

COLOR ME BUTTERFLY

A Novel Inspired by One
Family's Journey from
Tragedy to Triumph

L. Y. Marlow



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*To Eloise and Mattie,
the two women who gave me life and made
it possible for me to tell our story.*

*To my daughter—
you are my Treasure.*



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Saving Promise

Author's Note

Reader's Guide to *Color Me Butterfly*

Copyright

Some would say that I've lived a sad life, a pained life.

The room where I sit is beautiful, blanketed in my favorite colors—lavender and white. Colors that I so often dreamed about since I was old enough to appreciate color, to appreciate life.

I sit at the head of the table, a table surrounded by my most prized possessions, my most precious gifts—my family. The family I have often thought about in my darkest moments, my brightest hours. They are the saving grace that has kept me whole for as long as I can remember.

My mind was once full of memories of times when time seemed to have caved in on itself like a rainbow that has lost its arch, its color. Memories I recall having been so bad that I once prayed for death. But those times are forever lost in my mind like tiny dust particles. And as odd as it may seem, it is those memories that I have come to be thankful for. I now know and believe with all that exists within me that certain things are put in your path as a way to strengthen you, to bring you to your center. I have since gained many memories that far surpass those that once lay at the core of my being.

My life? Well, it is one that I cannot explain. You see, my life has never been the kind that one reads about in a romance novel or a Cinderella story. In fact, it is a life that many have shed tears over. But I would say to them, don't cry. Don't cry for me. Don't shed tears for something that I have come to be so grateful for. Yes, I've had my share of ups and downs—more downs than one lifetime might absorb. I've loved. I've lost. I've grieved. I've gained. And for this, I am grateful.

The nonbelievers would call this a sad story, but I like to see it as grace. In my heart and hearts, I am wise enough to know that God don't give you nothin' that don't serve a purpose or reason to make you appreciate all that has come to pass.

I have no complaints about my life, even though there still rests in the deepest part of my soul a craving to have known better things. But each time these thoughts cross my mind, I say a silent prayer and smile. I smile because I've come through the rain, pulled through many storms, and still I can't help wondering as I sit here surrounded by my chi'ren, my chi'ren, chi'ren, and their chi'ren, how it is that I can be so blessed. My blessings have been sixty years in the making.

I smile, and through my tears I see the smile in every pair of eyes, feel the love vibrating from each heart. "You are the reason for keeping this family together," my elder son says to me in a voice that reminds me of his youth. "We love you, Ma, and we thank you for all that you've done for us." This I hear from my eldest daughter as she takes me into her arms. M

second son's eyes hold my own as he hands me a single white rose, and all that he wants to say rests solely in his tear-stained eyes. I stand from my seat, wanting so much to lift up and spread all the grace that holds me, as words that are stuck in my heart push their way up to my lips, but I cannot speak. Humility has overtaken my heart and my mind. And it is now my youngest daughter who comes to me and folds me into her arms as she lets this serve as her words to me and my words to her. When she releases me from her embrace, I turn and look at a table that's covered in a white silk cloth and silver picture frames: frames that hold the photographs of those who are still deep within me, those whom I've loved, those whom I've lost.

All are here today, in spirit or in flesh. They have all come to celebrate me, to celebrate my life. And today, for this, I am grateful.

I am grateful for living. I am grateful for loving. And most of all, I am grateful for just being who I am.

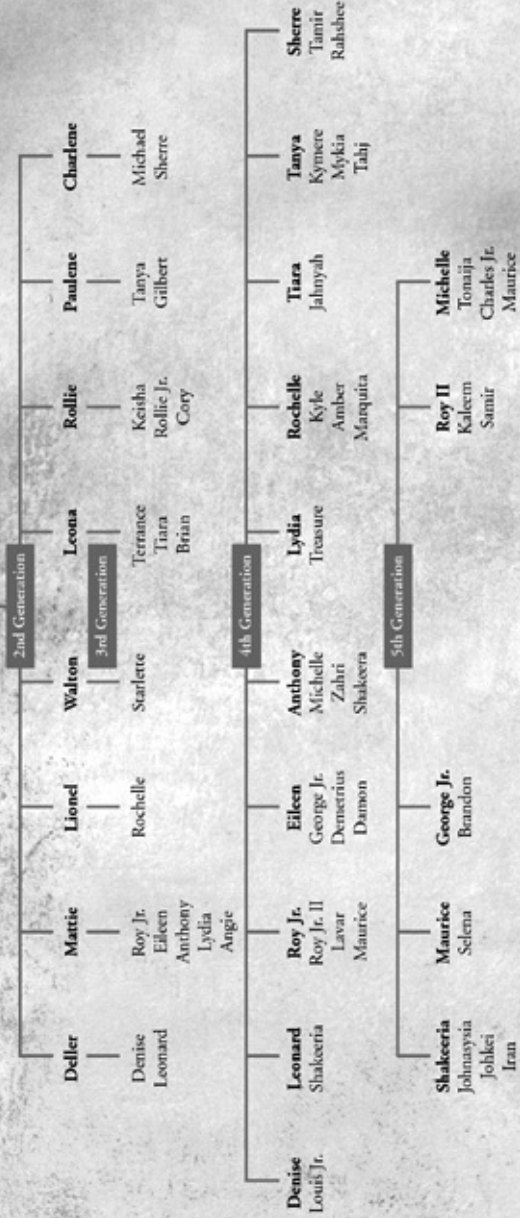
Who am I? you wonder.

