COLOR STRUCK: A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF SKIN COLOR WITHIN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

By

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Chapter 1

Something was different about Aaron today. There was sadness in his deep blue eyes that Eve had never seen before. It must be school she thought. Of course he was nervous; this was his final year of medical school, and he had just completed exams. Why wasn’t he more excited? He stared out the parlor window, and she knew that his thoughts were not with her. She rose from her chair and slowly smoothed out her pink floral dress. The cotton fabric clung to her body and accentuated her curvy petite figure. Aaron loved this dress. He always said it made her look like a perfect spring flower. Eve’s hand trembled as she placed it on his shoulder.

“Please Aaron, won’t you tell me what’s troubling you?” She said in a tender voice. Her touch brought him back from his dismal trance. Hastily he turned causing her to lose her balance and stumble. Swiftly, he pulled her into a loving embrace.

“Forgive me.” he whispered into her ear, allowing his cool lips to brush her skin.

“I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Eve turned to meet his eyes and their lips met. Aaron kissed her gently at first and then the chemistry between them ignited. Outside a violent storm raged. The wind blew savagely, and the rain pelted the windows. The two young lovers heard and felt nothing but their own desires.

Eve could feel his desire for her growing as he pulled her closer. Her body cried out for him, as she fought to control herself. She ached to surrender herself to him once again but could not. She longed for the day they would be man and wife and could
display their love publicly. She must not submit to her desires, not this time. She found the courage to break free.

“Aaron, please we can’t do this,” she said breathlessly. “We have to talk.”

Aaron was shaken by her sudden rejection.

Eve gradually backed away. Aaron Gray was a strikingly handsome man. At six feet his body commanded attention whenever he entered a room. He carried himself with confidence and regal assurance. Aaron seemed completely perfect from his electric blue eyes to his thin and sensual lips. His slicked back flaxen mane only accentuated his strong manly features.

Eve sat on the posh tan sofa. She couldn’t believe what she was doing. The risk she was taking by having him in her mother’s home was terrifying, but she had no choice. She desperately needed to speak with him so it was a risk she knew she had to take.

She took a moment to regain her composure before extending her hand to Aaron to join her. She remembered the purpose of their meeting today. They must work out their plans to move north and be married.

She took a slow breath as Aaron took the seat next to her on the sofa.

“Now that you’ve completed medical school and your residency is in place for the hospital in New York, we really must start making plans to marry and start our lives in a new city”

Aaron’s body stiffened.

Rather than wait for his response, Eve felt it best to continue before she lost her nerve.
“There really is so much to do to prepare. I’ve always dreamed of a large church wedding with tons with my friends and family present, but I understand that just can’t be.” she tried to hide the shaking in her voice. “I know you’ll be spending quite a bit of time at the hospital while you complete your residency, but I’ll have my hands full just trying to get us settled into our new home. Listen to me rambling on. So, tell me what you think about all of this?”

Hearing the dispirited tone in his lover’s voice, Aaron clasped her hands and attempted to calm her fears.

“My dove,” he said. “There’s nothing I want more than to make you my wife.”

Eve felt her cheeks flush with delight. Her fears seemed to disappear as she listened to him. The confidence in his voice was hypnotic. He was so sure of himself and very ambitious. It was clear to all that his drive and charm were a combination for success.

Aaron caressed her hand as he spoke to her.

“My dove,” he said, deliberately diverting his eyes from hers. “there’s no need to rush things. I know our marriage will only cause tension between you and your mother. I would hate to be the cause of tension between you and your mother. Marriages should bring joy and happiness to newlyweds and their families, not sadness and regret.”

“Aaron, what are you saying!” she gasped in shock. “Are you suggesting that we not be married?”

“That’s not what I’m suggesting at all,” he consoled her. “I just don’t want our marriage to cause you one moment of regret.” Sadness claimed his voice, and his face became ghostly white.
Eve immediately regretted her sudden outburst. How could she have questioned his intentions?

Aaron released her hand and stood. His eyes canvassed the room for his hat and trench coat.

“Aaron,” Eve called. “please don’t leave like this. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

He turned to face her. Before Eve could utter another word, he dropped to one knee. “I’m not upset, my dove, and I hope that I haven’t upset you with my thoughtless remarks.”

Eve was surprised to see him so shaken. She knew that more was bothering him than their brief conversation. His hands shook in hers as he spoke.

“Please don’t ever doubt my love for you,” he said. “You are by far the most beautiful and loving person I have ever known.” Eve could hear him trying to hold back the sadness in his voice. His eyes looked red and glassy. Rather than have her look at him in his distressed state, he lowered his head to avoid her gaze.

“I don’t deserve you.” his voice trembled. “You are the kindest person I’ve every known. You’ve loved me unconditionally no matter the cost. The only thing I have to offer you is my undying love.” He raised his eyes to meet hers. His fingers traced the contours of her face, as if he were trying to engrave her image on his memory.

“You’ll always be the love of my life,” he spoke softly. “Always.” Gradually he leaned in to kiss her full red lips.

“Please forgive me, but I’ve got to go,” his voice heavy with remorse. “There is something that I need to attend to.” Aaron grabbed his trench coat from the arm of the sofa.
“Aaron wait!” she said. “You can’t leave now. It’s pouring down rain, and besides, there are so many things we need to talk about.”

He lowered his head and wiped hot tears from his cheeks.

“I sorry, but I must go.” He disappeared into the evening storm.

Eve stood motionless at the door. She bit her bottom lip hard to hold back the tears that welled in her eyes. Monday, afternoon they would meet again as they had for the past several months. She must do it then; she had to gather her nerve to tell him about the baby. After all, they were to be married soon, and he loved her- hadn’t he just professed that he would love her always? Eve closed her eyes tightly and prayed that Aaron would be happy about their blessed event. He would understand the increased urgency that they marry and move away. He had to be happy about the child, or what would become of her? What would become of their child?
Chapter 2

Minutes later, Aaron sat in his old blue Plymouth Coupe and stared at the white gazebo in the middle of Grace Court Park. As the rain pounded down, he thought back to the first time he saw Eve Anderson. It was a gorgeous May afternoon only one year ago. Classes had not yet resumed at the medical school-so he was still able to find free time to spend with his friends. Aaron and his roommate Mitch were on their way to meet a few of there classmates for a bite to eat and a movie.

The two were walking through downtown discussing their upcoming class load when he spotted her sitting in the gazebo reading. She was without a doubt the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. Her olive skin glowed in the afternoon sun and her dark hair rested on her shoulders. The wide brim hat she wore made her look elegant and sophisticated. She was flawless.

As if sensing his gaze, Eve looked up from her book. Aaron felt his heart leap from his chest the moment he saw her almond brown eyes. Never in his life had he been as captivated as he was this very moment.

Mitch had continued walking; voicing his dislike of the new anatomy professor they would have in the fall. He was completely unaware that Aaron was no longer beside him until he turned to get his opinion.

“What’s wrong? Why’d you stop?” Mitch called out from several yards ahead.

“I think I’ll pass on this afternoon.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”
Aaron casually waved a quick good-bye to his friend and began to descend the steps that led to the gazebo. Suddenly he became nervous. Perspiration drenched his hands. His stomach felt as butterflies were trapped inside. Instinctively, he removed his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. Once he was sure he looked presentable, he continued walking. Upon reaching her, his voice escaped him.

“Excuse me sir,” she said. “you’re blocking my light.” The sound of her delicate voice brought a smile to his face. Still unable to speak, he simply smiled at her like a love-struck schoolboy. Her full red lips curled into an intoxicating smile. She was obviously amused at the tall mute stranger who towered over her.

Aaron stood awkwardly in front with is hat in his hands.

“Please pardon my rudeness for staring, but I’ve been trying to gather my nerve to come over and meet you. My name is Aaron Gray.” Fumbling nervously, he dropped his hat as he extended his hand.

Eve examined him with cautious eyes. She shifted uncomfortably on the bench as if unsure what to do next. Hesitantly, she placed her hand in his.

“Hello, Aaron. My name is Eve…Eve Anderson. It’s nice to meet you.”

Oblivious to her uneasiness, Aaron sat on the bench beside her.

“Well, Miss Eve Anderson, it’s very nice to meet you. I hope you don’t mind if I join you?”

Eve glanced at him sweetly and then returned her attention back to her book.

“Please tell me about yourself?” he inquired. “Do you come to the park often? I pass this way sometimes on my way to the diner, and I don’t believe I’ve ever seen you here before.”
Eve looked up at him shyly and began to laugh. Flattered by his attention, she closed her book and met his gaze.

“Aaron it’s very nice to meet you but I’m planning to join some friends later,” she said dismissively. “It’s probably best I be on my way.”

“Please stay?” he asked. “Surely you can spare a few minutes to talk.”

At his request, Eve offered Aaron a caressing smile. “I can only stay a few minutes, and then I must be going.”

Aaron breathed a sigh of relief. Suddenly, his mind began to swirl with questions. His time was limited and he wanted to learn as much as he could.

“I see that you’re reading. Are you a student at Salem College,” he asked, “or are you simply reading for enjoyment?”

“For school and enjoyment,” she said. “I love to read. I find it freeing. You can be transported to a different time or place and never leave the spot they’re sitting in.”

“So, is this book is required for a course you’re taking?”

“Not really,” she said sheepishly crinkling the bridge of her nose. “This collection of short stories by Langston Hughes was a requirement for my college literature class, but I’m planning to assign the book to my students when classes begin in this fall. I hope they enjoy it as much as I did.”

He glanced briefly at her folded hands. He could not recall seeing a ring on her finger. It baffled him why a young lady this beautiful and educated had not been whisked away by some lucky gent. Whatever the reason, he was extremely delighted she seemed to be available.

“So you’re a teacher?” he inquired.
“Yes.”

“It sounds like you’ll be teaching English.”

“That’s correct. I’ll be teaching high school students.”

“I’m a student myself.” he boasted. “I’m starting my third year at Bowman Gray School of Medicine.” He had hoped that the news would impress her as it had other young ladies he’d gone out with, but she seemed unfazed

Rather than flutter about and go on about how impressive that was, she smiled politely and said, “That’s nice.”

Aaron found himself intrigued. She was definitely not like anyone he had ever met before. There was a gentleness about her that would calm even the most enraged person. Her mesmerizing eyes seem to peer straight through him.

“It sounds like you just recently completed your own studies. I assume you attended Salem College?”

Aaron paused briefly to allow her to answer. When she did not, he continued.

“I was on campus once for a social of some sort, but I don’t recall seeing you there. Do you attend many of the dances there?”

“I’m fairly certain you have not attended any socials at the college I attended.”

“But I have!” he exclaimed. “Just last November, I attended the winter formal. The gentlemen from the medical school are often invited to socials and formals at Salem College.” Confident in his recollection of events he continued. “The campus is very charming. Stunning old historic buildings and the grounds are very well maintained. I’m sure you must have enjoyed your time there.”
“That’s not the college I went to.” Eve said calmly while continuing to focus her attention on her book.

A look of bewilderment crossed Aaron’s face. He had only lived in Winston-Salem for two years, but he knew only one college in the city admitted women and that was Salem, a historic Moravian women’s college.

“I’m sorry. I just assumed you were a student there. So tell me, what college did you attend?”

Eve lifted her head and took a slow deep breath.

“I’m a graduate of Winston-Salem Teacher’s College.” she said proudly.

Aaron jumped. His mouth flew open but failed to utter a word. Small beads of perspiration formed on his forehead. Finally he managed to stammer: “That’s a colored college isn’t it? Are you a-I mean, colored?”

Eve’s response turned cool and her body stiffened as if she was bracing herself for a violent storm.

“Yes Mr. Gray, I am a Negro, a college graduate, and a teacher. However, I can see that you were not aware I was colored when you came over to introduce yourself. Believe me, it was not my intention to deceive you about who I am but now that you know, I think its best I be on my way.”

Aaron had heard of Bennett College, a women’s college in the neighboring city of Greensboro. If he could recall correctly, it was for Negro women only.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “Your skin is as white as mine. Why I just assumed”

“That I was white?”
“Yes.”

“No Mr. Gray, I am colored just as my parents are colored.

Aaron sighed, shaking his head in disbelief. He was well aware of Jim Crow laws that ruled the South intended to keep blacks and whites as separate and unequal as possible. The weight of her news covered him like an enormous quilt. Every inch of him screamed out to get up and leave immediately, but his heart would not allow him to move.

“Well, that would explain your being ill-at-ease in my presence.”

“I’m flattered by your attention Mr. Gray, and I can tell by your northern accent that you’re probably not from here.” She paused briefly before continuing her reproach. “But this is the South and I’m a colored girl and you’re a white man which means one of us should leave”

“You’re right, I’m from New York and I do understand that this is North Carolina. I just want the chance to get to know you. I promise to be on my best behavior. Please meet me here tomorrow, whatever time you like.

Eve jumped to her feet and grabbed her purse.

“You don’t understand, I can’t meet you here or anywhere. Now please, I’ve got to go.”

“Well, if not here may I call on you at your home?”

The moment he made the suggestion he regretted it. How foolish to propose such a thing. They could no more meet at her home than they could a public restaurant.

Eve shook her head in aggravation and headed down the gazebo steps.
“I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking.” He said remorsefully. “I don’t care that you’re colored. What does that have to do with who you are? If you walk away now, you’re no better than those who judge you before getting to know who you really are.”

Eve stopped. Frustration had vanished from her face. Her brown eyes softened.

“I must be crazy to suggest this, but I’ll be having dinner tomorrow with my friend Sonia and her husband at their home. We should be sitting down at five o’clock. I’m sure they wouldn’t mind if you joined us as my guest. Here,” she reached into her purse for a pen and paper. “I’ll give you their address and directions to their home.”

Aaron beamed with excitement. He couldn’t believe he had succeeded in convincing her to meet with him again. She handed him a crumpled piece of paper with the scribbled inside. She bid him farewell and hurried away.

After more than a year together, he knew the time had come to end his relationship with Eve. A colored wife would be no more acceptable in the North than in the South. Northern laws allow them to marry but strong racial bigotry would never openly condone their union. All he need was a little more time to make his way through the ugly maze that had become his life.

Chapter 3

The fierce April storm had passed, only to be replaced by a muggy afternoon. Eve sat at the kitchen table staring out the open window, enthralled by the rainbow of tulips that filled her mother’s flowerbed, although even they were segregated by color. The irony of the segregated flowers and her own racially divided world would have been
slightly comical had she not lost her ability to laugh. Eve wasn’t sure if the difficulty she was having breathing was from the heat or the heaviness of her troublesome situation.

Her best friend Sonia would be pulling into the driveway at any minute, wanting a complete recap of her meeting with Aaron. She loved Sonia like a sister, always had. The two had become the best of friends during elementary school. Ostracized by their classmates, Eve and Sonia drew comfort and support from each other. Both had been taunted and teased for what others saw as their differences from the group and had never really found the acceptance they craved Eve was ridiculed for her white complexion, straight hair, and proper speech, while Sonia was not accepted because of her blue-black skin, short kinky hair, and tattered dresses.

Growing up with the burden of having to prove yourself due to your outward appearance was nothing new. Eve was burdened with not only defending her blackness against a wall of racism but also demonstrating she was black enough to her own race. Despite her dark complexion, Sonia was forced to prove she had potential to succeed as something more than a laborer.

She had always been about half a foot taller than Eve and her full breast and wide hips drew a lot more male attention. Her skin was smooth and flawless like fine chocolate. She took great care to ensure her coarse black hair was always straightened and fashionably styled. Her most stunning feature was her alluring smile that showed off her dazzling white teeth. While physically different in every way, each saw only a friend when looking at the other.

The sight of Sonia pulling her new Buick into the driveway made Eve shake her head with pity. The car was well more than what Sonia and her husband could afford, but
Sonia had insisted, and Isaiah, unable to deny her anything, emptied their savings and 
temporarily took on a second job to give her what she felt she deserved. 

She entered the kitchen looking exhausted. She had just left the Westwood home 
where she worked as maid. Her eyes met Eve’s, and without a word she knew her 
meeting with Aaron did not go well. 

“You didn’t tell him, did you?” 

Eve stared down at her hands. “I tried, but he was late for an appointment and had 
to leave quickly.” 

