. George, who told him he might never walk again.

Lee took a deep breath, tipping his head back and closing his eyes, letting the wave of emotions roll through him and back out again. He cycled through them several times a day: anger, fear, frustration, despair. Today there was also joy, because he was going home.

Cora showed up breathless and beaming, pushing a wheelchair in front of her.

“Lee Peters, your ride has arrived,” she said with a flourish.

He lifted one leaden leg and then the other over the edge of the bed to dangle at its side. He wanted to get up and go to her, and hated that he had to wait for her to come to him.

When she reached him, he pulled her closer for a kiss.

He closed his eyes, feeling her lips against his, and he could almost believe things were the way they used to be. He nibbled his way down her neck to the spot that made her melt, and she gasped. He felt powerful and whole. But then she pulled away and stepped back. “Save that for when we get home. The doctor’s going to be coming in here any minute.” She was right, but still, it gutted him, the stepping back where he couldn’t follow.

“Let’s check that you have everything,” she said.

He only had some clothes and a small collection of boredom busters people had brought him. A novel, a deck of cards, a book of crossword puzzles, all piled at the foot of his bed. She tucked everything into a bag.

“Did you want to keep this paper?” Her eyes flicked over the front page and her mouth flattened into a sour expression. “*Senator Pepper Running for President.*”

“No, thanks,” Lee said. “I’ve seen all I need.”

She dumped it into the trash. “Where’s that doctor? I want to get you home.”

There was something off about her. A restless energy that made her speak too fast and smile too much.

“You okay?”

“Of course. I just can’t wait for you to see it.”

She’d finished the first ten houses and wave one, as she called them, had moved in, Cora included. The other twenty were progressing nicely, right on schedule.

“Well, Mr. Peters, it looks like today’s the big day,” Dr. George said, striding in with a brisk efficiency.

A sturdy-looking nurse followed behind him and went straight to the wheelchair, positioning it next to the bed.

“No offense, Doc, but I can’t wait to get out of here.”

They went over his medication, discussed warning signs to look out for, and confirmed a checkup appointment. The doctor lectured him on not

overstraining himself and joked with Cora that it was her job to make sure he didn't. Cora nodded with a face so serious, he wondered if she really thought it was her responsibility. He felt like a burden instead of a partner.

With everything else explained, there was nothing left to do but get in the chair. He had practiced positioning himself and then holding firm and swinging into the seat with a little momentum. His arms weren't strong enough to do it without something above to hold on to, so the heavyset nurse helped guide his rear into the seat.

Embarrassed and exhausted, Lee didn't make eye contact as he said his goodbyes. He told Cora he wanted to wheel the chair out himself, but had to stop three times to catch his breath on the way to the car. He could tell she was getting impatient, but he needed her to see that he could do for himself, even now.

In the parking lot, she opened the door of her sky-blue Plymouth and pointed to a rope tied to circle the roof of the car. "You can hold on to that, to pull yourself in," she said. "It was Patsy's idea. I'll find something better later."

He smiled, relieved. "That's pretty clever." Taking a minute to gather his strength, he gripped the rope and hoisted himself into the car, pulling his legs in behind him. She put the chair in the back and got inside.

"Okay," she said with an intense perkiness and a smile that seemed too bright to be real. "Let's go."

His heart sank. Cora was acting, hiding her true emotions and her disappointment behind a shield of jolliness. He should have realized everything had changed. And what right did he have, anyway, to pile his burdens on top of her own? If he hadn't been good enough for her before the war, what would everyone say now? He gripped his dead thighs and squeezed out his frustration and wondered if he could still bruise even if he felt nothing.

“Listen, Cora,” he said when she’d settled herself behind the wheel. He felt like he was slipping backward toward the edge of a cliff. “I know this isn’t what you signed up for. I mean, we made a lot of plans, but we didn’t know that I’d be stuck like this, and I want you to know that I understand that this changes things. I can stay with Uncle Drew if you want to think it over now that—” He motioned toward his legs.

All that perkiness crystallized to stone, and she sat perfectly still, her hands clutching the steering wheel, her breathing growing deeper.

“Don’t you dare do that,” she said. She turned to face him with a fire raging in her eyes. “You are not going to give up on us. Not now. We’ve made it, Lee. Don’t you get that? You’re alive and we’re together.”

“I just don’t want to hold you back. I have to deal with my legs, but you don’t. There’s no commitment here.”

“No commitment?” she yelled. For a second, he thought she might hit him. “We’re not talking about this in a parking lot.” She cranked the car’s ignition and peeled onto the road.

“Cora.”

“And not while I’m driving,” she snapped.

