

The Color of Redemption

By

Lynn Cornell

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Dedication

I'd like to dedicate my first novel to my wife, Beverly. For years, you had urged me to write when I didn't know that I was a writer. But you kept after me to learn the literary craft and signed me up for my first writer's conference. It was then I realized I could be a writer. *The Color of Redemption* is the fruit of your wisdom. I thank God for your love and companionship.

P.S. I'll see you on the dock.

Chapter One

June 1960

An eerie foreboding had jolted me from my sleep this morning, vexing my spirit – the kind of vexing that made me want to cower under my covers and stay in bed. But, I had to get up. The call of Sunday morning chores wouldn't allow me to nurse my trepidation. Shaking myself, I grabbed my Bible and opened the door to face the day.

A pleasurable sigh escaped my lips as I stepped onto the porch. Like a tapestry stretched across the heavens, a golden-orange sun and puffy white clouds decorated a crystal blue sky, as only God could do. The morning was hot but tempered by a mild cool breeze. Knee-high grass and pink geraniums blanketed the fields in a gentle sway. I loved my farm – God's place of refuge for me. Here my heart is content. Here, I'm safe.

The sight of Maxine interrupted my gaze. I couldn't believe she had the nerve to come out of the house dressed like that. I marched over to our truck where everyone was waiting for me. "Maxine, have you lost your mind? You know that dress is too short and too tight to wear to church – let alone anywhere else. And who gave you that makeup?"

Maxine pressed her lips together. "A friend, Mama."

"You march your behind in that house and change out of

that dress and wipe that mess off your face!”

Maxine narrowed her brows, poked her lips out, and stomped into the house. As if someone had slapped me with a cold rag, reality had struck me with a sobering realization. Maxine was sixteen and budding into a woman—too fast if you ask me. My babies were growing up. Edward, fourteen, primped in the side mirror of the truck, thinking he was God’s gift to anything. Timothy, twelve, jostled Ruby. He was immature and at the same time tried to act like a tough black militant. Ruby was ten and milked being the youngest child. I wasn’t ready for them to grow up yet.

Gregory paced back and forth. He wore blue jean overalls and a dingy white T-shirt. His hair was matted in tiny naps, as if he’d never seen a comb. He kept darting his eyes at me. “You’s makin’ me late, Katie, sending that girl back in the house. You know she be slow.”

“Stop fussing, Gregory. That girl’s dress was too tight—let alone to be wearing to church. You would have gotten there, saw the way she was dressed, and thrown a fit.”

“Well, I can’t be late. I’m a deacon. I’m s’posed to be an example.”

Maxine stomped out the house with her lips poked out and her arms folded in protest of the brown flowered print dress she had changed into.

“See, there she is,” I said.

“I look like an old grandma in this dress,” Maxine said.

Gregory scowled at her. “Watch your tone, Maxine. You is the reason we is late.”

I took Gregory’s hand. “Calm down. We’re not going to be late, and we’ll get there with everyone dressed decent and in order.” I rose on my toes and kissed Gregory’s cheek. Watching

his frown turn into a smile made me give him another kiss.

“Now, let’s go to church, or we will be late. Y’all get in the truck before your daddy has a stroke.”

Timothy pushed Ruby and jumped in the back of the truck. Ruby shrugged. “Stop, Timothy, and leave me alone.”

Ruby and Edward got into the truck. Maxine followed them and plopped against the back of the cab, pouting. Gregory drove off.

Thank God, town was only five miles away. Gregory parked on the church lawn next to a row of cars. The church was a small white-frame building with four, black-framed windows that never cooled the church and five black-painted wood steps that led up to two black wood doors. The hand-painted sign read *True Rock Missionary Baptist Church*.

Edward, Timothy, and Ruby jumped from the truck and disappeared. Maxine stepped from the back of the truck, primed in the side mirror, and walked toward the church. Henry Lee Scott fixed his gaze on her. He was handsome and well groomed. He’d just turned eighteen and wanted to study for the ministry. His suits were always pressed and cleaned as if specially tailored. He dashed over to Maxine not realizing I was standing behind him.

“Morning, Henry Lee,” Maxine flirted.

“Maxine, you sure is a pretty sight. God has smiled on me today.”

“Henry Lee Scott, Maxine is too young for courtin’,” I said.

Henry jumped. “Yes ma’am, Mrs. Smith.”

I turned to tell Gregory whom Maxine was making all the fuss over, but he had dashed off to catch Reverend Sims before he went inside the church. He was flamboyant, wearing a bright green suit. His hair was pressed, and for a reverend, he wore

too much gold. But he was a good man. I tried to intercept Gregory from badgering the reverend, but I was too late.

"Pastor, you have the largest church in the county. It's the only buildin' on this side of town that could handle the crowds. We need a rally to stir the people," Gregory said.

The reverend grimaced. "I'm sorry, Brother Smith. I can't help you. You know the people don't want that kind of attention. They don't want no trouble. Things are good for us around here. Why do you want to mess that up?" The shrill of screeching tires sliced through the air. Reverend Sims snapped his head toward the street. "Oh, my sweet Lord."