I am Mattie.

COLOR ME BUTTERFLY ↔ Five Generations



Eloise & Isaac



PART ONE

Mattie



The cost of the Greyhound bus ticket and his new suit would set him back for weeks, and Isaac Bingham knew it.

From the moment he got the letter from his mother that Aunt Isabel had passed, things had started to deteriorate. *Gon' so quik we ain't ev'n no what ail her*, his mother had written. Now the bus was pulling out of downtown Baltimore at eight p.m., and he was due to arrive in Kingstree, South Carolina, early the next morning, just in time for the funeral.

The night was black and cloudy, thick with a misty rain. The smell of urine and heavy liquor that reeked from the man sitting next to him made Isaac sick. He didn't like riding the bus with its odor, and the way it bounced him around made him feel dizzy. He would have preferred driving home, but it would be a long time before he saved enough money to buy the car he'd been dreaming about since he was a young boy.

He was only fifteen when he left home. His friend Willie convinced him to move up north. "You need to go back to Baltimore with me," Willie had told him while home one week earlier for a visit. "That NAACP thing done figured a way to make it better for us coloreds, and you'll be able to fend for ya'self with a job in the city." Isaac didn't know the least bit about no NAACP, but Willie had said two words—*colored people*—that got him to thinking, and this NAACP was something that was gonna help coloreds, then it sounded to him like Baltimore was where he needed to be if he was ever gonna make something of himself.

At first, Isaac's parents wouldn't hear of it. "Boy, we can't afford to lose another pair of farm hands," his father, Jessup, had told him. "'Sides, what you gon' do in some big city anyway?" But Isaac convinced Jessup and his mother, Ruby, that he'd be better off up north. He'd make plenty more in a big city than the little he earned sharecropping, and he'd even be able to send them something from time to time.

After weeks of pleading and making promises, Isaac had made his case. He worked from sunup to sundown to earn enough cash for a one-way ticket to Baltimore. On the day of his leaving, he packed a small wooden suitcase that his father had lent him and confiscated an old Prince Albert tobacco can, which he would use to stash all the money he'd managed to save.

Isaac stared out into the blackness. He couldn't sleep, and he couldn't keep his mind off wanting to get back to Baltimore even though he'd just left. He'd missed his family the several years he'd been gone, but thoughts of returning to a place with few good memories and no future just didn't sit well with his stomach. Still, he'd be there soon. *Fourteen hours from door to door*, the driver had announced before leaving the terminal.

As the bus eased its way along 95 South at thirty-five miles an hour, Isaac stirred from fitful sleep that had kept him awake most of the night. He stretched the kinks from his neck and back and peered out the window, hoping to recognize someone who could give him a lift into Kingstree, his hometown, about five miles away. He saw many eager faces waiting to welcome loved ones, but no face to welcome him. He figured anyone who might have come was probably over at the church helping to prepare for Aunt Isabel's funeral.

He grabbed the wooden suitcase and walked along the side of the road, passing shanty homes that sat back in the distance and rows of cotton fields and crops that covered the land for miles. To this day, the sight of it still made his knees feel wobbly.

Isaac slowed as he neared his parents' home, a tiny wooden shack surrounded by oak trees and cornfields. He had often shut his eyes to his surroundings and imagined being somewhere else, anywhere other than this place, which had made his heart yearn for something better and his head fill with possibilities. Now he was twenty-one years old. He looked like the man he'd become since he left Kingstree, no longer the boy who was once afraid to dream. He had made a way for himself in Baltimore and managed to push this measly living from his mind. His legs ached and his stomach let out a growl, reminding him that he hadn't eaten since the time yesterday. His mind drifted as he pondered why a death had to be the only reason to bring him back this way.

