

Chapter 1

Pretenses

Marie combed through her closet for just the right clothes to pack—nothing too fancy, nothing too casual, and nothing too different from those worn by the people she was about to meet. She carefully considered the clothing, holding each piece up to her body in front of the mirror, and imagined how she would feel wearing it, how others would perceive her wearing it. Everything had to be well thought out for this trip. Her life was about to change.

Jonathan Brooks, her father, a man she had met for the first time just two months earlier, was going to arrive at her coach house apartment in less than twelve hours to take her to meet his family—her newfound family—for the Thanksgiving holiday. It was a ten-hour car ride from her home in Atchison, Kansas to his home in St. Charles, Illinois, and Jonathan promised her they could talk about anything and everything on the way.

'Anything and everything' in Marie's mind, meant nothing was off limits, and she intended to take full advantage of the opportunity. Jonathan had been married with three children when he had met Marie's now deceased mother, and Marie knew very little about their affair. She wanted to know how they met, what they did together, how long the affair lasted, and what caused their breakup. Most of all, she wanted to know what had attracted them to each other in the first place. After all, Jonathan was a Negro, and her mother was white, a rather unlikely pairing in 1923 Chicago.

Discovering who her father was also meant discovering her own ethnicity. With olive skin, nut-brown eyes, and hair the color of raven's wings, Marie could easily pass for white, and for the first twenty-four years of her life, she had. If it weren't for her guilt and self-loathing, she could continue to pass for white, because that would be easier on so many levels. But her strong need to know who she really was and where she belonged drove her to find the answers, the truths about herself, and she was hopeful her father would be able to give her valuable insight.

Not having made much progress with packing, Marie took a quick dinner break. She thought about Jonathan's family as she ate—his wife, Claire; their three grown sons; a daughter-in-law; and two grandchildren. What were the chances Marie would be accepted by all of them, and what kind of relationships would emerge from their first meeting? She didn't know.

Marie's best friend, Karen, who had offered to help her pack, arrived just as Marie was finishing her sandwich. Marie and Karen had met a year-and-a-half earlier, the first week Marie had arrived in Atchison, only days after leaving her husband and home in Chicago. Karen had been a godsend, helping her settle into a new home and lifestyle those first few months, and despite their differences, it didn't take long for the two of them to become fast friends.

Karen's matter-of-fact values caused the two women to be worlds apart when it came to Marie's ethnicity dilemma. If roles had been reversed, Marie

was certain Karen would have accepted the situation without any effort to change things—accepted the ambiguity of being biracial, the bigotry in the world, and the lack of self-esteem Marie feared plagued many Negroes. Karen, Marie was sure, would aim low and settle for mediocrity. Not Marie. Marie had more idealistic goals in mind.

Karen, a year younger than Marie and widowed for three years, walked into Marie's coach house apartment holding a bag from the clothing shop she owned. She handed it to Marie.

"What's this?"

"Just a little going-away present. Open it."

Marie pulled out a teal shirtwaist dress and matching short cropped jacket. "Karen...this is gorgeous." She tore off her clothes and slipped on the dress.

"Like it?"

"Like it? I love it!" Marie hugged her friend. "Thank you! I think I'll wear it on the first day."

Karen shot Marie a sheepish grin. "Hoped you'd say that. It looks great on you, hon, but then everything does."

The two women spent the evening picking out the right wardrobe for Marie's two-week visit—skirts and blouses, several pairs of Capri trousers, a variety of sweaters, and nightclothes.

"What about the horses?" Karen asked.

"What about them?" Jonathan owned a horse ranch. He and his family were skilled riders.

"You'll need some riding outfits."

"Shoot. I completely forgot about that." She went to her closet and pulled out two more outfits. Once Marie had become aware of her father's interest in horses, she had started taking riding lessons and bought her own horse shortly afterward—a three-year-old champagne gelding she named J.B., after Jonathan.

She put the riding outfits in her suitcase and looked up at Karen. "I think that does it."

