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Wide Blue Sky

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Caroline Imani Collins

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To the Women Warriors, the Mamas, Aunties, Sisters, and Nonnies who made me feel like my voice mattered; to the Bold Brothers, the Fearless Fathers, the Loving Husband who lifted me towards my dreams; and to the Beautiful Babies of the next generation: Thank you, this one is for you...

For Cathy

Wide Blue Sky

PART ONE:

“Throughout the years of history, woman has been the weathervane, the indicator, showing in which direction the wind of destiny blows.”

Elise Johnson McDougald, “The Task of Negro Womanhood,” 1925

CHAPTER ONE

If she knew she was going to live this long she would have bought more shoes. Strappy, spiky, sparkling shoes with no real practical value. Not those sturdy rubber soled numbers she clomped around in beneath her cap and apron, and certainly not the boots of her youth. Worn and weathered, their soles so thin by mid-winter she'd have to line the bottoms with butcher paper to keep the Tennessee snow out as she trudged to school, careful to pick up her feet, willing her battered boots to last until spring's arrival.

After all, spring birthed the hope of summer days so stifling hot Mother turned a blind eye to their shoeless abandon. Barefoot, they'd plow through tall summer grass and kick up cinnamon colored dust. They'd disregard cuts, scrapes and bites, freely wiggling their toes in the creek's cool water, all while dreading the unwelcome sight of slightly yellowing leaves. But always, this boot-free bliss was cut mercilessly short by autumn's inevitability; an unavoidable situation that prompted her mother's dutiful pre-school term ritual.

Annually, the ushering of fall was marked by two loathsome events. First, she'd spend those final days of summer with her brothers, hunched over in the garden, yanking brussels sprouts from their stems, collecting them by the bunches in her dusty apron. She never seemed lucky enough to land a spot in the kitchen with Mother during sprout season and to show her disgust with her outdoor post she liked to make a point of briskly turning over her apron, violently spilling the tiny cabbages across the kitchen table's scarred top as she brought them in. Her older sisters would suck their teeth at the display.

Even her sister Nora, who spent most of her days delicately wrapped in shawls, forever fighting off a fever or a cough, would softly shake her head from her perch in the corner of the kitchen. But her sisters' disappointment never worried her. Instead, one day Violet Anne Bishop placed her small hands on her little hips and announced, "One day I'm gonna hire out help like Mrs. Owens does, and I'm never, *ever* gonna have to pick no sprouts—"

"*Any* sprouts," Mother sighed.

"—'Cause I don't like sprouts no how—"

"*Any* how," Mother and Pearl corrected in unison.

"—I don't like 'em fresh," Violet pointed to the big boiling pot of brine before her mother and sisters, "and I don't like 'em pickled. And when I grow up. I won't ever have to pick 'em 'cause the help will do it for me."

Her oldest sister Darlene slowly wiped her hands on a red and white-checkered tea cloth, narrowing her eyes at her baby sister. "Well if you don't prefer brussels sprouts, why ever will they be in your garden in the first place?"

This question thoroughly stumped the six-year-old Violet who could only open and close her mouth before Darlene pointed a russet brown finger to the back door and Violet soon found herself moping towards it, then speeding up to pass Darlene before her oldest sister could swat her behind. When the sprouts were picked, soaked, trimmed, boiled, brined, and jarred the second loathsome event of the End of Summer ensued. The journey into town for mix-matched bolts of gingham (bolts never in the color Violet

desired) and new shoes for the older children (shoes always so shiny and smart yet unobtainable to Violet), which meant new-to-you shoes handed down to the younger.

Being the youngest girl, every fall Violet Anne Bishop arrived at their one-room schoolhouse in her neatly sewn frock and shoes passed down from Darlene to Nora to Pearl to Minnie and finally to their ultimate destination: her too-big feet. In fact, she was nineteen before she ever owned her first real pair of new shoes. But they ended up getting her into a bit of trouble, so she guessed she just never got into the shoe buying habit.

She supposed she could always get herself a couple of pairs now. But what on earth would a one hundred year old woman do with a pair of fire engine red stilettos? Actually, to be precise, she was still ninety-nine. But in two days, it would be official, she'd be one hundred and then maybe she could be left well enough alone. That's all they'd been yammering about around here. That one of their "residents" would be turning one hundred this year! That's what they like to call them when prospective families are touring the place, residents, like they're all tenants in a snazzy boardinghouse. And the one with that little mustache and clipboard and her colored pantsuits, she comes in at least once a week, barely waiting for Violet to answer her knock before barreling in with wary eyed young people.

"This is the one I told you about!" she loves to announce. She's never that enthusiastic when those families aren't around. "Our Violet will be oooone-huuundred this year! She's fit as a peach isn't she, and as sharp as a tack to boot!" Then she yaps on about the advantages of their living environment. But most of the time Violet doesn't

pay her any attention. She's either too distracted by that abundant lip hair--when Ms. Mustache is older she'll wish she'd waxed more, or Violet's busy eying the family's reaction to her upcoming milestone. Some offer polite congratulations, which is usually a letdown because Violet likes the ones who stare in wide-eyed wonder. She loves guessing whether they're excited Grandma may live to one hundred or if they're terrified the old bird could very well last a century. Grandma of course is usually nowhere to be seen. She's probably at home minding her own, no idea what her family has in store for her.

That's how Violet's got her.

"Good Morning Miss Violet!"

Her heart flips a little at the sudden interruption and she struggles to open her eyes. It's only now she realizes they'd been shut and she'd been enjoying her thoughts in peace.

The Hummingbird is on duty.

She twitters around Violet's white-walled "apartment" opening blinds, her little arms moving remarkably fast for someone with such an ample frame.

"Rise and shine honey, it's a new day!"

Needless to say, Violet doesn't like The Hummingbird. The sight of her too-slight arms flailing about as she sets upon the most mundane tasks is a personal affront. So much energy spent to pull a blanket, to viciously pump a blood pressure cuff. Violet was a nurse for over fifty years and a BP read doesn't require that much movement. As the nurse buzzes around Violet's rooms she's reminded of what she's become, of how her body has betrayed her and despite herself, her thoughts turn sour.

She lets The Hummingbird hurriedly check her pulse and jut the thermometer in her ear, wondering if she'll flutter off without any more conversation, a thought that suddenly startles her. Age is an insidious thief; surreptitiously stealing away loved ones, a strong body, a once open and sociable nature. But these days' conversations are harder and harder to uphold. It's a burden to be expected to recall earlier discussions and chats. And at her age what you don't remember can cost you. Forget a nurse's name enough times and more and more of your independence is snatched away.

Isn't it enough she knows who *she* is? Lord knows that takes long enough to figure out in life.

The Hummingbird's red beehive jiggles as she frenetically scratches away on her chart, her eyebrows creased, and Violet stifles a swell of panic. How long has it been since the nurse has asked her a question? Gathering resolve Violet puts on her sweetest face and smiles. "Such a happy girl," she laughs a bit crustily. The Hummingbird's head snaps up, eyes wary at her charge's sudden change in disposition. But Violet, having been around the block a time or two, soldiers on, slyly sneaking a peek at the nurse's nametag. HI! I'M SUZY! It announces between textured cat stickers and glittering paw prints. That's right. Suzy. And she has a small feline army at home. "One of your little ones at it again Suzy?" she asks in her sweetest little old lady voice, which sadly isn't too hard to come by these days.

And easy peasy, that's all it takes. Shelving any previous suspicion The Hummingbird launches into one of her you'll-never-guess-the-cutest-thing-Patches/Snowflake/Whiskers-did-last-night-tales. Violet closes her eyes, straining to nod at the right places but she must have nodded off because suddenly she's having the strangest dream. It begins with a cat wearing red heels of all things, then there's a thrilling chase, and finally hummingbird feathers that slowly scatter to the ground.



A tug on her shoulder jolts her awake. The Hummingbird. She grasps at her name, determined to remember. Suzy.

"That's right honey, it's me."

She blinks in confusion. She doesn't realize she's spoken aloud. With the nurse flittering above her, Violet feels a familiar lurch. The bed's motor gives a soft whir as Suzy punches the clicker to raise Violet's head while lowering her legs.

"It's breakfast time," she sings as she darts over to the cart she's wheeled in. Her fluttering hands whip off the pink plastic lid to reveal a dark brown Tupperware canister of oatmeal. No butter, no sugar. Though Violet's not diabetic. She looks at the hot cereal, remembering when she used to wake to the scents of Mother's breakfasts. Out of habit, she lowers her nose to the bowl. Her sense of smell was the first to really go so she isn't surprised she smells nothing.

The Hummingbird looks down at her, a wide grin on her face. She enjoyed their earlier chat. Too bad because Violet doesn't remember much except for that dream, and she figures she should probably keep that one to herself.

"Eat up. Your big weekend starts today."

She obediently picks up her spoon and begins to stir the contents of the plastic basin. It jiggles. She looks back up at the nurse who is releasing the brake on the food cart.

"I hear you've got gobs of family coming in for your celebration this Sunday." She maneuvers the cart out of the doorway. "But it's fitting. You only turn a hundred once right!"

Lord only hopes so. But she guesses she's spoken aloud again.

"Oh Miss Violet," the hummingbird chirps, "You are a live one!"

Violet shovels a mound of plain oatmeal into her mouth. It's not the first time she's heard that.

CHAPTER TWO

Memphis, Tennessee 1921

"Your Violet's a live one," Lula Mae Crawford remarked over a sip of sweet tea. Her mother nodded in recognition, her pale and unreadable eyes watching the activities before her. Pretending she didn't hear, Violet trotted back over to the boys, anger itching at the back of her throat. Mother, like always, had given nothing away. But surely she'd known what the reverend's sister had been insinuating. Her youngest daughter Violet was a "live one," code for "good luck marrying that one off before she embarrasses herself or your family."

Shaking the disturbing thoughts from her mind Violet swung her coffee brown braid back over her shoulder and chucked the foul ball she'd retrieved back to her little brother Teddy on the pitcher's mound, or the little clump of red dirt they called a mound.

"C'mon Teddy! Strike him out!" their brother James yelled from the outfield, his amber hair blowing in the June breeze.

The batter, Travis Hooper, knuckled the stick a little higher as his eyes darted from her younger brother Teddy on the mound to Violet squatting beneath him. She caught the direction of his gaze and glanced down at her frock--its muslin lapel inching downward revealing the small golden lumps that had recently become the bane of her twelve-year-old existence. Glaring at Travis, who at least had the decency to look embarrassed, she yanked up her dress as Teddy let his knuckleball loose catching the flustered batter off guard.

"Striiike Three!" yelled Reverend Crawford. He'd stepped in as umpire two innings ago "for the sake of all their souls," he'd explained.

Her team let out a whoop as they rushed to the sidelines, eager for their last chance at bat and the opportunity to win the game. They circled her older brother James

without hesitation. "This is it fellas," James addressed them before his eyes skirted apologetically to Violet, the only team member wearing a dress, which led to the inevitable outburst of annoying boy snickers that James quickly quelled with the natural authority of an older teen amongst younger admirers. "This is our last at bat. We're down by two and Hank is still pitching strong against us." At her brother's brief hesitation, Violet felt an assault of stony glares, but James continued in stride. "But we can still win this game. Just stay away from Hank's floater, keep your eye on the ball, and nothing stupid."

Did he just look at me? Violet inwardly scoffed.

"All right, Aaron, Nate, you're up." James continued. "Then we restart the rotation. Jimmy P., Teddy, then Violet. I'm still clean-up, but hopefully we won't need the whole lineup right?" he winked to a cluster of nodding heads. "Okay then, let's go!"

Letting out a holler that masked his skittish nerves their smallest teammate Aaron grabbed the stick in his eager hands and ran to home plate, one of four dirt-filled burlap sacks kept on hand in the church's shed.

The opposing kid on the mound, Hank, was almost three years older than Violet's younger brother Teddy, who'd been their pitcher. But standing on the little hill, he seemed not only older, but a good three feet taller than Teddy. In fact, in Violet's opinion, he suddenly looked like the biggest thirteen-year-old in the county. She squeezed her eyes shut and prayed Aaron would hit a home run that bounced right off of Hank's big head.

Aaron stood arms cocked; his ruddy face full of determination as Hank wound a long arm back, raised his leg with athletic grace, and hurled a pitch. The whirling sphere flew over the plate, Aaron's entire body swinging and missing with strained effort.

"Strike One!" Rev. Crawford called out before promptly announcing strikes two, three and retiring Nate as well.

Two outs.

On the brink of defeat, all of their team's earlier bluster cracked like a parched river bed as they watched tall and skinny Jimmy P. pick up the stick and gingerly take a couple of practice swings, his dark arms flexing in the sunlight. Perched on an overturned barrel from the mill, Violet nervously swung her foot to and fro. Two players away from hitting, her last chance at bat seemed to be drifting precariously away.

Jimmy P. stepped to the plate, spitting on the ground below. Hank nodded, unwound his long arm, and the ball flew forward. Jimmy's swing made an audible whoosh. Scrawny Bonzy Taylor caught the ball with his high-pitched hyena laugh and rose to toss it back to his pitcher. "Two mo' like dat Hank!"

"That's strike one." Rev. Crawford reiterated.

Jimmy P's cheeks puffed as he blew out a breath of frustration and stepped back to the plate. "That's alright J.P., shake it off now!" James yelled and Jimmy P. gave a determined nod. The second pitch came barreling down. Jimmy threw himself into the swing, connecting with a resounding crack. Their team erupted into cheers as Travis Hooper, the chest-peeker, dove for the bouncing ball as it dropped in left field. Travis scooped it up and darted it to first base seconds after Jimmy P. was safe.

Teddy rushed to the plate all oversized limbs like a playful puppy. He was nearly eleven, but somehow his legs and arms had already decided they were teens. Hank gave his most menacing stare. A grin split Teddy's caramel face and Violet stifled a snicker. After his pitching debut her little brother sure wasn't lacking any confidence.

Hank threw a pitch. Teddy's narrowed eyes followed the speeding ball and just as he was about to let loose his swing he shifted position grasping the top of the stick with

his right arm, lightly tapping the ball. "A bunt!" someone from the crowd yelled out as Teddy hightailed it for first. Bonzy hesitated for the briefest of moments, clearly surprised, before scrambling towards the rolling ball. Snatching it up, Bonzy cocked his arm, frantically twisting his body from second to first. But Jimmy P. and Teddy were already on base, Violet's little brother dusting off his worn trousers, grinning from ear to ear.

"They're safe!" Rev. Crawford bellowed with the enthusiasm of a seasoned radio announcer.

"All right Violet, nothing silly," her older brother James whispered in her ear as she headed to the plate. She stiffened at the warning but decided to direct her frustration at the bully on the mound. Picking up the stick her fingertips traced the smooth wood. Hank stared directly at her, his dark eyes expressionless.

"Time," he called. He strode determinedly off the hill before a surprised Rev. Crawford could blurt out assent. Hank's long legs carried him to Bonzy's jittery frame within seconds, and without a second glance at Violet he began conferring with his catcher, quietly whispering in his ear. She took a couple of nervous practice swings, darting her eyes over to James who offered a calm shrug. She glanced over at her sisters where Pearl, Nora, and Minnie sat on their blanket. Pearl was rhythmically stroking Minnie's hair, the younger sister's head in her lap while Nora, who's frail body was on the mend from one of her bouts, sat hunched over her dog-eared volume of Jane Austen, reading aloud to the younger girls. Before she could be put out at her sisters' lack of attention to the game, Hank unfolded his long body and headed back to the mound curtly nodding to the Reverend.

"Play ball!" Rev. Crawford proclaimed in his Sunday morning voice.

Violet snuck a peek at Bonzy squatting below who offered a smug smile. She choked up on the stick. Hank, eyes still blank, wound up for the pitch. She clutched the bat with clammy hands staring at the speeding target then took a hefty swing, the stick swooshing the air, way before the suddenly floating ball ever drifted across the plate.

"Strike One!" Rev. Crawford announced.

"Watch that floater Violet!" James admonished, one foot balanced on the overturned barrel she'd been sitting on earlier.

Bonzy cackled his sneaky little laugh as he tossed the ball back and she resisted the temptation to knock him over the head with the bat. She took a deep breath as Hank pulled back again and released the pitch. *Watch it, watch it*, she thought to herself following the hurtling blur. *It's coming fast!* She braced herself and swung, the stick slicing the air seconds after Bonzy caught the speeding ball and he howled. "Jest like dat Hank! Jest like dat!"

She stepped back and allowed herself a look at first base. Teddy's eyes locked hers and he smiled wide. She should have stopped there but she risked a glance at her teammates. Their eyes all revealed disappointment, resignation, and worse embarrassment. Tearing her eyes away she rolled her shoulders and neck, doing her best impersonation of her brother James and then stepped back to the plate, her eyes glaring at the tall chocolate brown pitcher on the mound. *I hate you Henry Garnett.*

Oblivious to her mental browbeating Hank wound up for another pitch as her heart banged against her ribs. *You can't strike out!* She watched the ball, her chest hammering as she gripped the stick closer. *Keep your eye on the ball! Swing!* Her arms flew across her chest as the stick solidly connected with the pitch. *Run!*

Violet dropped the bat and took off grabbing handfuls of her skirt.

Sorry Mother.

She could hear her team cheering. As she turned first she caught a glimpse of Travis scrambling in the depths of left field after the ball. *Sneak a peek at my chest Travis Hooper! That'll teach you.* Jimmy P. scored as she was rounding second and Teddy was barreling for home when Travis finally hurled the ball infield. In the corner of her eye, Violet could see James leaping up and down, his golden brown curls bouncing. "Violet Anne! A triple! You've tied it up!" He hooted and reached for the stick.

A triple? Her legs were pumping as she stomped on third base and ran on, barely glancing at the stunned baseman.

Violet's eyes locked on the final burlap sack and she hardly noticed James's look of horror. "No Violet!" he roared as she headed for home. She was halfway there when Bonzy's eyes popped in astonishment, his scrawny body propelled out of the way by a barreling Hank who moved his large frame with surprising grace. He pounced over the base and squatted, eyes darting to the short-stop, hands ready to make the catch. She couldn't see the throw; it was behind her so she leaned down and ran harder, lowering her shoulders for impact. She dove for home plate hitting the brick wall of Hank's body but her momentum gave her added power as she rolled head first into the dirt grasping blindly for the sack. Dust filled her eyes and she was sure she tasted the coppery flavor of blood. The thudding in her ears receded and she slowly heard the sounds around her, her own labored breath, the scraping of the body next to her, church-shined boots crunching the gravel near her soiled cheek and the preacher's monotone, "She's out."

Violet forced her eyes open, frantically blinking the dirt from her dark brown lashes before focusing on the pitiful sight before her. Her dusty arms outstretched, inches

from the plate. The vision slowly blurred and she wildly batted back tears in mortification.

"Violet," she couldn't tell if it was a question or a statement. Hank stood above her, a big hand outstretched. She moved to rise, hoping her face didn't show pain as she glanced at his open palm and determinedly pushed herself up on her own power, before unfortunately limping away with as much pride as she could muster. She tried unsuccessfully to avoid her older brother's gaze, which held a mix of frustration and pity. The frustration she could handle, in fact she was a little used to it, it was the pity that sent her directly to the sideline where she planted herself in a small patch of yellowed grass, arms crossed in shame or defiance she wasn't quite sure.

Rev. Crawford cleared his throat as if he was going to launch into his sermon. He patted his salt and pepper mane, which was perfectly coiled like sheep's wool, and gazed into the uncomfortable eyes around him. He raised his hand in authority, "We go into extra innings."

In the end they only needed one. Teddy held firm during his inaugural pitching stint, putting two of them away himself and popping out Bonzy Taylor to Violet's extreme delight. Then her older brother James, their strongest hitter, came to bat first cracking a home run on Hank's opening pitch, ending the game and sealing their victory, their first without their former star pitcher and her ex-best friend, Hank Garnett.



She was searching for tadpoles when she heard his footsteps. She crouched low to the creek's edge, squinting to see as the sun steadily lowered in the orange sky.

"I thought you'd told Pearl you wouldn't look for tadpoles anymore."

She tried to ignore him, remembering his disloyalty, but she couldn't help glaring in his direction before continuing her pursuit. Hank folded his long frame on their log. He knew that scowl. "Wrong subject," he murmured.