He poked his chest out a bit when his eyes caught sight of his father rocking slowly on the porch in the same old rustic chair. Jessup Bingham, a man of few thoughts and words, was as stubborn as a mule and as set in his ways as hardened cement. By virtue of the thirteen children he'd reared, and the countless years he broke his back sharecropping somebody else's farm, he didn't see the need for wanting anything much beyond the life he lived. He saw no need in colored folks being overproud or too good for their own senses, he used to tell Isaac. And when Isaac made the choice to seek a better life, Jessup had all but pushed him out of his mind and heart.

Jessup's ashen gray-brown face revealed his age, as he watched his youngest son approach him. "Looks like you done finally made it, boy. We didn't 'spect to see you till we done put Isabel in the ground," he said, his words rocking with the motion of the chair.

Isaac gave his father a weak smile. "I took a late bus out last evenin'," he stammered. "I figured I could make it in plenty of time befo' she be laid to rest."

Jessup's eyes swept over his son, inspecting him. "Well, I spose you must be hungry the way you Gon' in there and fix you a plate. I reckon the grits should still be warm."

"Yes, sir," Isaac said as he walked up onto the porch and gave his father a nod, the best gesture he could summon to say that he was glad to see him again.

Isaac was sitting in the kitchen slopping up grits and eggs, when his brother Henry came through the door.

"Hey, man, it sho' good to see you." Henry grabbed Isaac in a bear hug as soon as Isaac stood to greet him. "How you been, city boy?"

Isaac coughed and tried to release himself from his brother's grip. "I'm fine, but everything is so different now." He looked around, feeling like a stranger. And in a way, he was.

“You almost ready?” Henry asked. “We gon’ be late.”

“Yeah. I just need to change into my suit.”

The funeral was held at the First Baptist Church of Kingstree, the one Isaac and his family had attended since he was a little boy, the one he had been baptized in. Isabel seemed peaceful, lying there in her lavender dress, a wig, and makeup that made her look better than she did when she was alive. Isabel was Ruby’s eldest sister, the one sister who Ruby was most fond of, and Isaac would have been banned from the family if he hadn’t been there. It was a sad funeral, the way all funerals in the South are—with lots of hollering, Amens, fainting, and prayer, followed by the gathering.

After the burial, they all returned to the house that Isabel had shared with her husband Herbert. As was the custom, the women went to the kitchen to prepare the feast while the men sat on the porch, smoking cigarette sticks and drinking moonshine that Henry had made.

Isaac was standing near a tree talking to his cousin Chuck when he first noticed Eloise. The beautiful young girl was gazing at him from across the yard, but each time he turned to look at her, she quickly lowered her eyes. She looked familiar to Isaac, but he just couldn’t place her name. He was sure he’d seen her somewhere before. Maybe in church, just before he left for Baltimore. Most likely she was one of the many girls who had chased after him.

“Hey, Chuck, who that gal over there?” Isaac asked.

Chuck turned and looked at the girls standing across the yard from them. “You mean the one in the yellow dress?”

“Yeah, that one,” Isaac answered.

“Oh, that’s one of George and Affie’s girls. You rememba’, they have six girls. That one is Eloise.”

George and Affie had six daughters and three sons. Eloise was the third eldest daughter. Affie had known Isabel for twenty years, and when she heard about her death, she thought it was only proper for her family to attend the funeral. That was the way of life for coloreds in the South. If someone died, every family member and friend within a hundred miles was expected to attend the funeral.

A look of surprise flashed across Isaac’s face. He had known their family for years but had never much noticed Eloise before. He guessed that she was younger than he by only a few years. She was pretty. Pretty in a natural kind of way, he thought.

Eloise was still unaware of the allure and effect she had on men, especially men like Isaac who knew a good thing when he saw it. Isaac had fancied many girls, but he had never seen one as beautiful as Eloise, with her coppery brown skin and innocent eyes. Her beauty was magnetic. And Isaac was hooked.

After circling the yard like a lion stalking its prey, Isaac worked up enough nerve to approach her. “Hello, ma’am. You may not rememba’ me, but I used to live in these parts befo’ I moved to Baltimore.” Isaac flicked the cigarette he was smoking and mashed it in the dirt with the toe of his worn wingtip. A twinkle sparkled in his left eye. “You one of George and Affie’s gals, right?”

Eloise turned to Isaac and nodded. “Yes,” she said, her eyes shifting nervously toward the

ground as though she were afraid to look at him. He was the handsome boy whom all the girls had a crush on, including her. She used to go out of her way to get Isaac's attention whenever he happened to be at their shared family events; he would always nod and smile at her as though she were a child, which she was. But today was different. Today he'd been staring at her for the better half of the afternoon, and she had noticed him the moment he walked into the church with Henry.