Sonia let out a low moan as she sat in one of the empty kitchen chairs. “You’ve 
got to do something and you’ve got to do it fast.” She paused to search Eve’s face. 

“Now, you don’t have to say a word to anybody about this situation you’re in. I can take 
you to the woman who helped me last year. She can take care of this mess and not a soul 
outside this room has to know a thing about it.” 

“No!” Eve gasped. “I could never do something like that.” 

“Never say never,” Sonia laughed. “I never thought I’d have to do that either, but 
when I found out I was pregnant again, I knew I didn’t have a choice.” 

“But you did have a choice Sonia; there was no reason why you couldn’t have had 
that baby.” 

Eve regretting commenting on the abortion Sonia had last year. It was a sore 
subject between them. Eve had begged her not to go through with it. She was very 
bothered by the fact Sonia had never told Isaiah she was pregnant. To this day, he had no 
idea what his wife had done.
“Now, you know why I had to do what I did. But then I wouldn’t exactly expect you to understand, seeing as how you’ve never had one minute’s grief because you were too black and nappy-headed.”

Eve could see her friend fighting back tears.

“I just couldn’t take the chance that it would’ve been a girl. I got lucky with Little Jeremiah, but life isn’t nearly as hard for dark boys. A boy can go to school and get a good education and make a little money. Then he can find him a good wife that’s the right color. That way he can do better in life and life will be better for his children. But it’s different for dark girls. No amount of education or money will ever help a dark nappy headed girl. Her life will always be nothing but sorrow and disappointment. I just couldn’t take the chance that I’d be forcing a child to walk the same miserable path I did.”

Eve gently patted Sonia’s hand. She realized she might never agree with her friend’s reasons, but she knew she did what she felt she had to do. The decision had obviously been a painful one.

“I’m going to tell him Monday.” Eve said in a small voice.

“Why wait?” Sonia asked. “Today is Friday and you need to move fast. Isaiah’s having some of buddies over for cards tomorrow so that won’t work… but you can meet him at my house on Sunday and tell him them.”

“You know I can’t do that. Have you forgotten how busy Sundays are for me?”

Sonia nodded and said, “Even though your father, the good reverend Edward Andersen is no longer with us, you’re till the preacher’s daughter. I’m sure your mother will always see to that.”
Eve recognized the distain in Sonia’s comments about her mother. No love was lost between the two women. Ruth Anderson had never approved of their friendship and made it quite clear that she felt Sonia and her family were far beneath them. Ruth considered her own family to be quality. She often boasted of their lineage as privileged fair-skinned slaves, free people of color, and wealthy white ancestors. She took great pains to ensure Eve went to the right schools, joined the right clubs, and associated with the right people. Her daughter’s friendship with the chocolate-colored, nappy-headed little girl, from a poor uneducated family was in no way acceptable, and had it not been for her husband’s, she would have never allowed their friendship to continue.

“I can’t begin to focus on how mother will react to me being pregnant with no husband. She’ll be home from the ladies retreat in the morning.”

Eve rose to pour herself a cool drink of water. She hoped it would settle the queasiness in her stomach. Her floral dress clung in the afternoon heat. She wondered if the sickness was from her pregnancy or worrying.

“You know,” Sonia said as she dabbed at the small stains on her uniform with a handkerchief, “your mother’s really going to be upset the most about you not marrying that new minister, what’s his name again? Powers, yes-that’s it Reverend Richard Powers.”

“Richard Powers!” Eve said his name as if it were a deadly poison. “There was never any chance I would considered marrying that man. Why, I have never met a more arrogant and superficial man in all my life.”

“I don’t think he’s arrogant, just confident.”

“Whatever he is, I don’t like it.”
“When did it become bad to know what you want and be proud when you get it? Shoot… I wish he’d give Isaiah a few lessons.”

Eve was flushed with anger at the mere thought of her mother trying to marry her off to a man she loathed.

“The only reason that man is even interested in me is because I’m the former minister’s daughter. Of course he thinks it will give him leverage in the church. He cares nothing about me. I’m simply a good business deal.”

“Well, I wouldn’t know about that, but he sure does look good. Just tell me this, how can you not like a high yella man with a head full of curly black hair and light brown eyes? I’d sure love to have a crack at him, but you and I both know that a man like that would never look twice at a woman as dark as me.”

Sonia’s voice was filled with despair. She shook the bad thoughts from her head.

“Oh well, his loss.”

“You’re a beautiful person inside and out. Any man would be proud to have you. I think you’ve found a perfect husband. Isaiah loves you with all his heart. You have more than I do right now, and skin color has nothing to do with.”

Sonia stared down at her plain gold wedding band and glanced out the window at her fine automobile in the driveway. A devious smile crept over her face.

“I guess I have been blessed in some ways. But, Eve, you need to be very careful. I know you feel Aaron loves you, and the two of you are going to live happily ever after, which maybe you will somewhere, but, this is still the South and he’s a white man and you’re a colored girl, and nothing good has ever comes that.”
Eve collapsed into a chair. She had no argument for Sonia’s truthful statement. All she had left was hope that Aaron loved her as much as he claimed, hope that her mother would not look too harshly upon her, and hope that she could all have a happy ending.

Chapter 4

As Sonia drove away from Eve’s home, her mind raced in a million directions. “How could Eve get involved with a white man? What was she going to do about this baby if he wouldn’t take her North and marry her? How was she going to handle that mother of hers?” Sonia just couldn’t understand why she began seeing him in the first place. An open relationship with a white man was dangerous. But Eve had been fool enough to believe that this man loved her and was going to make a white-looking Nigger gal his wife. Sonia shook her head at the thought of Aaron and Eve living as man and wife. In the South it was a white man’s rule that you keep your colored mistresses tucked away. It wasn’t even legal for whites and blacks to marry, what had the girl been thinking?

For once, Sonia couldn’t help but take a small bit of comfort in her own blessings. She might not be living the life she’d dreamed about as a child, but she certainly was making the best of her situation. Of course, she would have preferred to be married to a professional man instead of one who worked all day in a tobacco factory, but it was certainly better than not having a husband at all. Even though her home wasn’t as fancy as those in East Winston where all the colored doctors and lawyers lived, it was definitely the nicest home in the Bottoms.
God had even been kind enough to bless her with a little boy rather than a girl. She was going to make sure that Little Jeremiah had opportunities she had never had.

Her thoughts reverted to all the things she felt she had been denied. She deeply regretted not being able to attend college, but it was a realistic option. Day-to-day struggles for survival replaced her silly dreams of college. She did take pride in being the only one in the family to have graduated from high school. Her bothers had all dropped out well before graduation to help either their mother or themselves. College just wasn’t practical. Everyone knew what path her life was going to take. She was destined for work as a maid and a poor man’s wife. She fought against it was a long as she could, but in the end she accepted her lot and tried to make the best of it.

At fifty, her mother passed away, a tired and broken woman. Sonia remembered her as old beyond her years. Her life had been hard. Her husband had abandoned the family, leaving her to raise two-year-old Sonia and her four older boys alone. Her mother spent her life working for a wealthy white family, often showering her love and attention on the white children she raised. By the time she retuned home, worn out and ill-tempered, there was little left for her own children. She had buried two of her sons. One killed in a fight at a local bar and another in the battlefields of France during the war. After that, she seemed to concede defeat and will herself to die. Overnight she became old and her health quickly deteriorated.

After her mother’s death, Sonia went to live with her brother Nate and his wife Della. It didn’t take long before tensions with her sister- in- law arose. There was always a disagreement about something. One day it was the cooking: the next, it was the
cleaning. The strain eventually carried over to her brother. Their relationship never recovered.

Sonia pulled into her driveway looked at her small, worn clapboard house. She knew that Eve was right. Her life might not have been what she had hoped, but it was certainly better than Eve’s prospects.

Chapter 5

Eve was glad Sunday service had finally ended. The church had been unusually warm, and she’d spent the entire morning fighting back a sick stomach. How silly of her to agree to ride to service with her mother. Had she driven herself, she could have been half-way home by now, instead of being forced to wait in an empty sanctuary while her mother attended a ladies auxiliary meeting.

Eve closed her eyes and tried to block out the conversations. She took slow deep breaths until she felt the stress begin to melt from her body. She imagined herself as Aaron’s wife, living in a quaint little home, filled with fresh flowers from her garden, in some northern city. Eve pictured Aaron sitting down, holding their child in his strong arms, playing with the infant’s small fingers. Calm settled over her as she slipped deeper into her daydream.

“There you are Miss Eve.” Reverend Powers’ voice pierced her thoughts and abruptly jolted her back to reality. “I hope my sermon didn’t bring on this sudden fatigue?” His hand on her shoulder stilled her.

“No, Reverend,” she said, brushing his hand away, “your sermon was fine. I just had a slight head ache from the heat.”
“I certainly hate to hear you’re not feeling well. Is there anything I can do to help?”

His lustful glare made her feel uncomfortable. She turned her body slightly in hopes of shielding herself from his unwanted attention.

“I’ll be fine once I can get home and rest.”

An awkward silence settled between them as Richard continued to examine her like a rare object he hoped to possess. His smile broadened at her apparent discomfort. She knew he took pleasure in the uneasiness his presence stirred in her.

“Why do you treat me so coldly? I’m sure you know how I feel about you?” The corner of his mouth lifted in a devious smile. “You know, it’s only a matter of time before you enter this church, not as the late reverend’s daughter, but as my wife and new first lady.”

Before Eve could protest such a ridiculous notion, her mother swept into the room, fanning herself with her white lace fan.

“There you are, Eve.” She said. “I’ve been looking every-where for you.” She removed a lace handkerchief from her purse and dabbed at the beads of sweat on her face.

Relieved by her sudden rescue, Eve leaped to her feet. She couldn’t be free of this insufferable man soon enough.

“Good afternoon sister Anderson.” said the reverend, “You’re looking lovely as usual.”

Ruth’s face blushed with pride as she cast an approving glance over her new pale pink suite. Despite her husband’s passing, she was still first lady of New Bethel Baptist
Church, especially since the new pastor was a single man. She took great pride in this role and felt it her duty to set the standard that the congregation should follow.

“I’m so glad you like my new outfit,” she replied. “I decided to use a new seamstress. I really think she does fine work.”

“I agree,” the reverend said approvingly.

Eve excused herself as the two continued to exchange pleasantries. She would much rather wait outside in the afternoon heat than listen to their idle chit chat.

Ruth had been instrumental in pushing for Richard’s appointment as the new pastor after her husband’s death. He had only one year as associate minister under her father, Reverend Edward Anderson, and was not yet thirty years old, so the deacons and trustees felt he lacked the experience needed to lead a church as large and influential as Bethel Baptist. Ruth attacked that notion like a tiger. She argued that after her late husband’s twenty-plus years as head of the church, it was time for a new young minister with progressive ideas. For good measure and to help close the deal, she added that it was her late husband’s wish that Richard succeed him. With the approval of the newly widowed first lady, Richard found no more opposition to his appointment. Their alliance had been sealed.

Eve saw through the show. She knew exactly why her mother had pushed for Richard’s appointment. In no way was Ruth Anderson ready to relinquish her role as first lady of the largest colored church in the city. She basked in the power and respect that came with it. Even her husband’s sudden passing from pneumonia could not budge her. Richard was a perfect fit, young, single, and well-educated minister, with the right background and social connections. There was no wife to battle for control. He was also
the ideal man for her single daughter. If the two were to marry, Ruth’s place would be secure. Richard Powers was the solution to all her problems.

As Eve sat waiting in the car, she saw Ruth walking toward her with a look of pure frustration. Drained from the already long day, she hoped an apology for her sudden exit would defuse her mother’s anger.

“I’m sorry for leaving so suddenly, but I just wasn’t feeling well.”

“That was so rude, Eve. I really don’t know what’s wrong with you.” Ruth fumbled in her purse for her keys “Richard is a handsome, well-educated man. He comes from one of the best families in Atlanta and has a promising future ahead of him. He’s exactly the kind of young man you should be interested in.”

“Please, mother, not today.”

Ruth threw up her hands in aggravated despair. “I guess if you had your way you’d be married to a tobacco farmer or some uneducated factory worker like that friend of yours.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” Eve barked. “Tell me mother, how has my light skin, straight hair, and fancy education made me better off? I still have to go to the back door of white restaurants for service, drink from separate water fountains and use dirty restrooms marked colored. Everyday, I wake up a colored girl no closer to white than you.” Eve purposely referenced her mother’s inability to pass into white society. Ruth Anderson had always been very sensitive about her skin color. Her caramel complexion had earned her the title of throwback in a near-white family. Ruth felt as dark as coal compared to them. Still stunningly beautiful at fifty-five, Ruth took great care to maintain
her slim figure. Her salt-and-pepper hair gave her a look of style and sophistication that suited her well.

“Don’t get above yourself, young lady. I’m still your mother and you will address me respectfully.”

“I’m sorry,” Eve said without protest, eyes cast down beneath her long black lashes. “I meant no disrespect.”

The two continued the drive in silence, each entangled in a web of thoughts. Eve turned away from the window and closed her eyes. Soon they would be home, and she could figure out exactly what she must do next.

Chapter 6

Eve had been so deep in reflection that she hardly noticed when her mother stopped the car at Dogwood Manner, the home of Jack and Olivia Callahan.

“Mother I thought we were going home. What are we doing here?”

Ignoring her daughter’s question, Ruth retrieved the rouge from her purse and began to apply a generous amount to her tan cheeks.

“Mother why are we here?” Eve pressed.

“Miss Olivia has a few things she wants to donate for the spring bizarre. I promised I would come by after service and pick them up and bring you along. She’s been asking about you for months now.”

“Not today, mother. I really just want to go home. I can visit with Miss Olivia later in the week.”
Ruth pursed her lips and shook her head. “I’m not sure what’s been wrong with you these last few days but I’ve had enough. For the most part, the Callahan’s are decent, not to mention among the richest in the county. Miss Olivia has always taken an interest in you. Allowing you to use of the family library and never once forgetting your birthday. And now you have no time to visit. I must say, Eve, I’m quite taken back by this sudden change in your behavior.”

Ruth was right. Olivia Callahan had always been kind to her and her family. She was by far one of the nicest white women she knew.

“It has been quite a while since I’ve seen Miss Olivia. We won’t have to stay very long, will we?”

Her mother smiled at her small victory. “Not long at all. I just need to pick up the items for the bizarre and say a quick hello. We actually need to get home and start on dinner.”

As they walked along the side of the grand house to the kitchen door, Eve was reminded of how small it always made her feel. With its six massive white columns and wide veranda, it bore a striking resemblance to the Greek Parthenon she’d studied in school. It was a magnificent home and one of the finest in town.

As they neared the back entrance, through the screen door, they could see Ma Sallie, the family cook, busily preparing Sunday dinner. The chubby woman scurried about the kitchen, and the unexpected knock almost caused her to drop her armload of pots and pans. Her plump, sausage-like fingers motioned for them to come into the kitchen.

“Afternoon, Miss Ruth, Eve. Yall come on in. Miss Olivia been expecting yall.”
“Hello, Ma Sallie. It looks like you certainly are hard at work this afternoon,” Ruth said stiffly.

“Well, Miss Olivia told me she wanted lamb chops for Sunday dinner,” she said, vigorously cutting a chicken in the kitchen sink, “but Mr. Jack say he have a taste for some of my fried chicken, and that’s what he was meaning to have.”

“I see,” Ruth said dryly.

Ma Sallie wiped her hands on her large apron and headed toward the kitchen door to announce their arrival.

Suddenly, in walked Mrs. Olivia Ragsdale Callahan in all her glory. With hands out-reached, she glided toward them as if she had wings, not feet. Her light and airy red dress flowed freely behind her and gave her skin the appearance of porcelain. Her lustrous dark hair rested on her slender shoulders. It was pulled to one side and held in place by two fresh orchids. Her refined beauty was completed by her high cheekbones and a sculptured nose. Time had done little to diminish her beauty.

“Ruth, Eve, how good of you to stop by,” she purred, in her heavy southern drawl. Ruth took her hand, and the two women smiled kindly at each other. Olivia’s sapphire blue eyes glowed with happiness.