Marie and Karen talked well into the night over a few glasses of wine, something they did often.

"Well, I'm packed and ready to go, but honestly...how does one prepare for something like this?"

"What about your cat?" Marie's cat, Sheana, was sitting on top of her suitcase.

"She senses I'm going away and doesn't like it. The Edwardses have offered to take care of her." Julia and Wayne Edwards were Marie's landlords and lived in "the big house" with their three children.

"She'll miss you."

Marie nodded.

"And so will I," Karen added.

When it was time for Karen to leave, the two women hugged, a little longer than usual, before saying good night. No final words were spoken;

none were required—just heartfelt smiles going in both directions in honor of Marie, who was about to engage upon what could turn out to be the most important visit of her life.

* * *

Marie prayed the last gulp of Pepto-Bismol left in the bottle would be enough to settle her stomach. Her head hurt too, and now she wished she hadn't had that last glass of wine the night before.

Jonathan arrived right on time. Tall and well-built, he wore a robin's egg blue Argyle sweater beneath a brown cashmere coat, which was a stunning contrast to his café-au-lait skin. After giving her a fatherly hug, he glanced around her second-floor apartment and said, "You did pretty well for yourself, kiddo. I'm proud of you."

She responded with a smile. The coach house was situated well behind the main house, a three-story Victorian occupied by the Edwardses.

"This place has been my sanctuary for the past year-and-a-half. I was lucky to find it."

The drawn window between the limo driver and the back seat enabled them to talk in private. Jonathan opened the conversation.

"Well, Marie, let me start by telling you about my family, and perhaps more important for you, my roots...our roots."

Marie suspected his opening statement would be the essence of...everything.

"My father was a mulatto. He was born a slave in 1843. His father—that would be my grandfather—was white and owned a cotton plantation in South Carolina. His mother was one of Grandfather's house slaves." His pause allowed Marie the opportunity for that to sink in. "Are you familiar with the one-drop rule?"

Marie nodded.

"So no matter how much or how little Negro blood you have in you, according to the one-drop rule—which is a white man's rule by the way—you're considered a Negro."

His words penetrated her conscious. Hearing someone say it, him in particular, gave it new meaning.

"I wanted to get that out in the open right away. It's important you know who you are."

Marie nodded.

"My father was raised by his slave mother alongside his two half-sisters. He wasn't allowed to go to school, of course, so he relied on the white children in the household to teach him to read and write. That was against the law, but they did it anyway, and it was something his dark-skinned half-sisters were completely denied."

While Marie knew skin color really did matter, she didn't understand it and didn't want to believe it. It bothered her to hear him talk about it so casually.

"So your grandmother had two Negro daughters before your father was born?"

"Yes."

"So was she married?"

"I'm not sure. My father wasn't sure either."

"Okay. Go on."

"In the mid-1860s, shortly after slavery was abolished, my grandfather gave each of his sons, including my father, several horses and a piece of land. My father made the most of it and became a fairly successful horse breeder down there."

"How old was he then?"

"Early twenties. He worked the ranch and stayed a bachelor until well into his forties. That's when he met and married my mother, a Negro in her twenties, and I was born the next year." He paused, then shrugged. "It's never been clear to me which came first—their marriage or my conception."

"Anyway, my mother died of tuberculosis when I was ten. My father died twelve years later when he was sixty-nine, and I inherited the business." He turned to look at Marie. "Are you following this? Should I slow down?"

"No, please go on. What happened to your grandmother?"

"She died somewhere in her thirties, on the plantation, before my father was given the land. Anyway, I tried to maintain the horse business down there for a few years but struggled at it, and I wasn't a very happy person, shall we say. My white half-brothers on neighboring ranches tormented me every chance they got, and between that and the general bigotry of the South, I decided to move my ranch to St. Charles. That was in 1915, when I was twenty-five."

"You didn't mention school. What kind of education did you get?"

"I was able to go through the eighth grade."

"That's amazing."

