



a novel

the darkest child

DELORES PHILLIPS

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To my sister, Linda Miller, my  
brothers, Lennie Miller and  
Gregory Green, and my  
daughter, Shalana Harris.

## **the darkest child**

## Content

[one](#)

[two](#)

[three](#)

[four](#)

[five](#)

[six](#)

[seven](#)

[eight](#)

[nine](#)

[ten](#)

[eleven](#)

[twelve](#)

[thirteen](#)

[fourteen](#)

[fifteen](#)

[sixteen](#)

[seventeen](#)

[eighteen](#)

[nineteen](#)

[twenty](#)

[twenty-one](#)

[twenty-two](#)

[twenty-three](#)

[twenty-four](#)

[twenty-five](#)

[twenty-six](#)

[twenty-seven](#)

[twenty-eight](#)

[twenty-nine](#)

[thirty](#)

[thirty-one](#)

[thirty-two](#)  
[thirty-three](#)  
[thirty-four](#)  
[thirty-five](#)  
[thirty-six](#)  
[thirty-seven](#)  
[thirty-eight](#)  
[thirty-nine](#)  
[forty](#)  
[forty-one](#)  
[forty-two](#)  
[forty-three](#)  
[forty-four](#)  
[forty-five](#)  
[forty-six](#)  
[forty-seven](#)  
[forty-eight](#)  
[forty-nine](#)  
[fifty](#)  
[fifty-one](#)  
[fifty-two](#)  
[fifty-three](#)  
[fifty-four](#)  
[fifty-five](#)  
[fifty-six](#)  
[fifty-seven](#)  
[fifty-eight](#)  
[fifty-nine](#)  
[sixty](#)  
[sixty-one](#)  
[sixty-two](#)

PAKERSFIELD, GEORGIA 1958

Mama washed the last dish she ever intended to wash. I alone witnessed the event, in silence. It was on a Friday—a school day—but instead of sitting in a classroom, I was standing in unfamiliar surroundings, the home of my mother’s employers, stunned by the wealth around me. As I regarded my mother through unwavering peripheral vision, something in her glances at me seemed to say, “Tangy Mae, this will be your life. Grab an apron and enjoy it.”

Domestic servitude was not what I desired for myself, but she had only to speak and I would do anything she asked. It was my obligation to obey her though I did not want to be like my older brothers, Harvey and Sam, who seemed to breathe at our mother’s command. They were men, and their lack of initiative disturbed me, although I knew they could not *just leave* our mother’s house. Departure required consideration of consequences and a carefully planned escape.

At the age of thirty-five, our mother was tall and slender with a head of thick reddish-brown hair. Her face, with its cream-colored skin and high cheekbones beneath dark gray eyes, was set off by a gleaming white smile accented by dimples. I thought she was beautiful, despite my acquaintance with the demon that hibernated beneath her elegant surface.

She had worked seven years cleaning house for the Munford family. Now she stood at their kitchen sink holding a dish under running water longer than necessary before handing it to me to wipe. She finally dried her hands on her apron, took a seat at the table, and waited for her pain to subside. She had spent most of the day complaining of her misery while instructing me on the proper way to make a bed, scrub a floor, polish silverware, use a washing machine, and on and on.

According to Mama, her pain—something like gas—had begun during the wee hours of the morning. It balled up in her chest, rolled through her stomach, between her thighs, and into her knees. It did a slow dribble in her swollen ankles, then just like that—her finger snapped—it bounced back to her chest and started all over again, taking her breath away.

On the table, beneath a crystal saltshaker, was an envelope. She picked it up and fanned it before her face. “Fifteen dollars,” she said indignantly. “I don’t care what I do ’round here, it’s always the same fifteen dollars. Never mind that I stayed late on Tuesday evening when Mister Frederick’s mother came for dinner. Never mind that I walked to the Colonial for flour that Miss Arlisa forgot to pick up. Week in, week out, always the same fifteen dollars.”