Isaac smiled boyishly and pressed his hazel eyes into hers. "I'm Isaac," he said. "Isaac Bingham. I'm one of Jessup and Ruby's boys." He stepped in closer and held out his hand. Eloise took it and shook it lightly.

Isaac knew all too well the effect he had on girls. His Cherokee Indian mother had blessed him with unusually long, wavy hair, caramel-colored skin, and high cheekbones. All the girls in the South, not to mention in Baltimore, were always flocking to be his next girlfriend, but Eloise needn't have flocked. On this day, she had caught his eye and his heart.

"You look very pretty today," Isaac said, turning on the charm he had picked up in Baltimore.

Eloise looked up at him and smiled. "Thank you," she said.

"How old are you?"

Eloise's eyes lit up. "I just turned sixteen," she offered.

"Is that right? Well, you are a very pretty sixteen-year-old."

Eloise blushed.

"I rememba' when you were a little girl. Now look at you: all grown up."

Eloise smiled again as she searched for a reply.

"I live in Baltimore now. You eva' been to a city?" Isaac asked.

"Uh—no," Eloise stammered. She remembered seeing pictures in school of Chicago and New York and Philadelphia, but she had never thought seriously about anywhere beyond Kingtree.

"Baltimore's real nice. Got lots of colored people and things to do. You'd like it there," Isaac went on. "I didn't much think about livin' nowhere 'sides here till my friend Willie told me 'bout it."

Eloise nodded politely.

"I'm gonna be going back in a few days. I sho' wish I could take you with me."

Isaac's flirting made butterflies flutter in Eloise's belly.

"Maybe you'd be open to going out for a soda pop or somethin' befo' I go back to Baltimore," Isaac said, after a moment.

"Okay," she replied bashfully. "I'd like that."

The next day when Isaac showed up on Eloise's porch with two daisies that he had picked from his mother's garden, Eloise smiled from ear to ear. No boy had ever courted her before, and it was clear that Isaac Bingham intended to court her, especially after he asked her father in the proper way.

Eloise was fascinated by Isaac's big dreams. She'd never known anyone who had been in places like he'd been, and he dreamed of things she could not even fathom. He told her about Baltimore and how he longed to save enough money to buy a house. "A big old house," he bragged. "One that has plenty of rooms—and a car, too. I always wanted to get me a car so I won't have to take no train or bus everywhere I go."

Isaac Bingham was different. Different from any boy Eloise had ever laid eyes on. And she liked him, liked him more than he could ever know.



Isaac sat alone in the last seat at the back of the Greyhound bus, across the aisle from a young man and woman. He noticed the man fondling the girl's legs and her pushing his hand away. When the girl caught Isaac watching them, he tried to shift away, but she looked right at him and smiled. Newlyweds, Isaac thought. His suspicion was confirmed when the man turned, leaned toward Isaac, and whispered, "This here is my wife. We jus' got married." Isaac smiled and nodded, then stared into the night through the darkened window. He could still see their reflections, so he closed his eyes and thought of Eloise and how he was missing her already as the bus slowly made its way out of the terminal and headed back to Baltimore.

The past few days had been the finest Isaac had experienced in a long time. Being home made him realize how much he missed family and the simpler things in life. Meeting Eloise had stirred up feelings inside of him that had been dormant for a long time. For the first time ever, he thought of what it would be like to have his own family. It brought newfound comfort to his soul and spirit.

The night flickered through the window as he nuzzled deeper into his seat, and his mind drifted to a dream about Eloise.



Over the next few months, Isaac and Eloise wrote to each other every week. By spring Isaac had saved enough money to make a trip back to Kingstree to see Eloise. While there, he told her how much he had missed her and how he wanted to make a life with her. "Maybe we can marry and you can move back to Baltimore with me," he commented one evening while they were sitting on her porch.

"All my family is here, Isaac," she responded. "I don't know much 'bout livin' in no big city. I like it here. Maybe you can move back to Kingstree and we can have a life here together."

Isaac didn't put much stock in what Eloise proposed. Moving back to the South wasn't something he wanted to do. He had worked long and hard to make a life for himself in Baltimore. He'd been working with a local construction company since he arrived. And he was good at what he did. As a young boy, he was always fascinated with fixing things, and he didn't take long for others to notice how skilled he was with his hands. Even though he was a colored man, his boss treated him almost like an equal. He had come to depend on Isaac, asking his advice about almost everything. Isaac liked feeling important, and he liked the way his boss made him feel like a man, no matter his color. Just recently, his boss told him he had been thinking about promoting him and would do so for sure if they won the new city.

construction contract that was to start soon. Isaac didn't want to give it all up to move back to a place that held no future for him.

Isaac spent day and night thinking of ways to convince Eloise to marry and move up north with him. But every time he hinted at it in his letters to her, she'd write back that city life was no place for her.