A red 1960 Plymouth Fury with white stripes on the side and two Confederate flags flapping on the rear tail fins parked in front of the church. The horn blared, and voices jeered. The front of the Fury, sleek like a feline's face, stared at me as if stalking its prey.

Reverend Sims wiped the sweat from his forehead and pressed his lips. Gregory drew his brows in and looked at the reverend with contempt. Shaking his head, he folded his arms and looked toward the car. There was no fear in his eyes. That bothered me.

Four men sat in the car, shouting vile racial slurs. One of the men, wearing a brown fedora, sat in the passenger's seat. There was something different about his demeanor this week. He didn't say a word, but he peered at us with an evil glare. Everyone froze where they stood, eyes glued on the car. It amazed me that this man, just by his mere presence, struck unspeakable terror in our hearts. I looked at Gregory. He nodded, and I nodded back. That's all the assurance I needed at the moment.

The man wearing the fedora locked his eyes on my

husband. He spat a long stream and slapped the car door twice. The engine revved, and the car sped away.

Gregory glared at the reverend. "Pastor," he said, whipping his finger toward the street. "Why are you so 'fraid that you can allow that to happen every week?"

"Let it go, Gregory. They didn't do nothing, unlike the old days."

"Why do you cower before them like that? You always stood up for yourself. Ever since that night they tied a rope around your neck and dragged you from your house"

The reverend furrowed his brows. "That's not fair, and you know it."

"You've been 'fraid to speak out against things you knows is wrong."

Reverend Sims looked away. "I'm looking out for my family, the church, and our community." He faced Gregory. "Something you should be doing. I want to be around for my wife, children, and grandchildren."

I wished Gregory feared white people as much as the reverend did. Maybe that would keep him off of the streets of Birmingham protesting. I wished Gregory had the same burning desire to be around for his family as he did for fighting for civil rights. But that wasn't his calling. Stepping between them, I touched Gregory's arm. "It's time for Reverend to preach."

"Thank you, Sister Smith. Maybe you can talk some sense into him because I sure can't." Reverend Sims pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped the back of his neck, and dabbed his forehead. "I'll see y'all inside," he said, walking away, mumbling.

Dreariness draped over the service. From time to time, people, like me, glanced toward the window, wondering if

those men had come back. I was glad when Reverend Sims, dressed in a black robe with gold stripes down the middle, leaned against the podium, said, "Don't worry 'bout those men. The Lawd gon take care of us. Go in the joy of the Lawd."

'Thank you, Jesus. Praise the Lord' and 'hallelujahs,' billowed from all over the sanctuary. Relieved to hear those words, I leaped to my feet, but people already crowded the aisle all the way to the door. Folding my arms, I sighed and looked around the sanctuary.

"Hey, Sister Katie," someone yelled.

"Hey, Sister Smith," another woman said.

Church hadn't changed since I could remember. The same light brown paneling covered the walls; the same dark brown light fixtures hung from the plastered ceiling, and people sat on the same scratched-up brown pews. Reverend Sims preached behind the same old wooden podium, and the people – dressed in suits, dresses, and pressed hair – gossiped about nothing.

Gregory pinned the reverend by the podium. They were the same age, forty-five, but had two different perspectives on life. Gregory believed Negroes should stand up to the white man and fight for their rights. The reverend felt Negroes should leave things alone. A lot of people felt as the reverend did. Peering down the aisle, I plowed my way outside, past the hisses and sighs, and stood on the top step, waiting for Gregory.

The reverend came out the back with Gregory hounding him. I walked across the yard and stopped just a few feet from them. Preoccupied with getting his point across, Gregory didn't notice me. I grabbed his arm. "Excuse me, Reverend, you have a good day. We're going home," I said and marched Gregory toward the truck. "Maxine, let's go." Looking around the yard, I yelled, "Eddie, Tim, Ruby, to the truck, now."

The children promptly appeared. Ruby grabbed her father's hand, smiling her "please, Daddy" smile. "Daddy, can we get some ice cream on the way home?"

Gregory gave me his "please, honey" look and scooped Ruby up in his arms. Ruby giggled and hugged her daddy's neck.

"Gregory, I just want to go home."

"Come on, baby, it won't take but a few minutes. It'll be a nice treat for everyone."

I pressed my lips together, but a grin squeezed through.

Gregory laughed. "You can't hide that pretty smile. Ice cream it is, everyone."

This didn't feel right. I knew in my gut we should go straight home. It was a short ride through colored-town's row of shabby, rundown framed ranches, old two-story homes, and single mobile trailers. People waved and smiled either from their porches, or as they walked along the dirt road. I waved back. I knew most of the people or was kin to them in some way — first, second, or third cousins.

Gregory drove across the railroad tracks. The landscape instantly changed. Eeriness wrapped around me and pressed hard. This side of town always made me uncomfortable. The streets were paved, the houses neatly painted, and the lawns were well-groomed. Elderly men sat on their porches and scowled. Elderly women stared at us with furrowed brows. Others walked on the sidewalks, ignoring our presence.

"Oh, Henry, you so fine, I's just loves you so," Timothy said.

I glanced back and chuckled.

Maxine hissed a deep sigh. "Ooh, you're so immature, Timothy. I can't stand you."

