

**—1929—**

## Chapter 1

Bethal cringed as Ms. Mary's pearl necklace, a mighty expensive thing, soared through the air as if it had burst wings. The light reflected off the pearls had been the most beautiful light she had ever seen. And the strokes of moonlight shone a glittering path, a map, where Bethal could find the necklace 'casing, Ms. Mary, her best friend in the whole wide world, decide she want it back. But who was she fooling. She had charted its path into the bushes for when she'd come back 'cus nothing so beautiful should've ever been discarded.

Going after it was foolish, like drinking milk when a fly or time done spoiled it. Alongside her few pairs of clothes and shoes worn from working the farm with her Ma and Pa, a pearl necklace was simply absurd. In fact, when Master Rainy told his slaves they were free and explained sharecropping (Papa said sharecropping was a cruel forefather's joke), most stayed but never earned enough to pay back lines of credit for equipment, food and board. When they couldn't settle their debts, Papa said, folk fled to Chicago and New York mostly. But Pa, Ma and Bethal remained by the riverfront in a slave quarter home down the road from the big house.

Loyal Papa—and for this loyalty they did the work of ten slaves, at least. And with the work of ten slaves wasn't no use for the pearl necklace. But one day she'd have it, be it this one or another. Least that's what she told herself. When she liked a boy, she could wear it on a date as he courted her, or when she had children, she'd pass it down. Or maybe she'd take to wearing it around the house just to feel pretty like Ms. Mary. She'd imagined herself with a fiancé, silk white gloves, and one of those fancy dresses Ms. Mary got specially delivered.

The darkened sky grumbled a thunderous interruption as if to tell her she shouldn't have snuck out for such a selfish reason. She waved into the air, "Oh you hush, now and help me."

She needed the moonlight again, like when the necklace had been thrown it had helped her track it. She thought she had figured out exactly where it landed. She shifted dirt, rocks, leaves, branches, and some sticky stuff around in a desperate attempt to find it.

A hand draped over her mouth. A man's hand, and his hardened body lugged her close. Bethal thrashed back and forth resisting against her captor. The heavy arm wrenched around her neck, restricting her breath. She struggled as the rough hand scratched at her lips and face. She didn't want to look down at the hand and in the darkness wasn't sure if she'd be able to see anyway.

She didn't scream because what was in front of her, through the holes in the bushes, was worse than somebody holding her down. She could only see white men's legs and didn't recognize their voices. But she didn't give a hoot who they were. Any white person could be a threat, *'Mind your own and be respectful, don't call no fuss,'* is what she should've done.

*Who was holding her down?* If it was one of the whites they would've dragged her out, she thought, attempting to calm her mind.

"We can't be nice no more! These niggers thank they can get away with anything." A deep voice rumbled through the evening air.

"Right you is! I see the way they be having eyes for our women."

"They slow to move off the road now too!"

"I seen one of 'dem tryna' drink from our fountain."

*Why had she gone searching for the necklace? Why hadn't she minded her business?* No, she had to fuddle in darkness, three bricks shy of a load, like a fool searching for it.

"They getting mighty bold in other towns too. Our cousins own a grocery too. He said he thanking 'bout forming a union to put 'dem in they place."

So two people at least owned a grocery store in Jackson? These were locals. Bethal strummed her brain for familiarity in their voices. The Klein's were two white brothers, shop owners—it had to be them!

Her throat closed, breathes fraying like a burning piece of paper. Her throat crumpled and peeled, heat slinked, swaying inside bringing forth nausea. When her stomach settled, courage opened her eyes, looking down, she hoped a white hand wasn't over her mouth 'cus she'd be dead for sho'. A Negro man held her down. A sigh of relief blew through her—maybe she'd be okay—but his face was unfamiliar though she couldn't see it in full view yet.

Earlier, Ms. Mary had thrown the pearl necklace, a gift from her tempered fiancé, into the bushes. With her hair swept back in a neat bun, Ms. Mary looked giraffe-like and could've been the subject of a painting of one of those fancy paintings white people buy. Bethal had touched her shoulder, her dress soft under her fingers, silk or some other nice fabric, “Ms. Mary you gone want that in the morning.”

Ms. Mary kept yonder spot in her vision, though, if only for a last look at the necklace. “The trees can keep it.” Her butter soft voice, smooth as gravy with everything she said.

“Lee John done gave you that, he gone see it missing and be mighty cross with you.”

“I don't care.” She stretched each word as she took off her gloves.