"What is?"

"That you got as far as you did with only an eighth-grade education."

Jonathan chuckled. "What it meant was I did most things the hard way."

"How's that?"

"I spent a lot of time in libraries, and the libraries where I was allowed had limited resources, believe me. I learned accounting and everything else about running a business from books. But even then, when I arrived in St. Charles, I still had a lot to learn."

"So who inspired you? I keep thinking you must have defied all odds to get where you are today."

"This may surprise you, but whenever I feel defeated, I think about a man named Jack Johnson, the first Negro heavyweight boxing champion."

"You're inspired by a boxer?"

"He's more than a boxer in my book. He's an odds breaker. Here's a man, the son of two ex-slaves, who dropped out of school at the age of ten or eleven so he could work to help feed his family, who was told his whole life you can't do that when it came to boxing, and he ended up a boxing sensation."

Not only that, but the man had a seventy-four-inch reach. Now I know that doesn't mean much to you, but the average reach for a heavyweight is probably closer to seventy-eight."

"How long ago was that?"

"He won that title in 1908."

"You're kidding."

"Talk about doing something against all odds. And it didn't end there. Apparently, he preferred white women over colored ones, and he wasn't discreet about it. Unfortunately, he paid dearly for that."

"What happened?"

"As the story goes, he was arrested for taking a woman across state lines supposedly for immoral purposes. In reality, he was with his girlfriend who the cops alleged was a prostitute. He skipped bail and fled to Europe for a year or so, and then came back to face the music. Did some time for it in your neck of the woods, in Leavenworth prison."

"Would that have happened if he were white do you think?"

"Hell no. I'll tell you something else that wouldn't have happened if he were white. The way he died. This happened somewhere in the South. I forget which state. Some restaurant refused to serve him. He was pretty much a hothead, and he high-tailed it out of there like a racecar driver. Crashed his car and died. That was just a few years ago."

"Sad story."

"Inspirational story."

"Getting back to your story, were you accepted in St. Charles, more so than in the South I mean?"

"I moved to St. Charles because I had heard there was a nice mix of people there, including some Negroes, but mostly Lithuanians, Native Americans, and Germans. But I found out very quickly no one up north wanted to buy horses from a colored man, so I hired a front man for the business, a white man. For years, my customers didn't even know I existed."

So he pretended too.

"His name is Zach. He's still with me, as is his son. Well, Zach is from the South and knows a little bit about Negro culture. His people were poor, and he found himself living on the outskirts of colored neighborhoods his whole life. Zach and I got to know each other pretty well that first year, and he got it in his head I needed a good woman in my life." Jonathan smirked. "I ignored him for the longest time, and then one day this pretty young light-skinned girl shows up on my doorstep. Come to find out that Zach had sent for her to come for a visit from some small little town in Mississippi, and well, the rest is history."

"Does your wife have any...white in her background?"

"She's not sure. She was raised by a colored family, but never knew who her real parents were. She suspects she's mixed."

Marie nodded. "Please, go on."

"Once my business got established, I slowly started exposing myself to the various horse buyers and was eventually accepted, at least in the horse

community."

"But not by others?"

"My neighbors were another story. They didn't know what quite to make of me. I managed to buy this property without a realtor, and to be honest, I think the previous owner sold it to me to get back at his neighbors."

"Because you're a Negro?"

Jonathan laughed. "All of a sudden I was there, and it was too late for them to do anything about it. Anyway, I didn't give them any ammunition to lodge any complaints against me. I had the best kept home, barns, and property. I obeyed every stinkin' law, no matter how trivial. Luckily our ranches are spread pretty far apart, so they don't bother me much. There's a couple down a few ranches who are somewhat neighborly. And of course, the Feinsteins. But you know about them."

Gregory Feinstein was a vice president with the National Bank of Chicago. Unbeknownst to Marie at the time, Jonathan had asked Greg to oversee her college tuition after her mother died. Years later when Marie's estranged husband threatened to expose Jonathan unless Marie went back to him, Marie contacted Greg to alert Jonathan of her husband's threats.