The heavy smell of fried chicken began to fill the air and invaded their senses. Olivia suggested they continue their visit in the parlor, so Ma Sallie could continue her noisy work. Olivia led them down the long hall way to a large sitting-room, with crème colored furniture and windows hung with soft blue draperies.

“Please come in and have a seat,” she instructed. “I had this room redone since the last time you were here. I grew so tired of that dark green.”
Olivia instructed the maid to bring in a tray of tea and cookies. The timid girl gently placed it on the coffee table. Olivia dismissed her with a flick of her wrist.

Eve sat silent as Miss Olivia and her mother chattered away. The two women shared a long together. Eve’s grandfather had been the groundskeeper for Olivia’s family for many years and Ruth often accompanied him to the Ragsdale family’s estate, where Ruth sometimes watched over Olivia who was ten years younger, while she played.

“Eve dear,” Olivia said in a sympathetic voice, “are you all right? You’ve hardly said a word today. That’s so unlike you. Usually you’re telling all sorts of tales about your students and their classroom antics.”

“I’m fine, Miss Olivia.” Eve said faintly. “I just haven’t been feeling well is all.”

Olivia gave an exaggerated sigh of disbelief. “It sounds to me like someone is love-sick.”

Eve jumped with surprise. How could she have guessed? Why, her own mother had never presumed her distress was related to a man.

“No,” Eve protested, “it’s nothing like that at all.”

The two older women laughed in unison at what Eve felt was her complete humiliation. “I think it’s that young minister at our church,” Ruth chimed in. “I found them alone today in the sanctuary. She’s been all rattled since their meeting.”

Eve’s hand trembled as she poured herself a cup tea. “Mother, please, that’s ridiculous.”

Olivia sat down her cup and spoke in a soothing tone. “Eve, please don’t be cross. Your mother and I both know what a fickle bunch men can be,” her round sapphire eye cut a knowing glance at Ruth. “It’s perfectly natural for some handsome, well-bred
gentleman to hold your attentions. You’re a beautiful young woman, and any man would be honored to have you as his wife.”

Ruth nodded in complete agreement.

“She’s twenty-three years old,” she said with agitation. “It’s time she settled down and started a family.”

Playing the peacemaker, Olivia offered Eve a warm, caressing smile and remarked kindheartedly: “I do think that sometimes we mothers get so caught up in only wanting what’s best for our children. Your mother and I mean no harm, dear.”

“I must say,” she added, “I am surprised that my Lucy will be married before you. I thought your mother and I would have been planning your wedding right after your college graduation, and now it’s my Lucy who’ll be a married woman in just a few weeks.”

Eve drew a quick, sharp breath. “Lucy’s getting married?”

“Yes,” Olivia replied. “and he’s a doctor. It’s that wonderful. It all came about rather suddenly, but so goes young love.”

“She must be so excited.” said Eve.

“Lucy’s been too excited to even hold a thought in her head. She always dreamed about a spring wedding when everything’s in bloom, so she set her date for May 21. I thought surely your mother would have told you.”

Ruth looked up from her tea and answered promptly. “I’m sorry…It completely slipped my mind with everything going on at the church.”

Olivia chatted on while her gestures added life to all she said. She told of how the couple had met when her stepson James Lee brought the young man home for dinner,
how they had only dated for five months before deciding to marry, how in love Lucy was
with this tall good looking man and the wonderful outdoor wedding she was planning.

Ruth and Olivia were still discussing various wedding details such when Eve
decided to interrupt their banter.

“Where is Lucy?” Eve asked, “I’d like to offer her my congratulations.”

Olivia paused as if trying to recall her daughter’s where-abouts.

“Oh,” she exclaimed eagerly. “Lucy and her fiancé went with Jack to have a look
at the new factory. They should be home any minute. I’m sure Lucy would be thrilled to
see and you, and you’ll get a chance to meet her intended.”

Eve cut her eyes slightly at the thought of Lucy being remotely glad to see her.
The girl had never been fond of her but always cordial, probably at her mother’s
insistence.

Ruth Anderson set down her cup and let out an exhausted sigh. “I’m afraid Eve
and I need to be going. We’ve held you up long enough and we’ve got to get home and
tend to our own dinner.” She began gathering up her purse and gloves. “If we can get the
box brought out to the car, we’ll be on our way.”

At that moment they heard the front door open and the unmistakable deep hearty
laughter of Jack Callahan coupled with Lucy’s high-pitched voice. Olivia quickly rose to
her feet with a sigh of anticipation. “How wonderful! They’ve come back at just in time.”
She called out to them in her gentle southern voice to join her in the sitting room.

Jack Callahan was the first to enter. Eve noticed his jaw slightly tighten at the
sight of her and her mother sitting in the middle of the formal room of his house. She
guessed that he wasn’t fond of his wife’s friendly relationship with two colored women,
but had given up fighting her about it long ago. He looked much older than he had the
last time Eve had seen him. His fiery red hair had started to recede, leaving a small bald
spot at the top of his head. His waist line had expanded, giving him the look of a pot
bellied stove. One thing had certainly not changed, and that was his good ol’e boy
demeanor. His deep-set green eyes glared at Eve and Ruth while he planted a soft kiss on
his wife’s rosy cheek and took his place next to her on sofa.

“Afternoon,” he said dryly.

“Afternoon,” Ruth and Eve said in unison.

“Jack,” said Olivia in her pleasant voice, “I’m so glad you arrived just in time for
Ruth and Eve to meet Lucy’s fiancé.” She seemed completely oblivious to his irritation.

He removed the toothpick from his mouth and gave a long loud suck of his teeth.

“Well, I won’t be sticking around for the introductions. I have a few phone calls
to make before dinner so I’m gonna head on to my office.”

Before he could rise, Lucy appeared in the doorway. A mass of bright red curls
framed her pale face. She looked happier than Eve recalled seeing her.

“Good afternoon,” Lucy said in a chipper voice. “Momma, I didn’t know Miss
Ruth and Eve would be over today.”

“They just stopped by to pick up a few things I had for their church bazaar and to
congratulate you on your engagement,” said Olivia.

“How nice!” Lucy’s voice dripped with excitement. “Here he comes now. Let me
introduce you.”

Eve’s heart leaped into her throat. She caught her lip between her teeth to repress
the scream that was welling inside her and the taste of blood filled her mouth. She fought
to keep tears from spilling down her cheeks. It was Aaron, her Aaron, only he was standing next to Lucy Callahan his future wife, her arm wound tightly around his. Lucy gazed lovingly up at him with those feline green eyes while Aaron stared at Eve in disbelief.

Lucy introduced him proudly while he offered his greeting with down cast eyes. She went on to explain that Aaron would be graduating from medical school in a few weeks and squealed with delight at the thought of being a doctor’s wife.

An amused smile lit Ruth’s face as she watched the young girl swoon over her good fortune. “Aaron, you certainly are a lucky man,” she said. “Miss Lucy is quite a young lady.”

“You dog-on right he’s lucky,” Jack Callahan added sharply, rising to his feet. “My Lucy is the catch of the county.” He stopped briefly next to Aaron and placed his large hand on his shoulder. “You’re lucky indeed. It’ll serve you well never to forget it, doctor,” he said, as he left the room.

Eve lowered her head, in part, to hide her bitter sadness and, in part to escape her dismal reality. She fumbled through her purse for a handkerchief to dab the blood from her lip. She was scared to speak. She could hear the voices mingling about her in laughter. She noticed Aaron’s husky voice never joined in the chorus.

Eve took a slow, deep breath.

“Mother, I think I should get the things Miss Olivia’s donating to the car, so we can be on our way.”
Olivia placed her hand on the crystal bell used to summons help, but before she could ring it, Aaron eagerly spoke up.

“I’ll take it for you.”

Eve lifted her head at the sound of his voice. His eyes pleaded for forgiveness.

“How kind of you Aaron,” Olivia carefully selected a cigarette from the small box on the coffee table. “You’ll find the box by the kitchen door.”

Eve stood and offered her congratulations to Lucy, who was still overflowing with excitement, and thanked Miss Olivia for her hospitality. She left the room in a blind stupor. The tears she had fought to hold back now streamed freely down her pale cheeks. Her steps were slow and unsteady like a new colt learning to walk. At last, she stood dazed and alone, against her mother’s car. She wanted to escape before Aaron reached her but her feet refused take another step. Closing her eyes and breathing deeply, she pursed her lips together and gritted her teeth in silent determination. She would not give him the satisfaction of seeing her hurt and broken. She wiped away her tears and braced herself for his appearance.

He walked toward the car like a wounded animal. His face was covered with remorse as he awkwardly clutched the box.

“Please forgive me, Eve. You have to let me try to explain.” his voice was weak and shook as he spoke. Dropping the box at his feet, he grabbed her hands and held them.

Gathering what remained of her courage, Eve stepped out of his grasp. Sorrow had been replaced by a sweltering anger that threatened to consume her.
“Aaron,” she hissed. “Don’t apologize. It’s my fault for believing you when you said you loved me and for believing you really planned to marry me, a colored girl.” Overcome with emotion her body shook as if stricken with a sudden chill.

“For God sakes, Eve, I do love you. I never planned on being with Lucy but-”

Eve turned her back to him, successfully cutting off his excuses. “Shame on me for believing you would love the child I carry just as I thought you loved me.”

A deafening silence surrounded them. Eve kept her back to Aaron for fear her emotions would engulf her. The two stood silent until Aaron finally spoke.

“Eve, I didn’t know.” His voice was a sorrowful whisper. Walking closer to her, he gently grabbed her. “Please meet me tomorrow,” he pleaded.

Eve felt a dryness prickle in her throat. She wanted to scream but she could not bring herself to face him. Her legs grew weak, and everything became a gray blur. Her strength gone, she collapsed into the arms of the man she had once believed would hold her forever.
Chapter 7

It had been three days since Eve learned of Aaron’s engagement. She’d spent the time locked away in her room, wallowing in misery. Her sudden fainting spell had been blamed on the unusually warm spring day, which Ruth had no problem believing since she required Eve to keep out of the sun for fear her olive complexion would darken. She had refused to see anyone. She regretted missing time with her students, but in her desolate condition she had little to offer them.

Alone and rejected, there was nothing left for her to do but tell her mother of her unfortunate predicament and pray her backlash would not be too severe. She had to move quickly before she lost her nerve.

On Wednesdays, Ruth always worked in the small office she still occupied at the church. When her husband was minister, she had insisted on being given the smaller office that adjoined his, and he had happily accommodated Along with the deacons, she gladly took on the day-to-day task of running the church, freeing her husband of the cumbersome burden, allowing him to focus on the people he felt God had placed him there to serve.

“Eve, I’m so glad to see you up and out of bed,” Ruth said, removing her black rimmed glasses.” Don’t just stand there, dear; come in and sit down.”
Eve did as she was instructed, Ruth returned her attention to her paperwork while Eve’s stomach churned. She felt paralyzed by the thought of the Pandora’s Box she was about to open.

“Mother, I need to talk to you.”

“About what?”
“A problem.” Eve lowering her gaze.

Ruth examined her curiously. “It’s the white man isn’t it?”

“Ex—excuse me?” Eve stammered

“Aaron Gray, the young man Lucy’s engaged to. This is about him, isn’t it? You were seeing him, weren’t you?” Ruth leaned back in her chair, examining her daughter’s defeated expression. “He’s the reason you’ve been moping around the house like some kind of wounded animal.” Ruth allowed time for her words to wash over her daughter. “I saw the way you looked at him when he came into the room and how he tried not to look at you?”

“I’m sorry mother but—”

Ruth raised her hand. The room was silent except for birds chirping outside the open window. She continued leaning back in her chair, examining Eve as if she were trying to decide a proper punishment for a naughty child. “I must say Eve; I’m very disappointed. I can’t believe you would allow yourself to get involved in a mess like this, and with a white man none the less. Obviously, you were unaware that the he was involved with Lucy while toying with you. I am sorry you had to find out the way you did, but I’m glad it happened before you got too wrapped up in this young man’s lies.” Ruth studied Eve’s somber mood carefully before continuing. “I’ve always told you no good could ever come of such a relationship. Luckily, Olivia and Lucy were completely oblivious to everything. Believe me; you never would have been anything more to him than some colored girl he kept on the other side of town. The shame of such a relationship would have been yours to bear.” Happy with her stern yet lenient scolding, she coolly waited for Eve’s response.
“I’m pregnant mother,” Eve said in a small voice.

“Wh—what did you say?” This time Ruth stammered her response.

“I said I’m pregnant and, yes, Aaron Gray is the father.” Eve hung her head in shame.

“How could you let this happen?” Ruth pounded her fist hard on the desk. Her tone had become loud and angry.

Eve was suddenly very grateful the desk was there to separate them. Had it not been, she feared her mother might have struck her. “We were going to be married once he finished medical school, but that will never happen now.” Eve let her voice trail away at the memory of what would never be.

“Is that what he told you?” Ruth said furiously. “I can’t believe I raised such a foolish girl! You believed him? Such a thing isn’t even legal here.”

“We planned to go North.” Eve said quietly.

Ruth’s eyes smoldered. “You were raised quality, given every advantage,” she raged, all control gone from her voice. “I’m so glad your father is not alive to see you throw it all away only to become a white man’s whore.” Ruth drew out the word *whore*, allowing it to penetrate Eve like poison.

Eve sat quietly with her head bowed and her hands shaking in her lap, waiting for her mother to continue the verbal assault she felt she deserved.

Except for the life growing inside her, she was empty. There were no tears left to shed or words she could offer in her own defense. She had nothing left, not even hope.

Just behind the slightly opened adjoining office door stood Richard Powers.
After completing a mountain of paperwork, he had decided to grab a bite to eat and picked up his white fedora. As he was walking past the open door, he heard the women talking. Knowing it was wrong to listen, he found that he couldn’t help himself; he also couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Eve was pregnant, and the father was a white man who couldn’t and wouldn’t marry her. He had to be dreaming; this situation was too perfect. He had been unsuccess fully pursuing her for years. She was just the wife he needed to help him advance his church and political career. The woman he married had to be educated and from a well-connected family with the right type of near-white features.

Now Eve would need him just as much as he needed her. He wasn’t exactly happy about having to take responsibility for some white man’s mistake. He had to act quickly; he couldn’t let this opportunity pass him by.

Both women had been so distracted that they noticed Reverend Powers standing in the open doorway. Neither knew how long he’d been standing there nor how much of their conversation he had heard. He cleared his throat to help settle his nerves. He had to address them now before he was chastised for his intrusion. “Sister Ruth, Eve,” he said in a calm even tone. “Please forgive my intrusion, I was in my office and I couldn’t help but overhear.”

Through clenched teeth, Ruth attempted to speak through clenched teeth, but Richard quickly continued. “I would like to ask Eve for her hand in marriage.”

Both women sat speechless, exchanging bewildered glances. Neither was prepared for the unexpected proposal.
“I can give her a good life, and I will give the child my name, if she’ll have me.”

Finally turning to direct his words and attention to Eve, he addressed her in a sugary tone.

“I know you don’t feel quite the same for me, but I hope in time you can grow to love me as I love you.”

Eve stared at a small crack in the side of the wall. She had nothing to say, no words of gratitude or promises of eternal love. His offer only saddened her more. Not only had she been robbed of love, in exchange, she was offered a marriage of convenience to a man she didn’t even like.

Ruth leaned back in her chair and took a moment to consider his proposal. “I have no doubted that your love for Eve is genuine, and she’d be well provided for, but you will not just be accepting Eve, there’s a child to consider.

“I understand,” Richard said, using his most serious voice. “I’m sure you know how I feel about your daughter, and, yes, the circumstances are not what I had imagined, but the child is part of her, and for that reason, I will love it just as I love her.”

Ruth gave Richard a look of satisfied approval. “In that case, let me offer my congratulations. Under the circumstances, I think it best if we set a date right away. Of course, Eve and I can take care of that later today. If you two will excuse me, I have a lot of arrangements to tend to.” Ruth promptly turned her attention to her daughter’s sudden wedding arrangements.

“I’d like to walk you out and speak with you privately,” Richard said. Eve nodded.