She removed the bills and tucked them inside the pocket of her dress, then slid the envelope and a pencil across the table. “Sit down,” she said, “I want you to write me a note to Miss Arlisa.”

My obedience, as always, was swift.

“Dear Miss Arlisa,” Mama started as soon as I was seated across from her. “Tangy Mae can do just as good a job as I can. She is my child and I learned her good. She can start work for you on Monday. I will be dead.”

My hand trembled slightly, but I wrote the note exactly as she dictated. She snatched the envelope from the table, scanned the words, then passed it back to me. “Sign it, Rozelle Quinn,” she said. “Miss Arlisa probably won’t even know who that is. All they know ’round here is Rosie. Rosie do this and Rosie do that.”

I sat there dumbfounded. Loss traveled through my body, pulsed at my temples, and numbed my fingertips. I wanted to wail, to one-up her moans, believing my pain to be more severe than anything she could be feeling.

“You got something you wanna say?” she asked.

“No, ma’am,” I answered, forcing myself to look at her. There was plenty I wanted to say. Words were choking me. I covered my mouth with my hand so that Mama could not hear the words that might seep out. *Mama, you promised Mr. Pace that you would let me go to school one more year. You promised me the ninth grade. You promised! Mr. Pace thinks I’m smart. Please, Mama, let me go to school!*

But I had nothing with which to bargain and I knew it. Already I had attended school longer than any of my siblings. I was in ninth grade, which in itself was miraculous, considering I had never set foot in an eighth-grade classroom. Academically, I surpassed my peers, but at home I was a complete failure. At the age of twelve, my mother’s children were expected to drop out of school, get a job, and help support the family. I fell short of expectations.

“We gotta get on home,” Mama said. “Put me a bit of coffee and sugar in some wax paper. And, Tangy Mae, don’t make it noticeable.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, and thought how calm my mother appeared for a woman who planned to be dead come Monday morning.

Holding onto the table with one hand and supporting her back with the other, she heaved herself to her feet, then removed her apron and hung it in the broom closet. She checked the house one last time to make sure everything was in order, retrieved yesterday’s newspaper from a basket beside the trash bin, then ushered me out by way of the back door.

The bitter cold January afternoon seemed to freeze my mother’s face into a mask of disdain. “They done seen the last of me,” she grumbled. “They don’t give a damn if I freeze to death. They don’t care nothing ’bout me, and I don’t care nothing ’bout them.”

I knew she was talking to herself, so I walked along beside her, keeping my mouth and my coat tightly closed. Sometimes Mama would come home from work and talk about the Munfords for hours. Miss Arlisa, she opined, was a fat, lazy white woman who had no idea how to keep house or satisfy a man. Mr. Frederick was a show-off, who drove his automobile around town, honking the horn, and bragging about

everything he possessed, including his ugly wife.

I had seen them only once, the time they brought Mama home with a load of old clothes they had given her. The only things I knew about the Munfords were that they owned the hardware store in town and that Mrs. Munford was not nearly as ugly as Mama had described her. She was not nearly as pretty as Mama, either.

“I been watching you,” Mama said, as we walked along the paved street that led out of East Grove and toward the Cherokee Creek Bridge that would take us into Stump Town. “You think them Munfords is rich white folk, don’t you? Well, they ain’t rich. If you wanna see rich, you gotta go up there on Meadow Hill. That’s where the really classy white folks live. They got mansions up there that take from morning to night to clean, and that’s wit’ five and six people working. These East Grove whites bow down to them on Meadow Hill, and you better believe it.”

I had long been familiar with the Pakersfield hierarchy which ranked Meadow Hill supreme. Everybody bowed to somebody, but, all in all, Pakersfield was a decent place to live. The Negroes had Stump Town, the flats, and Plymouth, while the whites had Meadow Hill, East Grove, and North Ridge. There was never any trouble as long as everybody stayed where they belonged. We usually did.