They spent a tense, silent half hour making their way through Mangrove Bay to Liberty Heights. Lee was amazed to see the transformation. The dirt path had become a paved road, the barn and the lean-to and some of the trees had been cleared away, and the old field had been flattened, and in place of all that stood an entire neighborhood. Houses ranged from finished to almost finished to getting there.

Cora pulled the car up to a finished one. She got the wheelchair out of the back and placed it beside the passenger door. Lee hoisted himself out of the car and into the wheelchair and followed her to the house. Instead of a front stoop, she’d built a ramp leading to the wide front door. He rolled himself inside and saw the house was all one level. The living room had one lounge chair and one space for a chair around a coffee table. The kitchen

had a counter low enough to use when sitting down. He rolled into the bathroom and saw handrails along the walls. In the bedroom, a pull rope hung above one side of the bed.

A lump swelled in his throat.

“Cora,” he said. But he couldn’t get anything else out. He cleared his throat and tried again. “You did all this for me?”

“For us. Because we do have a commitment, Lee. It’s called being in love.”

He rolled over to her and pulled her onto his lap. She dipped her head to his and whispered, “Don’t you dare leave me.”

“Okay,” he said. And by that, he meant to say that she meant everything to him and there was nothing he wouldn’t do for her, even if it meant leaving, but he wanted to stay because if he lost her again, he might not survive it.

“Okay,” she said, relaxing into him. And he understood that she forgave him for frightening her with his talk about leaving, and that she knew his injury would change things, but it wouldn’t change what mattered, and that she didn’t care what other people thought about them or had to say about it. She was his, and he was hers, and that was that.

Cora sat up with a jerk. “There’s one more thing.” She had that look back on her face, the manic smile, and the too-gay voice. She *had* been hiding something. He hadn’t imagined it, and whatever it was, she was still hiding it.

She led him to the back door and let him swing it open, pushing through to the ramp on the other side.

“Surprise,” a chorus of voices shouted from the garden when he rolled out the back door. Cora had gathered his old friends from the Negro League and the music clubs, and new friends from his Green’s Whiskey connection. Uncle Drew was there, and Benny, and Momma North, and Patsy, and Aunt

Teen, and Momma Mae, and even Pastor Glen and that grouchy old Mrs. Hammond.

Above their heads, Cora had strung cardboard cutout letters spelling out Welcome Home.

“I wanted to do something special,” she said, with that big goofy smile and that perky, excited voice, that now made so much sense.

He pulled her onto his lap and wrapped his arms around her as his friends cheered and whooped. “Thank you,” he said. And by that, he meant to say *I love you*.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Coming Clean

It took three months for the FHA to admit there was nothing they could do about the loan they'd already made to Benny, but they weren't going to let it happen again. They wrote to tell him that although they were dropping the investigation, due to unsavory irregularities in his involvement with the program: *Any future application for mortgage or loan insurance submitted by you, or any firm in which you have 10 percent interest, will be rejected on the basis of an Unsatisfactory Risk Determination made by this office on July 30, 1948.*

"They're blackballing you," Uncle Drew said when he read it. "You won't get another mortgage."

That was fine by Benny. He'd just built thirty houses and didn't reckon he'd need another one any time soon. Besides, he wasn't staying. President Truman and his Executive Order 9981 had just solved Benny's problem, but he needed to do one thing before he left.

Benny stepped up to Gloria's door feeling even more nervous than he had that first time he rang the bell. He didn't circle the block, though, trying to talk himself out of it. He knew he had to do this. He pushed the button.

A few seconds later, Mrs. Meyers opened the door. Instead of the bright smile she usually gave Benny, she flashed a surprised frown. She crossed her arms over her stomach.

“Well, this is certainly unexpected. And probably not a good idea.”

“Hi, Mrs. Meyers. I’m sorry to stop by unannounced, but I need to speak with Gloria.”

“Gloria, who you said you didn’t want to see anymore? That Gloria?”

He deserved that. “I was . . . there were circumstances.”

“Yes, your mother, your bills, we know, but that doesn’t give you the right to hurt her the way you did.”

“I know and I’m sorry. I thought I was doing the right thing.”

“Ed said you sold your house. It must be pretty bad.”

He needed to come clean to Gloria, not her mother. “Is Gloria at home? I’d really like to talk to her.”

“Stay here. I’ll see if she wants to speak to you.”

She left him on the front stoop for fifteen minutes. He didn’t know if Mrs. Meyers was convincing her to see him or trying to get her not to, or maybe Gloria was just letting him stew.

She came out flushed and stiff, but she still took his breath away. “Hey, G.”

“I’m not sure you get to call me that.”

“Right.” He looked at the ground between them. “I guess I deserve that.” He wiped his palms on his trousers. “So, umm, would you like to take a walk with me?”

“Why can’t you just say what you came to say right here?”

“Please, G. I mean Gloria. I’d like to explain. I don’t know if that will make it better or worse, but I’d like you to know.”