"Your kids are acting up back there," I said.

Gregory smiled. "What else is new?"

I looked fixedly at Gregory. "You're so preoccupied with protesting and marching you can't see what's going on."

Gregory stared ahead. "Your daughter is in love."

The truck swerved, slamming me against the door. Gregory quickly recovered and grimaced. Ruby giggled, and we both laughed at the shock on his face.

My smile disappeared as we approached the ice cream shack. It was a small square hut with cinder-block walls painted red, white, and blue. It had one walk-up window. A few wood tables and chairs set on the patio. A large Confederate flag draped across the front.

Four men sat at one of the tables, slurping on ice cream cones. I recognized the man wearing the brown fedora, and the red Plymouth Fury parked in front. My stomach sank. He was tall, thin, and wore blue jean overalls with no shirt. I've never seen a grown man's face so smooth and hairless. He drew his brows in and fixed his eyes on Gregory.

Reaching across Ruby, I grabbed Gregory's arm. "We should go home."

But, it was too late. Gregory had already stopped. The men looked at us, still slurping their cones. Their mischievous grins disappeared.

"Hey, ain't that that agitator?" one man shouted.

"What's he doing here?" another one said.

A tall, husky man stood and tossed his ice cream to the ground. He walked toward us, proudly displaying his sculpted physique through a tight-fitting T-shirt. He pointed his finger at Gregory. "What are you doing here, boy?"

Gregory reached for the door handle, but I squeezed his

arm. "Gregory, the children are in the back. Let's go home." I squeezed tighter, praying he wouldn't be stubborn. "Please."

Gregory glanced at the man and looked at me. There was no fear or intimidation in his eyes. That scared me. "We have a right to be here, just as much as them. We have a right to enjoy an ice cream cone with our family. Blount City gots to change it racist ways."

"Please, Gregory. Let's just go home. Please."

Gregory clenched his jaw and stared intensely. It took every ounce of his strength to back down from the men who denied him his rights. Gregory turned to me, teeth clenched. He released the door handle and grabbed the steering wheel. "All right."

Gregory shifted the gear stick and circled onto Route 7. I let his arm go and closed my eyes. It took a moment for my nerves to calm. Glancing back at the children, I gasped. The red Fury bore down on us. I didn't know if Gregory had seen the car, but I was too afraid to ask. Closing my eyes, I prayed he'd go straight home.

The drive to the farm took only a few minutes, but it felt like forever. The Fury's horn blared, taunting us. Maxine closed her eyes and covered her ears. The car rode our tail, at times just inches from the bumper.

Gregory glanced at the side mirror. If he was scared, he didn't show it. He pulled onto the rutted driveway and stopped. The ruts led up a steep hill and disappeared into safety. The red Fury parked in front of the driveway. Thank God, the entrance was cluttered with wild brush, overgrown weeds, and brushwood. I hoped it was enough to camouflage our farm's entrance. I didn't want those men knowing where we lived.

The husky man jumped out of the car and walked toward

the truck.

Timothy jumped to his feet with his fists up. "Come on. Y'all honkies do something."

The husky man pointed at Timothy. "You got a big mouth, boy."

Timothy beckoned with his fist. "Come on, do something."

"Gregory!" I screamed. But, he already jumped out of the truck. I turned around. "Help us, Lord," I kept mumbling.

Gregory glanced up. "Sit down and hush up." Timothy plopped down with his lips poked out. "You got no business with us," Gregory said to the husky man. Timothy leaped to his feet with his fists raised. Maxine yanked on his pants. "Timothy, I said sit down and be quiet."

I glanced at the man wearing the fedora. He had a stare in his eyes that paralyzed me with terror, more than the vile curses and threats they spewed at us. I prayed that Gregory wouldn't say or do anything that would incite them.

He rapped the car door, keeping his eyes locked on Gregory, "Earl Ray, another time."

Earl Ray grinned. "Yeah, nigger, another time." He pointed his finger directly at Gregory and glanced toward Timothy. "You better teach your boy to mind his tongue, or well, you know what'll happen to him." He snickered as he walked toward the car. "You'll come out of your house one morning and find him swinging from a tree."

That wasn't an empty threat. The man wearing the fedora kept Gregory in his sights as the car sped away. Gregory glared at Timothy, got into the truck, and drove up to the farm.

He parked in his usual spot, next to the car. I got out and stretched my arms, relieved to be home, glad to be in the safety of our land. A loud yelp pricked my ears. I winced and whirled

around. Gregory had Timothy's head pressed against the truck.

"The next time I tells you to do somethin', you better obey me. Dos you understand me?" Timothy nodded as best he could. "Your foolishness could have gotten us killed. Those men are nobody to play with. They will kill you and string you up like an animal and thinks nothin' of it. And no one, and I mean no one, will dos anythin' about it."

The red Fury crept over the hill and purred at the end of the drive.

"Gregory!" I shouted.

Pressing Timothy's head, he shouted. "Katie, this boy gots to learn to mind his place."

I pointed my finger. "Look!" The red Fury slowly lurched back and forth, revving its engine in a taunting tease. I wondered what he would do if the car advanced toward us. The engine roared, and the tires peeled dirt. "Oh, dear Lord Jesus, help us!" I screamed.