Miss Janie Jay’s house was the first house on the Stump Town side of Cherokee Creek. Mama didn’t care much for Miss Janie, claimed she was highfalutin and put on airs, so it surprised me when she strolled through the gate and up to Miss Janie’s porch. I hesitated for only a second before following.

“Knock on that door and tell Janie I’m dying out here and I’d be much obliged for a drank of water,” Mama said.

Miss Janie taught Sunday school and sang in the choir at the Solid Rock Baptist Church. She was old, probably about sixty or so. She wore her hair parted down the center with a thick gray plait on each side. On Sundays she covered the plaits with one of her many fancy hats, and when the spirit moved her, she would wave one hand in the air and hold tight to the hat with her other hand.

“Tangy Quinn,” she said, opening the door and staring out at me. “Shouldn’t you be at school?”

“Mama’s real sick, Miss Janie,” I said. “She’s out here on your porch and wants to know if you can spare her a drink of water.”

“I’m dying, Janie,” Mama groaned. She had positioned herself on Miss Janie’s porch swing, slumped over, with her head resting between the chains, looking as if she might die at any second.

“Rosie, what is it?” Miss Janie showed alarm at the sight of Mama. “Just hold on, honey. I’ll get you some water.”

While Miss Janie went for water, I kept a close watch on my mother. Her eyes were closed and her arms rested against her abdomen with one hand clutching the newspaper. She moaned, shook her head as if disapproving of the sound, then moaned again. She did that several times, changing the pitch and depth of each moan, before it

dawned on me that she was rehearsing her suffering, exaggerating her misery.

By the time Miss Janie returned, Mama was trembling all over, tears streaked her cheeks, and her hair was loose and tangled about her head. She was in such a state that it took me and Miss Janie both to get her into an upright position. Miss Janie held the glass and Mama took a few sips of water before slumping over again.

“Rosie, maybe you need something hot,” Miss Janie suggested.

“I can get you some tea.”

“No, Janie. I’m going home to my children,” Mama whispered. “This is a terrible way to die, but I need to be wit’ my children. There’s things I need to tell ’em before it’s too late.”

Miss Janie’s eyes brimmed with tears. “Oh, Rosie, I’m so sorry,” she said. “Just remember, Jesus saves. Put your trust in Jesus.”

Miss Janie tried to get Mama to come inside to warm herself, and offered to call the doctor, but Mama refused. Miss Janie helped her to her feet and walked us out to the gate, saying we should pray, that God answers prayer.

Mama held tightly to my arm and used my shoulder to support her weight as we made our way slowly up Oglesbee Street. My knees were so cold that I knew if one touched the other I was going to fall to the ground, taking my dying mother with me. As we turned the corner onto Chestnut Street, Mama loosened her grip on my arm. She straightened her back, smoothed and pinned her hair in place, then smiled and winked at me.

Painfully, I parted my frost-chapped lips and returned a smile. I loved her with all my heart, but if she did not die by Monday morning, I was determined to discover from the pages of my schoolbooks, how to break the chains that bound me to my mother.

Our house stood alone on a hill off Penyon Road, about half a mile outside the city limits. It was old, crippled, and diseased— an emblem of poverty and neglect. Nature had tried to cure it by embracing the rear frame with herbs, roots, and a jumble of foliage which spilled over from the surrounding woodland. Nature had failed, and in frustration she sought to destroy the house by eroding the very foundation on which it stood.

Erosion had left the house slanted at an odd angle, held up on the east side by thick, round poles lodged into tilted, unstable earth. Occasionally, huge chunks of brown earth shook loose, skirted around the poles, and rolled down the slope into a waiting gully.

All of my life home had been these three drafty rooms under the same rusted tin roof. The house swayed in the wind but stood. It absorbed its fill of rainwater and stood. It groaned under the weight of celebrations and sorrows and did not crumble. But for how much longer? I thought we might wake up one morning—or not wake up—in the rocky, muddy gully below. Or maybe we would simply blow across the dirt road and get lost in the overgrown field of weeds. I could not predict what would happen, but I feared we were destined for disaster.