She looked back at the house, and he worried she’d tell him no, but she called over her shoulder that they were going on a walk.

“Are you sure?” Her mother called back.

“I won’t go far.”

She stepped outside and marched down the steps ahead of him. “Well, come on, get walking so you can tell me what you came to say.”

Now that it was time to say it, he didn't know how to start. "I'm . . ." He looked at the sky and dug his hands inside his pockets. "I'm going away. I wanted to see you before I go. I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry I broke it off with you the way I did. I'm sorry I hurt you. I still care about you, and I miss you every single day."

She stopped walking and turned to him. "That's . . . You hurt me a lot."

"I was afraid to tell you the truth. I thought that if you knew, you wouldn't see me the same way."

"Is someone after you, Benny? Is that why you're going away? Ed said you might be in trouble with a loan shark. Is that true?"

He ran his hand through his close-cropped hair. "Before I tell you, I want you to know that I think you're the most amazing girl I've ever met. And I love that you're outspoken. I love that you say what you feel. I love that you want to work at your dad's company because you know you're a great accountant. I love that you get mad when you see people being mistreated, and that you speak up about it even if people might not like what you say. I love that you came up with at least a dozen ways to help me, even though . . ." He stopped. Swallowed. Plowed on. "You were fixing a problem that didn't exist. That's why I couldn't use your help. I lied to you."

They walked two, five, ten steps without her responding. "Gloria?"

"Hang on. I need a minute to get my head around that." When she got to the end of the road, she said, "I think I'm going to have to sit down. You should have warned me I'd need to sit down for this."

The bay was only a few streets away, and they headed in that direction as if by silent agreement. The slap of the waves grew louder as they walked, inviting them closer and filling the silence. When they found a bench by the water, Gloria settled into it and nodded at Benny to continue.

"I regretted ending it with you the minute I did it," he said. "The second I did it."

“No, Benny. Get to the lying part.”

He swallowed hard. “Okay.” He readjusted himself on the bench. “So.” He looked out at the sea, gathering his nerve. “I’m not who you think I am.”

She leaned away from him and scrunched her forehead. “You’re not Benny North?”

“Well, no. I am. I’m not *as* you think I am.”

She shook her head. “What are you talking about?”

He turned to face her. “When you look at me, what do you see?”

“Benny.”

“Yes, but what Benny do you see?”

“A man. A veteran. A mechanic and auto worker, soon to be an engineer. A good driver. A music lover. A sports fan. A guy who takes care of his lawn and doesn’t like shrimp.”

“That’s all you, see?”

“No. I see the man who broke my heart.”

He ran his hands along his thighs. “I’m so sorry about that, G.” He took a deep breath. “But there’s another part of me you’re not seeing.” He shook out his fingers, trying to release some tension. His heart seemed to be thumping louder than the waves. “I was born at St. Benedict’s Negro Hospital.”

“What? Why?”

“I lived in New Rosewood.” He studied her face, gauging her reaction.

“But that neighborhood’s for—”

“And I graduated from Booker T. Washington High School.”

“Oh my God.”

“I made up a story about my family so you wouldn’t try to meet them.”

“They don’t live in Chicago.”

“No.” He clasped his hands and dug his thumb into his palm. “They lived in New Rosewood until recently. Now they live in Liberty Heights.”

“That’s that new development for coloreds.”

He nodded. “The day you came over and I was on my way to the bank for a loan, I was getting a loan to build Liberty Heights.”

“You built that?”

“It was more my sister’s plan than mine, but I got the loan because . . . of the way I look,” he said, studying her.

“So, you’re building homes for Negroes?”

“That’s not what I’m trying to tell you.”

“Somebody should have done that years ago. Or just let them buy where they want. Liberty Heights is a good idea.”

“Gloria.”

“I don’t really know what to say right now.” She let out a nervous laugh. “I was expecting a big confession, but I wasn’t expecting this.”

He kneaded both palms with his thumbs. Right. Left. “I’ve been passing since the war.”

“I’m just so . . . surprised.”

“Gloria, I’m still the same man I was a minute ago.”

“I know that. It’s just that this is more than I expected. I don’t know how to respond.”

Benny’s heart sank. “I see.” At least now he knew.

“You and me are illegal,” she said.

“I know.”

“If I’m going to go to jail for a man, I should know I’m doing something illegal.”

He snorted. “Gloria, nobody’s going to throw you in jail for being with me. They’d put me under the jail, but they wouldn’t touch you.”

“I loved you. You let me love you.”

“And now?”

She looked past him to the beach grass leading to the sandy shore, and down the coast to the mangroves, inching their way into the sea. “I’m the same person I was a minute ago, too. I can’t turn my feelings on and off like

a light switch, but I'm so mad at you." She flicked her eyes back to him, boring into him, full of accusation. "You lied to me."

