

Prologue

“Push!!”

Dr. Herbert yelled with impatience thick in his voice.

Tess was so tired after the long ride to the nearby country hospital and the long, painful labor that she didn't think that she could push anymore.

“Push now, girl!”

The doctor raised his voice again in his impatience.

Tess pushed with all of her might and out came her squalling baby. The nurse gave the doctor a strange look and did not pick up the squirming infant.

“Doctor Herbert, maybe we should get one of the colored nurses to swaddle the child.”

The doctor took one look at the baby and realized the reason for the nurse's reaction.

“Don't be silly, Rebecca, pick that baby up and start the clean-up. Don't you know that's Paul Roberts' grandchild?”

Dr. Herbert shook his head because everyone knew that Paul Roberts was more White than Negro and wealthier than most folks around town. That was the only reason that his son and daughter-in-law were allowed in the White part of the hospital.

By now, Tess was concerned and wanted her husband very badly, but husbands weren't allowed in the birthing room.

“Is something wrong with my baby?”

Tess' voice trembled because she was anxious because of the nurse's attitude.

Dr. Herbert finished his work on Tess and sought to allay her fear.

“No, child, nothing is wrong with your baby except she shows her grandfather's White blood proudly. What will you name her?”

“Her name is Victoria Alicia Roberts.”

Tess had to raise her voice to be heard over Victoria's demanding cries.

Dr. Herbert laughed.

“With lungs like that, I would say her name is strong enough to suit her.”

Finally, the nurse gave Tess her baby who was now swaddled and quiet. Tess took one look at the tiny white face and smooth red hair and burst into tears.

“Why are you crying, girl?”

Both the doctor and nurse spoke at the same time.

Dr. Herbert confused but familiar with post birthing emotions tried again to calm the beautiful dark-skinned Black girl.

“She's eight pounds and nine ounces of healthy baby. What could possibly make you cry about delivering a healthy child? Did Clyde want a boy that bad? Well, you're both young and healthy, you'll have plenty more chances to have a boy.”

Tess worried her bottom lip and sobbed.

“No, we didn't care if it was a girl or boy.”

“Well, what is it then, girl?”

Dr. Herbert could feel his impatience rise and tried to tamp it down. Nerves, it's just nerves, he said to himself.

“She's doesn't look Black! She won't have a normal life living with us, and I hate that God is punishing me like this!”

“Why would you say such a thing? Tess Roberts, I'm ashamed of you! Your family is a strong root in this community, and a healthy baby girl is not a punishment,” replied Dr. Herbert

His impatience reached its end as his voice rose in anger.

By now, Tess was beyond reason and shouted back. Her own anger made her forget that she yelled at a White man.

“You’re ashamed of me? Well, I’m ashamed of myself because I just had a White baby, and I am as Black as your boots! I’m ashamed for her that she will never be able to live like regular Negro people because she won’t be accepted, and people will stare at me! She won’t be able to associate with White people either because her mama and daddy are Negros! I am being punished, and I hate her and myself!”

The doctor grabbed the screaming baby from Tess before she could hurt her. However, after she flung her final statement, Tess passed out on the bed. Dr. Herbert took a deep breath, called in Clyde, Tess’ husband, and told him of his beautiful, healthy baby girl. He said nothing of his conversation with Tess. Clyde looked stunned when he saw his tiny daughter and left without even holding her. Dr. Herbert shook his head and felt that it was all just the post birthing emotions. He figured that when Tess woke, she would have changed her mind about her child.

He took one last look at Victoria, and his chest filled with pride to have delivered such beauty. Victoria opened her eyes and stared directly at the doctor at the precise moment. The beautiful white rose skin and blue eyes matched perfectly with her auburn red hair. Again, Dr. Herbert felt a swell of pride. Then, he called over the nurse to take Victoria to the White nursery and a Negro orderly to take Tess to her room on the Negro side of the hospital.

1

I was born in the early 1940’s, and I looked more White than Black like my parents. Many in the small town of Carson and the outer country community whispered that I was not my father’s child. Sometimes, they would whisper that I wasn’t my mother’s child either because my mother was a very dark skinned Negro woman, but my father had a very fair complexion. It was also said that I looked just like my grandpa, Paul Roberts, whose father had been White.

After a while, my parents couldn’t stand the rude stares and comments from White and Black people, so I was sent to live with my maternal aunts, Charlotte and Mary, in Dallas before my first birthday. My aunts were fairer skinned than my parents and used to the attention from because they looked closer to White than Negro.

Aunt Charlotte had fallen in love and married a wealthy White man named Jake St. Francis from California who left her a very rich widow two years after they married. When she inherited all of her husband’s wealth, Aunt Charlotte bought a big house in a secluded North Dallas neighborhood and took Aunt Mary in to live with her so that she wouldn’t be alone. When I came along, it was a blessing to Aunt Charlotte because she and Jake had not had any children. As I grew up in her home, she would tell me that she never would betray Jake’s love, even to have children. Then she would tweak my nose and tell me that I was more than enough.

Aunt Mary was a little different. She could look at someone and tell the future. When she moved in with Aunt Charlotte, she began to have wealthy White people come to hear their destiny. The more Aunt Mary’s “sight” produced results, the more people sought her out so that Aunt Charlotte built her a private salon where her clients could come. My earliest memories were from my Aunt Mary telling me in her soft voice that I was special, and that I would one day be given a special choice. I’d giggle, and she’d smile and send me back to Aunt Charlotte.

