

Chapter 1

She stood over the divan, where a decrepit woman lay attached to a ventilator, weeping while holding the trembling hands of the old lady. She slowly kneeled beside her.

“Mother...” she whimpered. “I’m so sorry, please forgive me.”

It was the day Amber and the family doctors had agreed upon for ending the misery of her ailing mother. She had been battling a barrage of diseases, including Alzheimer’s and osteoporosis for the past several years. Amber could no longer endure seeing the life force of her mother slowly seep through the pores of what was now an unrecognizable body. Before the diseases took hold, Ms. Anderson stood an intimidating five feet nine inches tall. Broad in shoulders and sharp in tongue, she was an African American woman highly respected and even feared by some in the predominantly Caucasian city of Levittown, Pennsylvania. It was her wealth and influence on political figures that was largely responsible for Ms. Anderson’s unusual seat at the table among whites.

Dr. Rosenberg allowed Amber to grieve for several minutes before finally consoling her.

“It’s time, Amber,” he gently whispered.

Amber stormed out of the room in tears, unable to stand the sight of her mother’s life forcefully taken away. Next to her Uncle Sam, her mother was all she had. She had never met her father. The only thing she knew about him was that he was a rich white man from Plantation, Florida, who fancied black women. Ms. Anderson told Amber how she foolishly believed that he loved her—until she told him that she was pregnant.

“I’ll get you an appointment with the family doctor. He’ll help you get rid of it,” he had replied.

“Get rid of it?” she shot back.

“What do you think my old man and Christian mother would say about me bringing home a half-nigger baby?” he chuckled.

“Oh, a little piece of nigger ass is good enough to sleep with, but not good enough to take care of?” she yelled with a Southern drawl. “Well, I guess we gone see what your Christian mama and daddy thinks when this half-nigga baby gets here!”

Ms. Anderson told Amber that her father had paid her a large sum of money to move away and keep her a secret. She agreed and began a new life in Levittown as one of the town’s wealthiest residents. Amber was disgusted by the story and, for that reason, never made any attempts to reach out to him. She never even bothered to ask his name, for that matter. Amber often teased her mother, “If it was one thing I would thank him for, it would be this fine hair. Thank God I never needed a fire comb!”

She would playfully mock her mother when it came to managing her coarse hair. Amber vividly remembered as a child the first time she watched, mouth wide open, her mother place a hot comb on a lit stove burner and, shortly after, comb her hair straight. Amber, with fair skin and blue eyes, didn’t look a bit like Ms. Anderson. In fact, it was almost impossible to tell she had any African American blood in her veins. It worked in her favor, as Amber dealt with little to no racial hindrances. The townspeople would often refer to Amber and her mother as the “Imitation of Life Family.” The characters Annie and Sarah Jane Johnson, from the 1933 book turned movie *Imitation of Life* by Fannie Hurst, were an accurate depiction of Amber and Ms. Anderson’s appearance.

Shortly after Ms. Anderson passed away, she was transported to the local funeral home to be prepped for her homecoming service. The expeditious preparation had been Ms. Anderson’s

request. Amber looked down at her mother's body and recalled the conversation she had with her mother years ago.

"Amber, I want you to promise me one thing," her mother had said.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"You know us black folks have a tendency to being late for everything. Now when I leave this earth, don't wait forever to bury me, child. I don't want to be late for my own funeral."

"Yes, ma'am," Amber replied, with a look of disinterest on her face.

She had no idea that day would come three short years later; nonetheless, she kept her promise. The funeral service was held two days later at the Levittown Church of God. The service was an indication of how mysterious and discreet of a life Ms. Anderson lived. There was a total of eight people in attendance, including the reverend and the two pallbearers. Also in attendance were William and Daisy Myers, who were good friends of Ms. Anderson. The Myers were the first African American family to purchase a home in Levittown back in 1957. Their arrival had caused an uproar within the community, which was supposed to be whites only. With her refusal to leave, Daisy Myers was later dubbed the Rosa Parks of the North. The remaining three attendees included the mayor of Levittown, Amber's Uncle Sam, and Amber. It was the first time Amber pondered how unusual a life they had lived. There she was at her mother's funeral and her next of kin was Uncle Sam, who oddly enough was not her biological uncle. Sam and Ms. Anderson had moved to Levittown around the same time. He owned several businesses within the town, including a laundromat and a convenience store. He had been a part of Amber's life since she was a child. As Amber grew older, she suspected there had been some love interest between her mother and Sam. However, with Sam being white and Ms. Anderson being black, whatever they shared was kept behind closed doors.