Chapter Two

The red Plymouth Fury let out a loud roar and plowed over the knee-high grass in a wide circle. Nasty vile slurs flung from the windows with each pass. Earl Ray hung out the side of the car, dangling a noose, hollering, "This is what we is going to do to you, coon."

"Gets in the house, now!" Gregory shouted. The girls bolted toward the house, but Edward and Timothy gawked with their mouths wide open. "Gets in the house, boys, now."

The car fishtailed, making a figure eight. Gregory clenched his fist and looked around the yard. *Don't do it, Gregory. Don't try to fight them. Just let them go.* I tried to will the words out of my mouth but couldn't utter a sound. Thank God, there wasn't a stick lying in sight. Gregory would have tried to drive those men off the land.

Earl Ray tossed the noose, hollered, and slid back into the car. The Fury sped off then screeched to a halt. The tires peeled, a cloud of dust puffed up. The car moved back until it stopped by the noose.

The man with the brown fedora stepped out of the car and pointed his finger. "We warned you 'bout your preachin'. Bad enough, you stirring up the niggers with your freedom crap. But when you step out of your place and preached to good God-fearin' white folks, you've gone too far. You should have kept your preachin' in Niggertown, boy."

The man turned and got back into the car. The Fury sped

away and disappeared over the hill, leaving a cloud of dust looming over the driveway.

Gregory picked up the noose and shook his head. I looked toward the driveway, hoping, this time, those evil men were truly gone. *Oh my God, they know where we live.* Folding my arms over my stomach, I couldn't control the quivering in my belly.

"Y'all come out here," Gregory yelled. The children trickled out and stood on the porch. Gregory held the noose toward Timothy. "This is why you keep your mouth shut around those men. We have enough trouble without them bein' provoked." Gregory threw the rope toward the side of the house and took me in his arms. "It's all right. They's gone."

I squeezed his waist. *I wish I could believe that.*

* * *

I lay as still as I could, hoping for the slightest breeze to brush across my body. Not so much as a breath of air blew. The heat sizzled on my skin, with no relief in sight. The house was quiet, but my thoughts screamed loud and boisterous. Anxiety buffeted my mind.

I snuggled next to Gregory, trying to take my mind off the horrors that had happened earlier. I couldn't sleep. I sat up and swung my legs onto the floor. I couldn't get the image of the man wearing the fedora out of my mind.

Standing, I threw on my dress and stepped into the darken living room. Panic seized me. It was silly to fret this way. I glanced toward the children's bedroom. Snores rattled from inside, assuring me that they were safe—I peeked in anyway.

Swiping the sweat from my forehead, I lifted the latch. *What if the man with the fedora is lurking outside? What if he comes*

in here for us? My hand trembled. I pulled the door open, expecting to see tree limbs flailing in the wind, debris hurled by a violent squall, or a raging tempest flinging things about, or worse, the man with the fedora ready to charge in and attack. But, pleasantly surprised and relieved, I stepped outside into a beautiful calm night.

“Ah!” I screamed. Two raccoons scurried off of the porch. “Darn critters. I told Timothy about leaving these tops off of these buckets. Slop is everywhere.”

The moon, full and bright, illuminated the countryside with a soft light. Frogs croaked. Insects whined. Owls hooted. I could stay out all night, enjoying the tranquil bliss, but the agitation in my soul kept me in a frenzy. Stepping back inside, I dropped to my knees and buried my head on the couch. I stayed that way for forty, forty-five minutes and stood with no relief. “Lord, what are you trying to tell me?”

I slipped into bed and nestled next to Gregory. He turned, and in his sleep, he held me in his arms. I stayed awake as long as I could. Finally, my eyes sagged as I tried to fight the sleep off. I didn’t want the man with the fedora invading my dreams. But, I couldn’t hold my eyelids open. As they closed, it felt as if moments had passed.

“Cock-a-doodle-doo” jolted me from my sleep precisely at 4:30 a.m. I tugged the sheet over my shoulders to catch a few more winks. Throwing the sheet aside, I jumped out of bed and slid into a black, flowered print dress and stared into the mirror. Running the brush through my hair a couple of times, I saw no improvement in the image staring back. My eyes are puffed, and my hair frizzled as if I had stuck my fingers in an outlet. Placing the brush on the dresser, I shook my head. “I have too many wrinkles for a woman of thirty-five.”

As I walked out of the house and toward the barn, my soul felt as empty as the basket I cradled in my arms. Where were my joy and peace? I wasn't used to feeling this way. Everything felt off-kilter. I wanted to hide somewhere. But this was the place of my refuge. Where would I flee?

I set the basket on the ground and gazed toward the rutted driveway. I'd always felt safe and secure on my land — until those vile men desecrated my sanctuary. They'd stolen my serenity and molested the land, despoiling it of all its tranquility. The image of the man in the brown fedora soiled the landscape.

Leaning against the fence, I closed my eyes. Not knowing how to articulate my prayers, I just quietly groaned. *Lord, I feel like my stomach is being wrenched in knots. Help me understand all of this.* I whispered, "Amen."