I always felt so loved with my aunts. I didn’t mind being away from my mama and daddy. They continued to have more children without the income to care for them. So, as I grew to understand what this meant, I was only too happy to be where I was the center of attention.

From the time that I was given to them, my aunts invested time and money to see that I had a good elementary education and nurtured my musical talents to sing and play the piano. I learned

to speak proper English, even better than my aunts. I learned so fast that sometimes my teachers and tutors would get frustrated to find things to challenge me. I'd giggle until they rapped my knuckles with the ruler, and the rest of my giggles died a very quick death.

Sometimes, my aunts would stare at me and tell me that I was the most beautiful child that they had ever seen. Well, they were my aunts. On the other hand, I thought they were the beautiful ones with their smooth latte skin and deep dark eyes. I felt ugly next to them with my White skin and red hair. My aunts were tall and with curves in the right places. I knew that only from hearing one of the church deacons say this to Aunt Mary when he asked if he could come over and sit awhile with her. She said no.

However, with all the attention, I never thought myself better than anyone or spoiled because my aunts kept up our family's Christian heritage by being involved in the local Baptist church. And since my piano teacher was also the choirmaster, it seemed that I was at the church every day. The open love that I had with my aunts continued there, and to praise God and Jesus with my talents became second nature.

On my seventh birthday, the choirmaster pronounced to my aunts that he could not teach me anymore because I had learned so quickly that I had surpassed even his musical skills. My aunts were amazed and bought a piano and several music books for me to practice and play at home. At seven years old, I played and sang for the church choir, which amazed the pastor so much, that he spoke to my aunts about more formal training in New York. My aunts knew that I needed to train, but declined because I was so young.

One night, I heard Aunt Mary speak of it to Aunt Charlotte.

"Charlotte, she has an old soul. She understands like an adult, and she learns fast. This is how it should be with her."

"Yes, I know, Mary, but she is my baby and I cannot let her go."

Aunt Mary sighed heavily.

"One day, you will have no choice."

I didn't know what Aunt Mary meant because I never wanted to leave Aunt Charlotte and Aunt Mary, not even to get married. And since my parents didn't want me, I knew that I would be with them forever.

That summer, my aunts decided to visit their parents, the Daniels in June instead of July like we usually visited. My aunts had made the trip to my grandparents' farm once a year since I was four. I was so excited because I loved going to the country.

I loved my Big Mama Chandra and Grandpa Ed. They made me feel so good. Big Mama was so beautiful. She was tall with light peach colored skin and long beautiful dark hair and deep dark brown eyes. She always smelled like vanilla and mint when she hugged me, and she always told me that I was her "lil' mirror". This became our game, so I would smile and tell her that I looked like my Grandpa Paul. Big Mama Chandra would just shake her head, smile, and send me to Ms. Sadie for teacakes. Ms. Sadie was the housekeeper, and she made the best teacakes.

Grandpa Ed was tall and dark. His skin looked like warm coffee, and he had the straightest and whitest teeth I had ever seen. And when he smiled, he really smiled. I always liked for him to smile at me, and since he was so quiet and serious all the time, a smile from Grandpa Ed was something else.

I loved to visit my mama's family because they accepted me when my mama didn't want me. I loved them and they loved me.

My mama and daddy started to visit Big Mama and Grandpa Ed the summer I turned six, and I got the feeling then that something was wrong and that they hated me. Sometimes, my Daddy

would look at me real hard and squint his eyes like he was looking for something. Then, he would go argue with Mama right in front of Big Mama Chandra but never in front of Grandpa Ed.

When I heard Daddy's raised voice during their second visit, I ran to the kitchen, grabbed a bunch of Big Mama Chandra's biscuits, and took my little brothers and sister into the fields to play so that we wouldn't have to hear the hateful words that Daddy said to Mama. I always felt like I was the reason that they fought so much, but whenever I would ask Big Mama Chandra about it, she would just grab me up in a big hug and tickle me. I knew that she did this to keep from answering me, so I still wondered if it was all about me.

That summer, Grandpa Ed took me to the fields with him in the mornings of my first week so that I could learn how the farm was run. We went to the cotton fields first, and I met all of the workers, drifters, and their children.

One of the children was a little older than the rest, and I heard Grandpa Ed call him David. He looked to be taking care of all the children in a cleared part of the field. He was tall for his age, and he had a nice face but he was very skinny. He smiled at me and asked if I wanted to play with him and the other children. Grandpa Ed told him that I was learning the farm, but if I wanted, I could come play later. I grew happy because I would be able to play with other children instead of my siblings. It's not like I didn't like playing with my siblings, it's just that if my siblings were around so were my parents. Anyway, somehow, I knew it was going to be nice playing with David and the other children.

My grandfather took me to the other crops that were the farm's livelihood: the corn, cotton, and the wheat. I looked across all of the land and I felt so connected. My little heart swelled with pride to see everything that my family worked for and owned.

Grandpa Ed told me that he rotated the crops every year so that the soil would never be ruined. He also shared with me that it was part of his Native American heritage to take care of the land and repair the harm done so that the land would always give plenty. His dark eyes shifted to look toward the neighbors land and he pointed.