Jonathan let out a heavy sigh.

"You sound tired. Do you want to stop for a bit?"

"No, this is important stuff. Let's go on. After dealing with me directly for a couple of years, one of my customers invited me to join the Central Union Club in Chicago. I was its only Negro member. That's where I met your mother."

Anxious to hear this part of his story, Marie took in a deep breath of air and let it out slowly. Now that the time had come, she was nervous to hear the details.

"It was a male-only club, and Sophia was the person who greeted members as they entered." A wistful expression swept across his face. "She was so beautiful. She had a striking figure, emerald eyes, and olive skin as smooth as porcelain. I was completely taken in by her, and after we talked for the first time, well, I couldn't get her out of my mind."

Marie thought back to the items she'd found in her mother's memory box after she died—the matchbook from the Central Union Club and the photograph of her with several other men, one of whom was Jonathan, although she hadn't known that until recently.

"I frequented the club often after that first meeting, even though I knew I shouldn't have, and it wasn't long before we started an affair." He glanced at Marie. "It was wrong, and I'm not going to make any excuses for myself. It was dead wrong, and it wasn't fair to Claire and our three sons."

Jonathan stared out the window for a moment. "It didn't take long. I fell in love with your mother. It was mutual, and it was intense."

"And Claire knew nothing of what was going on?"

"No." He let out an audible sigh. "Let me tell you about Claire and the boys. She had the twins right away, Evan and Arthur. They're thirty now. Both went to college. Neither one ever married. Evan teaches cultural studies

at the University of Missouri. Arthur is a lawyer on the south side of Chicago. Most of his clients are colored illiterates who can't afford a lawyer. Our youngest son, Melvin, went to college to be an accountant, but when that didn't pan out, he decided to come work for me. Best accountant I've ever had." His face beamed. "You'll meet them all."

"I can't wait," Marie said through a sincere smile, her stomach doing a series of tight somersaults. "So, what do they know about me?"

"I told Claire about you right after our meeting with Greg in September. To be completely honest with you, Marie, I don't think she was all that surprised."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Our relationship is somewhat complicated, and...well, someday I'll share that with you, but not now. There are too many other things...I need to take a break. Can we talk about you for a while?"

"Sure."

"You went through life having no reason to believe you were anything but white. Am I right?"

Marie nodded.

"What was your first inclination?"

Marie relayed the story of Mrs. Hollingsworth, a Southern-bred uppity customer who had confronted Marie where she was a manager at the Marshall Field's flagship store in downtown Chicago. The arrogant Mrs. Hollingsworth had referred to Marie as 'some half-breed nigger girl.' Marie's mother had revealed to her very little about her father, and certainly not the fact he was colored. That incident had been what triggered her desperate search for Jonathan.

Jonathan gave her a heartfelt look. "I am so sorry you had to go through that." He reached over and took his daughter's hand. "I've thought so much about you over the years. I've had struggles with my race too. But not like you. Everyone can see I'm a Negro, so there's no question about which public bathroom I have to use, so to speak. But you have different issues. I know. Believe me, I know. And I give you my word, now that I'm in your life, I'll help you through them as much as I can."

Marie responded, her heart dancing its beats. "You can't know how much that would mean to me, Jona...I mean, Dad." When she had first met him, he had asked her to call him "Dad" if she was comfortable with it. She wasn't, but thought it the right thing to do.

"More than anything, I want to know more about the Negro culture, *my* culture. I want to know how I can be in both worlds and be accepted. I want to stop pretending to be something I'm not. I want to..."

"Hold on, my dear daughter. Slow down." His smile gave her comfort. "It has taken a hundred years for bigotry to become what it is today in this country, and we're not going to change it in the next two weeks." He methodically patted her hand while he stared out the window, apparently lost in thought.