In December 1941, six months after Isaac and Eloise met, the war began. Isaac thought about enlisting, but a leg injury he'd gotten at one of the construction sites prevented him from signing up.

Four weeks later, his boss approached him. "Isaac, I have something I need to talk to you about. Why don't you finish up here and come on into my office."

"Sure, boss," Isaac said. He reached down and picked up the final nail, holding it steady as he hammered it into the board. He checked the angle of the nails, making sure they were just right, then followed his boss to the office.

"I don't quite know how to tell you this. You been a hard worker from the day I hired you. Always on time. Always good work." Uncomfortable, the boss looked out the window at the other construction workers.

Isaac shifted on his bad leg. It always seemed to pain him when bad news was coming.

"You know the war done started, and many of our boys are thinking 'bout enlisting and some may even be drafted." He paused, looking Isaac straight in the eyes. "Well, there ain't no way around this, so I'm just gonna come on out with it." He took a deep breath. "I'm gonna have to let you go. With the war and all, we've been told to cut back. Besides which, the city decided not to go through with the contract."

Isaac felt a small surge of heat rising from his leg to his head. He just stared at the boss, not sure what to say or how to say it.

"I know. This comes as a surprise to me, too, but I've got no choice."

Isaac stared out the window at the other men, all of whom favored his boss, and he couldn't help wondering if they'd gotten the same news. He forced himself to stand tall. *Always stand straight when you confrontin' another man*, he remembered his father saying. But somehow this advice didn't seem to leave the same impression as it did when he was a boy. Today he couldn't help letting his shoulders slump as he walked out of his boss's office and gathered his things.

"You'll be all right," Willie told Isaac when Isaac showed up on his doorstep. "You'll land on your feet, just like you always do."

Isaac lowered his head and nodded.

"Hey, you know what this might mean?"

Isaac looked up inquisitively at Willie.

"Why don't you do what you been talkin' 'bout for the last few months?"

Isaac's eyes narrowed.

“You know, about marrying that girl you met. The one you always talkin’ ’bout, the one you met at your aunt’s funeral.” Willie paused, letting Isaac gnaw on his thoughts. “You got no reason to stay in Baltimore now. Why don’t you gon’ back to Kingstree, marry her, and then y’all can move back here afta’ you save up some money.”

“I already done thought about that, but Eloise jus’ don’t want to move to no city.”

Willie chuckled. “Well, she ain’t gonna move nowhere with you if you don’t marry her,” he said. “You gotta go back there, marry her, and then you can talk to her about movin’ back up here.”

A smile broke across Isaac’s lips. “Yeah, you right. That’s what I need to do. I do love her. Love her more than any woman I eva’ known.”

“Speakin’ of women,” Willie said, scratching his head. “Maybe you should think about it before you bring her back to Baltimore. Afta’ all, you wouldn’t want to bring no new wife round all the women you done courted here.”

Isaac gave Willie a thoughtful glance. “Yeah, I reckon we can move to Philadelphia. I always liked Philadelphia. Hell, I’d been thinkin’ ’bout makin’ that my home anyway, afta’ that contract ended. Now I got no reason not to do what I’ve been plannin’.”

Less than two weeks later, Isaac sat on the Greyhound bus again, with the receipt for his one-way ticket to Kingstree clutched in the palm of his hand. He had spent the last month clearing out his ties to Baltimore and readying himself to return to Kingstree. He had written Eloise telling her about the recent developments, and her return letter indicated that she was thrilled about his decision to move back.

Isaac closed his eyes and leaned his head against the vinyl seat. He instinctively patted his coat pocket, which held a small tan box with a secondhand silver ring he’d bought with the last of his money that very afternoon.

Eloise lay in bed waiting for the sun to come up. The thought of moving to a place where she had no roots, a place that already felt foreign to her, was heavy on her mind. She kicked back the sheets. The room seemed still to her, even though she could hear the children playing outside her door. She looked out the window. A single tear rolled down her cheek. Isaac was loading the final bags into his brother's car. Anxious about their move, he had barely slept the past two days. It had all happened so fast. Isaac had wasted no time in asking for her hand in marriage. After they married, Deller, their first daughter, was born. Then Isaac lost his job and they were forced to move in with Eloise's parents until he found a new one. Not long afterward, Eloise was carrying another child and then another. And now, after they'd been living together in Kingstree for five years, Isaac had returned home one evening and announced it was time for them to move.

Eloise gathered the children and dressed them. Then she got dressed and fixed breakfast. She wanted to support Isaac's decision to move, but she couldn't help feeling sad about leaving the only home she had ever known.

"Are you ready?" Isaac asked when he came back inside.