"The Adams want part of our land, but they don't take care of what they got, so I'll never sell to them or anyone who doesn't know the land like we do, Victoria," said Grandpa.

I squinted my eyes and looked toward the Adams'. They were the White family down the road that owned several acres of land next to my grandparents. Mr. Bob and Ms. Sophie weren't nice people, and everyone knew they were greedy spiteful people who hated to see my Black grandparents have more than they did. I just stayed quiet and slipped my hand into Grandpa Ed's while we stared across the land. Somehow, even, at seven, I knew how Grandpa Ed felt. I reached down and grabbed a handful of the rich soil and put it to my nose. It was a smell that made me feel good.

When Grandpa Ed brought me back to the farm on the field wagon, Big Mama Chandra came running down the steps.

"Ed, I can't believe that you kept this young'un out in the wagon with you all day! Poor little mite! That pretty skin is all burnt up! Now, you come with me and Big Mama will fix you right up. Ed, you go on round back and wash up for your piece of vinegar roll."

Grandpa Ed just shook his head, clicked his tongue, and drove the wagon to the back. Big Mama Chandra made the best vinegar rolls, and if Grandpa Ed wanted a piece, he knew he had to move faster than my Aunt Charlotte and Aunt Mary. They loved Big Mama's vinegar rolls.

As soon as Big Mama Chandra was done rubbing me with her cream, I wiggled out of her grasp and tried to run off to find David and the other children.

"Where you off to, my lil' mirror?"

“Grandpa told me that I could play with the worker and drifter children,” I replied.

I stuck a toe out and tried to inch closer to the door. Big Mama’s dark eyes twinkled and she nodded with a smile.

“Well, your new little friends might not want to play with you just now after I’ve rubbed you with my special sunburn cream, but go right ahead. Maybe, you can keep yourself occupied so I can talk with your grandpa and aunts.”

With that said, I took off like lightning to find David. I found them all at the end of the cotton row next to the house playing Red Rover. I ran over to join them. David and several of the children saw me and gave a little wave. As I stood there, one by one, the children started to hold their noses and look around at each other. Since David was farther off, he wasn’t holding his nose.

“What’s that stink?” asked the little boy next to me.

“I don’t know, but it’s nasty!” cried the little girl on my other side.

“It smells like fish and lemons!” cried the little boy.

“My grandma just rubbed cream on me because she said that my skin was burnt. I think that’s the smell, but all I smell is lemon.”

“Lemme see,” said David.

He walked toward me, leaned down, and sniffed.

“UGH! Dat’s got to be her sun cream!”

“I’m sorry! I can go back to the house if the smell is too bad,” I cried.

Tears started to fill my eyes because I was really ashamed by then.

“Hey, it’s okay. Yo’ Big Mama done rubbed stuff on us too that stunk to the high heav’ns. C’mon!”

David grabbed my hand, and all of us ran to the freshly plowed dirt on the other side of the cotton row.

“Here roll around, and the stink will be gone,” advised David.

I threw my body into the dirt and rolled around without any hesitation. As I rolled the other children grabbed handfuls of the soil and started to rub me with it. Soon, we were all laughing and covered in dirt. I didn’t care if I got in trouble because my new friends accepted me.

That afternoon, we played and played until the other children’s mothers started to call them home to supper. David never got called so he stayed with me.

“Aren’t you going too, David? Where’s your Mama?”

He looked really sad, and I wanted to take back the words.

“She died while she was birthin’ me, so it’s just me, my Uncle P, and Aunt Addy. My daddy left me with them because he wanted to go see the world without a young’un taggin’ along. My uncle and aunt took me in and gave me a home because Aunt Addy couldn’t have no babies.”

“I’m sorry, David,” I said quietly.

I felt the tears gather in my eyes for David. I touched his arm and wanted him to know that he wasn’t alone in his pain.

“My mama and daddy don’t want me either. Are your aunt and uncle good to you? Do they treat you right? My mama and daddy are mean to me. I don’t know why they don’t like me. I wish I did then I would stop doing what makes them mad at me, so they would love me like Aunt Charlotte does.”

David patted my back and nodded.

“Yes, my aunt and uncle take good care of me. Aunt Addy is a school teacher, so she teaches all of the worker and drifter children wherever Uncle P takes us to help with the crops.”

He laughed.

“Uncle P, says that he’s the only one that she can’t teach ‘cause he set in his ways.”

David saw my tears wouldn’t stop, so he touched me on the arm and said, “You’re it!” He ran off for me to chase him, and I immediately forgot about my tears to begin the game of “tag”.

It was darker and the shadows were longer, so it was kind of hard for me to see David. I ran faster and saw him run toward my grandparents’ house. When I caught up with him standing beneath the side living room window, he caught me and put his hand over my mouth before I could yell, “you’re it!” He put his finger over his lips and nodded toward the open window. I nodded back, and he took his hand from my mouth.

“What do you mean, they want her for the rest of the summer, Pa?” asked Aunt Charlotte.

“They have not even sent her a letter or come by to see her and she has been here almost two weeks! You know what people have been saying to Clyde about her color and looks! Y’all know how he feels about her!”

“Hush, now, Charlotte!” Grandpa Ed said firmly.

There was immediate silence.

“Clyde and Tess have told us that they will come to pick her up on Saturday, and they will bring her back at the end of July,” Grandpa Ed said in his quiet manner.

“Mama have you or Mary seen or felt anything about this?”