Gathering my thoughts, I darted over to the garden; grabbed a few tomatoes, onions, and peppers; placed them in the basket; and made my way to the chicken pen.

"Morning, Ben," I greeted, entering the coop. "You won't get the ax today because you're my friend."

Gathering a dozen eggs, I made my way back toward the house. The place where the grass was matted in a figure eight caught my eye. *They had never come on the land before.* When I opened the door, Gregory startled me. He was slouched in the chair, wearing his usual blue jean overalls, white T-shirt, white socks, and black shoes. He stared in deep thought and hadn't noticed I'd come in. "You scared me, man. I thought you were sleep."

He sat up. "Naw. I thought I'd get up and sit with you for a while." His eyes lingered on me. "You got out of bed early. I don't like it when you get out of bed early."

I snickered, knowing exactly what he meant. "What you staring at?"

"I be starin' at you; that's what," he said. He jumped to his feet and rocked me in his arms. "Don't cheat me out of my lovin', woman."

"You're a mess, a real mess." I giggled, pretending to protest, but I loved every bit of his sporting. "Stop, Gregory. You're not gonna get breakfast if you keep bothering me."

He kissed my forehead and sat in the chair. "I'm gonna get both."

We chatted while I prepared breakfast. I pulled the pan of biscuits from the oven. Gregory liked his food cooked fresh. The smell of fresh-baked bread filled the room and made his nostrils flare. I smoothed butter over the nooks and crannies. His eyes widened. The rice was ready, so I rushed to scramble the eggs, knowing he'd growl with impatience. I set a plate of fried tomatoes on the table. He chewed the crusted treat with delight. I loved it when he was pleased with my cooking.

"I'm drivin' to the city this mornin' to talk to some old friends. Out of the blue, they wrote to me and said they wanted to come to town."

"I hate it when you drive to Birmingham."

"Don't start your fussing." Gregory drifted off for a moment. "After all of these years of tryin' to get them to come, now all of a sudden, they want to have a rally."

"That's good, ain't it?"

"I've been thinkin' 'bout things."

I glanced over my shoulder. "What things?" The question dangled for a moment. Something bothered him. Gregory should have been more excited than this. I glanced over my shoulder again. "What you thinking about?"

Gregory stared at the floor. "I've been thinkin' 'bout quittin' the movement."

Surprised, I stopped stirring the bowl of eggs and whirled around. "Stop playing, Gregory. You know you're not quitting your work."

"I ain't playing, Katie. I've been thinkin' hard 'bout quittin' the movement."

"How long have you been thinking this?"

"For a few days now."

"Those men got you scared?"

Gregory scowled. "No. They got me thinkin' 'bout things, though."

I set the bowl on the counter and studied him. "How can those evil men get you thinking about anything? I wish God would strike them dead."

Gregory frowned and leaned forward.

"They're evil, Gregory."

"That's wrong for you to think that, Katie. Despite what they is, God still love 'em. Jesus loves 'em enough to die for 'em. That's how you gots to see 'em."

"Umm," I grunted. "What else is bothering you?"

He shrugged. "Things."

"What things, Gregory? You're not telling me anything."

"I wonder if God's will is being done in the movement."

"Umm-hmm." I poured the eggs into the skillet, surprised he would even joke about giving up his passion. "I find that hard to believe, Gregory. I really do."

"I jus' feel different. My heart isn't in the movement anymo'."

I finished cooking and joined him. After we had eaten, I made some instant coffee. We both drank ours black. We went

outside and sat on the porch.

Gregory sipped from his cup, looking over the land. He caressed my fingers and kissed the back of my hand. "We've had a good life together, Katie. I gots no regrets."

"Lord willing, we'll have many more years together."

"Amen to that," he said. His eyes drifted across the field as somberness draped over his face. "I've put money away for the kid's schoolin'."

"That's nice."

"I want 'dem to have a better life than we have."

Stunned, I turned toward him. "Gregory, we have a good life here on this land. I wouldn't trade this life for nothing else in the world. What's bothering you?"

"Oh, nothin', everythin'." He shrugged. "I jus' want to do God's will, and I don't know if I am, workin' in the movement. I wonder if I've wasted all of these years for nothin'."

"I thought you were doing God's work. You've wholly devoted your life to the movement. You've neglected me, the children, the farm, even your duties at the church. I'm not fussing, but I thought you were doing what God wanted you to do."

"I thought I was, too."

"Then, what's changed?" Gregory just stared at me. "Is it because you haven't gotten the support from the people? I heard Reverend Sims fussing at you for trying to hold a rally at the church. I told you he would never let you have a meeting like that there. He's too scared of those white folks."

"That's part of it."

"Was it those men following us home yesterday? Did they scare you?"

He grimaced. "You know better than that."

"Don't give me that look. Something is bothering you. What is it?"

"I just think the Lord is takin' me in a different direction in life." The expression on my face must have jarred Gregory because he peered directly into my eyes. "The movement ain't doin' this... reachin' people for the Lord. I jus' feel the Lord want to reach people's heart."

I stared at him and looked off toward the hills. "I never liked you working in Birmingham no way. Too many black men are being beaten, tortured, and killed by the police and the Klan."