Mama stood at the foot of thirteen sagging, rickety steps that led up to a wide, shaky porch. All pretense was over. She was gasping for breath as she placed one foot on the first step and began, gingerly, to climb. She had almost reached the top when her knees buckled. My arms shot out instinctively, ready to break her fall.

“Tara! Tarabelle!” I screamed.

“Be quiet!” Mama snapped, regaining her balance and resuming her climb. “Ain’t no need to wake the dead.”

The front door, which was as much cardboard as plywood, swung open and my sister, Tarabelle, appeared on the porch. “What is it?” she asked irritably. “Why you calling me like that?”

“Mama’s sick,” I answered breathlessly, my heart pounding in my chest.

Tarabelle was sixteen and almost as tall as Mama. She had long, jet black hair, a copper-colored complexion, and the cold, black eyes of a dead poker player. I had never seen the eyes of a dead person— in fact, I had never seen a poker game—but I had heard that poker faces were expressionless, and I knew that dead people showed no emotion. That was Tarabelle. She stepped back, regarded our mother with those cold black eyes. Her mouth twitched as if she might smile, but I knew better.

“She ain’t sick,” Tarabelle said, still staring at Mama. “She ’bout ready to have that baby. That’s all.”

I had been ignorant in my innocence but I was wiser than my sister because I had

learned to study Mama as diligently as I studied my books. I watched our mother as she squeezed the collar of her coat. I heard her sharp intake of breath. I saw frustration and pain leap from the core of her soul and surge the length of her arm, down to the delicate hand that struck my sister's face.

The blow sent Tarabelle reeling back. She bounced off the porch wall and landed less than an inch from the drop that would have taken her down into the gully. She lay there, those cold, black eyes boring into the equally cold, gray eyes of our mother.

"I'm dying," Mama said with calm finality.

Tarabelle gripped the splintered boards at the edge of the porch and nodded her head. "Yes, ma'am."

Edna Pearl and Laura Gail, who were only four and five, stood in the doorway, staring in fascinated fright. I watched as Edna stole back into the shadowy gloom pierced intermittently by daylight filtering in through cracks in the walls. It was our only source of illumination until dusk, when we were allowed to light the kerosene lamps. I knew Edna had gone to alert Martha Jean to our mother's presence.

My next eldest sibling, Martha Jean, was a defective replica of our mother. She could not hear and had never spoken one coherent sentence in her life. There but by the grace of God went I, for only eleven months separated her silent beauty from my articulate homeliness. My imagination ran rampant when I thought of our births. I would fantasize Martha Jean stubbornly refusing to leave our mother's womb until I was conceived. We would blend together, and my thick nose would become thin; my coarse, tangled hair would become silky and straight, and I would have deep dimples in my cheeks. And, in turn, Martha Jean would be able to hear and speak. We would come rushing from the womb fused together, yelling at the top of our lungs, and no one would know that there were two of us. We would be smart, beautiful, and white, and Mama would love us with all of her heart.

Mama swept through the doorway of her castle and plopped down on her throne—the only bed in the house. Laura and Edna immediately knelt, removed her shoes, and began to rub her feet. Martha Jean brought in the customary cup of steaming water, and I produced the stolen papers of coffee and sugar from my pocket. Tarabelle, having pulled herself together, came to stand beside me.

"Mama, you want me to go get Miss Pearl?" she asked.

"No, I don't want you to go get Pearl," Mama snapped. "I want you to get outta my sight, Tara. How the hell you gon' go get Pearl when she at work way up there on Meadow Hill. I swear, I got the dumbest children in the world. Sometimes I wonder if all y'all belong to me."