“I have not, child,” said Big Mama, “have you Mary?”

There was a long pause, and Aunt Mary’s quiet voice sounded like a shout.

“She has to go Charlotte. I have only seen misery in my visions of her little face, but I know that she has to go to them for this time.”

“Misery? That’s too much for y’all to expect for me to let her go to them now!” Aunt Charlotte sobbed.

She wept out loud, and it made me want to go to her because I knew that they talked about me. I didn’t want Aunt Charlotte to cry anymore, but when I moved, David shook his head and grabbed my arm tightly.

“Calm down, Charlotte, we will be able to visit her every day if we need to see how she is doing. Remember, Charlotte, they are her parents, and they wouldn’t sign the papers to give her to you through the law. Maybe that’s a sign that they really do want her,” said Big Mama.

“All I know is that she is mine, and they are not going to treat her like a little slave like they do when they visit her here and expect for her to take care of their other children. She is only seven!” Aunt Charlotte cried.

I heard movement, and I knew that Aunt Mary hugged Aunt Charlotte as she did whenever Aunt Charlotte was upset.

David looked at me, grabbed my hand, and ran to the edge of the fields.

“See, your parents do want you!” said David excitedly.

When he saw my face, he calmed down.

“Why aren’t you excited?”

“Because I told you that my mama and daddy don’t like me, and I don’t know what is going to happen,” I said quietly.

David put his hand on mine and squeezed.

“Don’t worry, Victoria, nothing is going to happen to you. Ever. I won’t let it.”

“Do you promise, David?”

I squeezed his hand back.

David puffed his chest up, and said, “Yes, I do!”

It was then that we heard a deep voice singing, "I sing 'cause I'm happy, I sing 'cause I'm free, his eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me."

David smiled and pointed toward the dark fields.

"That's my uncle coming from the Adams'. He always comes late to get me and my aunt."

David's Uncle P came from between the rows of corn. He was tall, big, and dark skinned, and he had the biggest eyes Victoria had ever seen.

"C'mon now young'un, yo' ainty is a'itch'n to stuff som'n down our gullets," said David's Uncle P.

Then he glanced at Victoria and smiled.

"Well, lookee, it's a lil' Mz. Chandra! How do, lil' ma'am?"

He held out his hand.

I looked at his hand that was bigger than my Grandpa Ed's and hesitated afraid. He looked at his hand and took it back quickly.

"That's alright, lil' un. My hand is a mite filt'y."

I hadn't been thinking that at all, so I piped up.

"I'm sorry, mister, I was just shy for a minute. Can I shake your hand now? See, my hand is dirty too."

I held up my hand for him to see, and he laughed and shook my small hand. I felt my hand swallowed up in his large one. And then, I felt a peculiar warmth run through my hand across my chest.

"Yo'r special lil' un. You have an old spirit. Be strong and stay good," said Mr. P.

"Uncle P, you're going to scare her," David whispered and rolled his eyes.

I looked at Mr. P's face, and it looked like it was shining especially his eyes. I wasn't scared only curious.

"I like it, David, it's okay. Thank you, Mr. P."

"Now, now, lil' un, you call me Unca' P too, ok?"

I nodded my head.

"It's past time I was in the house, David. Will I see y'all tomorrow?"

"Yep!"

He jumped up and down.

Then I turned and ran to the front door of the house.

When I looked back, David and Uncle P watched me. I waved, and they waved back. Then, they turned and disappeared into the cornfield.

As I was tried to sneak back to my room, I heard Big Mama shout.

"Come in here, child, why are you sneaking around in your own house?"

I put my head down because I knew that I was in trouble and walked into the living room.

"Victoria Alicia Roberts! Why are you so filthy?!" exclaimed Aunt Charlotte.

Big Mama chuckled.

"I know why. The homestead children told you to roll in the dirt to get the stink of my cream off, didn't they?"

"Yes ma'am."

I kept my head down and picked at the crusted dirt on my elbow.

"Well, run tell Ms. Sadie to get you a bath ready."

"Mama! She needs a spanking with all that dirt she's tracked in here," said Aunt Charlotte.

"Now, this is my house, Charlotte, and I'll pass the discipline here, understand?"

Aunt Charlotte looked down.

“Yes, ma’am.”

I ran out of the living room as fast as I could, but I still heard Big Mama when she yelled.

“And as soon as you get out of that water, you come in here, Victoria.”

I kept running to find Ms. Sadie because I was scared then. Big Mama never called me by my name.

When I return to the living room, Grandpa Ed called me to him.

“Come here, my dear, grandpa needs to talk to you.”

I sidled over to his chair with my head down. He put his finger under my chin and raised my head up to look him in the eye.

“Never carry your head down, my sweet, always hold your head up high no matter what.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied.

“Victoria, your parents want to take you to live with them for the rest of the summer. They will be here day after tomorrow,” said Grandpa Ed.

“Pa, at least ask her if she wants to go,” pleaded Aunt Charlotte.

I didn’t want any more fighting about me, so I looked at Aunt Charlotte.

“I’ll go with Mama and Daddy, Auntie. That way you and Aunt Mary can do other stuff with Grandpa and Big Mama.”

Then I smiled really big so that she wouldn’t see how hard it was for me to go away from her.