The pair walked side-by-side to Eve’s car. She still could not bring herself to trust him or his motives. Glancing quickly in his direction, she noticed a faint smile on
his lips and a mischievous gleam in his eyes. He looked like a man who stood on the edge of a significant victory savoring the prize that was almost his.

“I told you it was just a matter of time before you were my wife,” Richard said smugly. “I must say, Eve, I never thought you would come to me carrying a white man’s burden, but I guess even you are not without sin.” Openly pleased with the power he held over her, he stroked her bare arms seductively.

Recoiling at his touch, Eve swatted his hand like a pesky mosquito. She fumed at his forwardness. The nerve of him treating her like property and speaking to her in such an undignified manner. “Need I remind you that I have not agreed to condemn myself to a loveless marriage filled with misery and contempt.”

Amused by her pointless protest, Richard smirked. “You will marry me, or you’ll forever live with the public shame and disgrace you’ve brought on you, your mother, and your father’s memory. You need me, and I need the image of the perfect wife.”

Richard and Eve stood in the noon-day sun, glaring at each other like two gladiators about to battle, each sizing up the other, trying to determine the opponent’s weakest point. Richard spoke first, adding softness to his harsh tone. “I have ambitions that go far beyond the pulpit of this church,” he said. “To achieve all that I want, I must have the right type of wife, and you, dear Eve, are just what I need.”

It had come to this. She had trusted the wrong man with her love, her happiness, and her body. Her fate stood before her, and she was left with no choice but to accept her lot and make the best of this bitter pill she was forced to swallow.
The anger was gone from her voice, replaced with resignation. She tilted her head and narrowed her eyes in hopes a new angle might give her a new perspective. Nothing changed. “I feel like the sacrificial lamb,” she said in a pitiful voice.

“Well, that may be, but you’re definitely not the sacrificial virgin.” With that, Richard tipped his hat, turned his back, and walked away.

Chapter 8

Richard Powers was generally pleased with the direction his life and career were taking. Only three years earlier, he had received his master’s degree in religious education from Columbia when he decided to pack his bags and accept a position as an Associate Minister for a large church in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. No longer an associate, he was now minister of one of the most powerful colored churches in the state, as well as the youngest in the church’s eighty-four-year history.

He was engaged to an attractive, well-educated woman from a fairly well-connected family. His power and influence were steadily increasing within the colored community as well as the city of Winston-Salem. There were some things that he wasn’t particularly pleased with, but they were just small cracks in the overall foundation. For now, he had all he needed, a prosperous and growing church, the illusion of a loving fiancé, and the hope of a successful political career. As far as he was concerned, his life was almost perfect.

He loved returning home to Atlanta as a successful man in his own right and not just the eldest son of Dr. Zebulon Powers, the affluent surgeon, and his wife, Prudence Yates Powers, daughter of a formerly prominent Atlanta minister. Richard’s decision not
to return to Atlanta after receiving his master’s degree had not been popular with his parents. For them, there was no city better for colored professionals than Atlanta. Why any well-educated and socially ambitious colored people would live anywhere else was beyond their comprehension. Richard was also painfully aware that his socially conscious mother would not be please with his shotgun wedding to Eve. He was hoping that his personal visit would smooth her ruffled feathers, but then nothing was ever accomplished overnight with Prudence Yates Powers.

Hurriedly, Richard prepared to join his parents outside for tea. He wanted to have a few moments alone with them before their guest arrived. He found them sitting on the screened in back porch, whispering. His mother seemed to be doing the most of the talking, her hands flying wildly. His father’s broad body filled the white-cushioned wicker chair. His dark eyes locked on his wife’s pale, freckled face. Richard assumed that their quiet conversation was about him and his pregnant fiancé. His father was the first to notice him standing quietly to the side. “Richard my boy,” he said in his deep, commanding voice. “Come join us. “Your mother and I were just talking about you.”

Prudence Powers turned to face her eldest son as he took the empty seat in front of her and her husband. Her pointed nose inclined slightly as eyes examined him carefully. His mother’s sandy blond tresses were curled tightly and framed her heart-shaped face. The lime-green derby dress she wore outlined her pear-shaped figure. Even in the scorching Atlanta heat, her air of superiority remained undiminished.

“What exactly were you talking about?” Richard asked.

His parents exchanged disturbed glances. Prudence narrowed her hazel eyes as she cast her inquisitive gaze upon her eldest son. “Your father and I are quite concerned
about this girl you’re planning to marry.” Prudence paused just long enough to receive a supportive pat on the hand from her always indulgent husband. “We realize that there is nothing to be done now that there is a child on the way, but we this Eve must have set her sights to trap you. Any young lady of quality would never have allowed herself to end up in such a mess. Do you really know what type of girl you’re marrying?”

Richard shook his head in frustration. Getting them to accept his new wife was going to be harder than he thought. “I can assure you Eve comes from one of the finest families in North Carolina. There wasn’t any type of trap set to get me to agree to marriage. The blame should stop with me.”

“There’s something very odd about this situation,” said Prudence, her sharp voiced laced with suspicion. “We had no idea you and the Anderson girl had been keeping company, and suddenly you’re engage, and she with child. Something is wrong about all of this. I just know everyone is bound to be talking about this quickie wedding and the bride’s sudden delicate condition. I’m just not convinced that this girl isn’t trying to pull the wool over your eyes, so she can get her hooks into a good husband. It’s not to late for you to reconsider this marriage before you end up paying for someone else’s mistake.”

“I can assure you that’s not the case.”

“An unmarried man can never be sure of such a thing.”

“Yes, I can mother.” Richard tried to calm his mother’s growing anxiety as he leaned forward, placing her hands in his. “I know this is all rather sudden, but Eve and I are a good match. She’s exactly the woman I need to help advance my church and my
career. It’s true, mistakes have been made, but things will be much better going forward. If you would only take the time to get to know her, you’d—"

“Son,” Zebulon Power’s deep voice thundered in, cutting off his son’s words, “no one was trying slight Eve. We’ve actually spoken to the girl on a few occasions when we came for visits to the church. Your mother and I are just concerned. We’re proud you want to do the right thing by marrying Eve. Your mother and I were just caught of guard by all of this. We only have your best interest in mind son..

Richard’s eyes darted from one face to the other. He thought it best to remain silent and let his parents voice their mountain of concerns. He could tell from the way his father continued to stroke his strong square chin that he felt caught in the middle once again. Over the years, Zebulon Powers had assumed the role of peacemaker between his wife and their sons.

Prudence rolled her eyes slightly. “I just don’t understand—why this girl? There were so many more beautiful, well-connect, and acceptable young ladies right here in Atlanta. I hope your brother keeps a more leveled head when his time comes to marry,” she said, sounding somewhat disappointed.

The family sat in silence awaiting the arrival of their guest. There quiet standoff was interrupted by the arrival of Melvin and Ester Sutton. The housekeeper led the well dressed couple in matching summer attire out to the porch. Mr. Sutton looked rather dapper, sporting a white linen suit and aviator glasses. Esther wore an eye-catching white halter dress and a wide brimmed white hat with a bright red sash. The women squealed with delight, giving each other an affectionate embrace. After pleasantries had been exchanged, everyone took seats. Tall glasses of tea, tiny finger sandwiches and cake had
been brought in on a sterling silver tray. Not until everything had settled down was Richard’s acknowledged.

Melvin Sutton took a sip from his glass, and addressed the young man sitting quietly to the side.

“Reverend Powers you’re looking well. I hear congratulations are in order, is that correct?” The older man’s tone was skeptical, though he smiled broadly. Richard knew the Suttons must be as concerned as his parents by his sudden marriage announcement.

“Marriage is definitely agreeing with us both.” Richard said pleasantly.

Prudence Powers let out a long, wistful sigh and lowered her hazel eyes as if in sorrow.

“Now, Prudence,” Zebulon scolded, shooting his wife a harsh glance.

“I won’t pretend I’m happy about any of this. I think the girl is up to something and shouldn’t be trusted.” said Prudence in a stern tone.

Eager to change the subject, Zebulon brought up a less controversial subject. “Esther, how are the children? I hope they’re both doing well.”

Esther immediately sat at attention, her face glowed with excitement as she began to gush over the accomplishments of her children.

“Their both doing fine. Michael will be graduating from Meharry this May and he’ll be back home in Atlanta to do his residency. My Bonnie just loves Spelman, as we knew she would. Bonnie tells me she and your Lawrence have been writing to each other.”
“How wonderful,” Prudence exclaimed, throwing up her hands in jubilation. “Zebulon and I would love to see them married,” she said, shot a sly glance at her eldest son. “He only has two more years at Howard Law. He’s really doing very well.”

The four continued reminiscing and comparing their own college experiences to their children’s. Richard began to ponder what he and a few of his old college buddies could get into that night. He was considering a spot that had just opened on Hunter Street when he heard the conversation change direction.

“Richard, I don’t believe we’ll be able to make your wedding. We’re rally sorry my boy, but we just needed a little more notice to change a few prior comments. Mrs. Sutton will send our formal apologizes along with a nice gift for you and your new bride,” said Melvin, offering Richard an apologetic smile.

“This sudden event has caught us all off guard,” said Prudence, narrowing her eyes.

“Prudence and I are just trying to get adjusted to gaining a new daughter-in-law, said Zebulon, using his napkin to wipe away the perspiration from his graying temples.

It did take a fortuneteller to know what type of afternoon he would be in for if he remained at home with his parents. Richard decided it was time for him to make his exit. He could see where the conversation was going, and he had had enough.

“Mr. and Mrs. Sutton, as always it was a pleasure visiting with you but I must be going.” he said, rising to his feet.

“Richard,” purred Prudence, “Can’t you stay a moment longer?”
“I’m afraid not, mother. I’ve made plans to meet with a few of my old college buddies and I’m already running late. I should be back in time for dinner.” He gave his mother a soft kiss on her warm cheeks and bid them all farewell.

Chapter 9

One week before Aaron was to marry Lucy Callahan, Eve would become Mrs. Richard Powers. Ruth had managed to put together a wedding and reception in just a month, turning the event into a one-woman show. The date was set for May 14.

Eve had tried to help—not that she really wanted to, but she believed it was her duty. She went through her days like a sleep-walker. In class, she was barely able to concentrate on the lessons she had prepared. After school, some days she’d drive to the park where she had first met Aaron. She would sit for hours, trying to understand how she could have been so blind. Some days, she wandered mindlessly to Sonia’s house in search of comfort and a sympathetic ear. Today was one of those.

Sonia and Eve sat on the cement steps of Sonia’s front porch watching the evening sun settle behind the trees.

“Aaron rejected and humiliated me, and I still love him. What kind of pathetic person have I turned into?” Eve’s voice quivered as she spoke.

“You’re not pathetic,” Sonia said in a low soothing voice. “You’re just a woman who’s been hurt by loving the wrong man. I know it doesn’t seem like it now, but the hurt will go away, and you’ll be stronger and wiser.”
She grabbed Eve’s cold, limp hand and squeezed it tightly as if willing her friend to return to her once happy, optimistic self. “You know Aaron’s been coming by the plant some evenings, trying to get Isaiah to help him find a way to see you.”

Eve stared blankly at the golden streaks that colored the sky.

“Did you hear me, Eve? Aaron wants to see you.”

“No,” Eve said in a distance voice. “I don’t want to see him. I don’t want him to have the satisfaction of seeing how badly he’s hurt me. Aaron Gray’s last picture of me won’t be of a broken woman. I know I’m stronger than this. I just need time to find my strength.”

Sonia nodded. She knew in time her friend would find a way to put the pain behind her, but a part of her had been damaged beyond repair.

The evening solitude was suddenly interrupted by the sputtering of Isaiah’s pick-up truck. Not feeling the need for additional company, Eve prepared herself to head home. Normally, she would have gladly spent the evening with Sonia and her family, but lately she had no desire for many of the things she usually enjoyed. She rose and brushed the dust from her linen pants, offered her good-byes to Sonia, and gently patted little Jeremiah’s head as he slept peacefully in his mother’s arms. Her friend offered her a sympathetic smile in return and carried her sleeping son into the house. Isaiah continued to sit quietly in truck. His eyes looked distant, as if pondering a perplexing riddle. Eve assumed his attention was drawn to a baseball game broadcast on the radio and decided to offer her hello and goodbye quietly, not to disturb his thoughts or her own.

“Eve, can I talk to you for a minute?” he said in an unusually serious voice.

She tried to smile politely.
“I really must go. Can we talk another time?”

Isaiah opened the door and slowly exited the truck. Eve stood still, puzzled by the seriousness of his tone. She could tell his leg had been bothering him by his slow limped toward her.

“Eve, you know I’m not one for putting my nose in other reached inside his pocket and pulled out a crinkled white envelop and handed it to Eve.

“It’s from him isn’t it?”

Isaiah nodded his head in response.

Eve balled the letter tightly in her fist. Her first thought was to throw it on the ground and walk away, but part of her desperately wanted to know what reason he could possibly give for allowing her to believe in something that he knew would never come true.

“Why, Isaiah?” Eve asked in a shaky voice. “Why would he send this? What could he possibly have to say to me to ease my pain?”

With both hands shoved deep in his pockets, Isaiah shook his bowed head apologetically

“I don’t think he sent the letter to ease your pain as much as to ease his own.”

“I wish I could just forget him.”

“Maybe what he says in this letter will help you put all this mess behind you.”

Isaiah patted Eve’s shoulder as he made his way into the house.
Eve drove home quickly, occasionally glancing at the crumpled letter that she had placed next to her. She passed the wedding gifts that had flooded their home during the past two weeks. She sat on her bed, and opened Aaron’s letter and began to read.

Dear Eve,

I wish I could say these words to you in person but I understand why that can not be. My beloved Dove, please forgive me for all the hurt and pain I have brought you. I pray that one day you may find it in your heart to forgive me although my actions do not deserve your forgiveness. My deception has not only cost me my one true love but I have lost my child as well. A marriage to a woman I do not love is not what I want, just as I’m sure you do not want to commit yourself to a man who does not hold your heart. Please meet with me so we may talk and I can explain how this terrible situation developed. I will wait there for you in the park where we first met all day Friday. I beg you to think of our child and the life we can still have together. Please do not do anything we may both regret.

Your forever love,

Aaron
Eve folded the letter neatly and placed it in her wooden chest where she kept her precious keepsakes. She no longer tried to hide behind the brave mask she’d worn for the past few weeks. She stretched her weak body across her bed and sobbed heavily into her pillow. She cried for all she had lost by loving Aaron and all the things that could not be brought back, not even with a hundred meetings in the park.

On Saturday May 14, 1949, Eve Anderson married Reverend Richard Powers in a beautiful church ceremony attended by more than seventy friends and relatives. Her delivery was expected Christmas Eve, and both she and her new husband were prepared to call it an early surprise.

Chapter 10

Aaron sat on the couch in the small, dimly lit apartment he shared with his friend Mitch. A bottle of Scotch was his only company as he stared out the small window at the darkening sky and the bolts of lightning. The weather matched his mood perfectly, dark and gloomy. He poured himself another glass and closed his eyes tightly while the brown fluid burned down his throat. He had hoped the alcohol would help him forget his pain; instead, it caused him to replay every detail. Eve was now lost to him forever, and there was no one to blame for his misery but himself.

Friday, he’d spent the entire day in the park hoping she would come, and he could talk to her, hold her, tell her how all of this had happened, and possibly persuade her not
to marry, but she never came. Only yesterday, his beloved dove had married another, just as he would do in a few short days.

Aaron knew he had no right to ask her not to marry. His actions left her no choice. Why should she want to talk with him or believe that he did not love or want to marry the spoiled Lucy Callahan to whom he was betrothed? He hadn’t planned on her discovering his secret and marrying another. Things had gotten out of hand. He hadn’t set out to marry Lucy but he needed a wife, and a white wife was only acceptable. He had been too much of a coward to tell Eve the truth and end their relationship. He drank because he could run from the truth, he was a selfish and spineless, and he’d brought this all on himself. Now, Eve was gone and he’d been exposed. She was married to another man and carrying his child. A child, his child, he had always been so careful the few times they were together, all but once, but one once it all it takes. The mere thought of her married to another was bad enough, but knowing his child would never know him but someone else as father, drove him to the edge of madness.