Two days ago, Pearl had pulled Violet aside, handing her a mended frock. She'd ripped yet another hem hunting tadpoles with Hank. "Mother can't afford new dresses," Pearl had quietly reminded her and not for the first time, Pearl sounded much older than her fifteen years. Chastised, Violet had muttered that it would be easier to catch tadpoles if she could just wear trousers. Pearl's mouth had parted, a soundless cavern, before she reluctantly launched into a speech she seemed about as excited to give as Violet was to receive. Violet was twelve now, Pearl had reminded her little sister. She had to realize she was growing up whether she wanted to or not, and that things were going to change, maybe not right away but eventually. She had to ready herself. Basically her mind needed to grow up along with her body. Violet blamed the pained expression on Pearl's face for any subsequent babbling because before she knew it, she'd promised to quit tadpole hunting, to take more pride in her appearance, and get "her head out of the clouds." She knew what that meant, less time drawing, more time doing something of "practical value."

A dark sliver darted past her open palm and she grasped at its wiggly frame and missed.

As she waited for another tadpole their silence lengthened and she snuck a peek over her shoulder. Hank had languidly crossed his arms over his chest, his breathing deep and even as he watched the still water. The cicadas were settling in for the evening and a rare breeze trickled across the thin reeds at the water's edge.

He sat on the log achieving the sort of relaxed contentment that came so naturally to him and that she could never seem to reach. She felt her shoulders drop.

He'd agreed with her sister. Hank, her so-called best friend, had defended Pearl.

“Maybe you should listen to her,” he'd suggested with a shrug as he took an enormous bite of a late summer apple. “Pearl’s pretty good at being a regular girl,” he’d finished with a mouth full of the tart fruit.

A regular girl. As opposed to what, a strange one? It wasn't just that she was best friends with a boy or slid head first into home plate. Everyone probably could have handled that. Truth be told, Dorothy Hyatt had beaten every man entered in the hay bale tote at last year’s Harvest Festival. And maybe they could have somehow come to understand the constant drawing of everyone and everything on every scrap of paper she could get her hands on, using any spare bit of coal she could collect, even lifting one from the church's grate. She'd explained to a forlorn Rev. Crawford that she was just using her talents, like the Jesus parable, the one with the workers and the talents, where you weren't supposed to simply bury them. He'd shaken his head and prayed for her mother right there on the spot. But she knew they all could have even looked past that deviance.

Her worst transgressions were the constant daydreams that one day she’d be in charge, the fantasies and delusions of grandeur that no colored girl could afford to consider. They weren't just foolish; they were dangerous. She'd had that explained to her time and time again. She had to *know her station* in this life.

If she was honest, she knew she could have handled her disappointment in Hank better. She did regret telling him, in quite a loud voice, he was a traitorous-pig-headed-good-for-nothing-excuse-for-a-friend. After all it was Hank who taught her how to hit a baseball in the first place. And there were all those other best-friend things he’d always done. In first grade, he rescued her hair tie from Tally Crawford, Rev. Crawford’s beastly niece, before she’d dropped it in the teacher’s inkwell. On her ninth birthday,

they'd defended their stick-and-mud fort together against Travis and Bonzy and sealed their governance of the creek. And just last week when a piece of her butcher paper flew out of her hands and into the murky creek water he'd waded in and fished it out, even when she told him to let it be, she hadn't drawn anything on it yet.

She recalled the fit she'd pitched before the church picnic and despite herself, her cheeks blazed. It was her or Hank on the team, she'd told James and Teddy, which put her brothers in a bit of a predicament. So she guessed she regretted that too. Sometimes it was like her mouth was out of sorts with her brain, spewing out words without a second thought, or doing the exact opposite and clamping shut when she needed to say something that mattered most.

She caught sight of another tadpole and sprang to action, quickly trapping it in her closed fist. "Got it," she announced triumphantly and involuntarily beamed at Hank. She had never been too fond of apologies, so before she could stop herself, she carefully carried her quarry to the log where Hank was perched, "for you."

Hank looked down at the baby toad darting in the small pool of creek water in her palms and lightly touched a long fingertip to the collection of water, triggering a tiny ripple. His dark brown digit contrasted against her wheat colored hand, and he slowly slid his other fingers into the water, carefully picking up the tiny creature with surprising gentleness. Transferring the tadpole to his palm he pushed off the log and crept back to the water's edge, his eyes strangely determined as he set it free.

He watched it swim away and then found his way to her side in a couple of long strides. For a moment Violet was worried he was going to comment on her busted lip, a small token of her failed home run attempt. But instead he shook his head and thumped her on the shoulder with little force. "Violet," he laughed and smiled his crooked

smile. But before he could say anymore she shoved him back and began trotting backwards to the slope towards home, "Race you back!"

And without hesitation, they ran.

CHAPTER THREE

She's awakening from her morning nap when The Hummingbird returns.

"Time for your meds," the nurse chirps, clutching a Pepto-Bismol colored cup of water and a handful of individually wrapped pills. Dropping it all on Violet's tray, The Hummingbird sets to work, quickly opening the sealed wrappers before hastily dumping each tablet into a tiny paper cup. Watching the nurse quickly peel the packaging, Violet is reminded of the little mangy park squirrels she used to feed pistachios all those years ago on her lunch break at the hospital. She was always amused to watch their little paws deftly shell each nut before hurriedly packing their whiskered cheeks. Smiling at the memory Violet imagines what fun it would be if Suzy would suddenly run off, a blur of pink scrubs, and scurry up a tree to stay until tomorrow. But instead, the nurse tosses the wrappers and slides the pill-filled mini cup to Violet with a reassuring smile.

One by one Violet takes the capsules, swallowing them on long pulls of water through her bent straw. She used to ask what each one was for but she's gotten tired of the pitying, or even irritated, looks on the nurses faces indicating they've shared that information with her more than a few times. Besides, the pills haven't killed her yet so she's decided they can't be half bad.

"Ready for your bath?" Suzy trills.

Violet nods, "A bubble bath?"

The Hummingbird giggles. "Oh Miss Violet, I'm afraid it's a sponge bath today."

"I figured as much." She's gotten used to baring all of her spare parts in front of the nurses, but having to do so while shivering on her automated bed is an added insult. She is permitted one to two whirlpool baths a week. Given her advanced age, that's what those baby-faced doctors call "old" these days—advanced, the docs consider her skin too thin and frail for daily submersion, hence the sponge baths. But she's suffered worse and

before long she's clean and tidy, dressed in a peach colored ensemble her granddaughter gave her last year. Suzy helps her to her chair and Violet sits, ready for her day to begin. Although she usually takes breakfast in her rooms, she likes to have her midday meal in the dining hall, where she eats with the same group of ladies she guesses she would call her friends. Everyone else sure likes to call them that. "There's your friends!" Suzy announces whenever they enter the dining room, like a beaming playground mama, finding it adorable that her little toddler has discovered other little people with whom she can toddle about.

"You've got some time before lunch," Suzy announces as she wheels Violet down the rose colored hall. Polished cherry wood chair-railings line the walls, and Violet has to admit they're cheery, even if she knows they also double as handrails for tottering old folks. The Hummingbird stops at the big bulletin board at the end of the long hall. It's splattered with brightly colored announcements and flyers. Her hand skims over the day's activities. "There's charades in the game room, ooh and 'cause of all this June gloom we're havin', Groovin' Gramps and Grannies is on the west lawn today!"

Violet doesn't respond.

"That's that new aerobics group."

Rolling her eyes at the class's ridiculous name Violet weighs her options. The last time she played charades had been a disaster. There'd been instances when, right in the midst of everyone guessing answers, the person giving the clues suddenly forgot what it was they were trying to act out in the first place. Why Ms. Mustache thinks elderly folks want to sit around playing games that only remind them of just how old they are, is beyond her. *Recreational Cognitive Reinforcement Activities*. That's what these games were called in the slick brochure her daughter and granddaughter showed her. The only thing she's really enjoyed so far has been bowling on that Wii Machine. But then

Norman Ginsberg and his cronies ruined that for everyone, constantly flinging the little controller thingamajigs smack into the rec room's new skinny TV screens, until Ms. Mustache had posted a bright orange notice, "ALL Wii ACTIVITIES ARE INDEFINITELY SUSPENDED."

She thinks about the exercise class on the west lawn. She's considered sitting in the sunroom this morning. But it would be nice to actually go outside.

"Maybe that exercise one?"

"Groooovin' Gramps and Grannies!" The Hummingbird sings with too much excitement. Her piled red hair, leaning like that tower of Pisa, trembles atop her plump face as she does an uncoordinated little shimmy.

"I'll go," Violet warns, "if you never call it that again."

Suzy hoots, releasing the brake then maneuvers them through the white and navy sitting room with its wicker furnishings and nautical décor, until they emerge onto the west lawn. The class has already started so Suzy deposits her in the rear with a couple of other wheelchair residents. "I'll be back to check on you."

"You can bring my hat," Violet adds before waving her away, turning to focus on the instructor, a cheery middle-aged strawberry blonde. They work on lifting their hands high while rolling their necks. As she turns her head up towards the gazebo's bougainvillea twined covering, she can sense the bright sunlight hovering above the awning, eclipsed by the morning's gray haze, like an omnipotent God, still powerful even in His invisibility. She closes her eyes and breathes deep. Though covered by clouds, the sun is still warm. She can feel a faint breeze and as she relaxes under the Texas sun, she remembers the sensation of lying on her back in the tall Tennessee grass as the laundry flapped in the distance, the sun awash on her face and the wide blue sky above her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Memphis, Tennessee 1923

The last summer of Violet's unconscious youth, (before the gnawing questions of who, and what, and why she was), started out like most others. The Tennessee sun lay heavy on their backs, almost oppressive in its heat. It was good laundry weather. Clothes pinned to the line, hanging like ripe fruit, dried swiftly, which meant they could move through bins quicker. They'd been spared some during the school term. But as Pearl had explained, Mother was earning winter's coal money in the midst of summer's heat.

Hearing the blunt ca-chunk of Teddy's axe as he split firewood for the laundry, Violet snapped her eyes open. Rising up on her elbows, the backs of her legs still flat against the tall grass beneath her dress, she squinted towards the wooden crate she'd abandoned to lie down. Its hazy aura had lifted signaling the departure of scalding steam. She gave one last look to the sky. The cloud that had resembled a kitten chasing its tail had shifted while she'd rested. Now it looked more like a key. Tearing her eyes away she pushed herself up just as the side door of their square house opened and her sister emerged. Sending Violet a queer look, Pearl descended the two creaky steps to the grass below. Quickly closing the distance to the crate, Violet scooped up a couple of laundry pins and shoved them in the corner of her mouth before she pulled out a large man's button down shirt from the bin.

Pearl joined her, glancing at Violet's hair. Knowing her braid was probably sprinkled with grass Violet resisted the urge to finger the evidence. Pearl expertly shook out a pair of men's trousers, her slender fingers moving deftly in their well-practiced movements.

Like Violet's own, her sister's golden summer skin shone, the cropped sleeves of her muslin frock revealing two well formed and sun-kissed arms that, come winter, would inevitably return to their natural shade of rolled oats. As Pearl concentrated on the task before her, Violet watched her sister's face settle into perfect symmetrical proportion, as if even her features recognized they would forever characterize an individual of particular order and stability. Pearl was considered remarkably pretty, but her natural reticence balanced her good looks, granting her the kind of harmless beauty that Violet often envied as Pearl never threatened or intimidated the more outgoing girls in school or church, and thus was never at a loss for friends or invitations of the female sort.

Pearl had also inherited Mother's serious eyes though they lacked their mother's honey colored hue. Instead Pearl, Teddy, Minnie, and their oldest siblings Darlene and Elias Jr. all possessed matching sets of dark brown eyes beneath equally matching pairs of smooth dark brows. Their brother James and his twin Nora, far fairer than any of them, bore hazel irises and sand colored tresses, while Violet whose hair was darkest of all, a deep brown-black, was the only sibling with piercing green eyes the color of creek moss. In the summer months, the hair on her head and body would slightly lighten while her skin bronzed. Violet would study her arms wishing the new colors would remain, as they gave the appearance that she was actually less hairy than she was. Unlike her sisters whose arms were noticeably sleek and smooth, Violet was often annoyed by the abundance of dark hairs covering her pale arms each winter. She'd once asked Mother, in a moment of daring, if Father was particularly hairy, or dark-haired, or even green-eyed. Mother had given her one of those long blank looks that Violet always found a bit unsettling before answering no, he was mainly like James and Nora.

Pearl and Violet reached into the bin, grabbing the same shirt at the same time. “Jehosephat!” they both blurted, neither quite ready to outgrow the old game.

“I said it first!” Violet declared.

Pearl, who’d always had a knack for losing gracefully released the shirt, before adding, “Mrs. Mitchell just left.”

Violet rolled her eyes and headed toward the line. Ursula Mitchell was married to Hugh Mitchell, the owner of the Negro mortuary. She was bosom-friends with Lula Mae Crawford, Rev. Crawford’s sister, and together they managed to spread more news than all of Tennessee’s radio and newspaper companies combined, albeit in the name of Christian charity. So whenever Ursula Mitchell picked up her family’s laundry she took special pride in leaving other folks’ business behind. “Who was she carrying on about this time?” Violet asked through a mouthful of pins.

Pearl gave a little pause. Obviously debating with herself if repeating what she’d heard was just as distasteful as saying it in the first place. But her mental warfare only made Violet more curious. “What?” Violet asked, slowing her pace.

Carefully pinning Dr. Owens’ gray trousers to the line Pearl finally conceded. “They say Miss Sampson won’t be returning next term.”

Violet quickly dropped the dainty handkerchief she’d just plucked from the pile, its descent to the ground below mirroring her plummeting stomach. She shouldn’t have been surprised. It had been rumored for years. Many had even wondered why the young teacher had taken the post at the public one-room schoolhouse to begin with. When Miss Sampson had arrived four years ago, fresh from a Negro university, they’d all assumed she was going to instruct at LeMoyné School. After all, they’d heard she’d attended a fancy and private Negro grammar school when she was coming up in Louisiana so why wouldn’t she now teach at one? Several had been downright suspicious of her supposed

“calling” to help all God’s children, instead figuring she was probably running from some lurid secret back home in the bayou. Eventually, to the gossipers’ silent disappointment, Miss Irene Sampson had simply turned out to be a young woman of uncommon fantasy and whim, spurred by an idealism that she’d somehow managed to carry with her into adulthood. “Not a lick of common sense in her pretty little head,” Lula Mae Crawford often whispered (quite loudly) about the young schoolteacher to her gaggle of bonnet-baring friends at church, who’d nod in stoic agreement, their head pieces bobbing in unison as if to accentuate their mutual concord.

Violet, on the other hand, found Miss Sampson utterly fascinating.

Leaving the clothes bin behind Violet collapsed on the steps leading to their side door and swiped at an ant crawling across her dusty bare foot. “Well doesn’t that beat all,” she scoffed, “where’s she going? LeMoyné?”

Pearl shook her head. “No, they say she’s getting married.”

She yanked a weed. “Says who?”

“I don’t know. Everyone I guess.”

Violet translated that comment to mean Ursula Mitchell and Lula Mae Crawford, Memphis’ Most Informed. She felt her temper ignite. She didn’t want a new teacher. She didn’t see why married ladies couldn’t teach to begin with. *It’s not like marrying suddenly made you dumb was it?* “Well who is she marrying anyway?”

Pearl hesitated for the briefest moment. “Gilbert Walker.”

Violet hopped to her feet. *Maybe marrying did do a number on your noggin.* “From Walker’s Market?” she spewed, “Old Walker with his patchy head and barrel gut who just stares at his copy of the daily while we shop?” Ignoring Pearl’s prissy look of disdain at her rude outburst, Violet shook her head in open contempt. She just couldn’t

believe it, their Miss Sampson, caught like one of those glossy eyed rabbits in Teddy's traps.

Miss Sampson had come to inhabit almost iconic status to Violet who now suddenly pictured her teacher in her mind's eye with her smooth skin the color of rich dark coffee, and her inky jet-black hair, which she always pulled into neat and tidy buns. Miss Sampson, who always smelled faintly of lemons, who loved poetry and music—and who was one of the few adults that actually acknowledged Violet's artistic talent with something other than perplexed annoyance. Because of their teacher Violet had even come to look forward to rainy and muddy days, when the downpour fell in torrents on the school's leaky tin roof, dripping into a collection of copper pots and pans. In the damp schoolroom, scantily heated by its temperamental coal stove, Miss Sampson would tell them all to lay their heads down on their desks, close their eyes, and listen to God's concert.

Violet looked at her sister in disbelief. The only time Old Walker even moved the solid lips on his thick face was when he was mumbling to customers about ears of corn or a new batch of pickled pig's feet, or something else equally dull. She'd bet he'd never even once listened to—or even noticed, God's concert!

But Pearl just nodded before murmuring, “They say she's in the family way.”

At that tidbit Violet's mouth dropped open. There were just no words. *Well they simply knew everything now didn't they?*

“But it sounds like it will be a big occasion.” Pearl continued, trying her best to remain positive.

“What will?”

“The *wedding*.”

“Oh,” Violet said making her way back to the cooling laundry and the dropped

handkerchief. “Well I don’t want any parts of it.”

Pearl turned sharply towards her.

“I don’t,” she said, digging in her heels, suddenly angry with Miss Sampson herself, like she did with those dumb rabbits when they went and got themselves caught. “If she wants to leave us for boring Old Mister Walker then she can just go ahead and do it without me there to see it.”

Her sister snatched a vest from the crate and shook it out before pinning it to the line. Violet looked down at her hands. They were already red and blistered. She knew by summer’s end they’d have cracked and bled repeatedly. She sucked at a sore spot and withdrew the remaining shirt.

“You can’t go through life expecting things will never change,” Pearl observed.

Violet was fourteen. She knew things changed. She’d seen their household change hadn’t she? Her oldest sister Darlene had moved all the way to Nashville, her oldest brother Elias Jr. right behind her. And just this past winter Nora had left to move in with Darlene so their older sister could pay special attention to Nora’s fragile health. And even though she missed her sisters so much it sometimes felt like her chest was going to squeeze itself shut, she hardly ever complained. At least not lately. Not that much. She hadn’t because she was fourteen. She wasn’t some baby without a lick of sense. “I know that.” She answered her sister defiantly.

Pearl barely hid a smile. “Then you will be there,” she said assuredly, completely dismissing the fire in Violet’s eyes before adding for good measure, “with bells on.”

And as usual, Pearl was right.



The Walker wedding was a hot and stuffy affair. The church house was filled with a surprising array of guests. Even Memphis’ wealthiest Negroes had come to

support their fellow business owner. Well the husbands had at least. Most of the wives were discreetly trying not to openly crane their necks in order to catch a good look at the bride's family from out of state. Were they really as well off as they'd all heard? An old family insurance company, barbershop, and dry goods business, and the nuptials were taking place in this creaky little sanctuary so far from her home? Memphis' colored elite had stepped into the foreign church, so unlike their vaulted assembly up the road, like royalty entering a barn in patronizing wide-eyed wonder. Mrs. Ursula Mitchell and Lula Mae Crawford, who cherished their roles as Violet's humble church's most esteemed ladies, looked simultaneously proud and wary at the sudden presence of their successful neighbors in the faded pews and they nervously fingered their Sunday best frocks and hats.

The sanctuary was abuzz as Violet stood at the entrance of the small church taking it all in. Miss Sampson had given her the special honor of asking if she would stand at the door with a basket of wildflowers, where she would greet the guests, offer each lady attending a flower and then ask the people attending the affair, "Guest of the bride or groom?" before pointing them to the correct side of the church. At first Violet felt a little silly asking, especially to the people she already knew. But she'd been asked specifically by Miss Sampson to do this task, when no other classmates were asked. And she was glad it was her, because whenever a gossiping lady mumbled something about Miss Sampson's "delicate condition" at the door to one of their friends, Violet took special care to crumple their flower a bit before handing it over.

Minutes before the wedding began Violet squeezed into her rear pew in time to hear old Mrs. Jenkins pound away at the piano as the bride marched in, her regal father beside her. Violet couldn't help but stare at the pair of them and something in her heart collapsed, knowing her father would never do the same for her. Yet, Miss Sampson was

beautiful as ever in layers of white and cream, comfortable in her small church, the place of worship for most of her public school students. When the ceremony began, Rev. Crawford did his best to move things along, which Violet knew required restraint on his part as their preacher did like the sound of his own impressive voice. And even with Violet's annoyance at the ridiculous whispered comments that Miss Sampson, foolish as she may have seemed, had indeed *snagged quite a catch*, Violet, despite herself, realized by the end of the service she had nearly succumbed to the romanticism of it all and was leaning forward in her rear pew, straining to hear the vows. But by the time the kiss came, she sat back, disgusted once again. She looked for Hank at the end of their row and made a face and the corner of his mouth lifted.

