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## Chapter 4

Next morning I was through hiding. An early wind blew the door wide open and I was the only one willing to close it. Blue haze climbed the trees, soaked the bushes with light. Miz Watkins was still a busybody but I knocked on her door ready for church. I bathed in her surprise, put her arm in mine, tried to act right.

“Don’t have to thank me. Fool ‘em Bessie, try to live a long time,” she said.

I felt full and strong with Miz Watkins, a big cork with pillow arms looked almost young but who could carry her if that bad knee gave out? She said Laurel walked with us on the long path edged by white-belle clover mixed with weeds. How many mornings had these trees covered us? A glimpse of the river’s wild slopes and shrubs. The trail ended in a lot beside a big house.

“Fine things lead to greed. I’m so glad Salvation’s free,” Miz Watkins said.

“Or we wouldn’t have money to pay for it,” I said.

“I mean money can’t get you in. Hundred percent faith. Ninety-nine and a half won’t do.”

She sermonized to signify with my mother because they both had come to the same idea: the world pressed down on black folk hot as an iron but the doorman to Glory left them a key. Out in the street, acquaintances better think before they call me names. I knew crib girls played out before they’re twenty-five living like dogs chained to a post. They were the white man’s lovers until he threw them back to the black. It will never happen to me.

Down through Cameron Hill the houses set back on grassy lakes. Miz Watkins worked for that one and the other one. Wide streets shaded by crooked trees. She could get me a respectable trade. I nodded and found holes in the brick walls, the nasty words carved on the fence. Miz Watkins recollected about the Civil War.

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“I seen the colored swarm the city, the black soldiers and their guns. The sadness and the blood, the jubilation of thinking we was free.”

She preached school and I promised to go back. The pain between my legs came and went. The good streets gave way to the big window stores and the rail line. I pointed at a Ford and said it would be mine before too long. Miz Watkins paid my way like she was my Mama. The trolley man said we could sit up front until the white people came but we stayed back, watched the city glide past. At Bushtown, a whole gang of colored got on and the wild laughing went all the way to the river. Miz Watkins waved and shook hands as the new riders came on. I threw hard looks before they could say anything. I spied some kids hiding in a doorway and could almost taste the liquor they'd found.

The Nickelodeon's white and red sign made me smile. Nickelodeon Girl, Queen of Dreamers. I wanted a movie of this street, every window and face. The light dust, the river, the shimmering coolness. Birdie, Mama's friend, got on board. I couldn't face her straight on. She hugged me, her heart timed to mine. She had one cloudy eye and said everything would be all right then tied a paper flower to a button on my dress.

“God's always near,” she said.

I didn't say anything. The stores mocked us with things we couldn't afford.

“Your mama hardly spoke. Her hands were already folding and pressing like she could make up time in advance. I'll never forget that, how her hands were a blur and she was so 'shamed to be late'.

I wondered if I had the guts to start over in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Half the money in the breadbox was mine. Clarence's last postmark was Charleston and I dreamed of going there. We got off at Battery House where the trolleys turned back. Pure cream clouds above the bridge. Low bluffs to the water, wide steps down to a beach of beaten dirt. The boardwalk thick with couples running after kites, boys selling candy and pigeons. Back then, vendors sang their hustles instead of printing up a sign. If you couldn't sing, you wouldn't sell. Boats headed for picnics on Shell Mound. People swarmed us, always “hello” never “goodbye”. White

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robed deacons washed feet while the members clapped. Preachers baptized sinners for a long count in the cold water. My mind changed direction. I wanted to be washed clean but none of the clothes I wore were mine.

Miz Watkins worked her way up front. I dawdled because I didn't want to talk to women wearing hats big as shade trees. A boy I knew spied me and got too familiar.

“Bessie! Heard you got broke up bad. People say Barabbas took...” I nearly skinned him alive, smoothed my skirt and forgot he ever lived. Prayers fell against the sand. Mama was there somehow. I was ashamed about doubting Bud had been at the window. I searched for him like a prize in the sand. The preachers led the sinners into waist high water. When they hit the river their robes clung like spirits. Miz Watkins saved me so I sang the gratitude I couldn't put in words. I heard my true voice, my own tone bounced back by the wind. It sounded so good I didn't recognize it was mine at first. I stepped into a chant and swayed like a floating bridge. A stout nervous woman sang to the baptized and I followed her. She paced the beach, one finger toward heaven and the drifting birds. Summer lightning burst over the river. Before that day, simple hunger owned me, but now I was satisfied. Never heard my own yearning until this woman singing *Steal Away* planted herself before me. I echoed everything she phrased. My song billowed out to the boardwalk, then returned. Sounds I'd only imagined now caused the rich to walk from the white beach to our side. I dared the voice to disappear but it went wherever I sent it. I plowed the beach with a sound thick enough to stand on. It weighed something. Heavy, then light, older than I was. A trumpet with lots of bass. Think they didn't wonder how a girl doomed to be a coke head monkey woman chained to a hell hound's dick could have such power?

I willed more people to come. The biggest crowd I'd had and no Andrew to pass the hat! I knew this sound was going to be gold. Even tasted the cool soft metal but my big sound suddenly turned small and caught. The church sisters talked me through. They wouldn't let me fall now that they'd seen me rise. If I failed to find the song again, their

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laughter would scald me. Right then a bolt of sound poured from me like rays from a lamp. Long as I sang from the edge of tears there was no need to doubt my voice. I could start fresh, forget being naked in the dirt. It couldn't last. I lost the woman who sang to me. Searched from the river's edge to near the landing where Second Hand and Orphan Girl schemed with a pickpocket.

"Leave the church folks alone," I warned.

My pals said I looked pitiful in my sisters' hand me downs and next time to grease my knees before I suck dick. I put my foot so far in their ass Jesus couldn't pull it out. Orphan Girl's throat was mine when the Peanut Man pulled me off. He had a tooth crowned in gold and sang his words more than spoke. The Peanut Man charmed me like a snake, led me still cussing past the crowd.

"That's a girl, let it all out."

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I knew I was being watched.

"Pretty good for a girl," Andrew said from behind me. I hugged him, remembered how he saved me, laid my head on his collar, saw the ragged tear at his hairline.

"Every time I run, it hurts," Andrew said. His face was close enough to kiss but I hung my head instead because he was still solid with love I didn't deserve. I left knowing joy and tears were a single taste in my mouth. So what if the whole town saw me torn and drunk? I know a loneliness they'll never find. If one of them put something in me when I couldn't remember; better never let me know.

"Where you think you're going?" Viola said later that evening.

"You know, Ninth Street, make some dimes," I said.

"Didn't something happen to you because of Ninth Street?"

"That man didn't get nothing. I didn't have no baby. He didn't get nothing."

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“You’re crazy.”

“Barabbas got me nervous but I ain’t scared.”

“I’ll pray for you.”

“Nobody safe until Judgement Day, Vi. Mama said we live on a raft in a churning sea. So be it. Then see if I care.”