"You can't turn it off? Does that mean you still have feelings for me?"

"I'm a human being, not a machine. Of course, I still feel . . . things. But Benny, you lied to me all this time."

"I couldn't tell the truth. I couldn't take the chance."

She stood and walked to the beach, kicking off her shoes when she stepped from grass to sand. Benny pulled off his shoes and socks and left them under the bench.

"When I met you, I was already passing," he said, coming up behind her. "Later, I wanted to tell you, but I didn't see how."

She picked her way through seaweed washed ashore at the water's edge.

"I lied to cover up that I was passing, and then there were just so many lies, I didn't see a way through for us."

She stepped into the waves, letting the water wash over her feet.

"I was a coward. I know that. I had good reason to be afraid of you knowing, but I wish I had trusted you with it. Because maybe we had a chance after all."

"Why are you telling me now?"

He followed her, wading into the water. "Because I hope I made a mistake. I hope I was wrong to cut and run." He came up beside her. "We're not illegal everywhere, G. The world is changing. We can do this. I know we can, and I want to try, if you do."

They stood there sinking deeper with every wave. Up to their ankles. Up to their shins.

"I'm angry, Benny. I'm shocked you're a Negro, but I'm angry you lied. And I don't know if I can trust you. Is your mother even sick?"

"No."

"I see. And there's no hospital debt?"

"No."

“No loan shark?”

“No.”

She looked at him, tears in her eyes. “You lied about everything.”

“Not everything. Not about my feelings for you.”

“I got my whole church to pray for your sick mother.” She gathered her dress, hitched it up above her knees, and wrung out the water from the hem. “Maybe at first you had to hide the truth to stay safe, but you knew me, and you chose not to trust me.”

“If people found out—”

“I’m not *people*. I’m me. Gloria. G.”

“What would you have done if I’d told you? Because I wanted to tell you.”

“I don’t know. You never gave me the chance to find out. You decided I couldn’t be trusted, and you disappeared.” She twisted her dress hem tighter, until there were no more droplets, just the moist sound of wet cloth chafing against itself.

“I was scared. And it was a dangerous risk.”

“I know that. I’m not a fool. But Benny, I loved you. I trusted you with my whole self. You owed me honesty.”

“You’re right. I did. I do. That’s why I’m here now. My feelings for you haven’t changed.”

“Then why are you leaving?” Her eyes blazed at him, mad as a hornet, but mad could be good. It meant her feelings ran hot, and strong feelings could be turned from anger to something else.

“I’m reenlisting in the army.”

Her brow furrowed in confusion. “Why would you do that? The war’s over.”

Pulling his feet free from the sinking sand, he moved to face her. “Last month, President Truman desegregated the military. All it took was an executive order. That’s how fast things are changing.” The August sun beat

down on his shoulders and back as soft waves sighed against the shore. “I’ve been a colored man and I’ve been a white man and they’re two different worlds. There’s a line, and you have to choose which side to stand on, but in a desegregated military, there’s one mess tent, one officers’ club, one barracks, one world with no line. It means I don’t have to be colored or white. I can just be Benny.”

“You could be Benny right here,” she said in a gruff tone that sounded like frustration elbowing in on her anger, making room for other feelings.

She spun away from him toward the shore, but the sand held fast to her foot and sent her toppling. Benny grabbed her, steadied her, their faces inches apart.

“Which Benny would I be, G? Levittown Benny or Liberty Heights? My momma’s son or your—” He bit his lip, stopping himself from saying more.

“My what?”

His heavy breath paced itself to hers.

“Everything.” A coiling want unfurled inside him. “I want to be your everything, G.”

She straightened, prizing first one leg out of the sucking sand and then the other. Then she put distance between them and stepped out of the water.

Benny’s heart dropped, and his chest squeezed. He sloshed back to shore, sticky sand clinging to his feet.

Out in the Gulf, sunshine danced on the gentle ripples while the August heat sent moisture into the humid air, thinning the oxygen, keeping his breath shallow and straining.

“Thank you for telling me,” Gloria said. She gathered her shoes to her chest, her dress damp to her thighs, and turned from him, walking barefoot through the grass.

Benny called to her to wait for him. He’d walk her home.

“I’d like to be alone now,” she said, shaking her head, but she didn’t go. Just stared and stared from ten feet away, boring holes into him with her eyes.

Was she looking to see what she’d missed? Where the Negro parts of him had been hiding? Or was she seeing the Benny she’d fallen for, despite knowing his secret?

“You can write to me,” she said, squeezing her shoes like she was trying to hold herself together. “I don’t know what I think yet, but if you write to me, I promise I’ll answer.”