Gregory looked at me, stunned. "I thought you were okay with me workin' in the movement. Why didn't you say nothin'?"

"You never asked. One day, you just went off to Montgomery, preaching and marching in that bus boycott. You were gone for a whole month. And when you came back home, you only stayed for a week, and then off you went with the car, toting people around Montgomery. I didn't see you again until that boycott was over. Thank the Lord you wrote. I knew you were doing something important. I didn't know what until afterward. Besides, I didn't say I didn't like you working in the movement. I said I don't like you working in Birmingham."

"You never said nothin' to me about workin' in the boycott."

"There was nothing to say. Your mind was made up. All I could do was pray that the Lord protect you and bring you home safe."

"I jus' wish I'd know how you felt."

"Wouldn't have done any good. Once you got a taste of marching in the streets of Montgomery and working with the

folks down there, you were fired up. Then you came back here on fire, wanting to march in Birmingham. That's what scared me."

"Negroes are bein' killed everywhere, Katie, not jus' in Birmingham."

I smacked my lips and looked off. "I know that. I don't want you to be one of them, killed by the Klan or the police in 'Bombing-ham'. I just prefer that you stayed here on the farm with me."

Gregory gazed at the land with an empty stare. "The Lord has to change men's hearts. The movement ain't doing that."

"Isn't the movement changing Negroes' lives? I don't know what you mean, Gregory."

"Only after God has changed the heart can you change society. You can't change men's heart with protests and marches. You'll change laws, but not men's heart. They still be hateful. If God change men's heart, that'll solve the race problem, cuz He takes the hate out their hearts and puts His love in place of hate. They's be changed from the inside."

I didn't know what to make of Gregory's outlook. He had been unmovable about his passion for civil rights. "What brought this on? This is not like you."

Gregory glanced at his watch. "Oh, Lord, look at de time," he said, jumping to his feet. "I gotta be in the city at nine, and it be already eight-thirty."

He intended to give me a quick peck, but when our lips touched, our kiss lingered.

I wanted to hold onto Gregory. I didn't want him to leave, now that he had made his decision to leave the movement. I didn't want to risk something happening to him, not when I was this close to having him home to myself. I wanted to

tell him how I felt, how troubled my night had been. I was desperate to try anything to keep him here. As he sped away, I only managed to say, "Be careful out there."

I never cared for the struggle the way Gregory did. As a child, I rarely left the Negro side of town. Most of what I needed were there; school, church, and even a small candy store run out of a lady's house. Sometimes, not often, my mother would take me to town with her, but I'd never noticed any prejudices back then. My mother, like all the Negroes, knew her place and never strayed from it. I thought it was natural for society to exist this way.

It wasn't until Gregory had gotten involved in the Birmingham movement that I had come face-to-face with bigotry. Like everyone else, we'd heard stories, had a relative, or known someone who had been beaten, jailed, or even lynched. My own brothers ran into trouble from time to time, but my parents had taught them how to behave – always with their heads down and speaking with a very respectful tone. Gregory never held his head down.

My greatest fear was that one day I'd be sitting on this porch, maybe on a day much like today, enjoying the scenic view, when over the hill it would come, a black and white patrol car, or my sister bringing the dreaded news that Gregory had been murdered.

Chapter Three

A black sedan steered toward the house with a quiet purr. Leaping to my feet, I squeezed the banister with both hands. *Is this the day?* It had only been a couple of hours since Gregory had left, but I couldn't help but wonder: was this the dreaded messenger of death?

How the news could come so fast? *God, please, don't let them tell me that Gregory is dead.* Questions buffeted my mind, forcing me to face a horrible reality. How had he been murdered? Who murdered him? How would I tell the children their father was gone?

Louise smiled and waved her hand as she brought the car to a stop. I lowered my head and blew out a long sigh. *Thank God, this isn't the day.* I threw Louise a quick wave. *Thank God, it's my big sister instead of the police blaring the news of Gregory's demise.*

I worried about Louise's health. She was tall, three hundred pounds, with extra-large breasts. High blood pressure ran on our mother's side of the family. She wasn't taking care of herself, and I feared she'd succumb to a heart attack one day. Louise maneuvered out of the car and stepped on the porch, pausing to catch her breath.

"Whose car is this?"

"It's mine. Curly... bought it for me... for my birthday."

Louise pushed out the words between panting.

"Happy birthday, Louise. How does it feel to be forty-five?"

"The same as forty-four." She tossed a big smirk. "Anyway,

I'm only here for a minute. I'm off to see Daddy."

"Ooh, that's a long drive."

"I don't mind. Birmingham is only an hour away." Louise stared at me for a moment. "Anyway, the reason I stopped by...."

"What is it, Louise?"

Her mouth hung open. "I don't know if this means anything, but...."

"Will you just say it? Dag, girl."

"I had a dream last night. It was so real it woke me up in the middle of the night. I couldn't go back to sleep. I saw you and the kids dressed in black. You and the kids had just come from a funeral. You and the kids came to my house and sat in the living room, dressed in black."

I don't know why, but Louise's dream hit me like a ton of bricks. She always told me about some dream of hers, but this one, for some reason, jolted me. It took a moment to respond. Someone was missing from the dream. "It must have been something you ate."