"Yes," she replied, looking around the small trailer as if taking a final mental snapshot and burying it in her mind's eye.

Their belongings were packed in old luggage and large brown paper bags. The trip with an infant and two small children would be long and difficult, but Isaac insisted the north would provide a better way of life for them. The children would get a better education, and he had a better job.

"Tickets, please. Final call for Philadelphia," the railroad agent called out as he took tickets from the boarding passengers. Eloise reluctantly released her mother's grasp, adjusting baby Lionel in her arms while Deller and Mattie clung to her skirt.

Affie worried about Eloise leaving Kingstree and moving to a place they couldn't even spell. There were all kinds of crime and crooked people in them big cities—that's what her church friend Pearl had told her when they learned of Isaac's plans to move his family to Philadelphia.

"You know you always gon' have a home here if things don't work out," Affie said to her daughter.

Eloise nodded. Her eyes filled with tears as she pressed herself and her three small children into her mother's arms.

“Isaac’s your husban’ and you got to do right by him. You gon’ make the best of it. I know that the Lord gon’ see to it that y’all gon’ be okay.”

“Okay, Mama,” Eloise whispered.

“You take care of my grandbabies,” Affie said.

“All aboard,” the agent called out one last time. Isaac loaded the final packages as Eloise gathered the children and gave her mother a final wave before boarding the train.

“How long befo’ we get there?” Eloise nervously asked Isaac after they settled into the seats.

“’Bout sixteen hours.”

Eloise sat next to a window, her head resting against the seat. Lionel lay snuggled in her arms. As the train pulled away from the station and picked up speed, Eloise gazed at the country zipping by and thought about all they were leaving behind. Large clouds began to flood the morning sky, turning gray as the sun slowly moved away. As the clouds thickened, Eloise settled into her seat. Her legs rocked slowly, lulling Lionel into a deep slumber. As she leaned her head back, closed her eyes, and let her thoughts rock along with the rhythm of the train, her mind brought her back to the time that Isaac had struck her.

Not quite a year after they had married, Isaac came home one evening very angry. He learned that the mill—where he worked in the evenings to support his family and save for their move—was releasing many of the colored workers. “Well, maybe we don’t have to move to Philadelphia,” Eloise had told him, trying to relieve his worries. Isaac’s eyes turned hard, and just as she was about to take back what she’d said, he slapped her with such force that it sent her tumbling to the floor.

“I’m sorry,” Isaac said, rushing to her side. “I been workin’ so hard to save the money we need to move, and this is gon’ set us back, Eloise. I’ll never touch you like that again. I promise.”

Although she forgave him, Eloise had carried an unsettling feeling since then. Isaac had never hit her again, but now that she was leaving behind family, friends, and the only home she’d ever known, she couldn’t help wondering.

Isaac’s voice jerked Eloise back from her thoughts. “Are you all right?” he asked, stirring her from her seat.

Eloise stared blankly out the window. “Yes, I’m fine. I guess I’m just sad ’bout leavin’ this place behind all.”

Isaac smiled at her, leaned his head back, and closed his eyes. He was numbed with weariness. He had worked around the clock to save for their move. Now exhaustion held him so tight, he could barely muster up any excitement. Sleep hit him before he heard Eloise’s lingering sighs.

Eloise looked over at Isaac softly snoring. Mattie lay across his lap while Deller snuggled under his arm. Eloise drew baby Lionel closer to her and smothered her thoughts in his scent. She closed her eyes and tucked away any further unpleasant feelings. Then she asked God to deliver them safely to their new home.

Eloise gaped out the taxi window, watching the city with its fast-moving cars and people. She marveled at quaint Philadelphia, with its miles of paved roads, wide city streets, row houses, and buses and trolley cars that cut from one end of the city to the other. The broad Schuylkill River moved diagonally, with a large park sitting alongside its banks. Oversized bridges gave way to the city, while ferry boats darted across the waters. The driver slowed the car and stopped in front of a two-story brick rowhouse on a street with the strange-sounding name—Susquehanna. Eloise covered her mouth with her hand and gasped.

The house had been transformed into two apartments, and Isaac had rented the small three-room apartment on the top floor. It wasn't much, with its living room, small bedroom, kitchen with a burner stove, and bath, but Eloise would make do. She'd brought plenty of blankets and towels to create a makeshift bed for the children in the dainty living room.

As night fell, Isaac and his family settled into their new home. Between the giggles of Mattie and Deller, and the loud snoring coming from Isaac, Eloise strained to hear the unusual sounds of the city below.

After four years of living on Susquehanna Avenue, Isaac moved the family to a two-bedroom apartment on 15th and Diamond streets, not far away. Eloise had given birth to two more children, and another was on the way. Isaac had to work two full-time jobs to support his family. And even then, they were barely getting by.