“Oh, sweetie, Aunt Mary and I don’t need to do stuff with Grandpa and Big Mama. If you really want to go, I’ll let you go. We will visit you as much as we can. I’m sure that Big Mama will keep us busy while we are here with her, so that the time will fly by until you’re back,” Aunt Charlotte promised.

She got up, came over to me, and hugged me.

As she held me to her, she turned her head and whispered.

“Don’t worry, a short time with them will be alright, then you’ll be back with your Aunt Mary and me.”

I nodded my head and she stepped back.

Big Mama came over to me then.

“Come now, lil’ mirror, and I will make sure that you get the first of the supper biscuits.”

I felt happier since no one was fighting anymore and because Big Mama made the best biscuits. It took my mind off of the little time that I had left before going to my mama and daddy’s house.

2

By the time Saturday morning came, I was so scared that I all I could do was stare at the top of my grandparents’ house. I don’t think that I slept at all. I thought a lot about the day before when I had played with David. We had a lot of fun, and he gave me a big hug and told me that he would visit me at my mama and daddy’s house. It made me feel a little better and gave me something to look forward to when I left.

Aunt Charlotte stayed with me all night in the rocking chair by my window. I don’t think that she slept much that night either. Her normally bright eyes were dull, and her long dark hair was loose and tangled. When she saw that I was awake, she got me out of bed and had me wash off in the hallway washroom. She dressed my hair, told me to put on my best play clothes, and go sit in the front room.

While I was waiting on the edge of the divan, Big Mama Chandra walked in and sat beside me.

“Don’t look so afraid, child, it’s your Mama and Daddy coming to get you.”

“It’s not that I’m afraid, Big Mama, I just don’t know what will happen to me. Sometimes, I feel like my Daddy doesn’t like me.”

“Of course he likes you, girl! He loves you and so does your Mama!”

I felt a little better after she said this, but I still felt a deep fear that I couldn’t explain to my grandmother. Big Mama Chandra grabbed me up to her chest and gave me a big hug. I forgot all about the fear in her strong arms. I could hear her heart beating and sniffed the fresh smell of baking powder on her apron probably from baking biscuits. I felt like I was imprinting a memory to savor in the time with my mama and daddy. I began to wonder where my aunts and Grandpa Ed were and if I would get to see them before my parents came to take me away with them.

Like a prompt from my mind, Aunt Mary came through the front room door.

“They’re here, Mama,” she said in a hushed voice.

“Well, Mary, don’t just stand there, tell them to come into the house like the civilized person that I raised you up as.”

Aunt Mary left the room, and a few moments later, my parents walked into the room.

Now, if I had been only a little nervous before, the look on my parents’ faces made me want to run into my room and hide under the bed.

My daddy, Clyde, had such a mean look on his face that he didn’t even look like the handsome man that I knew as my daddy. My mama, Tess, well she stood behind my daddy with her eyes squinted looking around the room until she zeroed in on where I sat with Big Mama Chandra’s arms around me.

From that point she just stared at me with her mouth tightened into a line. Her dark beauty was striking even though she looked a lot older than she really was. Her belly was large which meant that I was going to have another brother or sister soon. The thought crossed my mind that I didn’t want another sister or brother, and that my parents shouldn’t have more kids. I felt bad after and prayed that I wouldn’t be punished for it.

The tension in the room was so thick that I felt suffocated as if the air was full of smoke instead of bright summer sunshine.

“Didn’t I raise you to speak when you walk into a room, Tess?”

My mama stopped looking at me and focused her tightened features on her mother.

“Yes” she said as if tasting something nasty.

By this time, my grandmother had risen to her full height from the divan where we sat.

“Yes what?”

I had never heard Big Mama Chandra use that voice on anyone, and I stared at her in awe.

My mama looked down at the floor under my grandmother’s scrutiny.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Meanwhile, my daddy had moved into the room closer to where I was. When Mama gave into Big Mama Chandra, he turned to my grandmother.

“I guess I wasn’t raised with manners either, huh, Chandra?”

“I don’t know how you were raised Clyde, and I don’t care, but you are my son by marriage which means you will act like you have manners in my house even if you weren’t raised with them.”

“We just came to get our “daughter” and spend some time with her since no one seems bothered to bring her to see us.”

It was the smug way that he said “daughter” that had got my attention and Aunt Charlotte’s when she walked in the room.

“Why did you say “daughter” like that, Clyde?” she demanded.

My daddy swung around to face Aunt Charlotte, and the look on his face completely changed. Before, he had looked mean and twisted, but when he looked at Aunt Charlotte, his eyes brightened and the biggest smile broke out on his handsome face.

“Charlotte,” he crooned, “I thought that you would come to see Victoria off with us.”

“Yes, I wanted to give her some treats to share with my other niece and nephews. How many is it now?”

Aunt Charlotte’s mouth tightened and she looked in disgust at my mama’s belly.

“You know damned well how many we have, Charlotte! You make me so sick with all of your judgments. You don’t know nothing, you bourgeois bitch!”

The room hushed as my mama spat her last statement at Aunt Charlotte. All eyes except hers turned toward the door that was now occupied by Grandpa Ed. Even my daddy was quiet.

“As long as you live, Tess, you will never use that kind of language in front of your mother or child. You have become disrespectful and uncouth. It does not sit well on you. Now, you and Charlotte will stop your bickering, and you will apologize to Chandra and Victoria,” said Grandpa Ed in a hard voice.