An outdoor reception in the back of the churchyard followed the ceremony, and after forty-five minutes in the sweltering sanctuary, the tent used for Summer Revival was a welcome relief. Violet had drawn one of her coal pictures (a portrait of their beloved teacher) for Miss Sampson, or Mrs. Gilbert Walker, *yechk*, and she left it on the gift stand before being directed by one of the bride's female cousins to the Young Persons table, a pair of sawhorses topped with a wooden slab accompanied by two bench planks stuffed in the far corner of the tent.

The table was filled with youth old enough to at least warrant a seat and not be banished to run around the outside of the pergola in the heat. She squeezed between Teddy and Hank as Pearl took a seat across from them next to a couple of their classmates, among whom was Travis Hooper. He was still an avid chest-peeker and Violet instinctively adjusted her Sunday frock.

"Where's Bonzy?" their little brother asked Travis through a mouthful of chicken, causing Pearl to narrow her eyes at the distasteful sight.

“At home, tending to his parents. Both his Ma and Pa are sick. Might be Yellow Jack,” he ended on a hushed note and the table noticeably tensed. A body couldn’t grow up in Memphis without hearing the old folks tell tales of the 1878 Yellow Fever outbreak that claimed thousands of the city’s residents.

Before they could ponder the situation further a stranger approached the table. “Excuse me, but perhaps there may be room for one more?”

A young man of noticeable height and wiry build stood at the head of the table in a well cared for, if a bit worn, military uniform. He gave a lopsided grin, his coppery face gleaming like a shiny penny, as he eased between Travis Hooper and Pearl. “Name’s George Bennett,” he told the table at large. “I’m here visiting my Aunt Ida, Ida McNair, and she insisted I come along, but it sure is a crush, and war veteran and all, guess I’m still little Georgey to her ‘cuz she sent me off to the Young People’s table to find a seat. No offense of course.”

“None taken!” the table cried out in unison, awe-struck by the confident newcomer.

Glancing at Pearl, Teddy hurriedly swallowed the biscuit he was chewing before speaking. “So you were really in The Great War?”

“Sure was,” George answered easily, scooping a mound of collard greens onto his fork. “Enlisted at seventeen,” he offered before enjoying the greens in open appreciation. Private George Bennett didn’t miss a beat as the table peppered him with questions. How’d he enlist at just seventeen? What did he do? Where did he go? And George Bennett sure didn’t disappoint. His older brother had a wife and three boys and was prepared to do his duty and since he was twenty-eight and of draftable age had completed his papers. The war effort was taxing the country and the army had gone from turning Negroes away to searching them out like holed foxes. In fact, they were recruiting

coloreds for the National Guard right in Tennessee. George, full of a younger sibling's fierce but reckless protection for both his older brother and little nephews swiped his brother's papers, became part of the colored 93rd Division, and fought off the Germans in France where he'd learned words like *oui* and *merci*.

By the time they were all eating Lula Mae Crawford's famous red velvet cake Violet was sure George Bennett was the most fascinating young person she had ever met. She swallowed a bite of the moist dessert and beamed at their new hero. "Boy, I bet you wish you had never even come back."

George Bennett smiled his easy smile, "Well I don't know about that Miss Violet."

Her brow wrinkled in confusion. "Why not? You had all sorts of adventures. More'n we've had around here." She added as the table around her nodded in consent.

George took a liberal sip of lemonade, his eyes discreetly glancing at a blushing Pearl beside him. "Let's just say, there are some things a man can only find at home." Violet looked from George Bennett's easy demeanor to the blurry look in her seventeen-year-old sister's usually unruffled brown eyes and inwardly flinched with a surging protective awareness. As old as she sometimes seemed, Pearl had never been truly courted in her entire life, and just because Violet had enjoyed the private's stories didn't mean she was ready to watch some war hero they'd just met from a *county* away gallivanting around her big sister. Pearl nervously dropped her napkin and Violet's stomach did a little flip-flop when George Bennett gallantly retrieved it. Violet was fourteen. She knew things changed. But she'd never promised that she had to be happy when they did.

CHAPTER FIVE

It had been two weeks since Miss Sampson had married Old Walker. And they'd been busy conjuring up ideas about possible or unknown replacements, the unknown usually constituting unwanted strangers complete with humped backs and hairy moles.

"As long as she's not as old as Miss Teelridge," Teddy proclaimed as they led their sister Minnie from the house, finally free from the laundry for an early evening swim, hopefully with Hank if he could finish his own work in time. Violet shrugged in passive agreement. Before she'd passed away, Miss Teelridge had been the oldest Negro spinster in town. Prone to dozing at her desk, she hadn't always been the most capable of teachers, which didn't matter much to Violet since Mother avidly tutored them at home as well. Still Violet sort of had a soft spot for the old woman. Maybe due to all the times during Sunday School when Miss Lula Mae would look at Violet and shake her head, "You're not careful Violet and you're going to end up like poor Miss Teelridge. Lord knows no respectable man's gonna want a wife with so many opinions."

As they reached the path's end from the house and turned onto the road a familiar frame emerged from the dense foliage that surrounded the creek.

Bonzy Taylor, with his yellow dog, S.O.B., sauntered into the road, a mess of fish over his shoulder.

"I thought I told you to stay away from my creek Bonzy Taylor!" Violet yelled out with more wrath than she actually felt.

Bonzy just cackled in the distance. "Taint yo creek no how Miz Violet Bishop!"

"It is too!" she snapped back.

"Teddy, how come you wuz cursed with such an ornery big sister?"

Teddy smiled and waved at Bonzy. "Gee Bonz, looks like you made out well."

Bonzy beamed, holding out his catch as they approached him. Minnie got down on one knee to scratch S.O.B. under his chin and the animal flopped down belly up for more.

“Yep,” Bonzy crowed. “This here feed me and my brothers for a bit.”

An awkward silence descended upon the group. Teddy and Violet weren’t really sure of what to say next. They’d both been little mites when their father died so they couldn’t remember what people said to them. And what did you say when both parents passed?

“Your Ma and Pa went to Heaven,” Minnie said softly as she rubbed the scrawny dog’s soft belly.

“Minnie,” Violet softly admonished.

Bonzy knelt down with Minnie, his fish over one shoulder as he started to scratch behind the dog’s ear, the animal sighing in delight. “Naw Violet. Minnie’s right,” Bonzy said calmly, smiling at their sister and Violet’s heart stopped banging against her chest. Minnie was what some called *slow to pick up* and even though she was older than Violet by one year, and even taller, it was like her body had grown to fifteen but her mind had just stopped at five. Violet had gotten in her share of scrapes coming up defending her sister or something she’d said. So watching Bonzy gently show Minnie how if he scratched S.O.B.’s ear just right the animal’s leg would twitch, she almost forgave him for being such a general pain over the years, almost.

“So what are you going to do?” Teddy finally asked the question they’d all been wondering.

Bonzy rose back up, the dog giving a little whine before turning to look at Minnie in open adoration. “Well, I gotta say, it’s been rough, what with my parents up and dyin’ and all.” They nodded, a bit surprised at his open candor. “I talked with Rev. Crawford.

He tryin' to see if Ned can git me on at the mill. I got four mouths to feed sides mine now. Five if you count S.O.B. here."

"What about family? There aren't kin somewhere that can help?" Violet asked.

Bonzy adjusted his fish and shrugged. "Can't no one afford to take us. Plus, I'm fifteen now. Next week I am anyways—I'm old enough to run house. Sides, with Miss Sampson up and married, I won't miss school no how. Not that I ever made it much anyways,." Bonzy said with the fierceness of a mantra he'd been repeating to himself for weeks.

There was a small pause; and Violet knew she should probably say something to encourage Bonzy, but her mouth just couldn't form the words. S.O.B. suddenly rose to his feet and yawned. "Well, this fella's ready to head home. Thanks fo' the fish from yo' creek Violet."

Despite herself she smiled widely. "Well, only because you brought S.O.B. along," and they all laughed when the dog howled as if in agreement.



She was still thinking about Bonzy and his dead parents when they walked back to the house, their underclothes slightly damp from the swim in the creek but rapidly drying in the heat. Hank hadn't made it, and Violet wondered once again if he'd be able to attend school next term. She knew his family's crops hadn't been what they'd expected this season and the thought of a school year without both Hank and Miss Sampson was disheartening. More than that, she wanted to talk to him about Bonzy's dead mother and father. How could God have let one follow right after the other like that? Wasn't it enough to take one parent?

Knowing they were home late, she rushed in to change and wash up before supper and as Violet scrubbed her face at the washbowl in the room she shared with her mother

and sisters, she felt a sense of dread at her audacity to question God's doings. She decided that she needed to be more like Pearl, and concentrate on His blessings. So she stood in their cramped room, overcome by the heat, waiting for a constructive revelation. She splashed water on her face and found a nugget of positivity reminding herself that as hot as she was, at least scrubbing up in the summer was much better than trying to make due with frozen-over water bowls in the winter. She quickly drug the brush over her hair, replaited it into its habitual braid, and left the room, determined to elevate her thoughts. But within moments her mind was back with Bonzy.

In the small, balmy kitchen she counted out six plates and placed them on the scarred tabletop as James was due home from the mill at any moment. Hearing the familiar crackle of stiff paper, Violet noticed Mother was still on the back porch, methodically wrapping clean laundry in butcher paper and tying the packages in twine. Pearl, already busy in the kitchen, removed their heavy iron pot from the wood-stove, its dying embers glowing orange and red in the waning evening light as she hooked the pot on its stand.

“We saw Bonzy Taylor coming from the creek today.”

Pearl nodded, swiping at her golden brow, which was covered in a fine sheen of perspiration. She removed the cornbread from the oven and turned to Violet. “How was he?” she asked with genuine concern.

Violet withdrew six tin cups from the cupboard and began laying them out on the table around its current centerpiece of once vibrant and now wilted wildflowers from George Bennett. *When would Pearl let them throw the pitiful things out?* Then considering Pearl's question about how Bonzy was holding up, she shrugged. “Okay, I guess. Rev. Crawford's trying to get him on at the mill.”

Pearl made a small noise at the back of her throat. “Those poor boys,” she sighed and Violet knew from the look in her sister’s eyes she meant Bonzy as well as his little brothers.

“They say it wasn’t Yellow Fever,” Violet announced adding the news she’d picked up with Teddy at Walker’s Market earlier in the day.

Her sister absently nodded, obviously already aware of that tidbit of information. Placing the forks on the table Violet looked up, “They say they were just plain tuckered out. Have you ever heard of such a thing?” she whispered.

Pearl wiped her hands on her apron and as Violet watched, she caught Pearl’s eyes quickly dart to the back porch. Violet’s eyes followed, her heart thudding in comprehension. Pearl, obviously frustrated with her lapse, hauled up the pot and began spooning steaming beans onto each plate as Violet followed close behind adding a chunk of cornbread. “You don’t think—“ Violet began.

“Violet, let it go.” Pearl commanded jutting the wooden spoon into the kettle for another scoop. That’s what she always said about everything important.

“Well what about Nora, Pearl?” Violet asked, her voice steadily rising. Pearl heaved the pot back to its hook and released her load as Violet continued, determined in her mission. “Why hasn’t she gotten better? Darlene said as much in her last letter.”

Pearl turned in exasperation, her eyes darting to the porch. “Violet Anne, please,” she sighed. “Not now, okay. I’m sure Nora’s going to mend.”

Thinking about her sister Nora, who’d always been a bit sickly but who was now ailing worse; Violet’s heart began to pound. They rarely got to see Nora since she’d moved in with their oldest sister Darlene and her husband in Nashville where their oldest brother Elias Jr. also lived with his wife and family. “But what if she doesn’t get better?”

Violet asked, an unknown panic swelling in her chest. The death of Bonzy Taylor's parents had released a dam of emotion she hadn't even realized she'd been confining.

"But she will get better," Pearl answered with calm determination as Minnie, carrying her ragdoll Lucy, entered the kitchen and took a seat, arranging the toy just so in her lap before looking up at her sisters, "Sometimes sick people don't get better." Minnie announced, "Sometimes they die."

Pearl's lips thinned into a pink line and she glared at Violet. *Are you happy now?* She mouthed from behind their sister's back. How was Violet supposed to answer that? *Yes, I'm happy Minnie thinks about death.* Instead, she shook her head dumbly and sat down as well.

The back steps groaned and Violet instinctively knew her big brother James was home from the mill. Violet and Pearl watched the back door, waiting for it to open. But instead the back porch creaked and moaned under the weight of their pacing brother. Though the flimsy window curtain blocked part of their view, James was still partially visible as he stood before Mother, a scowl upon his usually handsome face as he stomped back and forth like one of those guards at the mill. Something strange had been brewing between Mother and James for some time now, and Violet was sure Pearl knew more than she let on which needled Violet to no end. She looked at her brother through the window. He'd changed so since they used to play ball at the church picnics. At nineteen, he'd grown taller and stronger, and now that he worked at the mill full-time his shoulders were broadening even further. Like Nora, he and his twin had the fairest complexion of them all, and in the heat of the evening his cream-colored skin flushed scarlet while his amber locks stuck to his forehead. Without another glance to Pearl, Violet jumped from her seat at the table and rushed towards the back of the kitchen where she would have a better chance of listening to the conversation on the porch.

She strained to hear the muffled voices, but Pearl wasn't making it easy, giving her disapproving glances the entire time. Pearl finally tugged at her sleeve, pulling Violet to her seat, but to Violet's dismay, Pearl headed back to the window, leaning her slender frame towards the porch. Violet watched in amazement, her heart thudding against her chest. She wasn't sure why, but somehow realizing her sister was just as worried about the tension between James and Mother made the threat of her family's conflict all the more real.

"What's happening?" Violet asked.

Pearl remained eerily still at the window, her body completely motionless, like one of Hank's scarecrows.

"Pearl!" Violet hissed, but her sister just raised a hand to silence her.

The back door suddenly flung open and the girls in the kitchen gave a small start. James eyed his sisters suspiciously. "Where's Teddy?" he finally asked.

"Out front," Violet heard herself answer. "Chopping wood."

James yanked his handkerchief from around his neck, dunked it in the water bucket on the floor, and then methodically wiped his dirty brow and face. "Tell him it's time to eat," he said.

Violet nodded, getting up once more from her seat. Before she left the kitchen she watched James at the washing bucket. "James?"

"Not now Violet," he sighed. And Violet knew, once again, there would be no answers tonight.

During supper Violet and Pearl tried a bit too eagerly to maintain normal conversation but instead to Violet their banter sounded stilted and forced as they asked, "Could you please pass the butter?" and "Would anyone else care for any pickled beets?" If Teddy noticed the awkwardness of the evening he didn't let on, completely absorbed in

his beans and cornbread. Minnie was occupied as well. She'd shared with the table that her doll Lucy had suddenly developed a fever, an announcement that triggered yet another look of exasperation from Pearl to Violet and Violet began to wonder when the trying meal when soon be over. So it wasn't much of a surprise when James shoveled through his beans and suddenly stood, his bench flying backwards, causing Teddy to simply reach further for another piece of bread. "May I be excused Mother?" he said as he rose, already leaving the table before she could answer.

Violet and Pearl turned to Mother in anticipation of her response to their brother's abrasive behavior. His hazel eyes blazed and Violet wondered for the hundredth time what was bothering him, and for the two hundredth time, she wished Mother would do more than just sit there, her pale eyes blank and worn. Thinking of Bonzy's exhausted parents Violet looked at her fatigued mother and felt a heady mixture of anger and fear.

Mother finally nodded, slowly gathering James's plate, as he headed towards the back door. "Darlene's bringing Nora for a visit." She suddenly announced. "Most likely Elias will come for awhile too."

At the mention of their siblings they all spoke at once.

"When will they get here?" Minnie asked, bouncing in her seat.

"How long are they staying?" Teddy wanted to know.

Mother's eyes focused on James and he nodded absorbing the news. "It'll be nice to see them," he said softly. But they all knew he especially meant his twin, Nora. Violet looked at Mother and could have sworn her narrow shoulders relaxed a fraction.

"Don't wait up." James briskly announced before striding from the kitchen.

"Lucy's fever broke!" Minnie exclaimed to the table, just as the back door slammed shut.

"Hallelujah!" Teddy hollered, laying a loud smack on the doll.

“Teddy!” Minnie laughed, “You got cornbread crumbs all on her face!” and her giggle washed over the room, a baptism of sorts.

Smiling wide, Violet caught Pearl’s eye, and with the fortitude of youth, willed their earlier conversation, James’ strange behavior, and the unwanted emotions both incidents had summoned with them to the outskirts of her mind. Pearl, ever happy with peace, however fleeting, returned the smile. And in the evening’s light, even Mother seemed content, revealing two rows of small, white teeth as she watched Minnie and Teddy happily fuss over Lucy's crumb-covered cloth face. And in that moment Violet sensed her family had prevailed over some unknown threat, as they ate, smiled, laughed, and imagined things could forever stay as they were.

CHAPTER SIX

A little before midday the Texas sun bursts from its gray skies, brilliant in its June glory. Violet and the other residents are partially shaded, perched beneath the west lawn's gazebo. Yet still, her aerobic instructor looks up at the bright sun now blazing above, her fair brows converging. "Maybe we ought to wind it up a bit early, people."

Reluctantly bringing her arms back to her lap, Violet gives a little sigh. She'd been reaching up, up, the sky in reach, before this interruption. At the trainer's appearance of alarm all manner of commotion erupts. Nurses and staff rush to mobilize the group of elderly people, evacuating them from the looming sun. Violet sits unmoved and unworried. Unlike most others she's had the good sense to wear her wide-brimmed gardening hat.

"Who's she belong to?" Violet hears a slender nurse anxiously ask, the young girl hooking a thumb in Violet's direction. She rolls her eyes at the obtuse question. *Belong to* indeed. But she knows what the girl is getting at. A yellow placard flags Violet's wheelchair designating her as an *Individualized Care* patient. Which means she's forever in the company of The Hummingbird, save for the nurse's few days off when Violet's then shackled to another attendant. She doesn't answer the girl. Not that she'd asked Violet anyway so instead she settles deeper into her chair, enjoying the mayhem.

She figures she can't really blame them for the panic. Imagine the look on Ms. Mustache's pinched face should she march outside in full pantsuit regalia only to find a gaggle of her residents prostrate in the summer sun. Fried like a dozen old eggs.

Violet grins at the thought. Her daughter and granddaughter would rush to the facility. Violet would live of course. You can't reach nearly a hundred just to go out like that. But Ruby and Jessica would arrive, stricken. "I'm so sorry Grand!" Jessica would wail as Violet comforted them: They'd only been doing what they thought best. But she

was packed and ready to go home. No harm done. Violet's eyes dazzle at the distant thought.

"Looks like someone enjoyed herself!"

The Hummingbird has landed. "Well, the class was cut short," Violet stodgily reports. And perhaps it's the beginning stages of heatstroke but she suddenly grants the nurse a smirk. "But yes, I think I did enjoy it."

"I think you did too! Regular exercise suits you, Miss Violet."

She nods in agreement. "It does Suzy," she looks at the plump nurse in thought. "Maybe I'll use my walker to lunch today."

The Hummingbird's little hands flutter in delight, "Wonderful! You're just a regular little Jane Fonda aren't you?"

"No, no," Violet waves a hand as if to swat away the silly comment. "But I've always enjoyed dancing, even if I wasn't always very good at it."

"Oh I'm sure you could kick up your heels with the best of them."

"At home in Memphis yes," she remembers. "The Big City up north," she trails off.

"Up north! You were a Yankee Miss Violet!" Suzy prattles, wheeling them towards the main building. Violet pulls the brim of her straw hat closer, noting that her hand shakes a bit. "What big city exactly?" Suzy asks before continuing, "You know my sister Carolyn just moved to Newark? *New Jersey*, can you believe it! She says she likes it, but Mama and I just know she's miserable," the nurse carries on without pause, listing the reasons why Carolyn, her sister, couldn't possibly find happiness in *New Jersey* of all places. But Violet barely hears a word, her thoughts wandering through crevices of long-abandoned recollections.

"Maybe I'll just rest a bit before lunch," she hears herself say.

The wheelchair slows and she can feel The Hummingbird's sharp eyes at her back. "Well sure thing Miss Violet," Suzy croons. "That was some workout you had out there and Lord knows we don't want you all pooped out before your big weekend even begins."

They turn towards her apartment and Violet nods in agreement. Birthdays, after all, are for the living.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Memphis, Tennessee 1924

It was as if Violet's life was told in summers. Perhaps the longer days and extended hours proved fertile soil for producing adventures. Or vital memories. Her brother James left home without a trace in the summer of '23. He hadn't even waited to see his twin Nora before leaving. And now a year later, during yet another summer, his disappearance still left a gaping hole in her family.