Eloise was relieved that Isaac hadn't come straight home this evening, because now wasn't the time to tell him she'd missed her menstrual cycle. Her sister Maybelle had written to tell her that she'd dreamed about fish again. It seemed every time Isaac looked at her, she got caught, just like the fish in Maybelle's dreams. And every time she got caught, it drove a wedge between her and Isaac.

"I don't know why you keep this up," Isaac had said the last time she announced she was pregnant, with their fifth child—as if he had nothing to do with it. Eloise had turned away from the telltale disgust in his eyes. "I ain't move way up hea' to raise all these babies!" Then he stomped out of the room, leaving Eloise standing there with his words stuck in her heart.

Eloise lay down and closed her eyes, but sleep wouldn't come. She sat upright in bed. The sun had long since gone down, and a silver moon peeked from the sky. She looked at the moon, trying to call up the years that had passed so quickly. She thought about how fast the life had changed and the pace at which Isaac was changing with it. Oftentimes he wouldn't come home at all, and when he did, he barely said two words to her and the children; the few words he did say weren't pleasant. The loving father, who once played happily with his children, now treated them like little soldiers. It was as if he were running a boot camp and they were his subordinates. Eloise tried to talk with him about it, but he only ignored her. "Don't tell me how to raise my chi'ren," he would scold.

Isaac left work after his shift ended at eleven p.m. and headed straight to Lee's, a makeshift bar buried in the basement of Lee's three-story home on Broad and Dauphin streets. It was a place where Isaac often went on weekends to bury his troubles in booze and his eyes in other women.

"Hey, Isaac, what brings you out tonight? I didn't expect to see you till Saturday," Lee said when Isaac entered. He poured him a glass of corn whiskey, his usual.

Isaac took a seat. "I had to get out of the house tonight," he said, taking off his overcoat. "Seem no matter how hard I work to try to get ahead, something always set me back." He chugged the drink and slammed the glass down on the bar, an indication that he wanted Lee to pour him another.

In no time at all, Isaac had slammed the glass down at least six times before Lee told him it was time for him to go home to his family. Isaac put on his overcoat, stumbled out of the

basement, and walked outside, where the blistering cold air immediately revived his sense of direction. He swaggered home and stumbled into the living room, where Eloise sat waiting. She helped him to the bed and then put a pot of coffee on the stove. Isaac's next shift was less than four hours, and considering the circumstances, he couldn't afford to lose another job.

Eloise let Isaac sleep for a couple of hours before she woke him. He stirred and shoved her away. "I ain't goin' nowhere," he gruffed before collapsing back into a deep sleep.

Eloise poked and pleaded, but Isaac wouldn't budge.

An hour later, Isaac got up and dragged himself into the bathroom. When he came out, grits and eggs awaited him. He stumbled into the kitchen and sat at the table, barely acknowledging Eloise as she poured coffee into his mug. After he stormed out the front door, Eloise went to their room to pray. She asked God to bring back the man she had fallen in love with and married nearly eight years ago. She wasn't sure what was happening to her husband, but she knew that whatever it was, it wasn't good.

Isaac returned home unexpectedly, much earlier than his usual time. The children were outside playing. When they saw their father walking up the street, they froze. Despite the fact that he had forbidden them to go outside when he was away from home, Eloise would often let them outdoors to play, warning the children to stay close by so that she could summon them in well ahead of Isaac's return.

Isaac ordered them inside. He slammed the door behind them and rushed to find Eloise in the kitchen. "What them chi'ren doin' outside?" he growled, grabbing her by the arm.

"They only been out there for a short while." Eloise winced, bracing herself.

Isaac released her arm and turned toward the children. "Y'all get on in that back room now! And I want every stitch of clothes removed."

Isaac stormed into his bedroom and fetched the thick leather belt that he kept hidden in his dresser drawer. The children listened to his footsteps, and when they saw the belt dangling from his side, they cried.

Isaac beat each one until fiery welts appeared on their backsides. Eloise could do nothing but watch helplessly. She was as afraid of him as her children were.

After Isaac beat the last child, he turned the belt on Eloise, beating her as shamelessly and even more forcefully than he had the children. Once and for all, he wanted to make it known that his rules were not to be broken—and make sure that they all knew who was in charge. And he had made it unmistakably clear that it was he, and not Eloise.

Mattie felt the weight of her elder sister's leg slung across her stomach; the two youngest girls also lay entangled in the blanket, their limbs sprawled across each other. She awoke to the sun beaming on her face in the small room that she shared with her three sisters and three brothers. They all slept in two small beds—the girls in one, the boys in the other. The youngest, a year old, slept between Isaac and Eloise in the narrow bed they shared in the room across the hall.