Mama turned to face Grandpa Ed while he spoke, and her mouth quivered as if she wanted to cry.

“Yes, sir,” she said quietly.

Then, she turned to me and Big Mama and with her mouth twisted like she had again tasted something nasty.

“I’m sorry, Mama and Vicky.”

I hated to be called Vicky, and Aunt Charlotte knew it.

“Tess, please don’t call her that. She doesn’t like it.”

“I will call my child whatever I want, Charlotte, because she is my child. And, I gave her that name.”

At that point, I didn’t think that Big Mama wanted any more fighting, so she settled it.

“Tess, I think Charlotte would know what the child likes and doesn’t like, so call her by the name that she uses all the time which is Victoria.”

Mama didn’t look she wanted to accept it, so she just stayed quiet.

“Well, get your things, ‘Victoria’, so that we can go to your other grandpa and grandma’s house to get your sister and brothers.”

Daddy rubbed his hands together. He was close enough to me by then to reach down and grab my arm in a tight hold. He squeezed my arm, and I stood up quickly to avoid another one.

“Why didn’t y’all bring the other children to see us, Tess?”

Aunt Mary cocked her head at Mama in question.

“Would it matter, Mary? Don’t act like you or Charlotte care about your other niece and nephews because I know that you don’t.”

“Now, Tess, what did your pa just tell you?”

Big Mama spoke gently, but there was steel in her tone.

Mama glanced at Big Mama and said nothing else. She held her full lips together so tightly that they looked like a thin line.

Aunt Charlotte came over to me with a small brown paper bag.

“Here are some rock candies and root beer licorice for you and your brothers and sister, Victoria. Now, you make sure and don’t eat too many before supper, okay?”

She was about to hand over the bag when Daddy leaned down and snatched it away from my grasp.

“I’ll take those and issue it out to the children, Charlotte. Don’t you worry your pretty little head about them getting any before supper.”

He finished this statement with a wide smile at Aunt Charlotte.

Aunt Charlotte looked him in the eye.

“You never answered my question, Clyde.”

Daddy didn’t even pretend not to know what Aunt Charlotte meant.

“I didn’t mean anything by it, Charlotte. I know that you have been taking on our burden, and she’s more your daughter than ours. I was just teasing.”

This seemed to satisfy Aunt Charlotte, so she leaned down and hugged me so tight that I almost couldn’t breathe.

She whispered in my ear.

“It won’t be long, and we’ll be back home in Dallas, ok? And remember, I love you.”

She stepped back quickly, and it was then she noticed the grip that my daddy had on my arm. She frowned but said nothing else. Daddy looked at Aunt Charlotte from head to toe and especially at her chest. Mama cleared her throat and frowned at Daddy who then glanced at Mama’s face and then returned his gaze at Aunt Charlotte.

“Let’s go, Clyde,” Mama said tightly.

Grandpa Ed picked up my little suitcase that Aunt Mary placed by the door.

“Come here, little one, and give old Grandpa Ed a hug and kiss before he heads to the field.”

I ran over to him glad that Daddy had to release me because his grip had started to hurt.

When I hugged Grandpa Ed, he slipped some paper in the small side pocket of my dress.

“Take this and hide it from your mama and daddy. Use it when you can but not in front of them.”

I nodded slightly to let him know I understood, he let me go and I slipped my hand in to feel the papers in my pocket. I knew that it was money.

Then, Aunt Mary and Big Mama Chandra came over and gave me a hug as well. Aunt Mary didn’t say a word, but I felt the weight of her dark eyes on my face. As I looked up at her beautiful beloved face, she sighed sadly and told me to be a good girl until I returned. Big Mama Chandra gave Mama a big linen covered wicket basket that had the most delicious smells coming from underneath it.

“Here is some food for y’all so that you won’t have to worry about cooking today, Tess. It should be enough to have for supper today and dinner tomorrow.”

Daddy stepped up and gave the basket back to Big Mama.

“I can feed my family, Chandra.”

Big Mama just looked from him to Mama.

“I don’t doubt that you can feed your family, Clyde, but this is something for my daughter because she is in the family way. She doesn’t need to be on her feet that long, and if I can help her with only that part, I will.”

Big Mama then walked outside to Daddy’s big white Chevy car and placed the basket in the backseat. Aunt Charlotte walked past us and stood beside Big Mama who still had the car door open. Mama turned around and walked through the door of the house. Daddy grabbed my arm again in his hard grip and walked up behind Mama. I watched in horror as he put the hand that he had fisted the candy filled brown paper bag into the small of her back and push her roughly through

the front door. Mama stumbled but she caught herself on the front porch post. Big Mama and Aunt Charlotte gasped and ran forward a little when they saw Mama fall forward.

“Goodness grief, Tess, are you okay?”

Big Mama cried out and took a step toward Mama.

“Yes, Mama, I’ve just become a little clumsy with this baby,” said Mama breathlessly.

I opened my mouth to tell the truth, and Daddy squeezed my arm painfully. I looked up at his face, and he looked at me and shook his head. I got the message and didn’t say a thing. I felt so weak because I knew what he had done and to protect myself, I didn’t tell the truth.

Daddy walked forward and down the steps almost dragging me behind him. He let go so that he could open his door and nudged me roughly toward the back door where Big Mama and Aunt Charlotte stood.

Aunt Charlotte gave me another hug and leaned into the open window.