According to the whispers among the pews at church and between the aisles of Walker's Market, James had left to *pass*. Just like his father, some murmured, simply fed up living colored when he could so easily live white. A comment that caused quite a stir.

Because no one in their community was really sure of what had truly happened to the original head of the Bishop clan.

A dozen years ago, Dolly Bishop and her brood had limped into town, no husband in sight. She'd claimed to be a widow. So Rev. Crawford (being a true Christian gentleman) had helped her negotiate a lease on a little square house. Dolly had moved in her family, set up her laundry operation, and promptly commenced upon the business of keeping to herself. "Uppity as all get," Lula Mae Crawford immediately assessed about the seemingly educated washerwoman, "I'd keep an eye on her if I was you ladies." And they did. Maybe all those children would dissuade a single man from looking twice. But Dolly Bishop possessed that delicate kind of beauty that only intensified when blemished. Like chipped fine china you rushed to set up high in the breakfront, eager to protect it from further harm and kept safe so that it could be taken down on occasion, to be admired and used when the daily crock ware wasn't special enough. So they all watched and waited, ready on the trigger should any tempted husband fall prey to the urge to secretly take the widow Bishop under his protective wing.

If any of the county husbands tried, none were successful and their spouses weren't really sure what to make of the situation. On one hand they were certainly relieved. But on the other some found themselves further embittered. Just who did Dolly Bishop think she was turning up her nose on their men? In fact, that was probably why she couldn't keep one herself. For now there was talk that she wasn't a widow at all. Some suggested that her husband was just plumb tired from trying to please a woman who couldn't be satisfied, so he'd simply left, dejected and abused.

Fortunately, by the time Violet reached school age her mother and family were no longer the focal point of neighborhood gossip. By then Irma and Jacob Benson had taken that mantle. Their tumultuous marriage had resulted in four children (two of whom looked more like Fisheye Watts than Mr. Benson), countless public quarrels, and even one knifing. According to Dr. Owens who'd stitched up poor Jacob, what Irma Benson lacked in aim and precision she certainly made up for in pure spite.

Yet the Bishops were never completely exonerated from the rumor mill. Every so often, usually thanks to Lula Mae or her horse-faced daughter Tally, Violet would be reminded of the chatter (that her father, Mr. Bishop, had been murdered, had committed suicide, had *passed* for—no, was actually white). Once in their one-room schoolroom, before Miss Sampson had arrived, during Miss Teelridge's tenure (who was so old she'd taught many of the students' parents) Tally had taken to hissing every time Violet came near, teasing her for her green eyes. "She's got cat eyes like her white daddy," Tally had whispered to the entire back row of the class while Tally's friends had cackled along with her. All morning it continued. Until they'd all returned from outdoor play after lunch and the class was greeted with a four-foot illustration upon the blackboard. A perfectly drawn horse with Tally Crawford's unmistakable face smiling at the class through its yellowed chalk teeth. Violet took special care to avoid her older sister Pearl's look of

dissatisfaction as she stood at the front of the class with Miss Teelridge as the class filed in. “Boys and girls let’s thank Miss Bishop,” the old teacher had rasped as she talked to her feet, her frail back hunched over. “She’s helped us begin this afternoon’s agricultural discussion. The equine’s involvement in our work.” Pointing a gnarled finger at the board the near-blind spinster schoolmarm had beamed. “That’s some horse.” To the teacher’s dismay, her entire class (save Tally Crawford of course) had burst into laughter, even the ever-mature Pearl. And when the nickname “Horseface Tally” took from that day on, Violet felt a little tingle of pride at her accomplishment.

But then the disappearance of James had truly sparked The Bishop Family talk anew. Considering the odds, until then, Dolly had remarkably produced a succession of intelligent, morally sound and well-adjusted adult children. So when misfortune struck the Bishop household through James’ apparent abandonment, the neighborhood women descended. All bore casseroles, cakes, or pies. Many were full of genuine concern. And a few carried thinly veiled words of comfort that belied an almost giddiness towards the beautiful and elusive Dolly Bishop’s failure to keep her son among them.

Now what surprised Violet most was that even a year later the surrounding community had managed to discuss James (and even her father) more than the Bishop family had themselves. Not that she hadn’t herself tried to instigate conversations with Pearl and even Mother in those first days when James had gone missing. And when the *passing* talk had sprouted around town she’d rushed home, face flushed, a heaving pain in her chest, “Is it true?” she’d wailed as she threw herself at Pearl. “Did he hate us that much?” Was being colored so very terrible that he’d give them all up forever?

And then there was the private question to herself, which she barely allowed conscious thought. Would she have considered doing the same if her own golden skin suddenly went near creamy white like her brother’s? But such notions were useless to

ponder because one couldn't change how they were born. She refused to acknowledge any validity in her brother's motives because to do so was an indictment of who she was intended to be. And until now, though she may have felt the nagging awkwardness regarding her dreams, her art, her overwhelming tendency to speak before she thought, Violet Bishop had grown up basically content with who she was. She was of course aware of *race relations* and was well versed in the necessary rules and restrictions of where she ought and ought not to find herself in which parts of town. But it had never occurred to her that whatever life went on beyond those boundaries of acceptance was so much better than her own that it would be worth throwing away contact with everyone and everything she'd grown to love just to be able to taste its fruit.

So in the end Violet pushed aside any anger regarding what James' leaving inferred about her own limitations and stuffed away any sinking awareness that perhaps her brother felt she was destined for some colored future so detestable he'd escaped it when she could not. Those were feelings she'd fervently declined to accept.

Instead she'd grown furious with Mother. "How could she let this happen?" she'd continually hissed to Pearl and even once to Mother herself. An accusation that had ultimately earned her a firm slap across her cheek from their mama. The first ever of its kind. A blow whose stinging pain was far eclipsed by the look of pure disappointment upon her older sister's face. "Why can't you ever let things be?" Pearl had sighed when Mother had crept from the room, desperately wringing her hands as if she'd been the one physically punished.

Finally, succumbing to familial tradition, Violet had slowly begun to curb her tongue. "Could it be, or are you trying to gain some good sense Miss Violet Anne?" Lula Mae Crawford had acknowledged quite loudly after church one Sunday in response to the new, quieter Violet Bishop. And at home, she'd played along when it was as if James

had never existed. She even mimicked Pearl, admonishing Teddy and Minnie on those rare occasions they cautiously broached the subject of their older brother's whereabouts. From then on any discussion of her brother was tossed into the gaping sea of their family's undisclosed emotions, an expanding body of water Violet may have now conceded to, but secretly feared would soon grow so big it would one day drown them all.

Nevertheless, life continued. She reached another summer. And another birthday. And in the summer of 1924, the year of the infamous Birthday-Her-Family-Forgot, she turned fifteen. The morning of Violet's fifteenth birthday she awoke to the smell of Mother's griddlecakes. She nearly hopped out of bed even though it was barely dawn. It had been ages since her mother had made them. Her mouth watering, she hurried at the washbowl and wondered if they'd even get a little syrup. She hadn't really expected her favorite meal for her birthday. Since James had left, money had been even tougher to pinch together than it had already been and she'd gotten pretty used to all sorts of hash and meal. She swept into the kitchen her stomach growling.

"Good you're up," Pearl said from over the stove. The kitchen was a bundle of activity. "The mill's received a huge new order. We've heard Ned has been hiring countywide. The new shift's payday was yesterday and Mother's laundry drop-offs this morning have almost doubled. It supposedly won't last long though."

Violet nodded somewhat confusedly as Pearl scooped a couple of steaming pancakes from the griddle and placed them on a square piece of butcher paper. "This order's up, take it to the gentleman with the gray cap. Tell him syrup is a nickel more."

She took the thrust-out meal and headed out the back door. The yard was filled with men in various stages of undress and Teddy was scampering from body to body eagerly scooping up haphazardly shed garments of clothing. "It was all my idea!" he

beamed at her. “Old feller over there chomping on the griddlecakes,” hands full of clothes, he jutted his chin towards a wiry old man with baby pink skin except for a shock of white whiskers and an infant’s toothless smile. He was gumming away at Mother’s hot breakfast. “Old man there came to drop off his wash and asked where he could garner a meal in these parts. And then it just popped out!”

She stood unmoved, a bit overwhelmed by the activity of the yard and still scanning for the man in a gray hat.

“I told him we’d feed him too! And after Mother got over the shock, we got right to it. And now we’re selling out of those cakes fast as they come off the griddle!”

Guessing her birthday wishes had been put on hold, Violet tried to catch her brother’s excitement as she eventually found the man in the gray cap, handed him his cooling order and reminded him that syrup was five cents extra. She was heading back to the house when the back door flew open revealing Pearl in her apron, a bowl and a wooden spoon in her hands, “Violet, it’s still Tuesday, so you and Mother have to go the Gardens. I’ll probably send Minnie along too. This rush should end before long. Most of these men have a shift coming up real soon.” Violet nodded back as Pearl motioned to another pile of pancakes on the back porch. “Those are for the one sitting on the barrel with the red hair and freckles.”

She scooped up the order and trekked back to the yard. This one was easy enough to find. The man was probably not much older than her oldest brother Elias Jr. and in the early morning light his bright hair glowed atop his head. She handed him his meal, “Syrup’s a nickel more.”

He took the butcher paper letting his calloused hands slowly slide over hers as he did. “After seein’ you don’t think I’ll need nuthin’ else sweet all day long.”

Violet pulled her hands towards herself yet he held on tight. “Excuse me sir, but I need to head back.”

“Choo hoo, now listen how fine you talk.”

She tugged harder and freed herself, quickly turning towards the house.

“You think cuz you high yella with green eyes you special gal?” he called out after her as she hurriedly climbed the steps and closed the door, her heart beating against her chest.

“That’s the last of them,” Pearl said handing Teddy the final piles of griddlecakes. “For those two sitting by the laundry kettle.”

Violet stood rooted by the door as her little brother sailed past her. She looked at the stove. Not one pancake was left.

“Violet, there’s hash on the stove if you’re hungry,” Pearl absentmindedly announced as she pumped water at the sink, already starting on the breakfast dishes.

It was then that it finally dawned on Violet that her family had quite perfectly forgotten her birthday. And though she was hungry, (they were forever ravenous now that food was rationed even more), Violet found herself too proud to eat. So she barely murmured, “No, thank you,” before heading to their room to start her daily chores.



She was sweeping the front porch not long after the yard had finally cleared out when Minnie stepped outside walking on her tiptoes, a habit she’d recently developed for what reason no one could decipher. She pranced to and fro delicately avoiding the broom before stopping in front of Violet and reaching into her apron’s pocket. “This is for you!”

Thinking maybe someone had finally remembered her day, Violet ceased her sweeping, her heart lifting a bit. But it wasn’t a present Minnie held but a letter. Violet

looked down at the worn envelope in Minnie's hands, immediately recognizing her oldest sister Darlene's bold penmanship and wondered just how many days it had been since Minnie had retrieved it from the afternoon post.

"Violet, you and Mother need to leave in ten minutes!" Pearl called from within.

"Okay," she answered back sitting on the porch.

"What's it say?" Minnie asked, steadily tipping away on her toes.

"I haven't opened it yet," she tried to answer nonchalantly. "I think you're coming today Minnie. Why don't you get Lucy settled for while you're gone." At the mention of her beloved doll she raced back, flat-footed, into the house as Violet gingerly opened the thick envelope and pulled out the neatly folded pages.

Dear Violet Anne,

Thank you for your previous letter. Will and I are well, as is Nora, and Elias Jr., Jane, and their boys. I have to admit I was a bit impressed by your directness, a trait I've long admired, and after much thought I have decided direct questions deserve direct answers.

"Lucy's down for her nap!" Minnie announced, bounding out of the house. Pearl wasn't far behind and Violet struggled to casually fold the correspondence as if it didn't contain much more than ordinary tidings of sisterly affections.

"Violet," Pearl summoned. "Mother has an appointment with Dr. Owens today at three this afternoon so you have to make sure that she finishes no later than two. That's why I'm sending Minnie as well." Pearl removed two dollars from her money pouch and pinned them to the inside of Violet's apron. "Here's two dollars. \$1.50 is for Dr. Owens' back fees and \$0.50 is for Service Drugstore for Mother's elixir. And remind Dr.

Owens that when Mr. Kirkland finally pays us with those chicks then we can also give him a bird or two towards the rest of the bill.”

She nodded in understanding as Pearl determinedly eyed her. She'd comprehended what went unsaid. These were all responsibilities she was going to have to handle on her own sooner than later. It had been a year and Private George Bennett was still sniffing around. And every time he could get away from his farmhouse a county away he was at their doorstep handing Pearl and Mother wilted flowers that they rushed to place in water and dispensing hard candies, warm from his pocket, to Teddy, Minnie, and Violet. This spring Pearl had turned eighteen and had even completed her schooling in spite of the extra laundry they'd taken in on account of James's absence. Yet her continued presence at home was tenuous at best. Violet knew there was a bit more time before the inevitable nuptials since George was busy helping his mother with their land and crops. His father had been ill and he was picking up the slack.

So a couple of months ago Violet had decided to treat Pearl and George's upcoming wedding like *The James Situation*. (That's what Pearl had called James' disappearance once. “Violet please, we're all upset about *The James Situation*, not just you.”) So in the wedding went: into the Bishop Family pit of things not to be discussed. And when Pearl would bashfully approach the subject Violet would make her eyes go blank, just like she'd seen Mother do a hundred times in response to an unwanted conversation.

“I know we can't really afford a trousseau,” Pearl once softly murmured at the line as they quickly pinned linens, “But Rose Jenkins said she might be able to get some extra fabric from her uncle's mill in Nashville. She said she'd even help me sew a few things.” Pearl's golden face flushed scarlet at the mention of the delicate bedroom attire.

“I think we can manage. I’ve always been good with a needle. Maybe you’d like to help as well Violet?”

Violet just stared at her sister, eyes void until she finally responded, “I thought there wasn’t a date yet. Are you sure you should be so presumptuous?”

Pear stammered, her lovely face uncharacteristically askew.

“Is his father any better?” Violet continued as indifferently as if she’d inquired about the weather.

“He’s rallying,” Pearl answered and then with a determination that shamed Violet she recovered. “And when he does, George’ll come for me.”

Those conversations always left Violet defeated. When she’d purposely ignore her sister’s excitement she’d feel no better than Travis Hooper was when they caught him at the creek toying with that kitten, mercilessly dragging the helpless creature by its tail. Hank had thumped Travis good before taking the animal home with him. “Lucky” they’d named the little orange tabby.

Maybe Violet deserved a good thumping as well. Because she understood that Private George Bennett was honorable, stepping in for a sick father. She comprehended his good looks, his engaging humor. His unwavering devotion to her sister. And she hated that her sullen behavior could be mistaken for something as malicious as not wanting Pearl to be happy.

Instead it was much simpler. She just didn’t want her to go. She didn’t understand the necessity of the move to *his* county after the wedding. As Mother’s right hand Pearl was practically a second mama to Teddy and Minnie, and Violet didn’t think she could fill her shoes. More importantly she didn’t want to. Not because she wasn’t prepared for her shift as second-in-command but it seemed to loom before her as a life-long post. Teddy would eventually leave. And Mother would be left all alone. She’d

always have Minnie, but their Minnie would perpetually be a sweet child in an aging body. So there would be no younger sister left to take Violet's place at Mother's side when she was ready to go. And selfish or not she didn't want to be left behind forever.

"Mother," Pearl called into the house, "Violet and Minnie are out front waiting. Send Teddy out as well. The wood is low."

Dolly Bishop made her way through the doorway, Teddy darting out before her. She wrapped her shawl tightly around her even though the summer morning was already quite warm. Mother took Minnie's hand and they set out together with Violet right at their heels. Violet knew the walk to Central Gardens would take a little less than an hour at this mild pace. Usually she and Mother walked in companionable silence most of the way but this morning they had Minnie's steady stream of narration as they passed the familiar homes she knew.

The first stretch of their walk led them down their dirt road that was sprinkled with small box houses with flat roofs much like their own, homes that housed a large number of Negro families in the south side of Memphis. As they walked Mother pulled her wrap about her and looking at her back, Violet thought about how small she was beginning to look.

According to a comment their sister Darlene had made last Christmas Mother hadn't always been so frail and quiet but life had simply taken its toll. And to Violet it seemed like ever since they began going to the Gardens every week to the Pritchett's whatever spark had been left inside Mother had simply closed up for good. This assessment made her finger Darlene's letter in her apron. Would it be terribly rude to read it while Mother was walking right ahead of her? Watching her mother and sister slowly making their way along the lane, Minnie chattering happily, plain curiosity

defeated good manners as Violet carefully eased the letter from her pocket and opened it to the first page where she left off.

...and after much thought I have decided direct questions deserve direct answers.

Well Violet, I can't say it's surprising to hear about Mother's further decline regarding the Gardens. In fact, Mother once told me when I was a very little girl that her father used to say that he felt God had smiled on him. Because all he ever wanted was to make sure his wife and daughter never had to work in a white man's house for a living and The Good Lord had granted him that request.

Violet reread the last sentence before unconsciously looking up at Mother who was still ambling along.

And Violet in response to your claim that you have the right to know your family history as much as I or Elias Jr., first of all please allow me to state that I certainly agree, beloved. I read your letter to Will and to quote him directly, he stated: "Good God but she is a fierce one!"

Violet's cheeks blazed a bit as she read on.

So needless to say, dear sister, I do believe you deserve to know your family history and I don't feel it has been kept from you or Teddy, or even Pearl to some extent, by any malevolence, but simply from a broken heart. Let me explain.

Violet quickly turned the thin page over.

Mother, Dahlia Bishop,

Violet silently let her mother's full name run over her tongue. Dahlia. She'd always been Dolly to friends.

...was born Dahlia Wiggs in 1872 not long after our nation's war. Mother was born free to Mitchell Wiggs and Ellie Wright Wiggs in southern Tennessee. Mitchell owned two acres of land just years after the war and he was able to provide quite a life as a blacksmith for his wife and four children.

Four children. That meant aunts or uncles.

Mother's parents, Mitchell and Ellie had both been born into slavery. Mitchell was the child of John Wiggs (a widower) and his mulatto slave Anna who was a companion to his youngest daughter. Ellie was the product of Isaac Wright and his sixteen-year-old slave Janie.

Shortly after Emancipation Mitchell and Ellie married. John Wiggs had ensured that Mitchell learned a trade and by fourteen he was an accomplished blacksmith. He had also been sufficiently educated and by the age of six could read and write. When Mitchell and Ellie married Mr. Wiggs gave them the two acres of land on which Mother was raised through a land grant.

Running into Mother's back Violet nearly dropped the letter. Minnie was hunched, fiddling with her boots.

"They pinch," she was whining. "It's summer anyhow."

Mother knelt down and wiggled each shoe. “Summertime or not you cannot arrive at the Pritchett’s barefoot and wild.”

“I don’t wanna be wild Mama, just barefoot!”

Mother opened her mouth to continue, but her hacking cough got the best of her, causing her pale face to redden as she doubled over in one of her coughing fits.

“Come on Minnie,” Violet jumped in, admonishing her sister in her best *Pearl Voice*, “don’t give Mother a hard time.” With just a bit of pout Minnie straightened up ready to continue walking. Mother righted herself then slowly wiped her mouth with the edge of her shawl, and Violet hated that in that moment she was wishing her mother would use a handkerchief to brush her lips like her teacher Miss Sampson did instead of using her shawl. Mother smiled weakly at Violet and Violet offered back a small smile. She was now also inwardly ashamed that she was reading her mother’s life history right behind her back.

But not embarrassed enough to stop.

Violet scanned to the bottom of the page. The land grant, *gadzooks!* They were happy to make rent each month on their small clapboard house. Darlene continued in her strong script.

Mother’s mama, Ellie, came to the marriage illiterate, as her father and master, Mr. Isaac Wright had no particular fondness for Ellie or her mother Janie. At any rate, he was completely opposed to the idea of educating negroes, as he believed it both criminal and immoral and furthermore impossible, given his firm belief in the negro race’s mental inferiority. So Mitchell diligently taught his wife to read and write once they were married.

Mitchell, however, was a poetry enthusiast. I know what you are thinking. Just like Mother. One of Mother's favorite memories she often shared with Elias Jr. and myself was how she used to love hearing her father read to them after supper. Her brothers on the rug below, her mother near the fire with her mending, and Mother on her father's lap. He would read Ralph Waldo Emerson, (yes from the same volume Mother now reads to us), and she would lay her head on his chest, falling asleep to the deep rumble of her father's voice.