Cross voices boomed in the distance, reminding her of where she was. Ms. Mary was long gone and she, a fool in the woods with some guy and crazy white folk threatening damage.

The white men's voices rose deeper, spreading into dangerous territories with their declarations. She knew these men were up to no good 'cus don't nobody be in the backwoods late at night picking flowers or going on a walk. Mama said don't nothing good happen past a certain hour, and Bethal knew she should've known better, should've waited to get the necklace.

“We ain’t got nothing to worry ‘bout, our Niggers ain’t gone get like that. That’s them outside folk.”

“Suppose we do nothing and they get out of hand?”

“What ya’ll reckon we do then?”

“We gone do what we should’ve done a long time ago—make an example out a few.”

Rain thrashed down. Not warning rain either, but the kind of rain where the sky darken one minute and the next rain pelt down, like the sky and rain holding hands working in tandem all along.

Her body sagged drawing toward the ground like it was a plant seeking burial. She had to get away before she was the example. Would they rape her? Or kill her? Or worse, rape and kill her? These kinds of men might do anything. They obviously didn’t care about Negroes.

“The woods ain’t the place for a Negro.” The boy mumbled next to her ear.

She struggled against his body. *Don’t he thank I know that?* Like she took a stroll, middle of the night whistling, saying, “I thank I’m gone find me a secret meeting in the backwoods of Mississippi. About right time to be skinned alive.”

*What a fool she had been.*

Negroes died ‘cus they had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. She wanted to live. But now that didn’t matter ‘cus she went searching for the necklace.

Maybe they could run. But what if they had guns? Or if one was faster or if she fell? Or if they chased her with their trucks? Any mistake could get Bethal and the guy caught.

The guy who had his hand over her mouth slinked to her side allowing her a good look at him. Her breaths didn’t burn her throat no more. And her heart vied erratically for a different

reason. He was a fine man—even in the dark. His eyes and teeth bright white against his honey brown skin. And his bone structure had been cut with sharp edged of rocks.

“What you doing here?” she whispered.

Drops of water caressed the side of the boy’s face and they both looked up at the steely indigo sky for a moment, then he answered, “I ain’t from here otherwise I woulda’ avoided the meeting of the minds ‘dey got going over ‘der. I wasn’t tryna die tonight.”

The two white men stood about a half a field of crops away; they couldn’t hear Bethal and the guy, she was positive.

“How I got here beside the point. We gotta get out’ta here.” He whispered.

“How you s’ppose we do that?” Bethal gazed into his dark brown eyes.

“We slip away while they distracted.”

A humming noise bayed. Wheels railed over dirt. Two headlamps of a pickup truck shone.

“Keep quiet now.” The moonlight clouded the dusty front window so only a shadow of the driver remained visible. The two men in the back stood as the truck came to a halt near the group of men. “What you think they got in the pickup?”

“Don’t know.” He eyes darted all over the place from man to man. “You see any guns, any weapons?”

“No.” She looked at the guy. “Why?”

His eyes glowed like cat eyes. “‘Cus I thank we should make a run for it.”

Bethal gawked. “You don’t know your way around. Where you thank you gone go?”

“Don’t have to know...just gotta run. Don’t take a genius to know when to run.” The muscles in his face pulsed and tightness entombed his jaw.

He stood but Bethal's hand dragged at his pant leg, pulling him back down next to her. She spread the bushes. "That's Sammy!" Tears trickled down her face. "That's Sammy they dragging."

The guy grabbed her arm, but she wrenched to the side. Wet mud squished through her fingers as she crawled to get around the bushes. He dragged her back. Her clothes and hands filled with mud. "I don't care if you know him. You mad if you think you can save him."

They drowned in water. Gushing down like somebody sat in the sky dumping cloud-sized buckets of it.

"What if you knew him? You'd let white folk," she gulped, "kill him?"

The boy studied her as if deciding. "You say you from here?"

Bethal nodded.

"Then they likely to recognize you." He scooped up a hand full of mud.

"What you gone do with that?" She squinted down at his mud-covered hands.

"I'm making us the darkest, most-unrecognizable Negroes they done ever seen so we can get away."

She opened her mouth to argue and he nearly smeared dirt in her mouth 'cus of it.

"You gone crazy." She jerked away.

He shook his head. "I'm from Catchings, Mississippi, ever heard of it?"

His question threw her off guard. She shook her head, trying not to flinch as he padded her face, neck, and part of her clothes with mud. She stopped fighting him for fear of making too much noise.