I wondered, too. Sometimes I even prayed there had been a mistake, and that somebody would come along, take my hand, and say, "Rozelle Quinn, I believe this child belongs to me." Mama would push me into the arms of the stranger and say, "You're right. I knew all along that she was your child, but I loved her so I just couldn't bear to let her go. You take her, though, because she rightfully belongs to you." I would go off to my new home where there would be a bed from the Griggs

Furniture Store, a dress for every day of the week, a change of underpants, and two pairs of shoes with good hard-bottom soles. I would have an electric light to read by, and rows and rows of all sorts of great books.

Most of the books I read belong to the colored library, and the selection there wasn't great, but I would read anything, even when I had to ask Mrs. Jordan, the librarian, to pronounce words for me. Winter months are bad for reading, but during the summer, I sat out on the porch, or in the woods behind the house, and read until God dimmed His lights and called it a day.

"Tangy Mae, don't you hear me talking to you?" Mama barked, and I jumped because I had not heard her. "I told you to write a letter to Mushy." That was my oldest sister. "She needs to know her mother is dying. And you go straight to the post office and mail it off. Take the dummy wit' you and don't y'all be gone long."

The command was barely out of her mouth when she took a sip of coffee, gave a short cry, and doubled over in pain, as if she had been poisoned. Five of her nine children stood at her bedside watching and waiting.

She breathed in and out through pursed lips, then her eyelids fluttered and opened, and she turned glassy eyes on the five of us.

"You sick, Mama?" Laura asked. "You don't feel good?"

Mama placed her coffee cup on the floor and gathered Laura and Edna in her arms. "It's all right, baby," she said. "Mama's just dying, that's all."

"Humph." Tarabelle snorted so quietly that only I could hear it.

"Tell the dummy to fetch the tub and warm me some bathwater," Mama said. "I don't intend to die smelling like a white woman's kitchen." She stretched out on the bed, settling Laura and Edna beside her, while I stood there miming a bath to my deaf sister.

It was uncanny the way Martha Jean understood the crude signs we dangled before her eyes. My hands had barely cleared my armpits before she was off to the yard with the water bucket. Tarabelle followed after her and returned shortly, carrying the round, tin bathtub by a single handle. She placed the tub on the floor at the foot of the bed.

I retreated to the front room. There I settled and wrote a most convincing letter of suffering, pain, and impending death. I begged Mushy to return to Penyon Road. Mushy, whose real name was Elizabeth Anne, had been gone for four years. One summer evening, just after her eighteenth birthday, she had left for Ohio. She had not returned, not even for a visit.

The house still mourned her absence. It had taken on a coldness that no amount of coal or kindling in the stoves or fireplace could penetrate. Life seemed to have drifted out through the chimney in gray whiffs of smoke. And yet, for some reason, we continued to exist.

Martha Jean wore a brown and purple plaid dress that was at least three sizes too large. It had once belonged to Miss Arlisa. Mama had given it to Martha Jean, saying how it didn't matter about the size since Martha Jean wasn't going anywhere anyway.

It was true. Martha Jean did not go to church, school, or anywhere much else, except up to Miss Pearl's house on Sundays. There were times when I would take her with me to the colored library in Plymouth, or to the Colonial store in town, but mostly she just stayed at home and watched over Laura and Edna.

She walked ahead of me, exploring the world as though for the first time. She wore white knee-high socks, and I watched as her heels bobbed up and down in a pair of hand-me-down Buster Brown loafers that were also too large. She was not wearing a coat because she did not own one, but she wore, one on top of the other, two wrinkled, navy blue sweaters, each of which had seen better years.

We walked past the familiar: small shotgun houses with tin tubs hanging from hooks on side walls, outhouses beyond rows of winter-bare trees and empty clotheslines, chicken coops, woodpiles, coal bins, the standard black cast-iron washtubs, and the ever-present water pipes snaking up through the ground like bronzed pythons.

We crossed Buford Street—the area of Stump Town modernized by electricity, indoor plumbing, and telephones. It was the street where Frank and Pearl Garrison lived. Mr. Frank was one of five Negro men who had been lucky enough to get a job at the Packersfield carpet mill. In our eyes, the Garrisons were wealthy. Miss Pearl just happened to be Mama's best friend.