Violet tried to imagine her mother as that small girl, warm and safe and loved on her father's lap, but she could barely form the image. As they turned with the road the box homes gave way to a smattering of larger residences. Homes with gable roofs and impressive shutters. Wide porches enveloped the stately homes where the town's wealthier negroes like Dr. Owens and Tomas Lewis who owned the negro insurance company lived. As Violet returned to the letter she shook her head at Darlene's usual astuteness.

Now Violet, I have painted quite the picture of familial bliss and security, have I not? So I know you are surely now wondering however Mother traveled from one life to the other. Well, when Mother was seventeen she met Elias Bishop, our father, at a summer tent revival. Elias was new in town and not much younger than Mother's father Mitchell. He was by some standards a slight man with extremely fair skin, dirty blond hair, hazel eyes and bold to a fault.

Violet diligently pictured a smaller version of her brother James.

Mother's father didn't like nor trust our father, who, though extremely handsome, was what some called "shiftless." But Mother fell deeply in love despite her father's objections. Her father wanted to send Mother to the new negro ladies' university in Georgia and felt she should wait until she had completed her education before marrying, hoping by then she would have outgrown her youthful infatuation and found a more appropriate spouse.

Violet silently nodded, recalling the occasion she'd unwillingly overheard one of their wealthier laundry clients whisper to another regarding their mother's "unfortunate decision." Refocusing her thoughts towards the letter she continued reading.

However, Mother eventually got her way and they married. Her father bought them a house very near his as a wedding present, which our father promptly sold then moved them to the eastern part of the state. Within the year Father had run through the proceeds from the sale of the house and they began to move from town to town throughout Tennessee, "each time with less money and more children," as Mother once described the circumstances.

By the time you were three Violet Anne, and Teddy was just over one, Father died of alcohol inset wasting. He left Mother with eight surviving children, one of whom she was becoming sure would grow to be quite slow.

Mother decided to move from outside Nashville to Memphis, I strongly believe to avoid Father's debts, and start anew. You may be asking, why not return home to her parents? Violet, believe me when I say Mother has known her share of trouble. Years before Father's passing her childhood home burned to the ground, Mitchell, Ellie, and two of their eldest sons tied up inside.

Violet's mouth went dry as she shakily turned the page.

Mister John Wiggs had finally died and Mother's father, Mitchell, was supposedly set to inherit another four acres. The town men heard of the disgrace, donned their white robes and set out to handle the matter. Mother learned this devastating news from a stoic recounting from her brother James (yes, ours was named for him).

Noting the past tense in reference to their brother it was as if he too was now long gone like these distant relatives from history.

Her brother had run, escaping the horror and was wasting from guilt. He was heading for Brazil where he heard American negroes were welcome and he thought his sister should know of her family's fate.

So after Father's death, Mother moved to Memphis husbandless, parentless and without siblings. She had her children though I eventually went back to Nashville. Will had just opened his shoe repair, and to be perfectly honest, I was ready to live my own life. As you know Elias Jr. has now joined me with his Jane, and he's very happy on the railroads as a Pullman porter. Mother's third child William, (you have seen his likeness in her locket), died at five from whooping cough—there had been no colored doctor available, nor the money to pay for one if he could have reached us in time. Her twins, well, we have yet to hear from J, however Nora fares well here with me considering. Yet Mother still has you all in Memphis.

Violet, I hope this letter helps you understand our mother a bit better. She was not always as she is and I don't know if she will ever be as she was before. So if you have noticed that "something inside her has closed up for good" as you stated in regards to your new weekly post in Central Gardens, please remember that as she cleans the home of Mr. and Mrs. Pritchett, Mother has recently turned fifty and we are all concerned about her failing health. She is left with her dutiful Pearl, but we know that Pvt. George Bennett will not wait forever. She has our little angel Minnie, her dreamer Violet, and her joyful boy Teddy, and deep down inside, dear sister, I believe she feels she has failed you all.

With Love and Devotion, (and In Confidence),

Your Sister,

Mrs. Darlene Exby

Violet carefully folded the pages and placed them within the envelope. And for some time she simply stared down at the letter silently asking it for more. Darlene had answered her queries directly as promised, but now that Violet possessed this wealth of information she was unsure of what to do with it.

Before Violet could give her feelings further thought Mother's demeanor shifted. And so like always it wasn't the changing landscape or the altering architecture that alerted Violet to their entrance into the white part of town. Instead, it was Mother's sharp glance wordlessly telling them to remain near. Violet thrust the letter in her apron pocket and instinctively huddled closer. Slightly bowing her head, Mother's eyes bore into the road below, carefully avoiding eye contact with anyone on the street and Minnie and Violet followed suit.

As Mother quickly navigated them ahead they began the last stretch to Central Gardens where many of Memphis' most wealthy citizens took up residence and where they helped clean Mr. and Mrs. Pritchett's huge manor home every Tuesday.

The Pritchetts employed full time help. But each Tuesday additional Negro service was needed for detailed cleaning such as windows, baseboards, and chandelier and silver polishing. For on the next day, Wednesdays, Mrs. Pritchett routinely hosted a select few of Memphis' most respectable women for legendary bridge games where she dazzled, showing off her fine home. It was one of the most important social traditions of the community. Years ago Mr. Pritchett's own mother had established the weekly gathering. An affair in which a coveted invitation could secure a high-profile marriage for one's daughter or a sponsorship at a club for one's spouse.

However Dolly Bishop and her daughters were unaware of these high societal stakes when they entered the Pritchett home through the back door of the service kitchen. Hattie Jacobs, the Pritchett housekeeper and Mother's friend from church, met them at the door. She'd been the one to originally inform Mother about the available position.

Mother hooked her shawl before walking Minnie to the butcher board workspace carefully explaining to her daughter that she was going to be polishing forks and knives and spoons until they shined brightly. Minnie nodded, recognizing Ms. Hattie's familiar round face and set off to work, closely following the older woman's example.

Then without any fanfare Mother and Violet began their weekly work quietly making their way through the huge house, standing on stepladders to wash windows and then kneeling to scour baseboards. While scrubbing a finely paneled molding a recent thought, one she now commonly mulled over, entered Violet's mind. She didn't know what she dreaded less, her work at the Pritchetts or the laundry they took in at home especially from the wealthier Negro families in town.

She couldn't stand the look in those women's eyes when they dropped off their prosperous husbands' shirts and trousers, a humiliating mix of pity and wonder. Their expressions openly pondered how such seemingly beautiful, well-spoken, and obviously well educated children could be brought up like *common coloreds*, a phrase Violet had learned to loathe. She despised the whispers and snickers that pitied poor Dolly Bishop. The conspiratorial suggestions that Dolly had come from education and money but married poorly. And even worse, the stories that she had never married at all, that the father of her children was actually some white man from out of state who lived with his own family and whose infuriated wife had finally chased Dolly and her mongrel children from out the town.

The worst part for Violet was that as annoyed as she was with these clients, as she watched these elegant women, there was still a part of her that couldn't help admiring their demeanor or dress. The lacy handkerchiefs they daintily tucked into the wrists of their sleeves. Their hands that passed payment for stiffly starched garments, hands that were free of calluses and lye ravished blisters. For a moment, watching them, Violet felt as if she was glimpsing into an existence she could have had. And she hated that they made her ashamed of the life her family led or the hard work Mother endured for them. A life that she'd found sufficient before James' disappearance. It was like his leaving had scattered the nearly completed puzzle of her identity and now that she was trying to put it together anew she found the pieces no longer fit.

James' departing had also brought her to the Gardens and a home so unbelievably lavish she'd often wonder what else existed in life in which she'd grown up completely unaware? However, as opposed to those moments spent studying their wealthy Negro customers, when she was polishing chandeliers in Central Gardens she knew she wasn't peering into a life just beyond her reach. Instead, Violet was witnessing something she

would never be, or have, and her stomach clenched whenever she imagined a day that she would have to teach her children to stare at the road when they entered the white part of town.

At the Pritchetts no one looked down on her with pity or disdain. In fact, if she was doing everything right, no one looked at her at all. It was like she didn't even exist. And on this fifteenth birthday that no one seemed to remember, Violet didn't know what upset her more, being pitied or being invisible.

They finished on time and slipped back out of the house the way they had entered after Ms. Hattie handed Mother the sealed envelope with her wages. The trek back towards home always seemed longer than the walk to Central Gardens but Violet suspected that was because they were usually so exhausted. Even Minnie was quieter on the way to Dr. Owens' house. And so, the three Bishop women simply walked in silence.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When they climbed the steps of Dr. Owens' back portico, Mother removed a worn pocket watch from her apron that Violet knew had belonged to her mother's father. Mitchell, she silently reminded herself, mentally testing the new name. Violet assumed they were on time when Mother lightly rapped at the rear entrance. Within moments the door swung open revealing Mrs. Owens, dressed neatly in a dark blue dress, its high neck trimmed in ivory lace. Her dark hair was piled elegantly atop her head and small pearl earrings adorned each petite caramel colored lobe.

"Good afternoon Dolly," Mrs. Owens smiled, twin dimples indenting each cheek as she pleasantly gazed upon Mother. She'd always struck Violet as the particular kind of woman who seemed to be, at all times, sincerely interested in the person before her. "Please, come in. My husband said to expect you." She turned her attentive eyes to the girls. "Hello Violet. And Miss Minnie as well, what a surprise." Retreating into her expansive home she gracefully led them down a dim hallway, then into a side parlor, which the doctor reserved for waiting patients. "Dolly, you can go on back, he's waiting for you. Girls, would you care for some teacakes and milk?"

Violet and Minnie immediately looked to Mother and at her slight nod, together they answered, "Yes, ma'am," in almost perfect unison.

"So well mannered." Mrs. Owens chuckled. "Here, please have a seat and I will be right back."

The girls approached a satin covered settee. It was the color of a ripe green tomato. They dutifully sat, primly crossing their hands and ankles, backs erect. The

familiar smell of the doctor's home—rubbing alcohol mingled with lemon furniture oil permeated the room. Like the hallway, the parlor was barely lit. The heavy rose-colored draperies that hung along the wall's windows shaded any sunlight, and helped keep the Owens' house far cooler than the little square Bishop home ever was in the summer. Violet folded and unfolded her calloused hands then looked to Minnie, who was inquisitively eying a glittering glass ashtray on the small mahogany table before them. Violet shook her head, silently communicating to her sister not to touch *anything*. The girls sat silently. They studied the darkly paneled walnut floors. The empty high backed chairs across from them. The stately mantle above the fireplace. The mantle's finely framed photograph of the elegantly clad Owens Family: Doctor, Wife, and Son, each staring sternly from behind the glass as if annoyed by the girls' mere presence in their parlor.

A commotion sounded at the front of the house, before slowly drawing closer down the hallway. Violet, remaining perfectly still, watched as Mrs. Owens returned to the room bearing a tea tray and a huge grin upon her face, a handsome young man close behind her. In their wake were two additional young men who moved with the same confidence and ease as the first.

“Honey, of course I'm pleased to see you,” Mrs. Owens smiled at the pouting young man, giving him her beaming attention as she delicately set down the tray. He was tall and lean with skin the color of weakly steeped tea. “I'm simply surprised, you weren't due in for another week. But your father is in with a patient right now, so you are just going to have to wait to see him Everett.”

Exuding a mild annoyance, Everett Owens elegantly slumped into one of the parlor's high backed chairs and reached for a teacake before his mother lightly swatted his hand. "Our guests have yet to enjoy one, son. Everett, you remember Violet and Minnie Bishop don't you? Their mother is one of your father's patients. You probably knew their brothers, James and Elias."

A flicker of faint recognition passed through Everett's brown eyes as he nodded in the sisters' general direction. And without really looking at them he politely waved to the platter in a well-practiced if not wholly sincere gesture.

Violet gingerly leaned forward and hesitantly took a cookie. She looked at Minnie and her sister carefully took one as well before Everett and his friends attacked the plate. As the pastries quickly disappeared Violet was suddenly sorry she'd neglected to eat breakfast. Taking a small bite she prayed her stomach wouldn't rumble in the quiet room.

When the front door suddenly clanged with a delivery, Mrs. Owens excused herself once again, declaring aloud what a busy afternoon it had turned out to be. The two other young men politely nodded to their exiting hostess, then comfortably took possession of the room. The taller of the two languidly leaned against the parlor's mantle while the short round one reclined in the available chair adjacent to Everett's. Settled, the three launched into a lively conversation, barely noticing the two girls on the green settee, ankles crossed, nibbling at their cookies.

Apparently Everett was home from Fisk. Violet had often heard Dr. Owens remark upon his son's progress at Nashville's esteemed colored university. It was also

common knowledge that after his graduation he was to attend Howard Medical School in Washington D.C. Like his father.

A few years back while in Nashville, Violet had actually seen Fisk's manicured grounds herself from the bucket seat of her oldest brother Elias Jr.'s wagon. Elias had taken Violet and Teddy for a ride while they'd been in town visiting him and their oldest sister Darlene. As the buggy had gently swayed, Violet had held her new nephew, Lawrence, Elias' first child. She'd spent the majority of her visit holding him, washing and dressing him in his tiny baby clothes, brushing his downy hair. Her own living doll baby. As they approached the university's proud brick structures Elias had slowed his old grey mare and for a moment they'd silently watched the book-toting students march across the campus from here to there and back. All purposefully headed in some direction. Violet lifted her nephew from her lap, turning him so he could squarely face the university. "You know what little Lawrence?," she asked in his soft ear, "that can be you some day. Right Elias?" Her brother gazed upon his son and then the immaculate grounds, "Maybe so," he murmured before lifting the reins and pulling the buggy away from the school. Violet had held her nephew tight, somewhat disheartened by her brother's uncertain tone, his reaction sounding as if she'd proposed that his son might also one day sprout wings and fly. And she'd nuzzled Lawrence's little infant nose as Elias clicked the mare forward, deeply inhaling his sweet brand-new baby smell. The scent the world would soon scrub off of him.

Violet couldn't help but recall that day as she watched the three well-dressed gentlemen that now inhabited the parlor as they eagerly spoke to one another. She

watched Everett Owens finger the cuffs of his well-made shirt as he conversed with his friends, cuffs exactly like the ones on his father's shirts that Violet and her sisters scrubbed against their worn washboard each week. And as she watched his hands gesticulate with a sophisticated flair, she suddenly recalled the gossip that swirled around the Owens's son a year or so ago, something about a girl from a poor family crying foul, a tactically avoided wedding and a summer spent in Maryland with his preacher uncle. But as quickly as the recollection popped into Violet's head she spurred it away. How often had Memphis's rumor mill tormented her family without a second thought to accuracy or fact? So instead she concentrated on the lively exuberance emanating from the boys. From the content of their excited banter she quickly determined that the friends had all just completed their university studies together. They certainly made quite the picture. Young men of the world eagerly attempting to out perform each other in swagger and wit.

"It's as if it all made sense then," the round one animatedly exclaimed. Everett and his tall friend at the mantle shared a look, simultaneously agreeing with and mocking their companion's eagerness. The two of them were trying to remain much more casually mature in their excitement. "No really," the little round one continued. "Dr. W. E. B. DuBois himself! It was like everything all came together for me."

"I'm glad you had your moment of epiphany Walter," the tall one drily smiled from his perch at the fireplace. "Now for me, *this* was all it took," he said as he produced a little leather bound book from the pocket of his immaculate brown coat. "Claude McKay. He changed my life gentlemen."

“So you’ve said Brian,” Everett smiled, elegantly polishing off the last cookie before slowly leaning forward in his seat, fingering his clean white cuffs one last time. “That’s why *I*’ve been saying it’s time to join the Movement. Sadly, it’s become sorely evident that our university continues to sing the song of the south. So what if President McKenzie has raised a million dollar endowment? At what cost brothers?”

“Discontinuation of our magazine and newspaper,” Brian spat from the mantle.

“Cutting the baseball team and seizing most of the football team’s funding!”

Walter cried.

“Exactly,” Everett smoothly acknowledged. “So he could please his donors—even the northern foundations. They only want our colored universities in existence if we are bound to a Jim Crow curriculum. So just as you said Walter, Dr. DuBois himself, arguably our institution’s most notable graduate just *days* ago in our own university chapel took a stand against the university’s leadership for President McKenzie and all to hear.” As if re-enacting the moment, Everett gracefully rose to his feet. “ ‘*Men and women of Black America:*,’ he proclaimed in a noble voice, “ ‘*let no decent Negro send his child to Fisk until Fayette McKenzie goes.*’ Now, we’ve already graduated, so we can’t help the student body with next year’s strike. But we can certainly do our part.”

“Harlem, man, *Harlem*,” Brian crooned from the mantle, clenching his little book.

“It’s where it’s at man,” Walter excitedly assented.

Everett solemnly nodded, resuming his seat. “It’s where we can instigate *change*. It’s the *epicenter* of the New Negro.”

Violet slowly closed her mouth, suddenly realizing it had been hanging open.

“That’s it. That’s exactly how you have to say it to your father Everett!” the round Walter exclaimed. “If he’s on board, our fathers will be right behind him.”

Everett Owens waved the advisory comment away with the confidence of youth. “If my father is anything, it’s *reasonable* gentlemen.”

“Yeah but, we have to make sure he understands—“ Walter implored.

“Fellows, a child could understand the importance of the Movement,” Everett declared before suddenly turning to Violet where she sat affixed in her seat. He pointed a slim finger towards her. “If you want something done, what’s the best way to make sure that it happens?”

Violet watched the young men before her. Each one staring at her like her answer could determine the fates of the ages. She swallowed at a lump and then answered. “You do it yourself,” she heard herself say.

Everett Owens slapped his hands together in exhilaration. “You hear that?” he laughed to his friends in approval of her response. He glanced at Violet once more, “You keep thinking like that and maybe I’ll see you in Harlem one day,” he said with a wink.

That said, they threw themselves back into their conversation and Violet watched as the little book was passed back and forth between the young men before it was eventually laid to rest on the table beside the crumb littered cookie platter. By then, the boys were busy bandying about names of poets and musicians, authors and artists, and if Violet understood them correctly, these people were all Negroes. Throughout it all, Brian continued his mantra that Claude McKay had *changed his life* while Walter kept declaring Harlem was *where it was at, man*.

Though she'd never heard of McKay, or Harlem for that matter, Violet was growing more and more sure she wanted to know exactly how this man had managed to change a life and why exactly Harlem was *where it was at*, whatever that meant.

As Violet watched and listened, she experienced a brief light-headedness. Almost like the feeling that overtook her when she was truly immersed in a drawing. As she listened she came to understand that somewhere there were artists and musicians, painters and poets, who believed their work could change people's minds and perspectives on *life*.

The door to Dr. Owens' office sprang open and Violet started, her shoulders giving a small flinch, as she plummeted back to earth.

Dolly Bishop emerged, wrapping her shawl about her, nodding to Dr. Owens as he explained she needed to take her elixir twice a day and whenever possible, place her head above boiling water so the steam could loosen her cough. Mother handed the doctor the money Violet had given her earlier and he politely shook her hand, giving her back fifty cents. Violet recalled Pearl's instructions to tell Dr. Owens about settling the rest of Mother's bill with one of Mr. Kirkland's chickens, but now as she sat across from these sophisticated young men in the parlor, men who planned to join a *Movement*, she couldn't bring herself to relay the embarrassing message.

Dr. Owens caught sight of his son and his round face lit up. Everett and his classmates bounded over and the doctor enveloped his grown boy into a huge hug before shaking Everett's friends' hands and asking them all into his office to catch up.

Violet and Minnie rose to meet their mother as the men departed. Seeing them, Mother clucked her teeth before reaching to brush the generous array of cookie crumbs

from Minnie's frock. Violet was looking at the front of her own dress to check for crumbs when a small brown object caught her eye. She glanced down at the table. It was the book of poetry the boys were discussing, the one written by McKay, the man who changed Everett's tall friend's life.

She tore her eyes from the book to the room around her. Mother was still fussing with Minnie and she could faintly hear Mrs. Owens' laugh from the front of the house as she chatted away with the deliveryman. And for the first time since James's abandonment Violet felt her old sense of certainty spark anew, as if her inner compass had ceased its endless spinning, its needle now firmly pointing to the small token of intellectual freedom upon Mrs. Owens' petite parlor table. Violet had submitted to *good sense* for the better part of a year and it had only managed to leave her more dismayed with life. What good was doing what everyone expected of you if no one believed you would amount to much anyway? Hadn't Miss Sampson (back before she was Mrs. Walker) always reiterated to them all: *to thine own self be true*? So heart clanging against her chest, Violet grabbed the small book, stuffed it in her apron's pocket and hurried Mother and Minnie out of the good doctor's well-appointed house.