“We call it *Catch-a-Nigger-ssippi* ‘cus ‘dats what they do. Where I’m from, you don’t get away from white people looking for niggers for no reason ‘cept the color of they skin. But I always get away.”

“Catchings?” She whispered. The mud slinked down her arm, caking up on its own.

Beneath the grime she got embarrassed—he shouldn’t see her like this. He needed to see her at her best. Not in coveralls cloaked in mud. She shook her head; ‘twas folly to worry about the way she looked in a time like this.

He nodded. “Trust me, this a good plan. I done got away every time.”

The mud drizzled over her body in clumps, falling off in places and grabbing a hold of her in other places. “But if we’s quiet—”

“Look my name is Ray Parker and you can trust me. I know you don’t know me but you can trust me. If we stay here they liable to find us.” He smattered more dirt on his face, neck, and the shoulders of his shirt as he had done her. That’s when she noticed the sack sitting on his side.

Ray Parker? Ray Parker. The name repeated in her head. She leaned closer. “How you gone run with that?”

“Don’t you worry yo’ pretty little head ‘bout me.”

Bethal’s heart skipped like it a five-year-old in an open field. She took in a sharp breath.

“You go first when you hear me say run.”

Bethal grazed her eyes over his. “You sho’? What you gone do?”

“You sit tight while I disable their trucks and cause a distraction, make sure they ain’t got no guns.”

“But how?”

“Just run. You heard?”

She bit the inside of her cheek. She didn't know him but he risked his life for her.

He crawled away. Bethal hadn't been concerned with their faces until then. But when she peeled the bushes back and dipped lower she confirmed it was the Klein brothers and other white men she didn't recognize. The Catchings guy snatched her attention back and she followed him for a second through the cover of the bushes.

"I'm ready to beat this nigger up now, why's we still talking?"

"Why you pick him? His mama used to work for my house."

"Any nigger was good enough for me. Found him walking alone. You feel sorry for him or something?" The man dragged Sammy from the back and threw him on the ground. He was already beat, his face no longer black but dark blue. He clutched his arm and looked like he was in fierce pain. At first it looked like his hands were tied behind his back but upon closer look he was begging for his life. What more was they gone do to him?

The guy from Catchings slid under the truck that fast, visible no more. Her eyes never left the spot where he should be and she finally breathed again when he rolled from under the truck after a minute or so. He crawled to the other truck and his body disappeared again, though she barely saw him roll out. He finished in less than a minute.

"I don't mess with no one. Ya'll don't have to do this. I won't tell."

"I told you to shut up." One of the Klein brothers pushed Sammy.

Sammy cowered while he stood. Bethal looked for chains or ropes but he wasn't bound. He could run if he had the chance.

"Run!" Catchings's voice rebounded around the trees and bushes ringing in her ears as if he had been right next to her.

The white men turned every which way to look from where the voice had come from.

She pushed up off the ground and stood, knees quivering. Mud on her face and all, she hoped they didn't recognize her. "Run, Sammy, Run!" she yelled.

"Run!" Catching's voice echoed.

Rocks and sticks pelted the white men from Catching's hands. "Run!" he yelled again.

And so she did. A crack of the wind followed her and footsteps. She wanted to get as far away as she could for she looked back.

A truck engine rumbled on but the tires skid in the dirt and an err-err-poom-poom sound wrecked the air. They'd flood the engine with dirt if they kept it up. She could tell without looking back that they wouldn't roll forward.

"Next time we bring guns. Coulda' had three dead Niggers." If the last words she heard were boulders, she would've fell over them as she sprinted farther and farther away.

She ran and ran from the deep woods to where the pond met the back of her home. Took the same path near the pond Ms. Mary and her always sat at. Rain clouded her eyes, muddied her shoes and she slipped and fell.

A hand helped her up. *Catchings*. She hadn't heard him behind her.

"Get on up now, pretty girl." He helped her stand, and through the mud his teeth shone as if they lived in a happy moment.

She glanced behind them.

"Don't worry your Sammy got away, too. They trucks is stuck, they ain't coming after us." His expression sloped downward. "I'm sorry to see you go but you got to go on home now, hide 'dem clothes and go to sleep quick as you can case'n they come looking for you."

"Where will you go?" The words slipped out her mouth for she could stop them.

“I’ll be fine. And I’ll see you again,” he whispered before taking off in to the darkness.

“Remember I’m from Catchings!”