“Clyde, I will be by early next week to visit.”

Daddy turned his head around to the back seat and smiled widely at Aunt Charlotte.

“I would love for you to come by Charlotte. I’m sure that Tess would love it too. Wouldn’t you, Tess?”

By that time, Mama opened her own door and sat silently in the front seat. She glanced over at Daddy.

“It’ll be too early for such a visit, Charlotte, why don’t you wait a couple of weeks so that “Victoria” can get settled in with us?”

Daddy put his arm along the back of the seat and pinched Mama’s neck hard. She put her head down and bit her lip but she didn’t cry out in pain.

“What Tess means Charlotte is why don’t you let us spend some time with Victoria, and then you are welcome to come over and see me, I mean us, when you are ready.”

Aunt Charlotte hadn’t heard the last part of Daddy’s statement because Grandpa Ed started up his field tractor.

When Grandpa Ed drove into the fields, Aunt Charlotte turned around, and said that she would give mama and daddy time with me before she visited. Then, she stood back when Daddy started the car and started to drive slowly around the circular driveway.

I looked back through the rear window and wanted to cry out, “Please don’t let them take me now! He’s mean to Mama!” but I just raised my hand and waved at Big Mama and Aunt Charlotte who waved back at me.

As Daddy’s car made its way down the lane, I saw David and the other children run through the rows of corn on Mama’s side of the car. I slid over and waved at them as we drove past. They ran to keep up with the car and waved back at me too.

Daddy looked back at me and yelled viciously.

“Quit all the silly waving like you’re leaving on a ship or something, Vicky! You look stupid!”

“I’m just waving at my friends, Daddy.”

“Did you just back to talk me, girl?”

I was afraid after seeing what he did to Mama, so I looked down and shook my head.

“You will look at me when I’m talking to you!”

He shouted so loud that it hurt my ears. I looked up then and noticed that he had slowed the car down and almost leaned into the backseat.

“When I tell you to do something or not to do something, you better listen and do as I say, do you hear me “Vicky?”

Tears filled my eyes, and I replied a quiet, “yes, sir”.

“And we will call you “Vicky” if we want to whether you like it or not!”

I didn’t know what to do or say, so I kept quiet and tried to shrink myself into the corner so that he wouldn’t notice me anymore. He turned around in his seat and sped up a little.

I looked out the window and saw that my friends heard everything through the open windows of the car. They stopped running in the corn and come out to the side of the field next to the lane. They were like silent statues lining the lane with David at the end.

“Dirty field children,” grumbled Daddy, “you don’t need to be around children like that anyway. Don’t you know who your grandpa is? He’s Paul Roberts, the wealthiest black man around here. Your Grandpa Ed needs to remember that when he’s giving my wife orders. I mean who does he think he is? My pa has ten more acres than he does and more hands. Why, more people respect his word than Ed’s!”

On and on Daddy went about what Grandpa Paul had that Grandpa Ed didn’t.

I stopped listening and started to think about Aunt Charlotte and Aunt Mary and all the things that we would do when we went back to Dallas. I tried to wipe the tears that fell down my face slowly so that my daddy wouldn’t notice and do something worse than yell at me. And all the while he yelled, Mama had not said a word.

When we arrived at Daddy’s wealthy father, Paul Roberts’ house, my brothers, Clyde Jr. and Steven came running out of the long one-story stone ranch house. My little sister, Ruth tried to run too, but at three, so she stumbled over her feet to get to the car.

As we go out of the car, Daddy held up the candy bag.

“Look what Daddy bought y’all! Candy!”

He handed both of the boys a handful and when Ruth came to stand beside him, he gave her a smaller handful.

I stood at his side waiting for my handful, but he only crumpled up the bag and put it in his pocket. I felt left out but I didn’t want to gain Daddy’s attention. Little Ruth came over to me and held out her arms for a hug. I reached down and squeezed her little body because she was my favorite of my little siblings. Ruth noticed when she pulled back to grab my hand that I didn’t have any candy. She held out her bounty of sweets and said, “Huh, huh,” while trying to push the candy into my hand.

Mama came around to stand by Ruth.

“No, no, Ruth, Vicky can’t have any candy now.”

She looked at me meanly, picked up my little sister, and walked toward Grandpa Paul’s house. I felt like someone had hit me in the chest, and I wanted to turn and run all the way back to my Aunt Charlotte, Aunt Mary, and my grandparents. I saw Daddy stare at me, and I put my head down and shuffled my way to the house.

When I looked up at the door, I saw my grandmother, Betts, who never let us call her Grandma. It had to always be Betts. She was pale skinned with long auburn red hair like mine. Her eyes were a light brown that sometimes looked gold in the sunlight, and she was covered in freckles. Betts was not as pretty or shapely as my Big Mama Chandra, but she was a handsome woman that knew she was. Many people whispered that Betts was not faithful to Grandpa Paul, but none would ever say that to his face.

Betts doted on her sons though, especially my Daddy. She sent her daughters away to live with her aunt in California. Her explanation to everyone who asked why she kept her sons and sent her daughters away was said laughingly.

“Why I sent them off because there will be only one hen in this nest.”

No one quite knew what it meant, but no one who knew Betts wanted to ask her more questions than necessary because she could be a downright mean and nasty. Since she was Grandpa Paul's wife, she was respected and held in awe even if people whispered behind their hands about her.