When it was apparent that her family wasn't waiting for the evening meal to suddenly recognize the anniversary of her birth she quietly excused herself and escaped out of doors. She'd seriously considered rising from the table right in the middle of the meal, shrieking to them all, "How could *all* of you forget!" she'd imagined screaming. "Pearl, Teddy...*nobody* remembered? It's. My. Birthday!" She was positive it would

have felt pretty good. The only thing that stopped her was the pitiful scene that would have assuredly followed. All of Mother's hand-wringing and Pearl's blotched cheeks at their collective neglect. Minnie would mostly likely have bawled, upset that they were upset, and Teddy—well Teddy would have probably fallen into a fit of laughter, finding it all hilarious. Which would have really gotten Violet steamed. So then she'd have punched her brother good, causing Minnie to truly let loose, making Mother's pale eyes well-up as she rushed to calm Minnie, all ending with the inevitable. Pearl, eyes full of shock and disappointment at Violet's behavior—which had once again managed to throw the family into turmoil. So instead, Violet had raced through her fried potatoes, thankful to finally have more than a cookie and some milk on her stomach and left the house.

It wasn't very hard to get away. Being summer, the sun had yet to set. And Mother and Minnie were so tired from their day at the Gardens that they were already prepared to retire for the evening, so she simply called to Pearl from over her shoulder announcing that she was taking some air for a bit.

Violet descended the front porch and looked to the yellow poplars to the west of the house, the foliage radiant in the fading sky. Her feet guided her on a familiar path through the shrubs and before long she was situated on their hollowed and gnarled log, nestled comfortably. The creek glistening before her and the dense trees hovering at her back.

She withdrew the purloined text from her pocket and with less guilt than she should have felt began to read, quickly absorbed by the bravery and passion of McKay's pen. His words harkened from the page, as if they were rising from the book, floating to

flank about her, commanding in their insistence, "*O my brothers and my sisters*," the poet called, "*wake! arise!*"

Violet read on. And on. And by the end of the passages she sat in awe, surprised at the wetness she felt upon her cheeks, the evening breeze causing the tears to cool her face.

"I turned fifteen once," a familiar voice called out. "It wasn't that bad."

Snatching a handful of her apron she swiped her eyes, leaping to her feet as she stuffed the book away. Hank was making his way through the brush. At sixteen he already towered over most everyone they knew. He came closer, smiling his crooked smile, before sinking to their log. His long brown fingers caressed the ground below, searching for a smooth stone. Finding one, he flicked his wrist and sent it bouncing across the water as he looked up, giving her a sideways glance.

Hank knew it distracted her to no end that she couldn't skip rocks. He also knew she couldn't stop trying, so despite better judgment Violet selected a flat, smooth stone and let it go, watching it plunk abruptly into the murky water below.

One of Hank's black brows lifted slightly.

"Don't say a word Henry," she warned, lightly shoving him against his shoulder before joining him on their seat. Her eyes had dried and she turned to him and smiled.

"It's good to see you."

Hank nodded in reply.

"Your beets came in?"

“Mmm hmm.” He silently fingered the rocks below him. “Good harvest this year. The collards had been disappointing so this should help make up some slack. Okra’s almost on us too.”

“Will you be back at school in the fall?” They had this discussion every summer. And each year he didn’t know. So annually first days of school brought with them both the customary jitters of a new term and the speculation of whether Hank would even be back. They’d been blessed so far.

“I went by your house first.” Hank suddenly said, avoiding her question. “Pearl was surprised to see me.”

Violet swallowed at a dry lump. She was of course saddened, but mainly she was embarrassed that her *entire* family had neglected to remember her birthday. Apparently, she was pretty easy to forget. “It was a busy day.”

Hank looked directly at her before abruptly rising. “Wait here.” He took off towards the shrubbery behind them, bending down in the reeds. The sun had nearly set and Violet had to squint her eyes to see him. He returned holding a flowered hatbox in front of him. She instinctively smiled at the sight of Hank’s big hands clutching the feminine container. It was covered in a light blue fabric embellished with soft pink petals and deep green vines.

Violet whistled appreciatively.

Hank made a face. “Do you want this or not?” he said as he eased back down.

Her heart thudded a bit in anticipation, even though Pearl preferred decorative hats more than she did. She usually stuck to the practical gardening variety. Not that they owned many hats to speak of.

“It was my mama’s. It was her only one.”

Eyes widening, her mouth made a little o.

“The hatbox was. Not what’s inside. I mean, she only had one hat and hatbox, but the hat’s not inside.” He plopped the box unceremoniously on her lap and she was surprised at its heft.

Giving Hank a big smile she yanked off the top of the box, placing it next to the log. “So where’s her hat?” she asked peeling away a layer of yellowed newspaper.

Violet felt Hank’s look and stilled. She was probably buried in it.

“Go ahead. We had to use that box for something someday.”

Hearing the genuine confidence in his voice she continued, revealing a precious sight. The box was full of carefully stacked paper. Butcher paper, writing paper, wrapping paper, all neatly tied in twine. Next to the package was a cheesecloth bundle, also tied off. She scooped it up, already guessing its contents as she hurriedly untied the twine and opened the cloth, discovering a veritable treasure trove of coal. Violet looked up at Hank, his face unreadable. “Thank you Hank! I don’t hardly know what to say!”

Hank nodded in recognition, his throat bobbing as he looked down at her.

“You’re always looking for paper, for coal, you know. So I started collecting these awhile ago.”

“Wow-wee Hank!” Violet continued, beaming. It must have taken him forever to get this much.

“Reverend Crawford should be thankful,” he said, revealing his straight white teeth as he finally smiled, reminding her of the trouble she’d once found herself in for stealing coal from the church’s grate in order to draw her pictures.

She laughed good-naturedly. “You’re right about that.”

Hank kicked at a stone. “What will you draw first?”

Violet considered his question, her eyes on the creek, and while she thought, Hank watched her closely.

“You could draw some more pictures of the creek,” he suggested.

Violet made a face. “I must have a hundred of those.”

Hank raised a brow at her exaggeration but remained silent, this time staring straight ahead as well, watching the still dark water.

“Don’t you ever get tired of looking at the same thing?” Violet suddenly asked.

Turning towards her, Hank tilted his head to one side, the way he did whenever he was giving something serious thought. He held her eyes for a moment. “No,” he finally answered. “Not if it’s something worth looking at.”

The sun had almost abandoned the sky, yet Violet’s cheeks grew warm. She’d have to be simple to not know he was referring to her. She reached for another creek stone. “I just mean,” she fiddled with the cool rock before letting it slip between her fingers to the ground below. “Don’t you ever want more?”

Hank scooped up the stone she'd just dropped, flicking it towards the water. "More what?" he asked as it hopped across the creek's surface.

"Just, more." She turned towards Hank. "When you wish—when you pray. What do you ask for?"

Hank's eyes settled upon her once more, brows furrowed, as if she were a puzzle he was working to decipher. He leaned back, raising one long arm to the back of his neck, where he kneaded his sun darkened skin. "I don't know."

"You don't know," Violet sharply answered in her best Lula Mae Crawford Sunday School Teacher Voice. "Do you mean for me to understand that you don't *pray*, Mr. Garnett?"

Hank's white teeth flashed, before he was suddenly the face of contrition. "No ma'am. Never that, Ms. Lula Mae."

Violet smiled before giving him a light shove on the shoulder. "Then, what? What do you ask for?"

Hank opened then closed his mouth. "Um, the crops."

"The *crops*?"

Hank shoved her back. "Yes, the crops. You know, that we'll have a good harvest. That Pa will reap enough to make his quota with Mr. Lackett. That the weather will be fine, no frost, yet not too hot. Enough rain, but no flooding."

Violet lifted the corner of her mouth.

"Well you asked," Hank answered, suddenly a bit put-out. "You don't think about everything needed to make sure the laundry goes right?"

Violet shook her head. To be honest, she didn't think she'd *ever* given that laundry any thought when talking to God. "Okay, well don't you ever just wish things could be different? That *you* could be different?"

Hank tossed another stone. "I wish we'd stop planting okra."

Violet rolled her eyes.

Hank smiled, "And I wish, I pray, that maybe one day the land could be mine. That even if Pa can't make good on the deed, that one day I could finally buy it outright from Lackett. No more sharing the crops."

"You'd be happy then?"

Hank splayed his large hands. "Well, yeah, I guess."

Violet chewed at her thumbnail. "So if it was yours, the land. What would you do?"

Hank rearranged himself on the log. "Well," he gave her his lopsided grin. "Well, I already have some ideas." He smiled enthusiastically. "First, I'd stop growing so many different crops. Maybe keep a small garden for myself with that much selection, but I'd just choose some core items to grow. Then, well," he smiled quickly, as if he was about to divulge a secret, "I'd like to try that new fertilization. The kind they produce. It's sold in these big sacks in town. And it's supposed to out-reap any old plain manure that you could ever make on your own. Though I gotta say, even though we only have those two milking cows, Pa keeps 'em good and fed right. And our manure is pretty effective." Hank nodded in emphasis. "You can't skimp on these things." He smiled wide at her. Satisfied with himself.

“Well, Hank,” Violet weakly smiled back, “that sounds real nice.”

“It does, huh?”

Violet placed the lid back on the hatbox and leaned in to hug her friend. “Thank you for the birthday gift, Hank. It really made my day.”

Violet knew there’d been a time when Hank would have immediately shoved her off like he did anytime she got too “daggone girly” for him. Yet lately he seemed to search out any excuse for contact—letting his fingers collide with hers when he helped her hang laundry or subtly leaning close in a crowded church pew. Often she felt him silently watching her, a pained look of hunger in his eyes.

Violet understood what was happening even if it gave her pause. Not that she was naïve enough to consider herself immune from the wistful encounters the other girls at school giggled about on the yard. But there had been a hesitancy towards deepening her friendship with Hank. A tentativeness that hadn’t quite made sense until today. She realized now that perhaps she’d been shelving any realistic notion of her own romantic adventures because she was saving them for some elusive future that she unconsciously knew was before her. A future beyond her current circumstances of laundry and manure.

With this new knowledge she fully understood that the best thing to do would be to give Hank no further encouragement. They were best friends and that was all.

Trouble was, Violet found Hank’s intense quest for these new moments of near intimacy a bit exhilarating. She’d never felt as powerful. So she ignored the feelings of guilt that told her she had no business using Hank’s real emotions as practice for her whimsical future, and instead, she held Hank tight.

As if caught off guard, it took Hank a moment for his sturdy arms to finally follow suit and pull her closer, hesitantly testing these new boundaries. But soon he openly explored. Long fingers led strong palms over undiscovered terrain in a surprisingly delicate survey, nothing missed or overlooked. And when lips replaced hands along her forehead, her eyelids, the soft skin of her cheek mere centimeters from her mouth Violet pulled away seconds before her lips met his. Not from shame or coyness but because, to her mortification, she had quite literally, lost her breath.

“I’m sorry—“ they both blurted before an awkward dance of stilted reassurances were exchanged: *don’t be sorry...completely my fault...no sorry—you were saying...* Then, silence.

Violet was at a loss. She pictured Pearl at the line, her rosy lips turned in a secretive smile as if she was in on a joke in which everyone else had been left out. “I don’t know how you know,” she’d smiled days after meeting Private George Bennett, the sun ridiculously seeming to shine brighter on her than the rest of the yard. “But you just *know*. It’s like when he’s near, you forget to breathe.” Violet sat astonished. She was certain this was not her future. She possessed a destiny she couldn’t yet articulate. But after her revelation at the Owens’ she did at least know her future would not—no *could not* simply entail an ordinary life, in an ordinary house, with an ordinary man.

Worried he could somehow sense her hurtful thoughts, she allowed herself a glance at Hank who was silently watching the creek as if all of life’s answers were bubbling beneath its surface. He’d returned his long arms to himself where they sat firmly upon his lap.

Searching for something to say Violet fingered the McKay book, which was once again tucked into her apron. She thought about telling Hank about Everett Owens and his friends, Harlem, and the artists living and working there but she suddenly felt embarrassed to share her thoughts. And maybe even a little unsure Hank would even understand the headiness that led to her acquisition of the stolen book. He of course acknowledged her art. He wouldn't have just given her the gift he'd had if he did not. But would he truly understand this new restlessness? This gnawing feeling that perhaps she wasn't so strange, so different? That maybe James had gotten it all wrong when he'd decided to *pass*? Perhaps the problem wasn't *who* she was at all, but simply *where*? That maybe, it wasn't so bad to ask God for just a little bit more in your own life? More than what you could even think of yourself?

So Violet sat in weighted silence as the sun finally descended and the night sky slowly came alive. As she looked up at the heavens, at the stars twinkling above, she wished her coal drawings could do the sight justice. Then she thought about the people and places she'd heard about today, and for the clearest of moments she imagined seeing them all for herself. "Sometimes I look up at the sky," she heard herself say, "and wonder about life and what it's like for other people, other people who are also looking up. Who they are and what they're doing."

Hank listened, silently waiting for her to continue. But she didn't know how to put the totality of what she was feeling into words. So instead, they both turned heavenward and waited, while the night slowly crept by.

CHAPTER NINE

Two fuzzy caterpillars greet Violet as she awakes. They're black and bushy, and tinged with silver streaks. She rubs her heavy lids, slowly adjusting to the sight before her. The caterpillars wiggle freely above a pair of light blue irises.

Norman Ginsberg.

That man has to have the wildest eyebrows in all of Whispering Oaks Assisted Living Manor. Only Truman Beadle's ear hair is more unruly.

"You didn't come to lunch," Norman snaps.

Violet feels for her bed's clicker but before she can grasp it, Norman scoops it up, his furry brows converging as he mashes his gnarled fingers on the button that raises the bed. Violet snatches the clicker away. "I can do that myself, thank you." She lifts the bed's automated back to her liking. Sitting up, she wiggles her fingers and toes, settling herself, before turning towards her visitor. Norman's sitting in the wooden chair beside her bed, arms crossed, looking as if he owns the place.

"Why are you here?" she finally asks.

Norman scratches his hooked nose. "Hazel sent me."

Violet narrows her eyes. "Why would Hazel send you to my rooms?"

"You didn't come to lunch."

"You've said that already," she points out as she scoots higher up the puffy mattress. She'd only planned on resting a bit after that exercise class, and she's surprised she's missed the midday meal. She's never done that before.

"Hazel and the others were wondering where you'd gone."

“So they sent you.” Violet’s eyebrows lift in doubt. Norman doesn’t even sit at their lunch table.

Abruptly rising to his feet, Norman adjusts his tan cardigan. He pats his bottle dyed black hair and rubs his left ear. It’s heavily scarred and missing a generous chunk of its droopy lobe.

“What happened to your ear?” Violet asks, pointing towards him.

Norman immediately drops his hand. “Well, are you feeling better or not?” he demands.

Violet stares up him, her face unreadable.

“Yoo hoo!” The Hummingbird sings, pushing a food cart through the open doorway. “I thought I heard voices.” She smiles wide at Norman and Violet. “You were resting so peacefully, Miss Violet. I just couldn’t bring myself to wake you.”

Without another word to either of them, Norman Ginsberg shuffles from the room.

Violet watches him go. “That,” she remarks, “is one strange man.”

Clutching a plastic covered meal, Suzy gives a quick glance to the open door before setting the lunch on the little tray table by Violet’s bed. “Who, Mr. Ginsberg?” Suzy asks absentmindedly, rolling the wheeled table so that it sits above the bed, right in front of Violet.

Nodding, Violet lifts the platter’s cover. Turkey and mashed potatoes.

Suzy chuckles. “Oh, I’m sure he’s harmless.” She goes back to the cart and returns with a petite white vase, a single pink carnation peeking above it. It’s one of the

table decorations from the dining hall. She holds it up conspiratorially, giving a tiny wink as she places it on Violet's table.

Despite herself, Violet grins at the nurse. "Very pretty."

Looking pleased with herself, Suzy smiles back and begins pushing the cart from the room. "Besides," she suddenly calls back to Violet. "I think he's got a bit of a crush on you." And there's that wink again.

Violet's fork stops midair. Well. That's one she certainly hasn't heard in awhile.

CHAPTER TEN

Memphis, Tennessee 1927

The worst part about being a nearly eighteen-year-old girl, who was pretending to be a boy, was the binding. Strips of old linen, like the ones Dr. Owens sometimes used for bandages, had to be wound tightly around the chest. And when every breath drawn felt like it was being funneled through the eye of a needle, then you knew it was tight enough. But as Violet slipped through the back door of their little square house, dressed in a pair of Teddy's outgrown trousers and one of his button down shirts, an old hat of Elias Jr.'s pulled nearly to her eyes, she considered the bindings well worth it.

Mother and Minnie were fast asleep in the bed they shared together, which was snugly tucked along one corner of the small bedroom, across from Violet's cot. Violet's bed, the one she'd once shared with Pearl, occupied the opposite "wall." Or, the faded red and white gingham curtain that separated the girls' "room" from the front room—the great room, as Mother liked to call it. Teddy was sleeping as well. His long limbs splayed, overflowing his narrow palette on the great room floor, as he lightly snored from beneath his thin sheet. And Pearl, tonight she was most likely safe and warm, snuggled up tight against her husband's, Private George Bennett's, sleeping body in their own little room at his mother's house in Fayette County, dreaming of their homecoming to Memphis, just days away.

Violet let the door softly close behind her and in the darkness she fumbled with the lantern and matches she'd left just outside the back door after supper. Finally sparking a flame, she lit the tiny wick, and the lantern came to life. She turned down the

kerosene until the lamp produced a modest glow, yanked her hat further down upon her head, and set off into the night.

Violet prayed she didn't get lost. She'd barely heard the directions Fisheye Watts had given Hank two afternoons ago. She'd been busily sweeping the rear stockroom of Walker's Market, one of the countless side jobs she'd garnered for herself over the last three years. Hank was out back, unloading crates from the back of Mr. Walker's wagon, and through the cracked door of the stockroom, she could catch a glimpse of him every now and then as he easily heaved the crates, quickly stacking, unloading. Generally maneuvering them with ease.

Her fifteenth birthday evening hadn't repeated itself between the two of them since that night. There'd been an awkward hand holding at the following year's Harvest Festival, but soon, they'd drifted back into their previous boundaries of friendship. Though things were never quite the same. She stayed fully dressed while they swam. He went out of his way to spare extra inches while seated together in the church pews. They'd both finished school early, and then, they really didn't see much of each other at all. It seemed he was working as many jobs as she was. So when Mr. Walker hired them both, it was the most quality time they'd spent together in months.

She couldn't remember what caught her attention first. But it was most likely the sudden silence that descended as the rhythm of his work abruptly ceased. It was then that she heard the hushed voice. Drawing closer to the back door, which stood slightly ajar, allowing for a bit of air in the stockroom as she swept, she peered out into the rear alley behind the store. Hank was standing in the midst of a pile of unloaded crates, a trail of

sweat seeping through the back of his worn shirt, a hand on either hip. Next to him stood Fisheye Watts, tall and lean as ever. Spinning his cap in his hands, Fisheye leaned closer to Hank. Violet drew nearer to the door, pressing her ear towards the small opening.

“—could always use someone like you,” Fisheye was saying, his dapper cap twirling away in his hands.

Hank had yet to reply.

“If you can unload these here crates, you can do a bit of work for me. It’s quick. Easy. Just this one time.”

The back of Hank’s head cocked to one side as he lifted his long arm, unconsciously rubbing his neck. “I don’t think so, Fisheye.”

The cap stopped spinning, but Fisheye grinned wide. “That’s fine, Hank. No obligations, no sir. But look, Friday night’s a big job. I’m gonna need to work real fast. And I’m willing to pay well.” He flipped his cap once more. “More’n you probably make in weeks toting these canned goods and such,” he smiled again for good measure.

Hank dropped his arm from his neck and turned towards Mr. Walker’s wagon, obviously finished with the conversation.

Fisheye popped the cap back on his head. “Well, I’ll let you get back to your work. But listen here, if you decide you want to make some real money Friday, you meet me at the barge.” He’d given Hank the time and directions, then left, whistling away as if without a care in the world.

Walking home from work that day, she’d asked Hank outright about the conversation.

“You know ol’ Fisheye,” Hank had muttered. “Always up to something.”

“Yeah,” she’d answered, chewing on her thumbnail. “But, what about all that money he was talking about?”

Hank had come to an abrupt stop. “What about it?” he’d asked as he looked down at her. “Whatever he’s up to, I don’t want any parts of it.”

Violet’s cheeks had blazed, as was often the case during conversations with Hank lately. Sometimes she hated how everything could be so black and white with people like Hank and Pearl. Whenever she even considered the gray parts of a situation, they looked at her like she was some kind of Jezebel.