Martha Jean slowed, then stopped. She raised her right arm above her head with the palm of her hand turned down—her sign for Mama. She then crossed both arms over her chest and leaned forward, her brows drawn into a frown.

I nodded. She had asked if Mama was sick. I wanted to tell her what Tarabelle had said, but I didn't dare. It was possible Tarabelle was wrong, and I did not want to confuse Martha Jean.

Mushy could make Martha Jean understand anything. She had spent long hours, many days, teaching Martha Jean to read and write simple words, and coming up with different signs which she made the rest of us learn. Mama had refused to participate, called it a waste of time, but within a matter of months Martha Jean could write and sign all of our names.

Martha Jean's most profound lesson had been learned through a curriculum of intimidation and pain. In fact, we had all been students in that classroom with our mother as our teacher. Although I had been only six at the time, and Martha Jean barely seven, it was a day that we were not likely to forget.

*Late evening. Mama saunters in from one of her many excursions carrying a metal box. It is slightly larger than a cigar box and has a thin sheet of tin covering the*

*bottom. She makes my brother, Harvey, pull up one of the floorboards in her room. She nails the box to the underside of the board, then she demonstrates how the tin slides in and out. We are fascinated. It is like a game to us, although we do not understand the significance of the box.*

*Mama tears a strip of newspaper and crumples it into a ball. Her gray eyes sparkle with delight. "As long as y'all live, don't ever touch this box," she says.*

*Mushy speaks up. "Why you showing it to us, Mama?"*

*Mama shoots her a cold stare, but Mushy repeats the question. "Why you showing it to us if you don't want us to touch it?"*

*We are sitting on the floor in a circle. It is warm and cozy, all of us together like this, with a fire on the grate heating the room and making shadows dance on the walls, swaying to the crackle of burning kindling.*

*Mama drops the crumpled paper into the box, then she touches Martha Jean's arm, and points. Martha Jean reaches for the wad of paper, but before she can grasp it Mama slaps her hand. Martha Jean draws her hand back and studies our mother's eyes. Mama is smiling.*

*Again Mama nudges Martha Jean and points. Martha Jean is hesitant, but she reaches for the paper because she has been bred to obedience and has not been able to hear our mother's warning.*

*Mushy's head rocks from side to side. No! No! No! Her hands are pressed against her chest, one over the other. Tears spill from her eyes and roll down her cheeks.*

*Martha Jean misses the sign. She holds that ball of print-covered paper and offers it to our mother as if it is a sweet-smelling bouquet of roses.*

*I am witnessing it all, every movement in this room, from the shadows on the walls to the shift of my mother's dress as her hand sweeps down and shoots up again, tightly clutching the handle of an ice pick.*

*She seizes Martha Jean's wrist with one hand, but her other hand is wrapped into a fist of thunder that flashes a spike of lightning through the flickering shadows. The ice pick pierces the flesh of my sister's hand and stands there, the handle sways back and forth as if it might fall, but we can all see that it is not going to fall. It is embedded in Martha Jean's hand.*

*Mama grips the handle, and deliberately rips flesh as she wrenches the ice pick from the tiny, trembling hand that rises with the motion. A dark crimson oozes from the wound and begins to spread across the skin and down onto the paper bouquet that has fallen to the floor.*

*Martha Jean opens her mouth. "Baahaa! Baahaa!" Over and over she wails, twitching as she scoots away from our circle, across the floorboards, back against the wall. Her eyes are wide with terror and pain.*

*"Baahaa! Baahaa!"*

*I cover my ears with my hands but cannot silence those terrible inhuman wails*

*issuing from some place deep within my sister's soul, shrill and dull, long and halting.*