Aaron had wanted to tell her about the horrible deal he’d made with the devil and beg her forgiveness. For her to discover his involvement with Lucy in such a terrible manner was definitely not his intention. Maybe if he had gone to her first, in time she might have understood his reasons and consented to an arrangement for them to remain together, but that hope had died the moment she realized he had betrayed her.

In six days, he would be married to Lucy Callahan, and in less than three hours, he would be sitting at the family dinner table, pretending to enjoy their company. He had never imagined a dinner invitation from his future brother-in-law, James Lee Callahan, would have led him to this.
As wild as the wind, James Lee made the town his personal playground. Aaron liked him immediately. The two meet coincidentally when he and James Lee were the last two left standing in a barroom drinking contest. He was completely fascinated by the life of a southern son of privilege who did nothing and gained everything. Aaron enjoyed being part of this foreign world where things were given rather than earned.

James Lee’s younger sister made no secret of her interest in Aaron. A southern belle who had never been told no, she pursued him with feverish intensity. In the beginning he ignored Lucy’s less than subtle advances, but the pressure from her family, especially her father, who wanted to please his daughter at any cost, became overwhelming.

The morning storm had cleared away, leaving a bright Sunday afternoon. As usual, Miss Sally had prepared a feast of roast beef, fresh vegetables, and mashed potatoes. Like actors in a well-rehearsed skit, the family rose from the mahogany dinner table and made their way to the living room for dessert and coffee. Aaron had learned in his brief dealings with the Callahan, that everyone was expected to attend Sunday dinner without exception. Servants rushed in with trays of fresh coffee and slices of chocolate cake. A wooden box of cigars was placed beside Jack. A colored man dressed in a white jacket and black pants stood stiffly in the corner waiting to attend to everyone’s needs.

Jack settled into his comfortable leather chair and signaled for the frozen man to light his cigar. Aaron took his obligatory seat next to Lucy on the dark leather sofa as Olivia and James Lee filled the remaining chairs.
Olivia Callahan was the first to speak. While sipping on her coffee, her enchanting blue eyes scanned the room to observe the mood of her small audience.

“The entire town is all a buzz Lucy’s wedding. Your wedding is going to be the biggest and best this county has ever seen, your father and I have made sure of that.” Olivia turned to offer her husband her most caressing and seductive smile.

James Lee shook his head in amusement, “You all can talk weddings all you like as long as I’m not the poor sap waiting at the end of the aisle. There are too many fine southern belles out there that I have yet to meet.” He shot a mischievous grin at Aaron.

“James Lee, you’re so wicked,” Lucy said in a teasing voice, brushing a wiry red curl from her face. “If your reputation gets any worse, no decent woman will be willing to have you.”

“For your information, my dear little sister, I’ve had my fill of decent ladies of society, and they all came willingly.” James Lee ran his long fingers through his thick mane of red hair.

“Son, that’s quite enough. Mind your tongue when speaking to your mother and sister.” Jack Callahan scolded his son for show only. The faint hint of a smile showed on his face. Clearly, the old man was proud of the free-spirited son he had raised.

Both son and daughter bore a striking resemblance to their father. All three shared the same fiery red hair, mischievous feline green eyes, and tall, lean build. It was James Lee who was blessed with looks and charisma. He wore charm and confidence like a king wore a majestic robe. At twenty-seven he was the catch of the county, and what he enjoyed most was trying not to get caught.
He placed his hands together as if in prayer and offered his apologies to his sister and stepmother. “Please forgive me. I sometimes forget myself in the presence of truly decent southern ladies.” Turning his attention to Olivia, he continued in a mocking voice. “Mother, I hope I did not offend your delicate and sensitive nature.”

It was common knowledge that the young man had never been overly fond of his stepmother. His own mother, Elizabeth, Jack’s first wife, had passed away in childbirth with the couple’s second son, who was lost only few days after his mother. Two years later, Jack married Olivia Jane Ragsdale, a beautiful socialite from an old, wealthy, and respected southern family. His new bride was also ten years his junior. Outside of being a stunning beauty, marriage to Olivia offered Jack what his father’s new money could not, acceptance into the old monied elite, which had repeatedly snubbed the sock-makers’ new found wealth.

James Lee had always resented the vivacious socialite who had replaced his humble, soft-spoken mother. Theirs had never been a comfortable relationship.

Olivia rose, brushing away the flimsy apology with a flick of her wrist. Over the years, she had become immune to her stepson’s crass comments and the ungentlemanly behavior that her husband regularly overlooked.

“Lucy and I must be excused. The florist has agreed to come over today to have a look at the garden and discuss the arrangements for the wedding.” Olivia extended her dainty hand and Lucy gave Aaron a quick peck on the cheek before scurrying after her mother.
Once the ladies left the room, Jack Callahan summoned the butler to pour three glasses of bourbon. Each relaxed a bit more in his seat. James Lee gulped his and was immediately poured another.

“Papa, I really have enjoyed all this family time, but I have a few matters in town that require my attention. Please offer my apologizes to your wife, I mean, mama for my sudden departure.” James Lee gave a sly grin to his father and patted his shoulder.

Snapping his suspenders into place, and straightening his tie, he grabbed his hat and jacket, and headed for the door. He stopped suddenly in front of Aaron to examine him carefully. “Aaron, my boy, you’re looking a little green around the gills. You boys didn’t start the bachelor party without me, now, did ya?” Laughing at friend’s noticeable discomfort, he grabbed his glass, finishing off the remains. “You don’t mind, do you, Aaron? You look like you’ve had enough.” Before Aaron could respond, James Lee had put down the empty glass and left the room.

Aaron motioned for a refill. Jack continued to puff away on his cigar as an awkward silence settled between them. He couldn’t help but noticed that Jack was watching his every move. Those uncompromising green eyes examined him closely. Aaron felt trapped by the heated stare.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you, Aaron my boy.” Jack’s voice was steady. “How have you been feeling lately? Just haven’t seemed like yourself these last few weeks.” His questions were laced with more accusation than concern.

“I’m fine, sir. I’ve just had a lot going on with graduation and the wedding. I should be fine once everything settles down.”
“Well, I’m glad to hear it’s not that colored gal you’ve been running round with getting married on you.”

Aaron felt hollow. His stomach churned. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out.

Jack rubbed his chin while sizing up his opponent. He was enjoying the sight of his future son-in-law squirming in fear. Jack kept his gaze fixed on Aaron as he leaned forward in his leather chair. “Did you think I wouldn’t find out everything there is to know about the man who’s about to marry my little girl?” His eyes narrowed like a fox locking his sights upon his prey. “I know all about your daddy walking out on the family when you were just a boy. Your mama took in washing and sewing just to keep you and your brother in that rat-infested tenement. I know your brother’s doing thirty years in upstate New York for killing a man, and your mother died of influenza just before the war. And I know you been carrying on with Eve Anderson for close to a year.”

Aaron swallowed hard. His face tensed in a puzzled expression. “Mr. Callahan, I can assure you my involvement with Eve has ended. I would never -”

Jack held up his large hand, interrupting Aaron’s remarks. “You would never what, boy?” Jack paused only to take a gulp of bourbon. “I’ll tell you what you’re not gonna do, and that’s break my daughter’s heart or make a fool out of her cause you’re running around with a nigger gal. You listen to me good because I won’t say this again. You best take care not to bite the hand that feeds you. I’ve known that girl’s family long before she was born. They’re decent colored folks. Eve’s daddy was minister at the colored church for over twenty years. He was a good man, had to be to put up with that uppity wife of his. He looked damn near like a white man, just like Eve. But I’ll tell you something, boy,
I don’t care how white they look, a nigger is a nigger. If you ask me, those white looking niggers are the most dangerous, slipping in and out amongst white folks passing themselves off and trying to make fools out of us. Well, I won’t have it, you understand? My daughter won’t be shamed by the likes of you. Make sure Eve was the last nigger wench you tom cat around with.”

Aaron heard the liquor behind Jack’s words and sensed his anger rising. “Yes sir, I understand.” Aaron’ pursed his lips in forced submission.

Jack leaned back in his leather chair and summoned a refill. “You remind me a lot of myself when I was young. You come from nothing, but you’re determined to have something,” Jack said in his raspy voice. “I worked like a dog to help my daddy build up the mill. Only thing is I understood what my daddy didn’t, no amount of money was going make them high society folks treat us like anything more than dirt farmers. I can see you’re cut from the same cloth.”

Aaron studied Jack carefully. As far as he could tell, there was no similarity between him and this man he was growing to despise. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Let me tell you what I mean, son. My daddy had turned the mill into one of the largest in the south. We’d become as rich as creases but these high fluting society folks still felt we weren’t good enough for their clubs, private schools, or social benefits. My Olivia and her family were part of that old money set. When she came back to town after being away at that northern college, she was the bell of the ball, beautiful and smart and I got her. And I’ll tell you how I got myself such a fine wife. Her father, the well respected William Ragsdale, had run up some sizeable gambling debts that his dwindling fortune
couldn’t cover. My new young bride cost me a pretty penny but she was worth every dime. Just like me, you understand that no price is too high to pay when it comes to being happy. Isn’t that right Aaron?”

Aaron hung his head and conceded defeat. “Yes sir.”

Winston-Salem Journal

Dogwood Manner, the spacious estate of Mr. and Mrs. Jackson Callahan, was brilliantly lit and beautifully decorated on Saturday evening, the occasion of the wedding of their daughter Miss Lucy Callahan, of Winston-Salem, NC, to Dr. Aaron Gray, of New York, New York. The grounds were lavishly decorated with roses, carnations, and orchids, many colored lights made a festive blending of color, adding greatly to the general effect. The wedding took place at 6:00pm in the presence of more than one hundred and fifty friends and relatives.

The bride wore a rich dress of ivory silk, and white Victorian lace and carried a lovely bouquet of white chrysanthemums. The bridesmaids were arrayed in pink lace gowns and carried bouquets of pink carnations.

An elaborate supper was served and a delightful evening passed until the time for the departure of the young couple on their honeymoon. They were showered with rice and good wishes.

On their return they will take up residence at Dogwood Manner, the family home of the bride.

Chapter 11

Eve woke feeling happier than she had in months. Not even the stifling July heat could dampen her spirits. Richard had left the day before for a weekend visit his parents in Atlanta, leaving Eve delighted to have some time to herself. Richard had invited her to come along, but she graciously declined. She told him her delicate condition made it difficult to endure the long drive. The truth was, a weekend with her mother-in-law would be far from pleasant.
Richard’s mother, Prudence Powers, had done nothing but criticize Eve since learning of the engagement. She had been very upset by the abruptness of their marriage and complained excessively. She’d been in a foul mood the weekend of the wedding. Richard had told his parents about Eve’s pregnancy but led them to believe the child was his. Prudence was convinced Eve had purposely trapped her son into marriage.

In her opinion, only a woman of poor upbringing, looking to improve her station in life, would ever put herself in such a shameful and precarious situation.

Eve quickly dismissed all thoughts of her husband and in-laws. She and Sonia were going to spend their entire Saturday together. In the two months she had been married, Eve had yet to invite Sonia and her family over for dinner. The one time she brought it up, Richard, had adamantly refused. They fought bitterly. He insisted that she end her friendship with Sonia, calling her an unfit companion for someone of Eve’s elevated stature. Eve quickly informed him that Sonia had been her closest friend since childhood, and no amount of elevation would change that. She reminded Richard that this home was also hers now, and her friends were welcome anytime; his presence was not required. As ridiculous as it was, Richard shuttered at the thought of having Isaiah over on a social bases, but welcomed him politely when he came to paint the house.

Eve stood and admired her newly decorated bedroom with its freshly painted cream colored walls, posh sky-blue bedding, and matching curtains. Richard realized that his home was desperately in need of a woman’s touch, so he happily permitted her to make any changes she saw fit. Eve had transformed the drab white walls into beautiful shades of pale blue and soft green and the nursery a lovely butterscotch. She had replaced the dark, heavy draperies that hung throughout the house with softer colors and lighter
fabrics. Secretly, she hoped that all the changes on the outside would help fix the unhappiness she felt on the inside.

Examining her slightly protruding tummy in the full-length mirror, she determined that it wouldn’t be long before she had to trade in her petite dresses for the comfort of maternity clothing. She often wondered about the tiny person growing inside her. From the moment she had learned of her condition, she’d known the child would be a girl. She had nothing to confirm her belief other than a gut intuition that was stronger than anything she’d ever felt. She was excited by the thought of having a daughter. There was so much she wanted to teach her, so many things she was determined to do differently with her daughter. This child would be her only link to the past and a bridge to her future.

Sonia held up the large green maternity top that looked more like an army tent than women’s clothing. “What about this one? It’s not so bad.”

“It’s terrible,” Eve said, shaking her head.

“Eve, you haven’t bought a thing all day. Remember, maternity clothes are not supposed to be fashionable; they’re supposed to be comfortable.”

“Well, someone should do something about that. These things are terrible. No woman wants to walk around looking like she’s wearing a sack.”

“If you don’t hurry and buy some maternity clothes, you’re going to be walking around in a sack.”

The two friends shrieked with laughter. This was the most fun they’d had together in months. There was no talk of unhappy marriages or shattered dreams. They realized
that spending time together as they once did was becoming more and more difficult. Neither wanted to spoil it.

“We really need to be going if we’re going to catch that new Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy movie,” Eve said, adjusting her wide-brim pink hat in the store mirror.

“I’m ready if you are.” Sonia headed toward the door. The two women started on the two block trek to the downtown movie theater in the sweltering July heat.

“I’ve thought of a name for the baby,” Eve said nervously.

“Good, what is it?”

“Dove,” Eve said softly

“Dove? How did you-?” Sonia paused, and then turned to face her friend. “That’s what he used to call you, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

Sonia gaped with confusion into Eve’s solemn brown eyes. She could tell she had made her decision and would not be swayed.

“Why Eve?” Why would you do that?”

“I have to give her that name,” Eve explained. “It’s all she’ll ever receive from Aaron. Besides, that name means something to me.”

“Just what could a name like Dove possible mean to you?”

“Love,” Eve replied, her voice filled with tenderness.

There certainly was no point in arguing with her, so Sonia decided it was best just to support her decision.

“Dove it is,” she said. Locking her arm in Eve’s, they continued to make their way to the theatre in the late afternoon heat.
They were so wrapped up in their own conversation that they never noticed the tall women blocking their path until her shrill voice caught their attention.

“Hello, Eve. I wasn’t expecting to see you in town today.” Lucy said, faking surprise.

Eve drew in a sudden breath. “Lucy,” she said, “how nice to see you.”

Pulling a starched white handkerchief from her purse, she dabbed at the small beads of perspiration on her face.

“After two months of marriage can you believe I’m still returning wedding gifts? But I’m sure you understand since our weddings were only a week apart.”

Eve smiled politely.

“In fact, I was just on my way home. I’m having Ma Sally prepare a special dinner tonight of veal and roasted potatoes, Aaron’s favorite.” Lucy’s feline eyes examined her surroundings as if she were about to divulge government secrets. “I have the most wonderful news, and I’ve just got to tell someone before I burst.”

Eve raised her eyebrows in anticipation of Lucy’s explosive secret. Maybe she and Aaron would be moving, freeing her from the looming threat of his presence. Sonia tried to make herself invisible by slightly stepping aside while pretending to read the theater marquee.

Lucy looked like a pot ready to boil over. She blurted out her news in one quick breath. “I’m pregnant! I went to the doctor yesterday because I haven’t been feeling especially well, and he told me I’m going to have a baby. Can you believe it? Isn’t that the most wonderful thing you’ve ever heard?”
Eve looked over her shoulder at Sonia, unsure she had heard the bubbly girl correctly. The look of surprise in Sonia’s doe eyes confirmed she had heard Lucy clearly.

Regaining her poise and reserve, she slowly dabbed the small beads of moisture collecting on her tan skin. “Now Eve, you mustn’t tell a soul. I want to surprise everyone tomorrow at Sunday dinner. I know Aaron will be so excited. In fact, the baby is due on Valentine’s Day. I certainly can’t think of any gift better than that. You must forgive me, I know one shouldn’t discuss such things, but I just had to tell someone before I burst.”