Louise's eyes drooped. "You all right, baby? I didn't mean to upset you."

"I'm fine," I retorted.

"I gotta go. Tell the kids I'll holler at them another time." She made her way to the edge of the porch but turned toward me. "Why don't you come with me? It won't hurt you to get off this land. It'll do you good."

"Girl, I have too much work to do. Besides, I have to cook Gregory's dinner."

"Don't try to hide behind Gregory. You just don't want to go anywhere. There's more to the world than this farm, Katie."

"I'm very content here."

“That’s your problem. You’re too comfortable living out here, away from everything. All you’re doing is hiding from people.”

“Bye, Louise. Thank you.”

“For what?”

“You’re the only one who drives out here to see about me. You’ve always looked out for me, and you’ve always let me know that you loved me. I really appreciate it.”

“Thank you, Katie. I do love you, and if you got out more, you would see that other people love you, too. I’m going to leave before I start crying.” She blew a kiss and got into the car. “By the way, if you had a phone, I wouldn’t have to drive all the way out here.” Louise sped off, beeping the horn as she passed the porch.

I plopped into the chair, perplexed. *It’s just a dream.* But, if it were just a dream, why was my stomach in knots and my heart racing? Looking toward the driveway, where it ducked down to turn onto Route 7, I yearned to see Gregory drive over the hill. I wouldn’t rest until I saw his truck. *It was just a dream.*

* * *

A blue truck drove over the hill, bouncing toward the house at a slow speed. I stood to see who was coming. Since Louise had left just a couple of hours ago, she couldn’t have come back so soon with bad news. I didn’t see a siren on top of the roof – that and the fact it was a truck put me at ease. I was disappointed it wasn’t Gregory.

A petite white lady stepped out of the driver’s side and brushed her dress. I folded my arms and squinted when Timothy jumped out of the truck with a defiant stare. He

opened his mouth to say something, but I held up my hand.

The lady was a little taller than I but much younger—in her mid-twenties, I guessed. Her hair was pinned back in a bun. She moved about, proper and prim. She grimaced as she grabbed Timothy's arm and marched him over to the porch. She wasn't intimidated by his size or his menacing African garb, which he would have to explain to me and his daddy later.

"Hello, Mrs. Smith. I'm Amy Broubaker, Tim's teacher. I know this isn't the usual protocol, and I guess I could have taken him to the principal's office, but I don't want him to get kicked out of summer school. But he won't listen to me, and I'm at my wit's end. He's a good student; he could make straight A's... but... I just don't know what to do with him."

"Ma'am, what has he done?"

She tossed me a look as if to say the list was too long. "Well, he disrupts the class with his constant preaching. He challenges everything. He criticizes everything. He preaches that Negroes are the original man, and all white people are evil devils, and that Negroes shouldn't listen to the white man. Did you know he believes that the white man was created in a test tube and that...?"

"The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches..."

"Timothy, hush up," I said, shooting him a look.

Timothy pursed his lips and stared off. Mrs. Broubaker sighed. "I don't have to warn you about that kind of talk. Tim is a smart boy."

"Boy. See, this is what I'm talking about. White people see us as boys and not men."

I shot Timothy another look. "Hush up, Timothy. You're in enough trouble." He quieted down again. "I assure you; Timothy was taught better than that. I'll speak to his daddy as

soon as he comes home.”

She glanced at Timothy and looked at me. “I just don’t know what to do when he gets like this. I would hate for him to be kicked out of school over this. But, if he persists, the principle will expel him. What concerns me the most is... well, I don’t know where to begin. I don’t know where he gets those views. I have never heard such anti-Christian talk before.”

“Timothy was raised in a Christian home. I can assure you of that.”

“That kind of talk, overthrowing the white man, killing the white man, the white race is evil isn’t safe for him to speak. You know what I mean.”

I stole a glance at Timothy and squinted. He maintained his defiance. “I don’t know where he gets that stuff from, but his daddy will give him a good talking to. I assure you.”

She glanced around the farm. A frown came on her face. I knew what she thought, what everyone thought about the farm. How could we live in such squalor? How could we live in an old and dilapidated shack? How could we stand the unsightly junk sprawled around the yard? How could we bear the stench of slop and animals? But this was my oasis away from the evil world. God had placed me here, and I wouldn’t live anywhere else. I loved my house — a shack by most people’s standards. But to me, it was my humble palace — a gift from God.

She must have realized she was frowning because she quickly plastered a smile on her face. She locked eyes on my Bible. “You’re a Christian?”

“Yes, I love the Lord.”

“Wonderful,” she said. “I do, too. What church do you attend?”

I thought the question was odd, since there was only one

church Negroes attended. "True Rock Missionary Baptist Church."

"I attend First Baptist in town," she said with a look of hesitancy. "It would be nice if you could come and visit us. It's all so silly – this prejudice against one another." She frowned and let out another sigh. "After summer school ends, I'm leaving Blount City. I'm thinking of heading out west to teach."

"May I ask why?"

