

Chapter Two

Friday, October tenth, 2:03PM. That was the official date and time of Velvet Sharpe's first day of freedom. The day she'd wandered out to the edge of the lonely country road at the end of her dirt driveway to meet Sadie, her one and only friend in the world. Sadie had been late, of course, so Velvet had taken those few precious moments of calm to sit by the side of the road and watch the cars go by, the way she used to back when she was a little girl in Sumter, South Carolina. Not that many cars actually came down this road anymore—it was one of the few in the county that seemed frozen in time, somewhere in the sixties or so, and had not yet been paved. Drivers trying to avoid damage to their hard-earned vehicles took alternate routes. But she'd sit out there anyway, wishing someone—anyone—would stop long enough for her to open a door and slide in beside or behind them and carry her off to wherever—the destination didn't matter, just so long as it was far away from *here*.

The postman, of course, came everyday, though Velvet usually only saw him from a distance. He'd arrive almost three o'clock on the dot, just about the same time as her husband, Willie Sharpe, and Velvet would watch from her bedroom window as the two men exchanged greetings, chatted briefly, then went their separate ways—the postman miles to his next stop, and Willie Sharpe up the driveway to the run-down single-family home he shared with Velvet, his wife of twenty-one years. It'd be at least an hour before he came inside, though, and when he did he'd be drunk "as all get out", as Sadie would say, having spent the better part of that hour drinking homemade whiskey behind the old outhouse that sat at the far edge of the Sharpes' property. He'd be

empty-handed, too, whatever mail the postman delivered having disappeared somewhere between the outhouse and the front door. If there'd ever been anything addressed to her, she'd never known it. In the twelve years they'd lived in the house, not one single piece had ever reached her.

Until Friday, October tenth at 2:03pm.

On that day the postman—not the regular one—had come early, just moments after she'd reached the end of the driveway and settled herself on the wooden fence her husband had constructed two summers ago. The young man had pulled up in his truck, smiled the whitest smile Velvet had ever seen on a dark-skinned man, and handed her freedom in the form of a narrow, beige envelope with a New York City return address. Even now she wasn't sure she'd uttered a word in response to his friendly conversation—*in fact, what had he said exactly?* She couldn't recall. She'd been stunned at this stroke of fortune—Divine Providence perhaps—that had led her to the edge of the road on that particular day at that particular time.

Sadie had arrived moments later, and after seeing the envelope and deciding it was something very official needing to be opened right away, the two sped off in her station wagon to the small lake a mile up the road, but not before stuffing the other pieces of mail into the box in front of the fence.

"That way he won't know you even saw it at all," Sadie had pointed out, her voice hushed as if he could hear her miles away at the printing plant where he worked. Velvet sometimes wondered if he couldn't.

"That one there," he'd often say, *"I want you to stay away from her. She ain't no good—no good for nothing!"* he'd hiss.

So Sadie had stopped coming around, except for when she knew he wasn't home, and even then she only stayed a few short minutes. Sometimes they'd sit in Velvet's kitchen and gossip, other times they'd park Sadie's car far off the road and walk down to the lake and back, talking about their men or their lives or whatever other subject that came up, and still other times they'd just relax in companionable silence.

Today, though, there was much to discuss once the envelope was opened. Her *freedom papers* as they liked to call them—the documents that for all their legal jargon and verbiage simply said she'd inherited a furnished apartment in Harlem, New York—would send her out on a personal journey within just ten days' time, and there were preparations to be made before then. Preparations that would ensure she would never again have to darken the doorway of the home Willie Sharpe made sure she understood belonged to *him*.

Those ten days passed as slowly as if they'd been thirty, but they had finally passed, and Velvet was ready, the two new suitcases Sadie had given her packed little by little each day and stowed in the trunk of Sadie's car, which was now in position down by the lake and ready to carry her six cities over to a bus station a full three hours *south* of their town. From there she would catch a bus back *north*, just to confuse Willie Sharpe who, knowing him as she did, would make no more than four phone calls to inquire as to whether a woman traveling under her name or fitting her description had purchased a ticket recently...and if so, *to where?* Phone calls to two bus stations in each direction would be the extent of his investigation, she was sure of that.

She had not, however, counted on her husband coming home hours early today and barely had time to toss the overnight bag she'd packed

with a few last-minute items out the window of the second floor bathroom before she heard the front door open and Willie Sharpe's footsteps at the bottom of the staircase. She could tell by the way he stumbled about that he was already drunk.

It wasn't too long before he passed out, but not before Velvet had to endure minutes of his sloppy kisses and groping. She couldn't even recall the last time she hadn't been repulsed by his touch—it'd been so long. But today it was especially sickening and it was all she could do to keep from pushing him away. Soon, though...soon she wouldn't have to suffer through it ever again.

A long, deep sigh came from him and Velvet breathed her own, one of relief. It was the sound she'd been waiting for—the one that meant her husband had fallen into a slumber that would last for several hours. Long enough for her to get away, even though his sudden appearance had put her behind schedule. She knew Sadie was probably worried out of her mind by now. Velvet had heard her girlfriend's car go up and down the road twice already and had silently prayed she would just park by the lake as they'd planned rather than risk passing the house a third time. Willie Sharpe surely would've become suspicious at that point, even in his drunken stupor.

But he was asleep now and Velvet slipped out of bed, the way she often did *after*. There wasn't time enough to fully wash off the stench of him—the clock was ticking and even with Sadie driving, they'd make it to the station with just enough time for her to check her bags and board the bus that would take her away from here—forever.