"You can't change people, Marie." He turned toward her. "I think you

know that. You can educate them, enlighten them, show them new ways, but you can't change them. They have to do that for themselves." His gaze turned back toward the window. "You can't change them."

"I know, but what I'm doing is ignoring who I really am, and that's tearing me apart."

"I'll never forget what our minister said once: 'God created us different to understand the need for each other.' It took me a long while to accept that explanation, and there are days I still have my doubts, but it's something I hope I never lose sight of." He gave her a loving look. "We'll try to sort this out, I promise you. But you must realize we're dealing with people with limited and usually flawed views of our people. And they're scared of us, so why would they accept us?"

"I know all that, really I do." She almost called him Dad again, but the more she thought about it, the more she knew she wasn't ready.

"Let me ask you something. And try to answer this as honestly as you can. What did you think about Negroes before you had any idea you were one?"

Marie let her mind go back in time. "Where I lived, the only Negroes I saw were from a distance. In fact, I remember the first one I ever saw was in the restaurant where my mother worked. The kitchen door swung open, and I saw this bent-over black-skinned man washing dishes. It was so foreign to me, I didn't know what to think. And then later on...well, they weren't in my schools, not in college either. Not where I worked. My only exposure to them was in this one jazz club Richard and I sometimes went to."

"Tell me how you met Richard."

She relayed the story about how he'd caught her eye and flirted with her while she was dressing a window display at Marshall Field's. He had enticed her into meeting him for a cup of coffee.

Jonathan shifted in his seat. "And what if he had been colored? Would you have met him for coffee then?"

"Of course not." The words flew from her mouth way too fast.

Jonathan raised an eyebrow. "Okay, *now* tell me how you plan to change people's minds."

Father and daughter held each other's gaze for several seconds before he rolled down the window separating the driver from them and said, "Pull over when you can, Walter. Let's stop for lunch."

Walter, a thin, middle-aged white man dressed in a black chauffeur's outfit, pulled over to a rest stop, and proceeded to take picnic lunch items out of the trunk. Halfway through lunch, another car pulled into the parking lot. A family of four emerged from their car and walked toward the only other picnic table. Two young boys sat down on the benches and proceeded to roll a ball back and forth across the table. The parents followed them with a picnic basket in tow, but when they saw Marie, Jonathan, and Walter, they gathered up the boys and scurried back to the car.

"Case in point?" Jonathan asked.

Marie pursed her lips and nodded. Walter gave Marie and Jonathan a

discerning look, but said nothing. He didn't have to.

"Aside from not being that surprised, how did Claire react when you told her about me, if you don't mind my asking?" Marie said after they resumed their journey toward St. Charles.

"At first...well, she didn't speak to me for a few days. Then the first question she asked was what year you were born so she would have that perspective, I guess." He paused. "She's a wonderful woman. You'll like her."

"I'm sure I will."

"I told the kids shortly afterward. I have to admit, they were pretty shocked. Melvin took it the worst. His first wife—she was white—ran off with another man, a white man, shortly after they were married, so he wasn't very understanding. In fact, he didn't talk to me for a whole week. I told him he could be mad at me all he wanted, but what happened happened, and it's time to move on. He'll come around. It may take a while."

"Will they all be there when we arrive?"

"No, just Claire to start. I wanted the two of you to get to know each other first."

"Is she over the initial shock now? I mean, I know she's not okay with it, but is she...?"

"Is she still upset with me?"

"Something like that."

"She's trying very hard, let's say." He paused. "Tomorrow, everyone will be there for Sunday supper." He seemed to be steering away from talking about Claire's reaction to his bombshell news. "Do you think you're up for it?"

"Yes, I think so." She thought for several seconds. "Do I have a choice?"

Father and daughter laughed effortlessly, like they had known each other for a long time. Then tears welled up in Marie's eyes.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She swiped away the tears. "I don't know, really. I think I'm just so happy to be here, I can hardly contain myself. But I'm nervous too."

"Well, contain yourself real quick, my dear, 'cause we're here."