EPILOGUE

Sunday, June 25, 1950

Cora opened the oven door to check on the corn bread, sticking it with a toothpick. When the wood came out dry, she slipped pot holders over her hands and slid the baking tray out of the oven.

“Do we have any more serving spoons?” Lee asked, wheeling himself into the kitchen from the backyard, where the whole neighborhood had gathered.

Cora rummaged in a drawer and handed him three large spoons, and then followed him outside, past Loretta and Momma swapping coleslaw recipes, past Deacon Gray and Uncle Drew arguing baseball stats, and past Pastor Glen and Patsy, with her pregnant belly, talking to Benny, the guest of honor and the reason for the late June cookout in the sweltering heat.

Cora set the corn bread down next to Aunt Teen’s deviled crabs and homemade hot sauce on the long food table and came to stand beside her brother. On leave from his army posting halfway around the world, Benny still looked every bit the soldier, standing with his legs wide, his chest high, his back straight.

“I’ve been reading that things are getting pretty tense for you in Korea with the Soviet Union meddling in,” Pastor Glen said.

“Politics are above my pay grade,” Benny said, glancing at his watch. “All I know is the communists aren’t welcome below the 38th parallel, and

we make sure they know it.”

“Here you go, baby,” Dr. Allen George said, coming up to the little cluster. “Brought you a Coca-Cola.”

“That’s sweet of you, sugar, but lately,” Patsy flashed a small frown at her husband, “soda pop gives me heartburn.” She pulled at her shirt, as if she could hide her overlarge belly.

“Oh, I forgot,” he said, glancing at her stomach and then at Cora. The doctors didn’t think Lee and Cora could have children, and no one wanted to remind them of it. Patsy’s husband looked flustered and a touch ridiculous holding two bottles.

“I’ll drink it,” said Cora. She took the Coke from him and filled her mouth with the bubbly sweetness that tasted of satisfaction. “Thanks, Doc.”

Cora couldn’t get used to calling him Allen after he’d been Dr. George for all those months in the hospital tending to Lee. Patsy had pestered him so often about Lee’s care that they’d wound up talking three, four, five times a day.

“She drove me crazy in all the best ways,” he told Cora later.

It had been Dr. George who told them they probably wouldn’t be able to have children, but it was also Dr. George who told them Lee might never walk again. Now, after two years of hard work and physical training, he could stand up and slide his feet a few inches.

Cora nudged Patsy’s shoulder and laid a hand on her belly. She didn’t want her cousin to feel like she had to hide her joy. “Who would have thought you’d be the first out of all of us to have a baby?”

Patsy laid her hand on top of Cora’s and looked over at Benny, who shook his head in a tight, narrow movement that was trying to be subtle.

“What?”

Patsy bit her lips and looked guilty.

“Nothing,” said Benny.

“No, it’s definitely something,” Cora said. She squeezed Patsy’s arm. “Tell me.”

Patsy crinkled up her face. “We’re the second,” she said, slow and cautious, like she was testing for riptide. “Roscoe just had a little boy. He named him Jasper.”

Benny and Patsy looked at her like she might break apart from hearing about babies she may never get to have, but when she took stock of her emotions, she realized she felt glad for Roscoe. She wanted him to be happy. “That’s good news,” she said. “Truly.”

“Brother Lee,” Pastor Glen said as Lee came to join the group. “Nice to see you looking so well. I’ve been praying for you.”

Pastor Glen gave God the credit for Lee’s progress, since it started after the one and only time he’d set foot into a church in order to marry Cora, making an honest woman of her, as Pastor Glen said, and silencing the Saints of Mercy gossip train that condemned their unmarried cohabitation. When Lee stood for the first time a few weeks after the ceremony, Pastor Glen declared him Mangrove Bay’s own lame-can-walk miracle man, and the rest of the church had no choice but to accept him as one of God’s sheep, even if Lee didn’t care to be in the flock.

“Are you going to play something for us today, Brother Lee?”

Lee’s mouth twitched in a half smile. “If Cora wants me to play, I will.”

“Well, I always want you to play,” she said. She bent down and kissed him, still getting a thrill from how good it felt to do that in front of everyone.

“Was that a knock?” Benny asked.

“I’ll check,” said Cora, ducking into the house to find that no one new had arrived. She grabbed Lee’s saxophone and brought it out to him with a wink.

Lee wheeled himself to the center of the lawn under the orange tree he’d planted for her soon after they’d moved in. “We have our own place now,

and I believe I promised you an orange tree," he'd said when he got it for her.

He adjusted his saxophone and began to play, easing smooth, buttery notes out of his instrument, deep and soul-stirring. It sounded like his music had seen some things, done some things, and survived some things, but it also sounded like it was going places. It made you want to put down what you were doing and come along for the ride.