*For a moment we do not move, do not dare to move. Mushy, Harvey, Sam, Tarabelle, Wallace, and I sit on the floor in a circle, afraid to move. Wallace is sucking his thumb, and I forgive him his pleasure because he is only four.*

*Mama is wearing a brown dress with a wide white collar and buttons all the way down the front. Her hair is hanging down her back, and her lips are painted to perfection with ruby red lipstick. And I am so afraid.*

*Mushy is the first to move. She wraps her arms around Martha Jean and pulls her to her feet. We all begin to move, fetching water, tearing bandages, pouring our love onto a wound that will never heal. We work as a silent, defeated army, beaten down by our mother, tending our wounded. We do not retaliate for our victory is inconceivable.*

In less than five minutes our mother had taught us to never touch her metal box, and the true meaning of fear. I wondered that day if I was the only one in the room who knew that there was something terribly wrong with our mother.

Martha Jean and I approached Market Street—the widest and busiest street in all of Triacy County—where stores and office buildings stood side by side east and west of the railroad tracks. We passed the Colonial store and the Greyhound bus depot, then entered the business district. Griggs's furniture store took up most of the block on the right side of the street, and adjacent to that were the offices of the town's doctor and dentist and a bicycle shop. Farther down and closer to the tracks were the Fashion Dress Shop, the newspaper office, and the drugstore. On the side of the street where we walked were the Munford's Hardware, the five-and-dime, the picture show, and a lawyer's office. The First National Bank stood on the corner of Market and Rockside Streets. A center divider separated Rockside from the train depot.

Poor planning had placed the white library, the city hall, and the courthouse on Rockside Street where they were disturbed by the noise of the trains. The courthouse ended at Barley Street, which ran parallel to Market. The Negroes in our town seldom went to Barley, and we called Rockside "white man's row" because we had very little use for the street. We were denied entrance to the library, we could not drink from the fountain or sit in the gazebo at the courthouse, and very few of us could afford to deposit funds at the bank, nor were we welcome to do so.

Automobiles were parked at meters along both sides of Market Street and on the courthouse side of Rockside, and people scurried in and out of buildings. It was always like this on Fridays and Saturdays. On Wednesdays the stores did not open, and if anyone passed through town, the only people they were likely to see were the Negro men sitting or standing about the platform of the train depot. Every day, except Sunday, the men would come into town and wait around for some form of labor to be offered.

It was late afternoon, and only six men were left loitering about the depot. My brother, Sam, was one of them. He wore overalls and a plaid shirt. His hair was cut in the high-right and low-left style that most of the young men wore. He was neither the

tallest nor the shortest man on the platform. What set him apart from the others was his light complexion and the sandy-brown color of his hair. He looked like, and was often mistaken for, a white man, although everybody in Pakersfield knew he was Negro. Probably the only person who did not know he was colored was our mother. She took pleasure in categorizing her children by race. Mushy, Harvey, Sam, and Martha Jean were her white children. Tarabelle, Wallace, and Laura were Indians—Cherokee, no less. Edna and I were Negroes.

“Hey, Sam,” I said, approaching the platform where my brother sat with Maxwell James and Junior Fess, rolling cigarettes from a Prince Albert tin. Behind them and across the platform three older men stood, talking and staring out at the four free-standing buildings that were the Market Street Café, Pioneer Taxicab Company, Western Auto, and our red-brick jailhouse.

Sam glanced up. His gaze traveled from me to Martha Jean. “Why you bring her out looking like that?” he asked.

“We’re going to the post office,” I said. “Mama’s sick. She wants me to mail a letter to Mushy.”

“How sick?” Sam wanted to know.

“Real sick. She thinks she’s dying.”

“Is she?”

“I don’t know,” I answered truthfully. “She might be. Where’s Harvey?”

“Who knows?” Sam shrugged his shoulders. “Trucks roll in, trucks roll out. Big boss sit in the cab, point out the men he want. Never say a word—just point. Never say what the job is, never say what it pay, and nobody never ask.”