Eve forced an angelic smile to her lips. “I’m very happy for you both. I’m sure Aaron will be very excited.”

“I guess I should congratulate you as well. I hear you and your husband are expecting a baby around the same time.”

Using the crumpled tissue she’d retrieved from her purse, Eve patted away the streams of perspiration that ran down her neck. She took a deep breath to help regain her crumbling composure.

“Yes, Richard and I are very excited.”

Lucy offered a weak smile in agreement. “I must be going,” she announced. Aaron will be home from the hospital soon, and want to be there when he gets home.”

Eve offered a feeble goodbye and watched lanky girl with the untamed crown of red curls make her way down the street. Closing her eyes tightly, Eve forced back the hot tears collecting behind her eye-lids. Sonia placed a gentle hand on Eve’s shoulder. Sensing her friend’s distress at the unexpected news, Sonia spoke in a low soothing voice. “We don’t have to see the movie. I can take you home, if you want.”
“No, I want to go in, Eve said, trying unsuccessfully to keep her voice steady. No one can see me cry in the dark.”

Chapter 13

Although not yet official, the frosty bite of winter was certainly in the air. Thanksgiving had normally been the holiday Eve enjoyed the most. This year’s celebration held little enjoyment for anyone. Her in-laws came bringing along Richard’s younger brother Lawrence, the Howard law student. Her wiry, blond haired freckle-faced brother-in-law, was the spitting image of his fair skinned, thin lipped mother, but this was where their similarities ended. Unlike his mother, Lawrence was a humble, soft-spoken man with sensitive eyes and a gentle smile. These were all qualities that were foreign to Prudence Powers.

Things practically got off to a bad start from the time they all walked through the door. The men had been very gracious. Father and son praised Eve and Richard’s newly decorated home and raved about her cooking, while her mother-in-law complained about the smallest details. The draperies were too light, the walls too dark; the mattress on their bed hurt her back; and Eve’s cooking was too spicy. As if the visit had not gone badly enough, Eve had spilled cranberry juice on the kitchen floor while cleaning after the Thanksgiving Day dinner. While she attempted to clean the spill in her cumbersome pregnant state, Prudence swooped into the kitchen, and accidently slipped in the puddle, breaking her bony leg. Eve couldn’t have imagined a more horrible ending to an already miserable family holiday.
Now that it was just a painful memory, Eve became anxious about the new life that would soon be entering. In only three weeks they would be celebrating Christmas with the gift of a precious baby. This child would be her link to her past and key to the future; this child would be her redemption.

She placed her small hands on top of her swollen belly. The cotton fabric of her maternity dress pressed tightly against her abdomen. The house was completely silent. She sat surrounded by a swarm of her own thoughts. Richard had gone to Atlanta for the weekend to check on his bedridden mother. Her own mother had left earlier that morning on an overnight shopping trip to northern Virginia with the ladies of the church to. Neither had been eager to leave her. Repeatedly, she assured them that she would be fine, especially since it was only the first week of December, and the baby was not expected until Christmas Eve.

Eve sat in her living room. She was extremely pleased that things had improved between her and Richard. Although they were not in love, they had managed to develop a peaceful co-existence. Eve did what she knew was expected of her. She played the dutiful wife, taking her place at his side after Sunday service, and singing his praises whenever the situation required.

Besides being the shrewd, ambitious, smooth-talker she knew him to be, Richard was becoming an activist for equal treatment of Negroes under the law. He had helped to organize the Negro workers of the RJR tobacco factory protest for better jobs and better wages. He’d gone to the school board to insist better text-books be given to the colored schools just as they were provided to the white schools. These were the things she had come to admire about the man she had taken as her husband.
A soft knock startled her back to reality. Rising to open the door, she laughed to think her mother or husband had instructed one of the church members to come over and check on her. When she opened the door, her heart plummeted like a rock to the pit of her stomach. The blood rushed to her face, turning her olive skin a burgundy red.

“Good evening, Eve,” said Aaron, his arms filled with brightly wrapped packages. Eve glared at him with an icy coldness. “What in heaven’s name are you doing here on my door-step?”

“Miss Olivia bought a few things for you and the baby. She instructed the driver to bring them over to you today, but I told him I would drop them off when I left the hospital.”

Eve watched him shivering in the frigid December wind. He gazed at her through remorseful eyes, searching her face for any sign of forgiveness.

“I know I shouldn’t be here, but I just had to try to see you and hopefully speak with you alone. May I at least bring the packages inside?”

With her arm stretched to block his entrance, Eve contemplated slamming the door in his face, leaving him and the gifts out in the cold. Instead, she acted against her better judgment, and allowed him to come into her home.

Aaron placed the bundle of brightly wrapped gifts on a small wooden table next to the sofa. His eyes immediately raced to Eve. He drank in the sight of her protruding belly and the angelic glow of her skin.

“Now that you’ve made your delivery, you can show yourself out.” said Eve.

“May I please have a moment?” he asked. “I haven’t seen or spoken with you since…” his voice waded away like a distance memory.
“Since when Aaron, the day I discovered you were leading me on, telling me believe we were going to be married, while you were carrying on with Lucy Callahan. The reason you haven’t seen or talked to me because there is absolutely nothing you have to say that I care to hear.” Eve’s voice was hard as stone.

“Eve, you must believe me when I tell you I never intended for things to turn out as they did. It’s true, I did start seeing Lucy, but that was only for appearances. One thing led to another, and before I knew it, she suggested we get married and her parents were announcing our engagement.” Aaron paused to catch his breath. Searching her face for the slightest sign of sympathy, he found none. “I didn’t even buy Lucy a ring. That diamond on her finger is family heirloom that belonged to her grandmother. Don’t you see Eve? We could have had a life together; we could have been happy if only you had been willing to live not as a colored woman but a-

“A white woman,” Eve interjected, finishing his statement. “You would have been willing to marry me only if I would have agreed to pass? Eve could feel warm tears building behind her eye lids.

“Why should you or I be forced to live surrounded by discrimination just because you carry the stain of Negro blood? I don’t care that you are colored, but even in the North, the hatred we'd face would’ve been unbearable. I love you Eve, and of course you being colored never mattered to me, but our happiness as well as my career would have all been compromised if we made it public knowledge you’re colored.”

Eve stood in awe, seeing Aaron with new eyes. She felt her anger rise. “You love me so much you would have me live a lie? Constantly, praying that no one discover my true Negro identity. What about my mother and friends? I’d be forced to see them in
secret, hidden by the darkness.” Tossing up her hands in a fit of desperation, Eve collapsed back onto the sofa. “If only I hadn’t been so foolish, acting like a lovesick school girl, I should have realized you never truly loved all of me. Believing in you has done nothing but make a mess of my life.”

“How can you say that Eve? I’ve always loved you.” Nervously, he knelt in front of her, placing his hands on her swollen belly. “I also love our child you carry.”

“How dare you touch me,” she said, pushing his hand off her, “You’re a selfish cowardly man Aaron Gray. I want no part of you. Because of what you’ve done, my life has turned into one giant masquerade. The only thing you can do for me now is to leave and never come back.”

Aaron’s face went pale. “Eve, I’m sorry I’ve upset you. I just wanted to apologize for all the pain I’ve caused you and pray you find it in your heart to forgive me.”

Ignoring his pleas, Eve walked toward the front door. Feeling a sharp pain in her lower abdomen, her face contorted and her legs buckled beneath her, forcing her to collapse to the floor. He rushed to her side as she lay on the floor in a fit of agony. With tears streaming, she called out to him in fear and distress.

“Aaron, help me. There’s something terribly wrong. Please don’t let anything happen to my baby. You have to save the baby.”

“You’re going to be fine. I promise I’ll take care of you both.” Scooping Eve into his arms, Aaron noticed the scarlet red stream coursing down her legs. His mind raced as he weighed the danger facing Eve and his child.

“I need get you to the hospital right away.” He said, trying to suppress the fear in his voice. Eve threw her arms around his neck and clung to him for dear life. As the pains
grew stronger, she screamed out in anguish. She could feel the heavy wetness covering her lower body. The bright red patches covering her emerald maternity dress caused her to quake with fear. She could feel herself slipping away with every stabbing pain. Images began to fade and Aaron’s voice grew distant.

“Aaron you must promise to do all you can to save our Dove,” said Eve, her quivering voice no louder than a whisper.

Aaron grabbed a woolen blanket from the sofa to cover her crumpled body as he made his way to his car “Don’t try to speak. Save your strength for the baby,” he said in a soothing voice.

The debilitating pain continued to grip her body, causing her slip in and out of consciousness. She prayed that if they both could not survive this grueling delivery, that God would take her and save her child. She could feel herself slowly fading into darkness. The once-loud buzz of passing cars became a distant hum. Instead, she could hear the strong voice of her father calling out to her from the darkness. With her last ounce of energy, Eve called out to him.

“I’m coming father, I’m coming.”

Eve woke surrounded by the sterile whiteness of her hospital room. The pain from her abdomen shot through her entire body as she tried to sit up. Her body ached, her throat was dry as bark, and she had no memory of the birth, but she had survived. All she needed was to hold her daughter in her empty arms.
“Thank heavens you’ve come back to us. You’ve been unconscious for two days,” said the soft voice with fervent relief.

Eve slowly turned to find Olivia Callahan sitting by her bedside dabbing her moist eyes with a handkerchief.

“Miss Olivia,” said Eve, her voice raspy. “Where is my baby? When can I see her? Is my mother here?”

Olivia continued to dab away her tears while she reached for Eve’s cold limp hand. “We’ve all been so worried we’d lose you. I’m so glad Aaron just happened to be there delivering those gifts when all this happened. Had it not been for his quick actions you wouldn’t be with us today. At least he had the good sense to bring you here rather than to the colored hospital.”

Still dazed from her ordeal, Eve studied Olivia’s face in bewilderment.

“This is the Forsyth Hospital dear, not the colored hospital,” said Olivia in her most superior voice. “Aaron brought you where he knew you’d get the best care. No one knows you’re colored, so you need not worry about a thing. I had them move you to this remote section of the hospital and out of that crowded maternity ward. I got word to your mother and your husband. They wish they could be here to help look after you, but they both realize that such a thing isn’t possible under the circumstances.”

“How soon can the baby and I go home? I appreciate you coming to check on me, but I’m sure Lucy must need your help. I’ve heard she has some complications that have caused her to be in and out of the hospital.”

“I’m hear with you because that’s where I’m needed,” said Olivia as she handed Eve a cold cup of water. “Lucy’s actually here at the hospital. She delivered her baby two
days ago. A tiny baby girl no bigger than a loaf of bread with the prettiest head of charcoal black hair I’ve every seen.”

Eve was starting to regain her wits. She could feel that something was wrong. Why was Miss Olivia here with her rather than her own daughter and new granddaughter? Why had she answered every question excepted the ones she asked about her baby?

“Miss Olivia, I really would like to see my baby. Can you please have one of the nurses bring her in?”

Olivia’s sapphire blue eyes became glassy with fresh tears. She squeezed Eve’s hand tightly as she prepared to answer the questions she could no longer avoid.

“Your sweet baby girl didn’t survive. Aaron and all the doctors did all they could to save the poor child, but she passed away just a few hours after she was born.”

Eve wanted to cry out in despair for the child she had loved but never held; instead, she stared out the small window while hot tears burned a path down her cool cheeks. Olivia tried to wrap her arms around her shoulders for comfort, but Eve’s body remained as rigid as the wall.

“I saw her,” said Eve as if in some sort of hypnotic state.

Olivia stared into Eve’s eyes, as her body. “You must be mistaken, dear. You’ve been sedated until now.”

“She was wrapped in a pretty pink blanket as Aaron held her in his arms. Her skin was as pale as cotton, and her little cheeks were as red as the petals of a rose. Aaron sang to her while my father watched over them. I wanted to stay, but father told me I had to go
back. He promised he would send my Dove back to me when the time was right. I guess that time will be when I’m dead and gone.”

Olivia cradled her in her arms as if she were a helpless new-born, humming the same familiar lullaby her mother used to sing when she was just a child. “I understand your pain. I know only too well what a fretful thing it is to love what death can swiftly take away.”

Eve’s body suddenly went limp as an uncontrollable flood of tears washed over her. She clutched Olivia’s dress tightly as she cried for all that death had taken from her. The future she had envisioned was dead just as she was dead inside.
Chapter 1: Introduction

The practice of intraracial color discrimination in the African American community is well known yet rarely discussed. As stated by Russell, Wilson, and Hall, there is an unwritten rule that the taboo topics of skin color bias, good hair verses bad hair, thick lips, and discussions of other distinctive Negro features, are not be let out of the confines of the Black community. Therefore, the subject is ignored and the discriminatory practice continues just as it has for hundreds of years (1992:1).

The skin color issue is nothing foreign to Blacks in America. An individual would be hard pressed to find an African American who has not heard the phrase nappy hair or good hair, blue black or high yella, directed at them or another African American. Few have never had the experience of being told to “get out the sun before you get black or blacker.” These prejudiced views have been passed down from one generation to the next.

For example, while searching the pages of a June 1959 issue of *Ebony* magazine, a publication targeted at African Americans, I was bombarded with advertisements for skin bleaching crèmes and hair strengtheners. The models found on the pages of the various advertisements were white females or fair skinned Black women. The only darker skinned Blacks found on the pages of the magazine were those who were interviewed for articles or entertainers such as Sydney Poitier.

As a child, I can remember when I was first made aware of the complexity of skin color. No two people had a stronger impact on shaping my world than my two grandmothers. Both were strong willed independent Black women who had overcome their own adversities. They were born long before we were African American, Black, or
Colored. These women were born the granddaughters of slaves, who still bore the visible and invisible scares of forced servitude. They sat at the feet of people who were once regarded as chattel. They grew up listening to stories of working long hard days in the fields with little food and poor living conditions or life in the big house, serving White masters. Both were painfully aware of the second class status of Blacks and prayed that the world would be a better place for their children and grandchildren. This however, is where the similarity ended.

My maternal grandmother, Eva, was a strong outspoken woman filled with pride and determination. Her skin was as dark as a moonless night. Her coarse hair had always been short due to numerous home straighteners that had left her fine hair damaged and brittle. Her stern face rarely softened for a smile, unless for her beloved grandchildren. Miss Eva, as she was know in the community, was a no nonsense woman who had grown up no stranger to hard work. As a child, she grew up picking tobacco on the family farm. After marriage and children, her work went from the fields to the kitchens of her White employers. Home offered little comfort. As the wife of a philandering husband, she was repeatedly humiliated by external martial affairs. Continually hurt by a spouse who preferred the companionship of fair skinned women to that of his dark skinned wife. Grandma Eva felt that her husband’s infidelity was partly her fault. Her dark skin made her less attractive, less desirable, which eventually drove him away.

From my dark skinned grandmother, as she was referred to by my father’s relatives, I learned terms such as high yella, redbone, half-breed, and white nigger. These words were used to describe other Blacks of lighter complexions. They were always used after words such as uppity and snobby. As I grew older I realized my grandma’s true
desire was not to be imprisoned by her skin color. She advised me not to get to friendly with “high girls” because they could not be trusted. Don’t date or marry a red bone man because they believe they’re too pretty to limit themselves to just one woman. In her mind, Grandma Eva was passing along words of advice to protect me from the pain she had suffered at the hands of her own people, including her husband.

Grandma Helen, my paternal grandmother, was as candid as they come, but unlike my maternal mother, she draped herself in a cloak of superiority. Her skin was as light as crème and she was often mistaken for white. Grandma Helen was born the daughter of a brick layer and lived what could be considered for the time, a privileged life. She never worked except for the occasional job as a seamstress during the holidays. Although still demoralized by the restrictions of Jim Crow, Grandma Helen enjoyed a more advantaged life. As my Grandma Helen once told me, she had been fortunate enough to be born on the right side of the color line.

She never approved of my mother, her dark skinned daughter-in-law, but she was happy her granddaughter had not inherited her mother’s dark complexion. This grandmother taught me to keep my hair long to make up for the unfortunate coarseness. I should avoid the sun and not drink black coffee because these things would make me darker. Grandma advised me to avoid dating dark men. “When the time comes to marry,” she would say to me. “You must think of your children. If you marry a dark man you run the risk of having dark children and we don’t want that, now do we?”