But now, as she stealthily crept through the night, she pushed those disturbing thoughts from her mind, and instead concentrated on the directions Fisheye had given Hank, slipping through town, towards the riverfront. She could faintly hear a soulful band playing somewhere in the distance, most likely from one of the juke joints she’d heard James talk about, the ones Mother would always say contained “nothing but trouble.” The night sky was black, save for the light of the moon, which peeked from the ominous clouds that drifted across the heavens. It felt strange to be out so late, and her skin tingled with a peculiar mix of excitement and fear. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, Violet found herself able to turn down the lamp’s kerosene, bit by bit, until all that was left was an eerie glow that lead her feet along their unfamiliar passage.

Hugging the warehouses that bordered the river, a waterfront which was full of steamboats by day and unnaturally subdued now in the middle of the night, Violet followed the dark path until she spied a few glowing lights in the distance, not far from a

rusted barge that was currently out of use. Taking a deep breath, she turned off her lamp and moved forward. But then she came to a quick stop and crouched, swiping at the muddy ground below. Violet hastily smeared the dirt on her face, hoping it would help her appear more boylike.

She felt ridiculous as soon as she did it.

She grabbed the lapel of her shirt to wipe her face, but remembered she needed to slip it back into Teddy's things without him knowing she'd taken it. So she stood back up and continued, now just ready to get this over and done with. As she joined the group, she was greeted by the lingering smell of tobacco, and the hushed voices of the couple of gathered men that clustered at the barge.

A tall and thin man approached her. It was Fisheye. "Who the hell are you?"

Violet opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

The few men who had been whispering to one another fell silent, and the only sound left was the thudding between her own ears.

Fisheye took another step closer. "Now I'm only gonna ask you this one more time, boy. Who. Are. You."

As soon as he said it, *boy*, Violet found her breath. Fisheye had really thought she was a boy. She was actually doing this. "My name's Sampson," she blurted out. *Sampson? Where had that come from?* She'd decided her boy name would be Tommy, in honor of Tom Lee. The Negro man who'd saved all those people from drowning in the river when that big steamer sank two years back.

"What's your business, Sampson?" Fisheye asked her.

Violet took a small step forward. “I’m here to work sir,” she stated. Trying her best to keep her voice as low-toned as possible. “I heard you had work tonight.”

“You *heard*. Who from?” He asked, turning to stare at the men around him, and Violet was thankful it was too dark to see the look he gave them, but from the way they each backed up a bit, she could only guess what it might have appeared like.

Violet’s heart raced. For some reason, she hadn’t really thought he’d ask who’d told her there was work. “From my cousin,” she hurried, “Hank.” *Oh no*, she thought as soon as she said it.

Fisheye Watts stared at her. He slipped off his cap and twirled it around his slim fingers. “Hmph,” he mused. In one quick fluid movement the hat was back upon his head. “Alright then,” he decided. “Let’s go,” he said as he took off towards the marshy riverbed.

Violet let out her breath, her heart pounding a mile a minute. She followed Fisheye and the rest of the men. Working as quickly and quietly as possible, two of Fisheye’s team waded into the murky water, dragging a beat up ramp to the barge. And within what seemed like seconds to Violet, two small rowboats appeared at the water’s edge, along with one large wagon along the shore.

“We divide it up by three,” Fisheye whispered, pointing to the two small boats and the farm cart. “Let’s go.”

They slipped across the gangplank and onto the barge, where Fisheye began removing soiled layers of musty cloths, soon revealing stacks of crates, all piled higher than he stood. When the other men quickly started grabbing the crates, Violet joined in.

She picked up her first box and nearly fell over. “What’s in these things?” she heard herself mutter, and every man on the barge came to a stop. Their eyes boring into her.

Violet swallowed, looking from man to man.

“Move it,” Fisheye finally hissed.

And they all went back to work, heaving the crates from the barge and stacking them between the two small rowboats and the wagon. Violet struggled with each load, her muscles burning, as sheets of sweat slipped down her back, her face, her neck. She was loading a crate onto the wagon, her arms shaking, when Fisheye suddenly pushed the box forward for her. He stared down at her for the briefest of moments. Then he gripped her upper arm and propelled her into the wagon as well. “Your new job.” He quietly barked. “You stand up here and stack them as they come. Nice and tight.”

Violet eagerly nodded and began arranging the crates on the cart. Neat stacks, tidily arranged, so they wouldn’t fall over once the wagon started moving. Before long the barge was actually near empty, except for a stack of empty crates, old boxes they’d been told not to touch. Fisheye stacked the old and empty crates haphazardly along the barge, then tossed the dirty cloths that had once hid the tall stacks they’d unloaded, here and there—transforming the barge that had held his cargo, once again into an abandoned vessel. The ramp was removed, slid onto the wagon, and the men scurried, each to an assigned spot on one of the rowboats or the farm cart.

Violet slowly approached Fisheye. “Where do I go?”

He watched her silently. Then he picked up her lantern and shoved it towards her. “You go home.” He clicked his teeth and the rowboats pushed off, quietly paddling down the river.

“But what about—“

Fisheye snatched Violet by the arm, dragging her away from the rest of the men. “You’re lucky I don’t tan your hide right here, Violet Bishop.”

Violet’s eyes grew wide as platters.

“I don’t know what kinda game you’re playing,” Fisheye hissed.

“How did you know?” Violet murmured.

“How could I not know? Damn green eyes peeking out from that cap all evening,” he muttered. “I had to worry about my cargo *and you* all night, you damn fool.”

Violet stood silently, thinking of what to say.

“And when I get a hold of Hank—“

“He didn’t know!” Violet exclaimed. “I overheard you. I heard you tell him to come here that day outside the market. I was in the stockroom. Sweeping.”

Fisheye snatched off his cap. “*Chrissakes-alive girl*, what is wrong with you? Now listen, I know your mama. And she’d have my hide if anything happened to you.” He placed his hat back on, grabbed her shoulders and turned her about, “Now go on,” he said as he gave her a sturdy shove. “*Get!*”

Violet stumbled forward, lantern in hand, numbly walking ahead. She suddenly turned around. “Fisheye.”

He spun back on her. “What?”

Violet held out her hand. “My pay. Where is my pay? I worked my job tonight.”

Fisheye rubbed his hands over his thin face. “You nearly dropped my shipment all over the damn riverfront.”

“But I didn’t.”

Despite himself, the corner of Fisheye’s mouth lifted. “Hmph,” he chuckled. “Yeah, you didn’t, huh?” He blew out a long stream of air and reached deep into his pocket, withdrawing the largest wad of bills Violet Bishop had ever seen in her near eighteen years. He counted out a small stack, grabbed her outstretched hand and slapped the clump of money into her hands. “I don’t ever want to see you here again, that understood?”

Violet stared at the overflowing cash in her hands. She slowly nodded. “You won’t tell Mother?” she heard herself ask.

Fisheye burst into a fit of laughter, its sound garbled as he worked to remain quiet at the same time. “Well, considering I need your silence as well, Miss Violet, I guess we’ll just call it even.”

Violet looked behind Fisheye to the loaded wagon. One last man stood anxiously beside it, his eyes darting from side to side in a nervous surveillance of their surroundings. The realization hit her like a sack of flour. She needed to get out of there. Now. Fisheye watched Violet’s comprehension, and he closed her fist. “Put that money away,” he whispered, “and get outta here.”

Stuffing the bills in her trouser pocket, Violet clenched the lantern close to her, and took off towards home. But, she'd done it. She was on her way to Harlem.



In the late spring of 1927, a month after Violet's midnight adventure at the barge, she sat upon her favorite blue quilt outside her childhood home. She was finally prepared to leave. She'd spent three years working towards this moment. Taking in extra laundry, cleaning all those Central Gardens manors, sweeping Walker's Market, mucking out Mr. Kirkland's chicken coops, and even unloading cargo for her fellow neighbor and church member Fisheye Watts, whom she now realized was also a notorious riverfront bootlegger.

Violet watched Pearl and George Bennett strike the last ceremonial nail into the home's new doorway and everyone gathered gave a cheer. Violet's erupted from her throat as a garbled cry, causing Hank's questioning eyes to dart in her direction. But when she looked straight ahead, avoiding his gaze, he shrugged, and stretched his long limbs from the quilt, rising to congratulate the couple.

When Pearl married George two years back, they'd originally moved to his mother's house. His father had died, and Mother Bennett needed the help. Violet had waded blindly through those first months of Pearl's absence, her heart heavy in her chest. And Mother, she had indeed leaned heavily upon Violet, as Violet always knew she would. But to Violet's surprise, she'd found that somewhere along the way, she'd grown up, and helping her family was not nearly as hard as the prospect had always seemed to be. Her true pain was simply missing Pearl, all their quiet moments, and the unspoken

conversations they'd shared throughout the years. She'd had Hank, but he simply couldn't replace a sister.

Violet's true solace became the hatbox beneath her bed. At first, it began with her drawing. Whenever she could, she drew. She drew portraits of people, landscapes, close studies of inanimate objects, broad surveys of buildings, homes, churches. Pictures that when completed, found a home in the hatbox under the cot, beside her book of McKay's poetry. But the more she read McKay, the more she wondered about what else existed and soon, she'd begun to save every scrap of information she could on Harlem, neatly placing it in her box. She'd read newspaper clippings pilfered from the copy at Walker's Market, then she'd rush home to draw any rare mention of New York or Harlem—tall buildings that reach to the sky, automobile lined streets, poets and painters sitting in well appointed drawing rooms sharing their work; all the while imagining herself there as well.

And at some point Violet crossed the threshold from imagining to planning. She searched out extra employment. She worked, and scrimped, and saved; and after she gave Mother some of her earnings to help with the household, she stashed away any extra money she could, wrapping it carefully in a money pouch Darlene had given her for Christmas. A pouch she also hid in the depths of the hatbox. She'd take the box out, late in the evenings, when the their little square house was asleep, pouring over her artwork and clippings, meticulously counting her savings before stashing it all away beneath her bed. A hidden box of dreams.

But deep down, Violet never thought she would ever actually see Harlem. Even though she'd been saving, she wasn't sure she had enough, and if she was honest with herself, she figured the money she'd saved would most likely one day go towards something a little more practical, like bolts of cloth, a month or two of rent, or a new kettle for the laundry. And even if she could get enough money, there was always Mother and Minnie to consider. How was she actually going to leave them?

It was a reality that greeted her each morning that she arose. Yet despite this truth, every evening when she laid her head upon her thin pillow, her body weary from the day's work, she came to realize that one of the most difficult human emotions to quell, was hope.

Then shortly after Christmas, the telegram arrived. It had been delivered to Walker's Market. Mrs. Walker (whom Violet still referred to as Miss Sampson within her head) had handed it to her over the store's counter. A broad smile across her pretty face. "From Pearl," she'd grinned. Violet had torn open the envelope with eager hands:

--MOTHER BENNETT REMARRYING. COMING HOME!--

A slew of letters had since passed between the two sisters.

Violet Anne,

I can hardly wait to come home! Mother Bennett is marrying her neighbor. He's a good man and George both trusts and respects him. He knows his mother will be in good hands. The night she told us, he turned to me and said he knew how much it meant to him that I'd come to Fayette County to be with him and Mother Bennett, and now he wanted to do the same for me. I could have

swooned right on the spot! I can't wait for you to see little Alyce again. She's walking now, can you believe it...

Pearl,

Your Alyce is walking! I still cannot believe you're really a mother. And George's news for the house—my head is nearly spinning...

Dearest Violet,

I could hardly believe it myself. But George is quite the saver. And between what he's saved since the War and the small inheritance his father left for him (the farm actually belongs to his mother's people), he thought we should buy our own home. I've even been able to contribute some from my sewing funds. It's remarkable, but I've established a bit of a client list here. And, you may not believe me, but purchasing Mother's home from Mr. Atberry was his suggestion. He's just full of surprises...

Pearl,

I'm counting down the days. I cannot wait to see you! Minnie says don't forget to bring the new dress you sewed for her doll, and Teddy wants to know if you're bringing any peanut brittle again...

Violet felt her lips turn up at the memory. George Bennett had been true to his word, purchasing her childhood home from their landlord—a feat they'd all thought they'd never live to see. Then he'd set into renovating the home along with Teddy and Hank, and even her brother Elias who'd come from Nashville whenever he could. In the end, they'd nearly torn most of it down and started anew. The new home now featured working plumbing in its kitchen, an indoor privy (Violet, Teddy, and Minnie had danced around the charred outhouse the day George had finally burned it down), and a separate dining room. There were also now three bedrooms and an additional small back room for Pearl's sewing. Violet and Minnie were to share one of the spare bedrooms, with Mother and little Alyce in the other. Teddy, now nearly grown, would not be sleeping in the house anyway as he was leaving for Nashville after the house blessing to stay with Elias Jr., where after he finished school in Nashville he'd eventually learn to be a Pullman porter like his brother. As the house had been built, it was as if Violet's hopes and dreams for Harlem were taking shape as well, becoming the fully fledged plan she now fervently believed she was destined to fulfill.

Violet stood from the quilt, heading towards her sister, Pearl. She made her way past the long tables that had been hauled out into the front of the house, which were covered with cakes, pies, and big bowls of sweet lemonade. Violet caught a glimpse of her mother laughing with Hattie Jacobs, and the last coil of worry within her sprung loose. Mother looked better than she had in years. Her shawl was still draped loosely about her, out of habit more than necessity, and her cheeks were flushed with color.

There was a light in her eyes that Violet had nearly forgotten her mother ever possessed. And Violet knew if she was going to make her move, now was the time.

Violet waded through the crowd, nodding at familiar faces. Reverend Crawford stopped her, planting a kiss on her cheek, his kind eyes twinkling. “Miss Violet,” he smiled, “you certainly get lovelier by the day.”

Violet murmured her thanks. Lately, it seemed as though her appearance was all anyone wanted to talk about. It had come to be a topic she almost dreaded, as every time someone remarked upon her growing beauty, Mother—who’d been seeming so happy and carefree of late, would turn and really study Violet. A look of near terror in her pale eyes.

Violet herself considered the compliments a bit silly. She found her eyes to be a little too far apart from one another. Then there was the halo of frizzed hair that constantly stood around her face, never submitting to the single braid she wore each day. She wasn’t elegantly tall like Miss Sampson, or daintily petite like Mrs. Owens, nor slender like Pearl or voluptuous like Darlene. But if she was pressed, she’d heartily admit to loving the color of her eyes, which could sparkle brightly like green gems, or glow deeply like a carpet of creek moss.

Reverend Crawford turned to look at the new house, breathing deep, as if inhaling the rich scent of fresh lumber. “Our God is a good God,” he crooned.

Violet grinned back in earnest. He was a good man. He couldn’t help that we was burdened with both Lula Mae and Tally as a sister and niece. “That He is, Reverend,” she smiled, before patting his hand and moving forward.

She finally made it to Pearl, who was standing on the new front porch, flushed with happiness. Little Alyce was perched upon Pearl's hip, her chubby cheeks spilling from beneath the adorable white bonnet tied upon her little head. Pearl was hugging Miss Fran, an old Sunday School teacher. She glanced at Violet, said a few parting words to the old woman before rearranging Alyce so she could hook her arm through Violet's as they walked down the front steps to side of the house and along the back of the property where they still hung laundry.

Mother had been able to cease her weekly trips to the Pritchett's last month with George's help, and as Pearl's sewing took off, the laundry was slowly dwindling as well. Soon, Mother was going to simply help Pearl with her sewing business, something much less physically burdensome.

"What's wrong?" Pearl asked, looking at Violet.

"It's that obvious?" Violet smiled, but Pearl just stared intently at her sister.

"Are you *in trouble*?"

"No!" Violet exclaimed, her cheeks filling with color.

Pearl's face showed immediate relief. Obviously for a minute, Pearl had been considering the necessity of hauling off to find George and Elias Jr., so they could hunt down the offending boy, grab Reverend Crawford, a shotgun, and that afternoon they'd all celebrate a new house and a wedding.

"No Pearl, of course not," Violet chastised her big sister, and Pearl had the good grace to look chagrined. Violet continued. "It's just that, well, I want to leave."

Pearl's dark brows rose in question. "Leave?"

“Yes,” Violet sighed. “To have my chance to see something new. Darlene stayed in Nashville when she fell in love with Will. Elias Jr., he got to set out on his own away from home. You went away with George, and now even Teddy is getting his chance to leave.” Violet didn’t mention James, no one ever did, but there was a pause and they both knew she was thinking of him.

Pearl walked towards an old oak, seeking its shade, and arms linked they found their way to the tree together. “Well,” she started, sinking to the grass below, where she placed Alyce between them, pulling a little wooden horse from her apron pocket, which she handed to her daughter. Alyce immediately stuffed the toy in her slobbery mouth. Pearl looked up at Violet. “Where are you trying to go?”

Violet joined her sister in the grass. “With Teddy, to Elias’ in Nashville.” Violet saw Pearl’s hesitation but continued, “I know it won’t be easy on them, and I’d be an extra mouth they weren’t expecting, but I can help with the children and work around the house. I’d pull my keep.”

Pearl remained quiet, staring out at the dense trees beyond the house. “I just got back.”

“I know,” Violet said.

Alyce threw the little horse to the ground and Pearl scooped it up, wiped it with her apron, and handed it back to the baby. “Violet, you’ve finished school. You haven’t thought of settling down? I thought that now I was back, that maybe you and Hank, well you know.”

“It’s not like that between us. Plus Pearl, not everybody wants to just, get married and have babies, you know.” As soon as the words left her mouth, Violet wished she could have them back.

Pearl blinked, unconsciously straightening Alyce’s bonnet.

“I didn’t mean—“”

“Just let it be, Violet.” Alyce tossed the horse again, squealing in delight, fat bubbles of spit bursting on her tiny pink lips. Pearl reached for the toy, wiped it, and handed it back over again.

“It’s not like this trip is about me and Hank, or any other boy. I just want a little time to have my own adventure before settling down here,” she said, guilt enveloping as she misled her sister. “I need your help. Please Pearl, Mother and Elias will listen to you.”

Pearl looked at Violet, a barely discernable smile upon her lips.

Violet screeched, leaning in to hug her sister as Pearl held her away from her, laughing. “Now hold on,” Pearl grinned, “You don’t even know what I’m going to say.”

Barely controlling her excitement, she gave Pearl the most sober look she could muster, and Pearl erupted into laughter. “You know I’ll help you. Besides, Elias and Francine can probably use the help. It’s going to be a sacrifice for them though.”

“I know.”

“This wouldn’t be a long term situation.”

“I know,” *boy did she know.*

“But maybe I can talk to George about sending you along with a little pocket money.”

“Thank you,” Violet mumbled, guilt twisting her stomach once more.

“Does Hank know about this?”

“No, not yet.”

“Well, I suggest you go tell him—he deserves as much.” Pearl gathered Alyce’s round body into her arms and pushed herself back up. “I’ll take care of Mother and Elias.”

Violet rose to her feet. “Thank you Pearl,” she breathed as she hugged her sister tight.

“You’re welcome Violet, you just be a help out there okay?”

“Okay,” Violet answered, but she was unable to meet Pearl’s eyes as she said it.



Violet returned to the front yard in search of Hank. Her eyes grazed the milling crowd before spotting him languidly leaning back on her blue quilt, resting on an arm, one of his long legs bent. Tally Crawford was sprawled on the blanket as well, hovering next to him as she balanced a dessert stacked plate in one hand. She was energetically laughing, at what, Violet wasn’t too sure because, like always, Hank wasn’t saying much of anything at all. Every time she cackled, she bowled over and tried to discreetly raise the hem of her frock inch by inch, until her stockings peeked from above her boots. To Violet, she still pretty much looked like a horse, but according to Teddy, Tally Crawford

now possessed a figure that completely distracted any male with a lick of sense from even paying attention to her face.

“Hey Hank, Tally,” Violet said as she reached them. Hank smiled as he looked up and nodded to her, but Tally just continued to giggle for no good reason, before glancing up at Violet in mock surprise.

“Violet,” she purred, “I didn’t even notice you standing there. My goodness you’re quiet as a cat.”

Violet clenched and unclenched her fist. This New Year she’d promised God that if He could just somehow get her to Harlem, she’d do her best to quit making a general fool of herself—and if she was honest, mashing Tally Crawford’s face into a platter of cakes and pies at her sister’s house blessing would have to qualify in the fool making category.

“I saw Hank here didn’t have a plate,” Tally sighed, “You’d think those closest to him would attend to such things.” She fluttered her lashes at Hank, immediately reminding Violet of Elias’ old gray mare who’d blink the buzzing flies from her eyes when they rode her.

Tally leaned in closer to Hank. “I didn’t know what you preferred so I brought you a little bit of each.”

“Well I thank you kindly Miss Tally,” Hank drawled—the picture of the perfect gentleman.