“Depends on how well a man knows you,” Maxwell said.

“Yeah?” Sam questioned in obvious disagreement. “There ain’t a man in Pakersfield, black or white, don’t know every other man. Getting hired out depends on how low you cast yo’ eyes, bow yo’ head, and bend yo’ back. You know that as well as I do, Max.”

“Nah, man,” Maxwell disputed. “You been listening too much to Hambone. Man, that nigger gon’ get you in all kinds of trouble the way he carry on. That’s the very reason the sheriff all time watching yo’ ass as it is. He waiting on y’all to start something.” Maxwell tilted his head toward the First National Bank and rolled his eyes, indicating that Sam should take notice.

I glanced over and saw the sheriff, Angus Betts, sitting in his cruiser, watching us. Even seated, the sheriff was an intimidating figure. He was over six feet tall with a tightness about him that seemed to start at his waist and move up across his chest and into his neck and jaws, and he had a nose that was exceptionally thick for a white man’s. I guessed him to be in his late thirties or early forties because of the way his hazel eyes stared out at the world with what appeared to be boredom, as though he had seen it all before and would not be surprised by anything or anybody.

Sam stared across the divider and mumbled something under his breath. He finished rolling a cigarette, licked the edge of the paper, then said, “Hambone ain’t so bad. Not once you get to know him.”

“I do know him,” Maxwell countered. “Maybe you think he ain’t so bad, but he be dealing wit’ them white folks and they gon’ kill ’im or run ’im outta town. You mark my word. He keep running his mouth, and they gon’ do something to ’im.”

“I agree with Max,” Junior said. “Hambone came back from Chicago like he’s ready to kill somebody. They’re not going to let him get away with that. We do need change, but he’s going about it all wrong. We need to organize like they’re doing in other cities, bring in the NAACP. We need to be in agreement on what we’re going to do and how we are going to do it. You can’t beat a man down with your fists and not expect retaliation but that’s just what Hambone thinks he can do. I, for one, think we should solicit help from the outside. We need laws to enforce the law—if you know what I mean. Take Chad Lowe for instance. He’s not a sheriff, deputy, or policeman, but he carries a gun and patrols the Negro sections, and we allow it. That’s the first thing we need to put a stop to.”

They were quiet after that, maybe thinking about what Junior had said. It was rumored that Chad Lowe, the name run together as one word by most, was the sheriff’s cousin, but I didn’t think that gave him a right to arrest people. He did it all the same, and people seemed to accept him as law in Pakersfield, although we knew him to be the proprietor of the Market Street Cafe and not a lawman.

“Tangy Mae, post office gon’ be closing in a bit,” Sam said.

“Yeah,” I said, agreeing with Junior rather than Sam. I liked listening to Junior. He had completed two years of college, and our principal, Mr. Hewitt, sometimes called him in to teach when one of the regular teachers was absent. Sometimes Junior talked about earning enough money to go back to college, but mostly he talked about the plight of the Negro. Junior was a lanky young man with a dark complexion like mine, and one day he had told our class that life was hard for Negroes, but harder for those his color. He held us riveted with his tales of the Ku Klux Klan, Jim Crow laws, and injustices taking place right in our own town. We never opened books when Junior was our substitute teacher, except old copies of *Jet* magazine that he distributed to the class and collected at the end of the day. Though Junior never told us so, we knew Mr. Hewitt was to remain ignorant of the lessons he taught us.

If Junior had continued to speak, I might have stayed and listened until the post office closed. He didn’t though. He stepped down from the platform with his appendage—an old, tattered brown satchel that he carried everywhere—and joined me and Martha Jean on the sidewalk.

“I’ll catch up with you later, Sam,” he said.

I took Martha Jean by the hand and began to walk along beside Junior. As we cleared the tracks, I glanced at the satchel he had tucked beneath one arm. “Do you carry your lunch in that bag?” I asked.

He smiled at me, a closed-mouth smile that lifted his cheeks and slightly widened