He made the notes dance, and when he settled them down and hushed them still, the church folks clapped and cheered. Mrs. Hammond even kissed him on his cheek.

He used to say he didn't care what people thought of him. He only cared that they'd think badly of Cora for being with him, but seeing him now, wrapped in acceptance, she knew differently. You can live without a community, but you can't thrive. Without the side looks, muttered tuts, and clutched purses, Lee unclenched inside until his sharp edges smoothed to sunshine. She'd never known him so easy in his own skin, even with the wheelchair.

The doorbell rang, and Benny hurried to the door. Exchanging a look with Lee, Cora followed her brother in. Most people would have come around the side of the house to the back, where anyone could hear the party was. That's how she knew, even before Benny opened the door, who they'd find on the other side.

"You came," Benny said in a rush of breath.

Gloria nodded, blinking hard, looking nervous and clutching a Key lime pie, as Cora gaped at her, genuinely surprised. It was one thing to write a few letters, but a white woman showing up to a colored folks' cookout to see a man? That was all kinds of a statement.

Benny had called her the day he arrived home on leave, asking her to come, and while she hadn't said she would, she also hadn't said she

wouldn't. Cora would have sworn up and down that there was no way she would actually turn up.

Smoothing her face into something more welcoming than a shocked stare, Cora said, "Hi," trying to sound light. "Come on in. I've heard so much about you, I almost feel like I already know you."

Gloria hesitated in the doorway and blew out a long breath.

"It's okay," said Benny. "We'll be okay." He put his hand on her elbow and gave her a nod of encouragement.

"Is that for me?" Cora said. "It looks delicious."

"It's my sister-in-law's recipe." She glanced at Benny. "I remember you liked it." Cora took the pie, and Benny reached for Gloria's hands.

"It's so good to see you," he said.

"You too."

When she stepped inside, he folded her into a hug, and she slipped her arms around him, drawing him close.

"You're sure it's okay that I came?" she said.

"It's more than okay."

The soft ache in his voice spoke of longing and need, and the relief in her sigh told Cora all she needed to know about what they felt for each other.

Cora stepped away, giving them a moment to themselves, and carried Gloria's dessert to the food table, cutting herself a slice. The tart lime and the sugary sweetness played on her tongue in a complementary contrast—a celebration of opposites.

In the yard, a sea of neighbors talked and laughed. Cora searched for Lee and found him speaking to Momma Mae, who was rummaging in her large bag.

"I brought this for you to play," Momma Mae was saying to Lee when she reached them. The woman pulled Jasper's trumpet out of her quilted sack and handed it to him. "I think he would have wanted that."

Lee turned it over in his hands, running his fingers across the stops. He adjusted the mouthpiece and fit it to his lips. And then he played, like only Lee could, painting the sky with feelings. The trumpet had never been his best instrument, but all the same, it sounded just right.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This novel is a work of fiction, but it is inspired by my late grandmother, Constance North Jackson, and her brother, my great-uncle, Arthur “Bran” North. They were both exceptional people who lived unusual lives, and I hope that the characters I’ve created honor them and respect their memory.

I’d like to thank their daughters: Brenda Shelton, for allowing me to grill her on her recollections, and Aleida Richards, for facilitating a long-distance interview with Uncle Bran shortly before he passed away.

I am extremely grateful to my wonderful agent, Tanera Simons, and the Greenstone Literary team, who loved the story right from the start and have been endlessly encouraging and enthusiastic. Thank you to my editors, Sally Williamson and Stephanie Koven, for your astute editorial insights and for loving *Inharmonious* and wanting to share it with the world. And thanks also to the teams at Transworld and Blackstone for all your efforts to get this book into as many hands as possible.

Thank you to my writing friends, who never tired of my sharing this story, one bit at a time: Gillian Anton, Heather Critchlow, Chris May, Adrienne Dines, Kelly Gerrard, Christine Dawood, Linda Jorgenson, Beth and Ken Pimentel, Lyn Litchfield, and Marina Poggi.

To Oli and the Jenkins family, thanks for humoring my Welsh questions.

Among a number of other resources, like old video interviews, newspaper articles, and letters, I used the following nonfiction books in my research and can recommend them to anyone wanting to delve more deeply into the themes raised in my novel: *Forgotten: The Untold Story of D-Day's Black Heroes, at Home and at War* by Linda Hervieux; *Brothers in Arms: The Epic Story of the 761st Tank Battalion, WWII's Forgotten Heroes* by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Anthony Walton; *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* by Ira Katznelson; *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* by Andrew Wiese; *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* by Richard Rothstein; *The Color of Money: Black Banks and the Racial Wealth Gap* by Mehrsa Baradaran; *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* by Allyson Hobbs.