“Oh no!” Tally exclaimed, “I seem to have forgotten a fork,” she pouted, bringing one of her hands to the ample bosom spilling out of her dress’s too-small bodice. Violet

watched as Teddy and his friends stared from across the yard—their eyes boring into Tally’s chest. “You’ll just have to excuse my fingers,” Tally sweetly smiled as she took a bit of strawberry shortcake and held it to Hank’s mouth.

“Oh for goodness sakes,” Violet muttered.

Hank looked at Tally’s strawberry covered finger, his face unreadable. “Miss Tally, I’d hate to see you make a mess on my account. You go ahead and enjoy that plate yourself.” He looked up at Violet. “Violet, was there something you wanted?”

Violet rolled her eyes in disgust and marched off down the dirt path that led to their dusty road. She could hear Hank scrambling to his feet and within a few seconds his long strides had caught up to her.

Hank smiled at her. “You have to admit that was funny.”

“I will admit no such thing.”

“I see,” he laughed. “So you’re the only one who can have admirers. No fair.”

Violet stopped, glaring at Hank before continuing her march down the road. “I have absolutely no idea what you are talking about.”

“Oh let’s see, there was this year’s Harvest Dance when you danced twice with Arthur Lewis and three times with Sidney Harris.”

“I danced with Teddy and Minnie twice as many times. Your point?”

“Then there was the Coleman wedding when Travis Hooper stopped by our table to tell you,” Hank swelled with mock gallantry, “*I hope I don’t offend you Miss Violet, but I have to tell you that you are the most beautiful woman in the county.*”

“Travis Hooper is a fool.”

“He may be, but he certainly knew how he felt about you.”

“Hmph,” Violet muttered as they both instinctively pulled off the road and walked through the tall grass towards the creek.

“It’s not that I was jealous,” Violet announced.

“ ‘Course not.”

“It’s not as if we have any type of hold on each other.”

Hank paused, “No, we don’t.”

“But *Tally Crawford*, c’mon Hank.”

Hank simply grinned back.

Violet’s eyes narrowed. “Why are you in such a good mood?”

Hank erupted in laughter. “Can’t a man enjoy a beautiful spring day?”

“*Beautiful spring day*,” Violet repeated in awe at his sudden poetics, “Good Lord—did Bonzy and them get their hands on Ned’s liquor again?”

Hank’s mouth opened then closed. A bit unsure of how to answer her ridiculous assumption. “Look, it’s been a good day, right? A new house? Family’s reunited?”

Violet nodded suspiciously.

“I for one am happy for your sister and her husband, even if you’re too ornery to be so.”

Violet waded through the marsh, swiping at vines, suddenly very annoyed at her friend’s new perky countenance. *What in the blazes had gotten into Hank?*

They reached the clearing and Violet’s feet stilled. Their log was gone. The ground where it had once sat was covered in white magnolia petals and above, their log,

was now cut, smoothed, and sanded, suspended by two ropes tied to an old gnarled tree above. A perfect swing.

“Hank,” Violet breathed.

Hank stared down at her. A slight look of embarrassment upon his face. Slowly smiling, he lightly placed his hand on Violet’s back, propelling her towards the seat. She sank into the swing and kicked off. “This thing won’t break will it?” she laughed.

Hank made a face. “C’mon, who made it?”

The wind sailed across Violet’s face and she smiled wide.

Hank gave her a firm push from behind and she flew higher. “You know Tally Crawford is the last girl I think about.” He suddenly said. “Besides, that whole act of hers was probably just to get under your skin.”

Violet swung higher. *Well, she won’t have to worry about me much longer*, she thought to herself as she watched her boot-covered feet pump back and forth, the creek drawing near and far with each glide.

She had to tell him she was leaving.

She suddenly let her feet go slack, slowing her speed. She turned behind her to look at Hank. As if understanding that they needed to talk, Hank walked to the front of the swing. He watched her slowly float through the air, as the swing lulled into a gentle sway.

Hank grabbed a rope in each hand, steadying her and the swing before him, his eyes firmly on Violet’s face. His hands slid down the cords, until they softly covered hers, and then he sank to ground below, balancing upon one knee.

Oh. My. God, Violet thought.

“Violet,” Hank whispered. “Remember that summer we built that fort?”

“Hank—“

“Then Bonzy and Travis showed up and they tried to raid it? So we fought them off with those little slingshots we’d made?” Hank’s white teeth flashed. “And then the fort, and the creek, it was ours. Until the rains came, and our little stick and mud fortress...it washed away. I moped around for days.”

Violet weakly smiled at the memory of the gangly and sullen ten year-old Hank, pouting at the destruction of his contraption.

“I was so sad because,” he looked into Violet’s eyes, “because I knew it even then Violet. It might seem simple, but even as a little boy—all I’ve ever wanted was to carve out a little space just for us.”

Violet’s heart did a little flip-flop. “Hank—“

“Wait, let me finish. You always do the talking, but today, on this good, good day, Violet, it’s my turn,” he smiled wryly. He squeezed his hands tighter over hers.

“Ever since you moved here, across the creek from me, my life has never been the same.”

Hank released her hands and reached deep into his trouser pocket. He pulled out a tiny cloth pouch, his large hands slowly pulling at its thin drawstring. “A lot of odd-jobs in this little pouch,” he laughed nervously.

“Hank—“

“Violet,” he smiled as he pulled out a delicate gold ring, a beautifully petite opal smoothly shined atop its tiny mount. “Please, be my wife. I know you’re shy about...this sort of thing. That’s why I’ve given you all the space I could.”

Violet stared at the ring. Her mouth unable to form any words.

“We’ve finished school. Your sister’s back. It’s our turn now. I’ve talked to my Pa and to George—“

“You talked to my sister’s husband?” she finally breathed, her head spinning. Did Pearl know he was going to do this when she told her to talk to him?

Hank nodded. “He stood in for Elias Jr.” Hank smiled, “After the wedding, we’ll move in with my father. Just until I can get something else built on the land. But I figure in, oh I don’t know, five, ten years, we can save enough to try and buy the land outright from Lackett. Remember what you asked me that night on your fifteenth birthday? Well, I’ve been thinking of it ever since. That land’s my destiny.” Hank thrust the ring at her. “Our destiny, Violet.”

Without thinking Violet reached out and lightly touched the smooth ring.

Hank smiled his crooked smile, grabbing her hand in his so he could slide the ring on her finger.

“Wait, Hank,” Violet closed her hand into a fist.

Hank looked up. His head cocked to one side.

“Hank,” Violet nervously licked her lips, “I’m, I’m going away for a little while.”

Hank grew still, his eyes searching hers. For a moment, neither of them spoke until he finally asked, “Where to?”

“To Nashville, with Elias and Teddy.”

Hank slowly rose to his feet. “Why? I thought you were happy Pearl was finally home.”

Violet looked up at him. “I am. I’m very happy she’s back. Mother and Minnie, they’re doing really well, Hank. That’s why I thought, that maybe I could take some time, for myself, to, to see something new. I’ve been here ever since I was a little girl.”

“Some time for yourself.” Hank spoke the words slowly, as if weighing and testing them for merit. “Okay, well, I don’t see why we can’t spend some of our engagement apart. If that’s what you want. And then, when you come home--“

“Hank, I don’t know if I’m coming home,” she suddenly said, the words spilling from her mouth. “If I like it. Maybe I’ll stay.”

Hank watched her closely. “What exactly are you saying Violet?”

“Hank, you’re my best friend, and I love you.”

Hank took a small step towards her. “What. Are. You. Saying.”

Violet’s chest began to squeeze, the air compressing. She couldn’t speak.

Hank brought his hand to the back of his neck, tightly squeezing it in a disjointed rhythm. Violet rose to her feet to join him, and the swing swayed, emptily, in the afternoon breeze. “I’ll write you, though,” she whispered, placing a hand on his shoulder. Hank jerked back, his dark eyes burning into her. He fumbled with the little ring, stuffing it into the small pouch, before hurriedly turning to walk away.

Violet watched him make his way towards the incline out of the creek, blinking rapidly when her vision blurred. How could she explain to him that leaving had nothing

to do with him and everything to do with the feeling that had literally consumed her for years? She didn't belong here. She knew she had to at least try to make her way, even if she had no chance at succeeding. She just *couldn't* stay.

She ran up the marshy slope before Hank could make it to the vine tangled trees that led out of the bog and creek. "Hank."

He stopped, but didn't turn.

"This is all so much more complicated than it seems—"

"I think I understand it fine enough." He bit out before walking again.

"You're not even going to say goodbye to me?" Violet asked, her voice catching.

Hank finally turned, and Violet edged closer. He looked down at Violet's upturned face, then over her head at the creek behind her.

"Goodbye Hank," Violet finally said, reaching up to lightly kiss him upon his cheek. Hank stared straight ahead, his eyes still solemnly watching the creek. She waited for a response. When none came, she moved past him to leave. In a movement so sudden she let out a surprised yelp, Hank caught her wrist in his hand, quickly pulling her to him. As he lowered his mouth to hers, he sealed her deepest fears, that those stirrings three years ago were no fleeting spark, that he could so easily tug the undetectable cord that bound them. And as he held her, a warm awareness, like fluid seeping through a cloth, enveloped her.

Then he released her, his eyes boring into hers. "Don't write me," he warned. And he turned and left.

For a moment, she simply stood alone watching the vines sway before her but not seeing them at all. Then she finally turned and found her way back to the swing. She dropped to the seat, the bench groaning in response. Violet leaned forward and picked up a smooth stone from beneath the bed of trampled magnolia petals. She held it just as Hank had always tried to show her before flinging it towards the water. The rock made one perfect skip before thudding and sinking into the dark creek below, small but sure ripples swelling across the water's surface from its instant descent.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Violet's head yanked back, nearly snapping her neck. She swung around to glare at Teddy who was riding in the back of Elias' wagon. "You pull on my braid one more time Theodore," she warned.

Teddy raised his arms in protest. "I'd called your name a good hundred times."

She raised one black brow. "What do you want?"

"What else is in that basket Mother and Pearl packed?"

Elias, hands on the reins, turned to his little brother in amused indignation. "We haven't even gone a mile. You can't be hungry again."

Violet shook her head. "He's *always* hungry." She rummaged through the basket before handing him a few boiled eggs.

Elias watched his little siblings, a faint smile upon his face.

The dusty road stretched before them, and soon, they each settled quietly unto their own thoughts. As Violet watched the emerald landscapes slowly pass beside her, she juggled feelings of guilt-tinged excitement. She recalled Mother and Pearl's fierce hugs and tears as they admonished her and Teddy to be of help. Minnie had even openly cried, asking Violet why she also had to leave with Teddy. Pearl, wiping her sister's eyes with her own apron, had clucked like a mother hen. "Don't worry sweetheart," she'd assured Minnie, "Violet will be back before you know it." Violet's heart had clenched at the betrayal. As the wagon swayed, the old gray mare plodding towards Nashville, Violet clutched the hatbox upon her lap. Willing herself to concentrate on the dreams it contained rather than her last encounter with Hank. But inevitably, her mind would

wander back to the creek, and as she'd contemplate a future without contact with her best friend, she'd wonder, if this was the dream she'd been hoping for, then why did she also feel so miserable?



Violet settled into life with her brother with remarkable speed. Before this trip, she'd always stayed with Darlene when she came to Nashville. The last time she'd even lived with Elias she'd been a little girl, so in those first few days in his tidy clapboard home, she often found herself marveling over the fact that the older brother who'd mercilessly chased and tickled her feet, was the real life head of his own household, complete with a sweet wife and three rambunctious sons. Elias came and went, his work as a Pullman porter carrying him across the southeast, and at times even up the northern coast. Violet did her best to make herself useful, helping his wife Francine with the laundry, meals, and bedtimes. And every couple of days, her sister Darlene dropped in, sometimes with their sister Nora in tow when she felt strong enough.

Two weeks into her stay at Elias's, Violet was ironing sheets when Darlene barreled into the house, a sack of groceries in her arms.

"I brought over some extras from my garden. Teddy's probably eating Elias out of house and home by now." She called as she bustled into the kitchen before making her way back into the front room where Violet was working. "I still don't know why you didn't want to stay with me," she said, a bit put out. Like Teddy, Darlene was amber skinned with dark brown curly-cued hair, and when she was annoyed, she fingered her coils. She pulled at a ringlet and plopped on the couch. "Ouch!" she shrieked, yanking a

tin soldier from underneath her round bottom. “See what I mean?” Darlene grinned. “Much more peaceful at my place.” She and Will didn’t have children; and though Violet had once overhead that the situation grieved her sister, Darlene always showed a brave face about the matter, and Violet knew better than to question her otherwise.

Violet pressed the iron into the linens. “I guess I figured I’d be more help here.”

Darlene’s eyes narrowed as she watched her little sister, “Hmph.”

Violet’s neck began to tingle. She *hated* when Darlene said that. It usually meant she was about to say something really uncomfortable for the person to whom she was speaking. Violet had never quite learned to manage her oldest sister or her astute assessments like she could finagle Pearl.

The door blew open and Teddy bounded in, a nephew on his back and one in his arms. Francine trailed him with the baby boy.

Violet smiled towards them, “Did you catch anything?”

Francine handed the baby over to Darlene so she could undo her bonnet. She looked at her sisters-in-law, “Hey Darlene. Violet. Your little brother decided he was going to catch supper over at that little pond across the glade. Oh, *and* teach his nephews to fish at the same time.”

Darlene bounced the chubby baby on her lap, “Well?” she asked Teddy, who was prying his nephews from his lanky body.

“Nashville fish are tricky,” Teddy muttered.

Francine giggled, “Thank the good Lord I went too, because my boys almost ended up in the pond themselves.”

Darlene looked at her little brother, “Nashville kids are tricky too?”

Teddy just grinned back.

“Well, I can get something started with those vegetables Darlene brought over,”

Violet said, setting the iron on the mantle and quickly folding the sheet she’d just pressed.

“I probably need to get back to Nora,” Darlene said, rising to her feet. “Y’all are still coming over for Sunday dinner, right?” Darlene asked the room, but Violet had the nagging feeling she was staring closest at her. So she did what she thought best when dealing with Darlene, she bobbed her head yes, and fled the room.

When Elias came home the next evening, Violet met him at the door. And after he’d greeted his wife and children, eaten his supper, and finally propped himself in his favorite seat in the front room, Violet picked up where she’d left off before he’d gone on his last stretch on the roads. Elias was patient with her questioning. In fact he was a little amused at his sister’s insatiable curiosity with his life and the trains on which he worked. He often mused that it should have been Teddy who was full of questions, since he was the one who was going to eventually work the railroads with him. However, most of the time Teddy was too busy wrestling with his nephews to even pay any attention to Violet’s queries.

“You going to draw what I’m telling you?” Elias suddenly asked from his cushioned chair. “Remember how you used to do that? You’d ask me about school, and then you’d run to the back room and draw me a picture—a picture of what I’d just told you?”

Violet grinned back. She'd forgotten all about that. "I suppose I could."

"Okay," Elias smiled, "What do you want to know?"

Violet asked about the train depot and the tickets, where Negroes sat, and how did one know when it was their turn to depart? As his few days at home went by, she asked Elias questions while helping to cook dinner, when hanging laundry or darning his socks, and when going over the alphabet with her nephews until Elias laughed to Francine that if their children had inherited just a fraction of their auntie's curiosity then they were in trouble indeed.

Sometimes Elias wondered if all the questioning was to keep her mind off of Hank. They all knew something had gone wrong that day at the house blessing. He'd wanted to ask her outright about it, but Francine had convinced him to wait her out. Violet would talk about it when she wanted to, his wife had assured him. And when Violet was bounding around the house, playing hide and go seek with Teddy and the boys, he often thought it was for the best she and Hank hadn't rushed into anything. She was just a child herself. But then, every once in awhile he would catch her quietly reading or drawing and he would find himself stunned at the beautiful young woman she'd become, and he'd suddenly wonder how it was that they'd all missed it.



That next Saturday morning Violet wasn't feeling much like a woman at all. She felt like a frightened child. This was the day. And to her mortification, she was having serious doubts. She sat at Darlene's kitchen table, shelling peas. Darlene was making a near feast for that next day's Sunday dinner. So Violet, along with Teddy and the Elias'

two older boys, had come over to help. Afterwards, Violet was planning on spending the afternoon at that movie theater down the road that had a colored balcony. How she'd managed to convince Teddy that he'd be better off trying his hand at fishing again than going to the show with her, she'd never know. At the moment, her older sister was at the market, picking up a few last minute items. Nora, who was feeling up to being out of bed, sat in the kitchen with Violet, a thin quilt wrapped loosely about her, and a worn volume of Jane Austen in her lap. "*Sense and Sensibility?*" Violet smiled. James had given Nora the book years ago.

Nora's dimples peeked from her cheeks, her pale face beautiful in the kitchen's natural light, and at that moment she looked much younger than a woman of twenty-three years. "I never seem to tire of it."

Violet nodded back, "Like my drawings."

"Hmmm," Nora smiled. She slowly closed her eyes, managing to look simultaneously weary and peaceful as her sand colored lashes fanned her cheeks.

Violet quietly continued her shelling while the sounds from the open kitchen window drifted into the sun drenched room. A lovely mixture of wind, birdsong, and children at play as their nephews tackled Teddy in the yard. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm a bit too old for them though," she suddenly heard herself say.

Nora opened her eyes, her hazel irises gazing at Violet.

"My drawings," Violet clarified. "Maybe, they're too important to me?"

Nora softly smiled. She scooted higher in her seat and opened her weathered book, gently turning the pages until she found her place, "*There is something so amiable*

in the prejudices of a young mind,” she read, a lovely smile upon her face, “that one is sorry to see them give way to the reception of more general opinions.”

Violet smiled back, “I’ve never quite lived up to the standards of *general opinions*, have I?”

Nora closed the book, a grin upon her face.

The little boys shrieked from outside, and through the window, they watched them climb Darlene’s fence only to leap upon their Uncle Teddy. “Why do they move about so much?” Violet laughed.

Nora watched the boys intently before turning to Violet, a peculiar look upon her face, “Because they can.”



Violet’s heart was thundering in her chest as she stood in line at the Nashville train depot waiting to be helped at the colored counter. She nervously wetted her lips as her eyes danced over the timetable above the ticket stand’s sign. It looked just as Elias had described it with its dizzying list of destinations and departure times.

She was supposed to be at the theater, watching the Saturday afternoon viewing of the new Buster Keaton picture. She’d nearly expired from anxiety, rushing from Darlene’s house before her sister could come home, then back to Elias’ where she had waited until Francine had left for Darlene’s as well with the baby, before hurriedly packing and escaping the house. She prayed she’d be well on her way by the time they realized she was gone and found her brief note poking out from underneath her pillow which read:

Dearest Elias,

I am so sorry to have caused any undue concern. Please do not continue to worry about me. I have embarked upon a journey of my own and will contact you as soon as an opportune moment arises. Until then, please tell the entire family that I love them and will correspond with them shortly.

*With Everlasting Devotion,
Your Sister, Violet*

She had signed the message with quite a flourish on the letter V, and she'd spent half an hour the evening before wording the note just so, trying to sound both adult and rational while also attempting to alleviate any needless fears, all without necessarily sharing where she was headed. But now, as Violet stood in line, her eyes darting nervously about her, she was having trouble alleviating her own fears.

When Violet finally made it to the ticket counter she stared at the balding salesperson, half way expecting him to point at her and yell, "Imposter!" for all to hear. But instead, it was actually surprisingly simple. She choked out her destination, handed over her money, and the attendant slid back her ticket with one hand while flicking his cigarette with the other. With what felt like wooden legs, she staggered to the colored car. Violet placed her worn travel sack atop the train's baggage rack and still clutching her hatbox tight, settled herself into her seat, her fingers trembling as she peeled off her church gloves. Her hands were wet and clammy, and she stretched her slender fingers, letting the warm air of the car caress them.

As she waited for the train to depart she unconsciously ran her fingers along the length of her braid and stared out the colored car's glassless window. The last passengers were hurriedly boarding. When the hair at the nape of her neck pricked, Violet turned to see the barrel-chested man across from her fixedly staring at her fingers

as they slowly ran up and down her plaited ponytail. Violet's palms immediately turned unnaturally cold, and she flung her braid over her shoulder, yanked her damp gloves back on and tightly clasped her hands atop the hatbox in her lap. She leaned closer to the car's siding. As she turned back to the window beside her the train suddenly gave a great lurch and began slowly rolling out of the platform. The locomotive's whistle shrilled, and to Violet, it was her own private call to adventure. So she leaned forward, her head jutting from the window as the engine began to pick up steam, soon effortlessly moving onward as it left the station behind.