"They stick me over here and tell me to teach, but they don't give me the proper facilities or resources to do my job. Don't get me wrong, I love teaching on this side of town, but I hate the politics. Maybe one day they'll integrate the schools like they did in Little Rock. I hate the way things are here. And I hate that Christians can't even fellowship the way God intended." She glanced around the farm again and looked at me. "I don't like it here. In Alabama. In Blount City. I don't like the South. You know how things are here. Both of us are Christians, and I can't even invite you to my church to fellowship. I can't have prayer, Bible study, or communion with you – with any Negro. Whites are not supposed to mix with coloreds. I'm just so tired of it."

It was strange listening to a white woman talk that way. I hadn't met any white people who felt as she did. Everyone accepted segregation as a part of our lives. Everyone tolerated it, except Gregory. I didn't know white people like her existed. "Is there anywhere where segregation isn't a part of our lives?"

"I hear up north and out west. That's where I'm thinking of heading. Why does it have to be this way, white people over there, Negroes over here? We're all going to live in one heaven. There won't be a black side of heaven and white side of heaven."

Her statement stunned me. "You really think heaven will be

integrated?"

"Oh, heaven yes! There won't be a white side of heaven and a black side of heaven. We'll live as one body in the Lord – the way we should be living here."

I glanced at Timothy. He squirmed, pining for the chance to respond, but I shook my head.

Mrs. Broubaker folded her arms, staring off toward the hills. "Maybe I'll join a group called the freedom riders. Have you heard of them?"

I nodded. "I think it dangerous what freedom riders are doing?"

"Something has to be done to end segregation. Have you heard of the sit-ins?"

I nodded. A shudder rocked through me. I'd begged Gregory not to get involved with the freedom riders or sit-ins, especially around here and in Birmingham.

"Well, a group of people want to organize freedom rides through the South on buses and stage sit-ins at lunch counters to protest segregation. People from all different races will join the riders."

For a moment, I thought she was trying to recruit me for her cause. She peered at me as if waiting for an answer. "Sounds dangerous. You be careful."

"Probably is. But, something has to be done about these unjust laws. It's wrong. It's not Christian. With the cry of freedom comes danger, I suppose. But, if we can change things around here, it'll be worth facing the danger."

"I suppose."

Her gaze lingered on me for a moment. I hoped she didn't expect me to join those riders. I don't march with Gregory. I prefer to leave things alone and to be left alone. Things are fine

with me – here in my paradise.

“Well, I’d better be heading back. Thanks for talking to me, Mrs. Smith. It was a real delight. I hope maybe one day to talk with you again. I’d love to share my heart with a fellow Christian – talk about things, life, the Lord, our faith. Believe it or not, I don’t have a lot of friends. People shy away from me for believing that God made all men equal. They don’t want to hear that kind of talk across the tracks. I love talking about the Lord, and if you love the Lord, then you’re my sister. I don’t care if you’re white or black.”

“I’d like that. I really would. Come by anytime. I’m usually here, except on Sundays.”

She smiled. “I just might do that. I love talking about the Lord, and I love talking to God’s people. I can tell you’re a child of God.” She looked as if she wanted to give me a hug, but she restrained herself. “Tim might as well stay home, since it is the end of the day. Tim, you have to do better.”

“I’ll speak to his daddy when he gets home.”

She nodded, jumped into her truck, and drove off. I glared at Timothy. He huffed as if to force his case. “I don’t want to hear it. I’ll let your daddy deal with you. Go do your chores.”

Meeting Miss Broubaker really blessed my soul. Her sincerity encouraged me in just the few minutes we’d talked. I didn’t know there were white people who felt as she did. I wanted to know her, if that was possible.

What she said had surprised me. I had never considered if heaven were segregated. Things, as long I could remember, were separate. Negroes had always lived separately from whites. My daddy had told me it had been that way since slavery. Deep down, I guess, I assumed people would be segregated in heaven. In school, white teachers taught that

Negroes were inferior to whites, and that it wasn't natural for the races to mix together. Preachers preached that it wasn't God's will for Negroes and whites to live together. To do so would violate his will and the natural order. To hear this white woman proclaim that heaven will be integrated blew my mind.

I grabbed my Bible off the chair and sat to read. I was desperate to know what God's Word said about this place where skin color wouldn't matter. I pored through the pages, searching passages on heaven.

* * *

Two snorts rattled from my mouth, jolting me from my sleep. Gregory kissed my forehead and gave me a squeeze. I smiled, still reeling from the special time we'd shared. With the ruckus we'd kicked up, God had to have put the children into a deep sleep. The night was young – around midnight, I figured. I could go for another special time.

Thoughts of being with Gregory charged my anticipation, now that he was going to be home. Our days, I selfishly planned, would be filled with talks, walks, and special times. In between all that, he'd catch up on chores. I really looked forward to our new life together.

Peace and calm held the farm in perfect tranquility. Not so much as a whisper of a breeze. Beads of sweat dripped from my body, though I lay perfectly still. The moon colored the night with a bluish tint. Insects buzzed and whined. Frogs croaked. Owls hooted. It couldn't have been a more perfect end to the night. I was where I wanted to be, snuggled tight in my husband's arms. It couldn't have been more peaceful. Struggling to keep my eyelids open, I was fast disappearing into

a blissful sleep.

An ominous roar crept through the window. My eyes snapped open.