Finally, I'd like to thank my whole family for their long-standing support. Mom, Dad, George, you gave me a rock-solid foundation of love and encouragement, and I'm forever grateful. Daniel, Mara, Viola, and especially Peter, thanks for always cheering me on, believing I'm better than I am, and loving me to the moon and back. You are all superstars!

HISTORICAL NOTE

Mangrove Bay is a fictitious version of Tampa, Florida. The Rosewood massacre really happened in Florida in 1923, about 130 miles away from Tampa (Mangrove Bay).

Pearl Harbor was attacked on a Sunday morning, so Sunday afternoon, Florida time. A radio broadcast went out on that day (December 7) declaring what had happened. The next day, FDR broadcast his radio announcement, and America declared war. On December 11, Germany and Italy declared war on America.

Dorie Miller was real, and the military did use his image in recruiting posters for Blacks.

My great-uncle often passed for white in little ways (to use a gas station, for entrance to a fairground). When he volunteered for the military during WWII after Pearl Harbor, the officer in charge didn't want to be accused of desegregating the barracks and made him enlist as white. He remained "white" for the rest of his life.

The 320th Barrage Balloon Battalion was real. They did train at Camp Tyson. Most officers were Southern racists, but some were not, like Lieutenant Colonel Leon Reed, who made it into this book. British soldiers did teach the men how to use the balloons. Everywhere Roscoe goes with the 320th in the story was where the 320th actually went in real life. As in

the book, they landed in Scotland, took a train to Wales and were stationed in Pontypool until they shipped to France for D-Day, then back to the UK briefly before heading to New York and then on to Georgia to train in jungle tactics, then to Pearl Harbor, arriving the day before Germany surrendered and staying until after Japan surrendered (after Hiroshima and Nagasaki).

I took many of the details of the D-Day invasion from personal accounts of men of the 320th.

The 761st Tank Battalion was real. They really gave themselves the nickname Black Panthers for the reasons talked about in the book. Their motto, “Come Out Fighting,” was taken from Joe Louis, as in the book. They trained at Camp Claiborne and then at Fort Hood, as in the book.

Lieutenant Colonel Paul Bates was real, and really did refuse a promotion to stay with his men. He also refused to court-martial Jackie Robinson, who was really in the 761st. (This is the same Jackie Robinson who would later be the first Black Major League baseball player and Hall of Fame baseball superstar.) Jackie Robinson’s story is accurate—he refused to get up when seated next to a woman who the bus driver mistakenly thought was white. The 761st did fight at the Battle of the Bulge. They were an exceedingly excellent tank battalion (probably because they trained for so long since the army refused to send them for two and a half years). They fought under General Patton, and his quote to them is accurate. They were also part of the forces that liberated Gunskirchen concentration camp. The camp descriptions come from accounts of men from the 761st.

The 34th Infantry did fight in North Africa under General Patton, but not at the Battle of the Bulge.

Negro newspapers really existed, and *The Pittsburgh Courier* was a real paper. These papers reported on issues the mainstream newspapers often ignored. The Double Victory campaign was started in the Negro press to garner support for the war while still addressing the injustices at home.

The crazy nursing situation at this time was such that the government claimed a nursing shortage while refusing the services of thousands of Black nurses. Because the army didn't want relationships to develop between nurses and POWs, they assigned Black nurses to care for German POWs, reasoning that this would prevent romances. (There is one interesting case of a Black nurse and a German POW who did fall in love and later married—but their story is beyond the scope of this book.)

POWs could indeed access whites-only areas that Black civilians and soldiers could not. There are numerous accounts of Black soldiers seeing POWs enjoying privileges they were denied.

Dr. Charles Drew, the inventor and organizer of the blood bank, was a Black doctor. He protested the army's ridiculous blood segregation and later resigned.

The idea for the sign in the pub in Pontypool—Locals and Colored Soldiers Only—was lifted from Bamber Bridge. When the locals were told they needed to have a color bar, they decided to bar the white soldiers instead of the Black, putting up Black Troops Only signs in the pubs. Subsequently, relations between Black and white troops deteriorated further, resulting in the Battle of Bamber Bridge.

Nathan “Nearest” Green was the slave who taught Jack Daniel to make whiskey, including introducing him to charcoal filtration. After emancipation, he was the first master distiller for the Jack Daniel's whiskey company. Three of his sons also later worked at the company. I invented Green George as his grandson.

The Buffalo Soldiers were indeed an all-Black fighting division, originally formed in 1866 and later reclassified as the 92nd during WWI. They fought well in WWI (on loan to the French), but in WWII, they were ill-trained and ill-used. At one point, they did indeed fight in Italy alongside a Japanese American unit (who were an exceptionally superb unit) called the 442nd. I watched an interview of one of the Japanese American soldiers

who fought that battle, and he mentions that when the Blacks saw the Japanese unit and the Japanese saw the Black unit, they all knew the battle was going to be hellish, since they were the most grudgingly formed and unwanted units in the entirety of the US Army.