It was from their words and actions that I learned the intricate workings of the color complex. My chestnut brown complexion allowed me to straddle the line of the color divide. Not light enough to be considered light and not dark enough to be called
dark, I stood in the middle of the skin color tug of war. As African Americans have been subjected to second class treatment, but by virtue of skin color some have been given first class privilege within their second class confines.

Today the painful rules of the skin color game continue. African Americans can still be found discussing good hair, nappy hair, dark and light skin. Mothers are still told to check the ears of their new born babies to detect if the child will darken. To get to the root of this problem one must travel back to slavery to understand how white racism divided a race of people so deeply that the division still remains more than three hundred years later.
Chapter 2: The Divides of Slavery

According to Russell, Wilson, and Hall (1992) in the seventeenth century, Blacks were torn from their native Africa and brought to a foreign land to live in forced servitude. Once in America, many female slaves found themselves in forced sexual relationships with their white masters or overseers. As a result of these forced sexual relationships, the mixed raced children that were born began to present a problem for the white establishment.

“The central question for colonial lawmakers to settle was whether mixed-breed offspring should have the free status of the White father or the slave status of the Black mother. Virginia’s legislators found a solution that worked to their advantage. Departing from traditional English law, in which the status of the child was always determined by that of father, the colonists voted in 1662 that children in Virginia would have the same status as the mother” (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992:13).

Hodges states that during colonization, white males were not the only members of society engaging in sexual relationships with Blacks. Free white women were also carrying on sexual relationships with Black slave men. Since the law dictated that the child should carry the status of the mother, these children were free just like their White mothers. As the number of free mulattoes grew, Whites became increasingly disturbed by the blurring of the racial lines because free mulattoes held a footing in both the White and Black world (1997:4).

“Neither fully White nor Negro, mulattoes lay outside the social order. Free mulattoes required legal definition, preferably in a way that would maintain the status
quo. How they came to be classified did much to create the color-caste system that lingers in America today” (Russell, Wilson, Hall 1992: 14).

The one-drop rule drew a line in the sand creating a clear distinction between Whites and Blacks. This rule declared that anyone with even one drop of Black blood would have the same status as a person of pure African descent. No matter how fair a person’s skin was, they were considered Negros if there was one trace of Black blood in their family lineage (Hodges 1997:157-158).

Keith and Herring noted that mulattoes brought higher prices on the slave market. Light skinned Blacks were preferred over darker skinned Blacks for personal service because it was believed their white ancestry made them intellectually superior to those with pure African ancestry (1991:762).

For example, the positions in the home such as butler, maid, driver, and seamstress were often given to lighted skinned slaves while the dark skinned slaves were sent to the fields to endure long hot grueling labor (Hill 2002: 77-78).

In Alex Haley’s autobiographical book, *Malcolm X*, the Nation of Islam minister discusses the role slave masters played in the light and dark racial divide in the African American community. During a 1959 televised interview titled “The Hate That Hate Produced”, Malcolm X spoke of the treatment and mindset of house slaves and field slaves and how this widened the racial divide.

Since slavery the American white man has always kept some handpicked Negroes who fared much better than the black masses suffering and slaving out in the hot fields. The white man had these “house” and “yard” Negroes for his special servants. He threw them more crumbs from his rich table, he even let them eat in his kitchen. He knew that he could always count on them to keep “good massa” happy in his self image of being
so “good” and “righteous.” “Good massa” always heard just what he wanted to hear from these “house” blacks. “You’re such a good, fine massa!” Or, “Oh massa, those old black nigger field hands out there, they’re happy just like they are; why massa, they’re not intelligent enough for you to try and do any better for them, massa—(1992:274-275).

Keith and Herring agreed with house and field slave distinctions. The field slaves were normally of pure African descent. These slaves had less contact with White society and experienced the harsher aspects of slavery. In contrast, the house slaves were largely mulattos. These slaves were given trained or skilled labor positions as well as, better food, clothing, and shelter (1991:762).

In E. Franklin Frazier’s analysis of the Black middle class titled *Black Bourgeoisie*, Frazier argues that mulattos led a more privileged existence when compared with Blacks with pure African ancestry. Frazier goes on to state that during slavery, fair skinned Blacks were at times emancipated by their white fathers. After emancipation, their ties to whites gave them an advantage over other Blacks in obtaining education, higher status occupations, and property. The majority of prominent mulattos married mulattos and passed advantages on to their light skinned children. So someone’s position in the community typically reflected the amount of “White blood” in their lineage (1990:14).
Chapter 3: Methods

As part of this project I wanted to gain the perspective of African Americans who had lived in North Carolina during the 1940’s, the same time period as that in which my short story is set. Therefore, I selected three African Americans between the ages of 76 and 80. Ruth Gary, a 76 year old retired Sara Lee factory worker, was born and raised in Winston-Salem, North Carolina and has lived in the area her entire life. Ms. Gary was selected because she was a young adult during the time frame my short story took place and a Winston-Salem native. Ms. Gary is a close family friend, as well as my God Mother. I specifically targeted this individual for her age, geographic location, and dark complexion. As a dark skinned African American female in post World War II North Carolina, I was very interested in discovering if her experience with skin color were similar to my short story character Sonia Little.

Claudia Anthony, a 78 year old widowed housewife, is a Greensboro, North Carolina native. She was born and raised in Greensboro, NC and has lived in the area all her life. Ms. Anthony is the great aunt of my husband. This person was selected because of her age, geographic location, and her fair complexion. As a light skinned college educated southern woman during the late forties, I wanted to discover what role if any her college education, fair skin, light eyes, and straight hair played in her life.

Edward Gary, an 80 year old retired RJR factory worker, is also a native of Winston-Salem, North Carolina and the spouse of Ruth Gary. He was selected for his age, geographic location, dark complexion, and to offer a male perspective on intraracial race relations in post World War II North Carolina.
All three individuals were interviewed in their homes. Ruth and Edward Gary were interviewed separately on different days. Each was asked a standard set of questions such as age, where were they born, and where did they grow up. They were all also asked the same standard three questions. “Has your skin color had any impact on your life? If so, please tell what the impact was? Do you see differences today in attitudes of skin color among African American’s?”

The interviews normally lasted one hour to ninety minutes. I allowed all three to answer the questions and give examples of whatever they chose to share.
Chapter 4: 
The Ups and Downs of Light and Dark

When I was a little girl I would sneak and wash my face in milk because my grandma told me it would make me lighter. When I got older I used all kinds of fade crèmes to make myself lighter. I started to believe all that stuff was really working and I was getting lighter. It took a long time for me to accept my skin color and not be sad every time I looked in the mirror. I’ve heard just about every nasty name under the sun. Tar baby, jigaboo, and porch monkey are just a few. Children can be mean but adults can be meaner (Ruth).

Ruth Gary, a dark skinned retired Sara Lee Factory worker, describes how she painfully came to grips with her own dark complexion.

“I never wanted to be white,” said Ruth, her eyes filled with sadness. “I just didn’t want to be so dark.”

Writing about the use of these skin lightening creams, Thompson and Keith noted that commercial skin bleaching products never really lightened anyone’s skin tone. The most these over the counter products and concocted home remedies did was turn self hatred and fear into fortunes for the manufactures and burn and damage the skin (2001:338).

Like many African Americans, Ruth learned the rules of the skin color game at an early age. Her negative experience is very similar to the character Sonia I created in my short story. Both were ridiculed by their peers because of their dark complexions. Just as Ruth saw her dark skin as a birth defect she was powerless to overcome, so did my character Sonia Little. This character felt trapped by her blue black complexion. Her dark skin had determined her fate as an unskilled laborer and weakened her chances of finding a well established, professional husband.
In this country there is a fixation for women to embody the ideal images of European beauty. For dark skin men the pressure to look more European is not as great (Hill 2002: 78). A person with a dark skin tone may be excluded from clubs such as the “blue vein” society, which only accepts members whose skin is lighter than a brown paper bag or light enough for the blue in the veins to be visible (Thompson and Keith 2001: 337). For men however, with a good education and a prosperous career, he can marry a light skin or white woman. This would help to improve his status and opportunities (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992:108).

African American women feel a strong burden to conform to the standards of white European beauty (Hill 2002:78). In 1984 the first Black Miss America was crowned. Vanessa Williams, a fair skinned woman with straight hair and green eyes, was hailed as the most beautiful in the country. When she was forced to relinquish her crown in the midst of scandal, it was another light skinned, straight haired female, Suzette Charles, who replaced her. What subliminal message did this send to African American women all over the country?

To be defined by mainstream U.S society as beautiful, most women must have light skin and European facial features, especially women of color. The relationship between skin color and beauty is very important for women because beauty is a form of social capital (Hunter 2002:178).

The message was clear, fair skin, light eyes, and straight hair was the standard of beauty that African American women must try to meet in order to be considered beautiful.

As Hill points out, the majority of beauty products marketed towards African American women are designed to aid them in looking more “white”. These women are aware that the few Black women who have risen to the status of “sex symbol,” such as
Lena Horne, Vanessa Williams, and Halle Berry, closely embody “white” standards of feminine beauty. For many dark-skinned females, the admiration of light-skinned women has substantial social and emotional cost (2002:80).

In sharp contrast to dark-skinned women, dark-skinned male celebrities such as Nat King Cole, Sidney Poitier, Blair Underwood and Michael Jordan have long enjoyed mainstream appeal. This fact suggests that light skin tone is less important for Black males than for Black females (Hill 2002: 80).

Men however, are not exempt from the perils of skin color bias. Edward Gary, an 80 year old retired Reynolds American factory worker, knew only to well the depths of complexion prejudice in the Black community. In 1949, Edward began dating a woman that was considerably lighter than himself.

She was a pretty high yella girl with good hair. We met at the church. Her family had just moved up to North Carolina from Georgia and we both sang on the choir. We’d been keeping company for about six months. Everything seemed to be going just fine. Our families knew each other and I had just got a good paying job at RJ Reynolds. One day I brought up marriage and she just started to cry. She just kept crying and saying she just could do it. So I asked her just what it was she couldn’t do. She finally stop crying long enough to tell me she couldn’t marry a man as dark as me. She told me she couldn’t risk having dark skinned children. Those words cut me like a knife.

Edward lowered his head at the recollection of his rejection.

I was used to the prejudice from white folks. During those days, a Black man in the south lived with the white mans prejudice same as you lived with flat feet or bad eyesight, but it’s a sad day when you have it coming from your own people. That girl did get married. She ended up marrying some redbone man from Mt. Airy. I guess she got those light skinned babies after all (Edward).
During the 1960’s, with regards to attitude, a shift occurred in the African American community towards skin tone. A surge of Black Nationalism declared “Black is beautiful”, and skin tone declined in its importance as a basis of prestige in the Black community (Keith and Herring 1991: 761). Many women and men put away their hair strengtheners for the first time in decades. The afro, a popular natural hair style, was a blatant rejection of the white standard of beauty. Furthermore, we see that educational achievement, occupational, and income levels for dark skinned Blacks did increase during the 1960’s (Keith and Herring 1991: 764).

By the late 1970’s the once powerful battle cry “Black is Beautiful” had become a soft whisper. The afro had faded into obscurity, as do most trendy styles. Hair straighteners returned from hiatuses and so did the prevailing belief that lighter shin was more attractive.

As history has shown, light skin carries rewards in the African American community can come with rewards. Lighter skinned Blacks have enjoyed better socioeconomic status, more political dominance, and have been awarded greater educational opportunities than darker skin Blacks (Nasser-McMillan, McFall-Roberts, Flowers, and Garrett, 2006: 82).

As long as Whites control the job market, the darker one’s skin, the darker were one’s chances of being hired. Throughout Reconstruction and well into the twentieth century, light-skinned Blacks were hired ahead of equally qualified darker-skinned Blacks, especially for coveted service jobs (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992: 127).

However, the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 helped to open the job market for Blacks. White employers frantically raced to meet new employment guidelines. Some White employers discovered that by hiring only light-skinned African
Americans they could be in compliance with affirmative action polices while minimizing the visible presence of Blacks. Once Black leaders realized what was happening, they protested and the hiring of “too-white Negroes” subsided (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992: 127).

In my story, See No Evil, the main character, Eve Anderson Powers, is an African American woman whose skin is fair enough for her to pass into white society. Through Eve’s ill fated love affair and several ironic twist of fate, we see some of the advantages of having fair skin, as well as the disadvantages.

Eve’s life was exemplary of the type of advantages more often enjoyed by lighter skinned African Americans. This is not to say that all those with light skin live better than those who are more darkly complected. However, as stated by McMillan, Roberts, Flowers, and Garrett, in a study conducted 36 years ago, among African American urbanites, the number of light-skinned African Americans who had attended college was double that of darker skinned African Americans. Lighter skinned African Americans also had higher incomes, were more often working in white collar jobs, and tended more often to have a father who also went to college. A follow up study done in 1991 found that darker skinned African Americans that were surveyed were less likely to have completed high school, had less prestigious occupations, and reported more below-average family incomes (2006:82).

Eve’s character was the child of prosperous light and brown skinned parents. Unlike her best friend, the dark complected Sonia Little. Eve was college educated and a teacher by profession. Although her African American heritage gave her second class status, her light complexion made her less threatening to Whites. She developed a cordial
relationship with a powerful white family, while Sonia continued to be viewed in a
domestic role.

Fair skin brought this character advantages she may not have been able to enjoy
had her complexion been darker. Studies however, have shown that many African
American females who are fair skinned often carry a sense of guilt about their appearance
and feel ostracized by both European American and African American women (qtd.
Boyd-Franklin, 1991). In a study of college students, Hill found that both light and dark-
skinned African American students associated skin color with physical beauty. Skin color
is a loaded issue among African Americans, regardless of age (2002:82-83).

Claudia Anthony, a 78 year old Greensboro native, knew first hand the guilt often
associated with having lighter skin.

My mama was a real light like a white woman. She had long straight
sandy brown hair and grey eyes. My daddy was as Black as soot. I was
light like my mama and my sister Shirley was dark like daddy with coarse
hair. When my mama, sister and me would go to town, people would look
at me and say to how pretty I was and what nice hair I had. Nobody ever
said anything like that to my sister. Sometimes people would ask whose
child was Shirley. I felt so bad for my sister that I would start wearing hats
out to cover up my hair so people wouldn’t say anything to me. My
parents would even treat us different. My sister always had to help with
work outside like helping in the garden and hanging up the cloths on the
line. I was always told to work in the house and keep out of the sun. My
sister saw the difference and we use to fight something terrible. We’re still
not close today. Looking back, I felt so bad but what could I do (Claudia).

In Black families with parents with very different skin tones, family members
may become anxious about the skin tone of a new born. Comments can range from “Look
at that little yella thing” to “You better keep that child out of the sun.” These comments
cannot only be heard from family member, but also friends and strangers (Russell,
Wilson, Hall 1992: 94).
In his autobiography, Malcolm X describes how his light skin gained him preferential treatment by his dark skin father.

I actually believe that as anti-white as my father was, he was subconsciously so afflicted with the white man’s brainwashing of Negroes that he inclined to favor the light ones, and I was his lightest child. Most Negro parents in those days would almost instinctively treat any lighter children better than they did the darker ones. It came directly from the slavery tradition that the “mulatto,” because he was visibly nearer to white, was therefore “better” (1992:7).

For more than one hundred years, African American women have struggled not to become white, but to appear less Black. Fortunes have been made on skin bleaching products, hair strengtheners, colored contacts, and hair weaves (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992: 51). To the white world, African American’s proclaim that skin color does not influence intelligence, ability, or beauty. Now African Americans must begin to believe and practice what we preach.
Chapter 5: Images of Blackness in the Media

The media has become such a powerful force in our society. Movies, television, magazines, news programs, and music videos shape our images of the world. The majority of us turn on our television sets everyday. We wait with eager anticipation for our favorite magazines to arrive in the mail. News programs such as CNN and Today keep us informed of events all around the world. Music videos have become a popular form of advertisement for the music business (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992: 135). All of these industries are controlled by a white majority.