Mattie pushed Deller's leg from the pit of her stomach, causing Deller to stir. She turned away from the sunlight to salvage a few final moments before the familiar sound of the mother's footsteps approaching their room marked morning. Instead, she was alarmed to hear the thunderous voice of her father—at it again—screaming at their mother for something Mattie couldn't quite make out because Isaac's anger obliterated reason.

She pulled the blanket over her head to silence him, but she could tell from the tone and depth of his voice that today would be a bad day, the kind when she was reminded that he was no longer their daddy. He was Isaac, with a capital *I*. They no longer thought of him as the father who used to play with them, take them to see a picture show, and lead them in their birthday song. Their *daddy* had disappeared, replaced by this volatile, angry man.

When the loud voices were replaced by loud thumps, they all sat up in their beds and looked at the door, imagining what was happening to their mother on the other side.

After the last thumping ceased, the children heard the swift shuffle of Isaac's feet moving quickly up the stairs and toward their bedroom. The door flew open, and there he stood, all his fury. "I smell pee way downstairs. Who done wet the bed this time?" he demanded, his anger gripping each child.

As if on cue, they all pointed to Rollie, the youngest son, just three years old.

"I tol' you the las' time, if any one of y'all wet this bed again, I was gon' see to it that ain't gon' happen no mo'," he shouted across the room, looking at Rollie, but intending his threat to be for all of them. "Get dressed and get y'all asses downstairs now!"

While the children dressed, Isaac went to the rat-infested basement and checked one of the large traps he had set. It held the carcass of its victim. Isaac picked up the trap and walked slowly up the dark stairs, the rat's tail swinging alongside him.

Terror shadowed the children's small faces as Isaac came into the kitchen.

"Get over hea'!" he ordered.

The children eased their way closer to the kitchen table. Isaac removed the rat from the trap, skinned it, and sliced it down the middle. Blood dripped on the table and chair. The children watched, horrified, as he filled a cast-iron skillet with lard and heated it, then put the skinned rat into the hot fat. He cooked the rat on both sides until the flesh shriveled and

the skin became leathery and brown. He tossed the rat onto a plate and shoved it at Rollie.

“Eat it!” he said, his gaze daring Rollie to disobey.

Eloise and the other children looked aghast: in the silence, they could hear the rat’s flesh still sizzling.

“Isaac, no! Please, Isaac, no!” Eloise pleaded.

Isaac turned from Rollie only long enough to warn Eloise.

Rollie cried helplessly; though he was too young to fully understand what was happening to him, he understood one thing—he had just watched his father skin the very thing that scared him as it scurried across the bedroom floor each night. The look in Isaac’s eyes left no doubt as to what would happen should he disobey. Rollie picked up the rat and bit at its flesh.

The children sobbed; tears flowed down their cheeks and soaked their clothing. Their eyes pleaded with Isaac, but each knew not to interfere or even speak. Eloise lowered her head and cried.

After Isaac left for work, Eloise went upstairs to her children, who had returned to their room. Rollie lay on the bed, crying. Foamy saliva and remnants of vomit still dripped from his mouth. Eloise held him and cried. The other children stood watching, crippled with grief.

“Mattie and Deller, y’all hurry up and get ready for school and help me get these here young’uns ready,” Eloise mumbled. There was no need to say how sorry she was; her face conveyed more expressively than words could.

The children came to the kitchen table to have their breakfast, but when Eloise put the plates before them, they stared with revulsion, their appetites lost. Today, she didn’t lecture them about eating their meal. She just let them linger as long as they needed.

After the five elder children left and Eloise was alone with the three toddlers, she forced herself to try and recall when Isaac had become so evil, but no single incident or reason stood out. She fell to her knees and prayed for the day that her children would forgive her for lacking the nerve to stand up to him, the strength to protect them, and the courage to leave. Exhausted and still aching from the beating Isaac had given her before turning his rage on Rollie, she drifted off to sleep.

Several hours passed before Eloise gained the strength to get up. When she awoke, Charlene, Paulene, and Rollie were huddled next to her, as though her body could protect them.

Charlene and Paulene, the one- and two-year-olds, didn’t understand why their mother held them so close as she repeated, “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.” But little Rollie knew. He understood that his mother wanted nothing more than to protect him from Isaac.

When Isaac returned home from work that evening, the children were already in their room. They had come home from school, done their homework and chores, eaten dinner, and hurried upstairs.

Mattie came downstairs to help her mother clean the kitchen. Isaac sat at the table, eyes buried in his plate.

“Gal, pass me the light bread,” he snarled, without looking up at her.

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