Blue discharges were real and indeed used to get rid of Black soldiers and, to a greater extent, gay soldiers.

Black vets in uniform were often attacked, sometimes lynched, so President Truman put together a committee to write a report on improving civil rights (*To Secure These Rights*). He later desegregated the military with an executive order in 1948.

The situation with the GI Bill and Veterans Affairs is accurate. Although it was theoretically for all, segregationist principles meant that millions of white vets benefited while very few Black vets could access the aid.

I mention *The Negro Motorist Green Book* briefly. This guidebook is now fairly well-known from the 2018 film *Green Book*.

All sports events mentioned actually took place, including the Joe Louis fight with Buddy Baer, the televised fight with Billy Conn, and Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier for baseball and leading the Dodgers to the World Series, also televised. (They lost to the Yankees.)

The film Benny watches with Gloria, *A Double Life*, was really a film that played that year.

“Levittown” housing developments were a real thing, but not in Florida. They were mainly in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. They were significant because they were huge postwar housing developments. Other whites-only developments were built throughout the United States, but the Levittown suburbs are the most well-known.

Millard Caldwell was the real governor of Florida at the time, and his personality was as reflected in the book. Claude Pepper was a Florida senator, and I have used his own words when commenting on the Soviet

Union. He had some good qualities, but was known as an opportunist politician, which I tried to reflect.

I couldn't find evidence of the No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs signs in Wales, but I found evidence in Bristol, so I had Roscoe go to Bristol for the divorce.

The racist Federal Housing Administration (FHA) attitudes were real, and redlining was common practice, as were restrictive covenants. The ban they issue to Benny is paraphrased from an actual ban that was issued to a white mortgage recipient for selling his house to a Black family.

The Supreme Court cases that are mentioned are real.

My grandmother was able to buy a house in a new Black housing development called Progress Village, but it didn't come about the way Liberty Heights did in the book, and it didn't happen until the early 1960s.

My great-uncle did rejoin the military after the war and stayed in service to fight in the Korean War (which began on the date of the last scene in the book, June 25, 1950) and later the Vietnam War. He married a white Cuban woman (which was not the same as marrying a white woman of European descent in hyper-race-conscious America).

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

1. At dinner, Cora, Momma, and Jasper lay out arguments against joining the military, while Lee, Benny, and Roscoe explain why they want to enlist. Whose arguments do you agree with the most? Did your opinion change or remain the same as you continued to read their stories?
2. Why does Patsy's military nurse posting add insult to injury? Why do you think the US Army preferred to have Black nurses caring for German POWs? (For more on this, check out the true story of Elinor Powell and Frederick Albert.)
3. In Wales, how does Roscoe's general treatment create an environment where a relationship with Megan is possible?
4. When Jasper won't admit to being gay, how does his refusal to share his truth with his closest friends mirror Benny's later fear of disclosing his true identity?

5. Cora encounters several people who say that if it were up to them, they would not uphold various discriminatory practices. Do you believe them? If they are telling the truth, what would that say about institutionalized discrimination vs. individual people's prejudices?
6. What does Benny gain by continuing to present himself as white after the war, and what does he lose?
7. What indications does Benny have that it might be safe to confide in Gloria about his true identity? At what point do you think he should have told her the truth?
8. How do Benny's prewar experiences help him understand Gloria's frustration at being prevented from working at her dad's accounting company? Even with the benefit of those experiences, why do you think Benny fails to recognize the restaurant waiter's sexist attitude toward Gloria until she points it out?
9. Why do you think Roscoe is unable to adjust to life back home the way Lee or even Benny is? What might he have done differently to avoid becoming the man he becomes?
10. Does Lee hold any blame, as Benny suggests, for the failure of Cora's marriage or for Roscoe hitting her?

11. When Cora comes up with the plan to build Liberty Heights, Benny, Uncle Drew, Patsy, and Lee are all for it. Why are Momma and Aunt Teen against it? Are their fears justified?

12. When Cora and Benny trick the FHA into underwriting a loan, do you feel they're morally justified in their deception? Is there a more honest way they could have achieved the same result?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tammye Huf grew up in California but has lived in the UK with her husband and three kids for the last twenty years. She loves nothing more than to immerse herself in new places and experiences, and she loves the way that books allow her to do that, traveling the globe or even back in time with the turn of a page. Since earning her BA from Wellesley College, she has been a teacher of various ages and abilities as well as a copywriter and a translator. Her short stories have been published in several literary magazines, and she was named the third-place winner of the London Magazine Short Story Prize in 2018. Her debut novel, *A More Perfect Union*, was published in the UK in October 2020 and in the USA in January 2022.

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