For years African Americans have fought vigorously for a voice and fair representation in the media. In this context racial stereotyping of Blacks has been widely discussed, but less attention has been given to the role of skin color (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992:135).

I can still remember my dark skin grandmother Eve, taking my cousin and me to the movies to see Flashdance. For the week leading up to our outing, my cousin and I could talk about nothing else. We were so excited to see a movie with an African American female in the lead role. My cousin was twice as excited as I was because she dreamed of becoming a dancer just like the main character. As I sat next to my grandmother in the darkened theater, I could hardly sit still in my seat. When the fair skin Jennifer Beals made her appearance on the screen I turned to my grandmother and whispered, “That’s her, isn’t she pretty.” My grandmother turned to face me. Even in the darkness I could see the look of sadness in her eyes. “Yes,” she agreed pleasantly. “She’s very pretty.” I remained silent for the remainder of the film. I knew my words had hurt her, but at 11 years old I wasn’t sure why. To afraid to revisit the subject I chose to say
nothing. Once back at my home, I over heard my mother ask my grandmother what she thought of the movie.

My grandmother Eve’s responded with words I still recall today. “It’s still as true today as it was yesterday,” she said in a remorseful voice.

If you’re light you’re alright
If you’re brown stick around
If you’re Black get back.

Light skin, long hair, and classic European features have become the look of choice for African American females in the media spotlight. In music videos you will find an unending array of light skinned women singing, dancing, and acting as “arm candy” for the artist (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992:159). Today, the majority of popular African American R&B female singers such as Beyonce, Keisha Cole, Rihanna, and Alicia Keys are light skinned.

As states by Russell, Wilson and Hall (1992), skin tone and image were not always as important to the singing careers of African American women as they are today. Since the eighties, when television went cable and sound went video, and image and packaging became a strong rival of talent and personality in the music industry, there has been a push for performers to have good looks, universal appeal, and a certain marketable “spin”. All of these ingredients are considered necessary before an artist can capture the attention of record producers and the public. One has to wonder if darker skinned full figured artist such as Aretha Franklin, Pearl Bailey, and Ella Fitzgerald would have found success in today’s image conscious market (157-158).
What would a discussion of skin color and pop music be without examining the transformation of Michael Jackson from a cinnamon brown to a pale white in a 25 year time span? Despite his numerous press release denials, it seems as if the pop star’s skin has managed to become lighter, his nose has become drastically thinner, and his hair is noticeably straighter. Could Jackson possibly have been so dissatisfied with his brown skin, coarse hair, and broad nose that he took drastic measures to reverse his natural Negroid appearance?

In a 1992 *Rolling Stone* article, the magazine notes that since Jackson’s 1979 release of his solo album *Off the Wall*, the pop star has literally remade his face right before our eyes. The singer has also been criticized for trying to become white and turning his back on his Black roots (Goldberg 1992:14).

One point of concern is the message Michael Jackson’s extreme physical transformation send to the youth who idolize the superstar. His actions give the message that Black is ugly. The last thing you should want to have is dark skin, nappy hair, and Negroid features (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992).

Michael Jackson did not invent Black self-hatred. He is simply the product of an environment with a long history of race and color bias (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992: 161).

Light skin actresses such as, Lena Horn, Dorothy Dandridge, Halle Berry, and Vanessa Williams have normally been the preferred love interest in Hollywood films such as Halle Berry in *Swordfish*, Lonette McKee in *Jungle Fever*, Jasmine Guy in *Harlem Nights*, and Dorothy Dandridge in *Carmen Jones* (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992:150).
Hollywood has shown more reluctance in placing dark skin actresses in romantic leading roles (Russell, Wilson and Hall 1992:151). For example, Cicely Tyson and Whoopi Goldberg are popular dark skin actresses. Both women have paved the way as dramatic leading actresses, but neither of them have been cast as a romantic lead in a film.

Despite Whoopi Goldberg’s box-office appeal, most directors consider her unsuitable as a love interest. In fact, a love scene between Goldberg and her White co-star, Sam Elliot, that was shot for the film *Fatal Beauty* ended up on the cutting-room floor. Like Hattie McDaniel, Goldberg has been recognized by the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences for her acting talent, yet her roles are restricted because of her dark skin and natural hair (Russell, Wilson, Hall 1992:151).

As for the African American male, the skin color pendulum often swings in the opposite direction. Dark skinned males epitomize strength, danger, and sex appeal. Popular actors such as Blair Underwood and Wesley Snipes have often been sought after for both action and romantic leads. The dark skin of African American men has often been equated with sexual virility. Light skinned males are generally perceived as lacking the physical strength and sexual potency of dark skin men (Hill 2002: 80-81).

Literature has also not been exempt from the skin color issue. In nineteenth century literature biracialism was often believed to be a tragedy for African Americans (Bost 1998:675). Trapped between racial worlds, and locked out of domestic harmony, these heroines nearly always met a tragic end (Bost 1998: 675: Russell, Wilson Hall 1992:136). In fact the conflicts and downfalls associated with mixed race Black females
were so common in such novels that this character became know as the “tragic mulatta.” (Russell, Wilson, Hall 1992: 136).

The mulatta became popular with fiction writers as an ideal victim of misfortune. Hanrahan goes on to describe the typical mulatta character found in nineteenth century literature.

In story after story, this near-white ingénue reappears. She is young. She is beautiful. She speaks impeccably and dresses in enviable style. She is raised as a lady in the household of her father, who is notwithstanding his sexual vagaries, descended from the best blood in the South. Her fortune is often irremediably reversed upon her father’s death (qtd. in Elfenbein 3).

For example, in some versions of the tragic mulatta tale, the mixed race female is abandoned by her white lover because he discovers her true racial background or he is aware of her race, but decides he wants a more respectable white wife (Hanrahan 2005:600). Despite her efforts to be an ideal woman, the character never fully succeeds.

Literary critic Sterling A. Brown, points out that White stereotypes led to a number of racist assumptions about the mulatta. First, this ill fated mulatto inherited the vices of both races but none of the virtues; second, any achievements of a Black person can be attributed to their “White” blood. The reasoning is that even the worst “White” trait is sufficient for achievement among Blacks. The mulattoes divided inheritance is intellectual determination; from their Black bloodline come emotional urges and savagery (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992:137).

The short story, *See No Evil*, is also an example of the literary tragic mulatta. Eve, the very fair skinned African American heroine, is beautiful, intelligent, and strong willed. On the surface she appears to have all the world could offer an African American female during this period in history. As the story unfolds, the reader discovers that Eve is
the victim of an ill fated relationship with a white man. Although her White lover is
aware of her racial identity, he still chooses to abandon her for her a White wife that
could offer him the respectability he could never have with a fair-skinned Black woman
who refuses to pass.

The character, Sonia is depicted as the stereotypical dark skinned female who
falls victim to unfortunate circumstances. Although intelligent and beautiful, this
character is extremely bothered by her dark complexion. She sees herself as unattractive
and a prisoner of the dark skin that limits her opportunities. Thompson and Keith would
explain Sonia’s self-hatred as a result of her constant exposure to the belief that light skin
is the skin tone of beauty and choice. They see light skin Blacks in advertisements,
magazines, and professional positions. They are led to believe that light skin is an
essential ingredient to popularity, professional status, and a desirable marriage

In Maya Angelou’s semiautobiographical I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, the
central character ponders about how much better her life would be if she could just wake
up from her Black ugly dream (1997). The message this sends is that dark skin causes
misery and inferiority; light skin brings love and happiness.

Images of blackness in the media reflect how far African Americans have come,
as well as how much still needs to be done in the area of race relations and color
consciousness (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 162).
Chapter 6: Passing

In the case of African Americans, passing can best be described as a situation in which a very fair-skinned or white looking African American whose physical appearance allows them to present themselves as “White”. This permits the passing individual to enjoy certain benefits they would not be able to take advantage if their true racial identity was exposed such as: shopping, sleeping, eating meals, or joining racially exclusive establishments or organizations.

African Americans have passed for white in a wide variety for a wide variety of circumstances. During slavery, White-looking Blacks may have used their fair complexions as a vehicle to freedom. During segregation, Blacks have passed in order to shop, sleep, or eat meals at racially exclusive establishments, while some Blacks have passed for White on a long term permanent basis (Burma 1946:22).

Burma describes the range of varied attitudes towards passing. Some African Americans have objected to passing because it represents a betrayal of the Black race and will “out” the passer. Others see passing as a good joke on Whites and find pleasure in the hoax. There are also those who defend passing for rational reasons, saying those who can are fools not to pass (1946:22).

Some argue the cost of passing far outweighs its benefits. According to Russell, Wilson, and Hall, passing for white inflicts psychological trauma on those who try it, because it requires them to put up a wall between whom they are and who they are trying to be amid white society (1992:74).
For those who choose to pass the rules can be ridged. The passer is required to strip their connection to their personal history and symbolically divorce themselves from friends and family that could reveal their true identity.

An example of the psychological suffering endured by passers can be seen in the 1960 film titled *I Passed for White*, based on a memoir by the same name, of a young biracial woman named Reba Lee, who leaves her maternal African American family to pass for white in New York City. The protagonist was prompted to pass because she wanted to be free of the limitations imposed on Blacks. While in New York, Reba Lee takes on a new name, new identity, and marries a young white man. In the beginning she is happy with her new life. However, the strain of hiding her past became a huge burden. Reba had told her husband’s family that her parents are dead. She finds that she is constantly on guard so as not to accidently say or do something that will reveal her true racial identity.

In the end the burdens of passing become too unbearable. Reba becomes pregnant and develops a terrifying fear that the child could be born with distinctive Black features, such as dark skin or kinky hair, which would reveal her racial secret. When she develops complications during pregnancy, Reba gives birth to a still-born child. In her exhausted agony, she asked the nurse if the child was Black. When her husband over hears the question, his mind fills with doubt and he entertains the possibility that his wife has been having an affair with a Black man. The couple’s relationship has been poisoned with doubt and suspicion.Eventually, she and her husband divorce. She then returns to her family and her original identity.
Eve, the short story heroine, rejects the notion to pass. Refusing to live a life void of childhood friends and family, this character understands that the burdens, lies, and constant fear truly out weight any financial gain or fleeting happiness passing can bring.

If an African American is identified as a passer by the White community, the consequences can be very dangerous for the passer. In a 1956 *Time* magazine article titled *Buyer Be Ware*, an African American family learned just how dangerous it can be when a passers true racial identity is discovered.

John Rouse, a 69 retired bodyguard and his family purchased a new home in a White middle class neighborhood on Robson Avenue in Detroit, Michigan. Two days after Rouse and his family moved into the neighborhood, a mob of 500 angry Whites assembled outside their home. The crowd hurled stones through the Rouses’ windows and shouted “Negros are not welcome on Robson Avenue.” Rouse insisted that he was not a Negro but half Cherokee, half French Canadian, and his wife Scotch-Irish by descent, but nobody listened. Instead, he was visited by officers of the neighborhood improvement association who started demanding that the family sell to them. Fearing for their family’s safety, the Rouse’s agreed to sell their home for $2,000 more than the purchase price (24).

Then there are those African Americans who have chosen to pass into White society not for reasons of freedom or better opportunity but rather seeking the acceptance their white skin has denied them in the African American community. In a 1959 *Ebony* magazine article titled *Why I Never Want to Pass*, an unnamed Black man explains why he made the decision to leave his life behind and pass. The unidentified man confesses,
I wasn’t accepted by Negroes. I was rejected both ways. There was no place I belonged. I didn’t have a race. Some of my friends and one or two of my teachers suggested I pass. I considered the idea, figuring I might fit in better if I did (1959:49).

Since the Civil War, passing has been viewed with disdain by other African Americans. To pass is considered a blatant rejection of race and heritage (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992:73). Novels that took an “anti-passing” perspective, included tales of the tragic downfall of characters who passed and the rewards that accrued to Black characters that chose to stay true to their race.

Frank J. Webb, an African American author, wrote of the problems of passing and the glories of racial loyalty. In his novel titled The Garies and their Friends, the author writes of a White slave owner who marries a slave woman he has purchased. The marriage produces three children that show no trace of their African American heritage. The Garies move north to escape the racial prejudice of the south. However, both parents and their infant child are killed when their White neighbors discover that Mrs. Garie is African American. The surviving two children, Emily and Clarence are raised by friends of the family. African Americans raise Emily, while Whites raise her brother Clarence.

Although subject to the second class treatment of Blacks during this time, Emily grows up happy and satisfied as a member of the Black community. Clarence identifies with the White family that has raised him and chooses to pass and conceal his Black heritage.

Emily happily marries an African American man she loves and has grown up with, although her brother tries to persuade her to marry “White”. Emily stands by her choice to marry and remain part of the Black community. Her decision brings her love, happiness, and contentment.
Clarence however, plans to marry a White young lady named Birdie. His fiancé has no idea he is actually an African American who is passing. When his secret is discovered, Birdie breaks off their engagement and his racial identity is made public to his White friends. Rejected by his beloved Birdie and his racial secret exposed, Clarence dies miserable and alone from a broken heart.

This novel praises those with the ability to pass, but choose to remain true to their Black heritage. The author commends racial pride as a trait to be admired and rewarded with happiness. Those who fail to identify and show pride in their African American heritage will lack true fulfillment.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

How this “color complex” issue will play out with future generations is uncertain. Intraracial color discrimination is a complex issue with deep roots in the history of our nation. Therefore, a quick fix is not likely. Russell, Wilson, and Hall (1992) do offer suggestions to help minimize the damage in the future. The first step must be awareness. Despite what some people may claim, this hurtful issue has not gone away. Secondly, more research is needed to document the effects of this problem on the African American community (1992:165).

Sadly, each of the individuals that I interviewed still carry scars from their experiences with skin tone bias. Ruth still feels her dark skin is less attractive than those with light skin. Edward believes his dark complexion has limited his career advancement. Claudia blames attitudes towards skin tone for her strained relationship with her sister. Time has softened their pain but it has not healed their wounds.

Yet even in our image driven culture, I do believe there is room for hope. Directors such as Spike Lee have brought the issue of skin color discrimination to the public’s attention with films such as School Daze and Jungle Fever. Director, actor, and producer Tyler Perry, is also another high-powered figure who continues to open media doors for African Americans. Black heroines in novels no longer have to be tragic mixed raced characters (Russell, Wilson, Hall 1992:162).

It was very satisfying to hear that all three of the people I interviewed felt that skin color was not as much of an issue in the Black community as it had been when they were growing up. Ruth Gary offered her thoughts on the improvements.
Things are definitely improving. When I was growing up, dark skinned people were usually overlooked for high positions. Today we have Jocelyn Johnson, a dark skinned women and Nelson Malloy, a dark skinned man, both on the city council. 50 years ago there wouldn’t have been any Black folks on the city council and they certainly wouldn’t have been dark (Ruth).

One might think that passing in today’s society would no longer be an issue. However, a decline in anti-black feelings and more African Americans in powerful positions today than ever before, a different type of racial passing has drawn concern in the Black community. Now African American’s have more choices regarding what schools to attend, where to live, and whom to date, there is more opportunity to distance themselves physically, socially, and psychologically from the African American community. This creates a new type of passer that has come to be known as the “oero”. The term “oero” is used to describe someone who is Black on the outside but White on the inside. This modern day form of passing is also seen as a form of race betrayal to many African Americans (Kennedy 2001:16).

The issue of racial passing continues to be a controversial topic. Russell, Wilson and Hall (1992) argue that individuals whose physical features are at odds with their inner sense of self, experience the greatest difficulties in adjustment. Societal racism makes it difficult to gain a positive sense of racial pride for individuals with dark skin and African features who feel White and those with light skin and White features who consider themselves Black (1992:79).

The one drop rule also plays a role. Not every person with a degree of Black blood is going to feel 100 percent Black, nor should everyone who wants to identify as White be charged with the “crime” of passing (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992:79).
The famous words of Martin Luther King Jr. that we judge each other on the content on character rather the color of the skin, still does not hold completely true in the African American community. It is time that the African American community realizes skin color is only skin deep. Although drastic improvements have been made, there still remains more that could be done to move beyond passing judgment based on external characteristics. We must learn to focus on what’s inside individuals so that we can avoid the painful humiliation of self-inflicted stereotypes.
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