Betts saw me walk up to the door.

"Well, it's about time that we got to see little Miss High and Mighty. Clyde, however, did you drag her away from those uppity folks across the creek?"

"Well, Mama, I just walked in and gave them what for. Why, they was so scared that they packed Vicky's stuff and had her out of that stankin' house so fast that my head was swimming," Daddy laughed out to Betts.

"That's right! They better respect my son."

Betts had a malicious gleam in her light eyes. She pointed to me with a long, sharp fingernail.

"Come on, girl, you and your mangy mama can get to the kitchen to start serving dinner."

I looked up at her when she called Mama a name, but Betts wasn't looking at me. She looked at Mama with a frown.

As Mama glanced back at the car, Betts looked at Daddy.

"Why does it take your lazy wife so long to move? And why is she looking back at that Chevy?"

"Her ol' Mama gave her a food basket, and I guess she wants to go get it."

Then he turned to Mama with a sly grin.

"Is that right, Tess? Do you want to go get the basket?"

I saw Mama started to tremble and she replied haltingly.

"Uh, no, no. I was just checking to see if any of the little ones were at the old well."

Daddy laughed again.

"And what if they were? It wouldn't hurt to lose one or two of the little piggies. Takes more money to feed them than Daddy's livestock."

"Hush now with that, Clyde," said Betts, "you don't want any bad hoodoo on you."

"Hoodoo, Mama, can't touch me because I'm your child," replied Daddy.

"It can touch anyone, boy, never forget that."

Betts looked hard at Daddy.

And with that statement, Betts turned and walked farther into the house. I followed her curious about what hoodoo was, and what it did. The cool interior of the house was a welcome relief to the summer sun but it seemed too cold. I hesitated in the doorway and found that there were lines of salt under each window. There were two large square mirrors on each of the walls that had sprigs of sage hanging at each corner. There were small tables under each mirror that had a black and silver bowl on the top right in the middle. I glanced into the bowl closest to me and found that there was a small mound of salt sitting directly in the center.

When I felt movement behind me, I moved quickly into the large front room of the house. This room felt very dark and cold as if the sunlight that streamed through the windows was afraid to come inside. The divans and chairs were heavy with all of the dark wood and dark dyed cotton pillows. They were placed in an exact square around the stone fireplace. I didn't like the room at all, and I felt as if something watched me from the dark corners where no light from the windows could reach. I felt stunned almost as if I couldn't move.

I jumped when I felt the small hand placed in mine. I glanced down at Ruth's tiny face that was almost blocked by the thumb in her mouth.

“Sced, Vic-kee,” she whispered.

Her expression became frightened as she looked in the dark corners.

“It’s okay, Ruthie, God won’t let nothing hurt us.”

I gave her hand a little squeeze that made us both feel better.

Daddy came into the front room with Mama behind him.

“Don’t you go filling her head with all that God nonsense, Vicky. You hear me?”

Ruth and I both lowered our heads at his voice.

“Yes, sir,” I whispered.

Mama came over to us, looked down at our hands, and yanked Ruth away from me.

“Go help your grandmother,” she said.

She pushed me toward the hallway and turned her back to me. I wondered what I had done to make her so angry with me, but I did as I was told and followed the smells of food down the hallway to the kitchen.

As I walked into the kitchen, Betts turned around from the brick oven and pointed to the counter by the icebox.

“Take that possum out of the pan, and put it on a big plate.”

She turned back to the oven without another word.

I was disgusted that she had cooked a possum, but again, did as I was told. I looked around for a platter but couldn’t find one. I swallowed the fear in my throat and turned to my grandmother.

“Betts? Where is the big plate?”

“Oh my! You mean to tell me, that cow, Chandra, didn’t teach you how to set a plate? Ugh! Look in that cabinet behind you and take one of the plates from the second shelf. Or do I need to show you what that is too?” she said snidely without turning around.

“No, ma’am,” I whispered.

I turned, followed her directions, and found the shelf with big plates. I placed it on the counter then I grabbed a cheesecloth off of the worktable and went toward the possum pan.

“No, you don’t use my cheesecloth for that,” she yelled, “grab that big fork and use it and your hand to move it.”

I dropped the cheesecloth back on the table and picked up the big fork. I went to the counter with the possum and looked down at it. Since it was whole, it looked like a skinned cat that had been cooked in a big pan of grease. It didn’t smell good either, but I didn’t want to get in trouble again. I bit my lip and said a silent prayer for courage. Then, I placed the big fork in the mouth of the possum, put my hand on the rear of it, and lifted the creature. As soon as I lifted the possum, it started to slip.

“Ouch!”

I grabbed the bottom of the creature to keep it from falling, and the hot grease burned my hand.

“Don’t you drop that meat,” Betts shrieked when she saw me jump at the burning heat.

My hand burned and hurt badly, but I refused to drop the possum. I slowly shuffled to the counter with my disgusting burden. When I was finally able to place the creature on the plate, I let out a painful but relieved breath. I turned to go to the large tub sink to wash the heat and grease from my hands.

“Take your lazy behind outside to wash that off! I don’t want none of that stinky grease in my sink.”

“There is no need to speak to the child like that, Betts. Calm your common ways.”

I jumped at the sound of the low voice that came from the now opened back door. I wanted to turn to see who had the nerve to chastise Betts that way, but I already knew.