The service was short and not much was said, outside of Uncle Sam's heartfelt eulogy, which brought tears to most of the few in attendance. The time they arrived at the church, to the dropping of the casket six feet under, was no more than a forty-five-minute process. Amber felt somewhat at peace knowing she had honored the last thing her mother would ask of her.

Chapter 2

With her mother's passing, Amber would inherit the Anderson estate as well as her mother's life insurance policy, worth one million dollars. A year after graduating with a degree in journalism from Penn State University, Amber would have more money than she would know what to do with. Her first thought was to sell the house and travel the world while pursuing her dream of becoming a Pulitzer Prize winner. Amber was a very talented writer and was already the owner of several literary awards, including the Walt Whitman award, the Flannery O'Connor award, and the PEN/Hemingway award. Amber was told writing was another gift she acquired from her estranged father.

Amber rummaged through boxes of old keepsakes, reminiscing of the times she spent with her mother. Her intent had been to eliminate some of the clutter in the attic, but the more things she unboxed, the more she realized how difficult it would be to dispose of her mother's remnants. Amber stumbled across a box of items she had surprisingly never seen before. The contents consisted of bundles of newspaper articles over twenty years old, a beautiful pearl necklace, and a picture of a young Ms. Anderson standing alongside a Caucasian couple. Looking at the photograph, Amber felt she strongly resembled the man and woman in it and pondered if it could possibly be her father and another relative. The newspapers weren't a complete surprise to Amber, as her mother had always been a news buff; however, Amber could only remember a handful of articles that her mother had thought were worth keeping. Most of those articles were of Amber's achievements. What Amber couldn't put a finger on was why her mother had lied to her. Several times Amber had asked her mother if she had a picture of her father, or to describe him, but her mother would always say she didn't have one. Amber gave her

the benefit of the doubt in her death and thought maybe the man in the photo wasn't her father, or if he was, her mother might have forgotten about the lone picture buried in the box.

"Oh, Mother....," Amber said, shaking her head with a grin. "Still keeping secrets in your death. I guess you were saving these for my wedding day?" Amber said, picking up the beautiful pearl necklace. Amber placed the pearl necklace around her neck and began to read the newspaper articles. She was intrigued by the very first article she picked up.

Double Homicide in Oxford: Negro Woman Murders White Husband and Child

April 4, 1969: Oxford police have arrested Primrose Smith, a Negro woman, for the murder of her husband, Oscar Smith, a well-known politician in the city of Oxford, Alabama. Oscar Smith was found in their home with multiple stab wounds and was pronounced dead at the scene. Primrose Smith was subdued with the murder weapon still in hand. A witness said she saw Primrose Smith dump what looked to be an infant swaddled in a bloody blanket in the Choccolocco Creek before officials arrived. Less than two years after the Loving v Virginia case, in which the Supreme Court invalidated laws prohibiting interracial marriage, white Americans are beginning to protest the atrocious law permitting such marriages.

Amber was quickly engulfed in the story and continued to read article after article.

Double Homicide in Oxford: Negro Woman Sentenced to Death

June 1, 1969: Primrose Smith, indicted for the murder of her husband, well-known politician Oscar Smith, and their one-month-old son, Aaron Smith, has been convicted on two counts of first-degree murder and sentenced to death. Primrose, who pleaded not guilty, was convicted after an open-and-shut trial that lasted only two days. On April 3, Oscar Smith was found stabbed to death in their Oxford home. When police arrived, Primrose was found kneeling next to Oscar with the murder weapon in hand. The prosecution stated the motive was jealousy

and that Oscar Smith was planning on divorcing Primrose for a white woman. In a jealous rage, Primrose attacked Oscar, stabbing him repeatedly. She would then murder her newborn child and dump him in the Choccolocco River. Her plan was to come back to the house, where she would kill herself, completing the murder-suicide, but police arrived before she could take her own life. A citywide search for the child's body was conducted, which resulted in the discovery of the child's bloody blanket, but the body was not found. It was presumed that wild animals mutilated the body. Primrose Smith will be shipped to the Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women, where she will serve her time on death row.

Amber immediately became obsessed with the story. A million questions circled through her mind.

“Why did Mom save these?” she pondered. “What happened to Primrose?”

Amber needed answers and immediately began to search for them. She couldn't figure out for the life of her why she gravitated to the story, but she wouldn't be able to sleep until she found answers. Amber read all twenty articles related to the case. The latest article was ten years old, dated January 1, 1982. Amber couldn't believe Primrose had sat on death row for at least thirteen years and doubted she'd still be alive over twenty years after sentencing. This, however, did not stop her from contacting the Alabama Department of Corrections the next morning.

“Alabama DOC,” the receptionist answered.

“Hi, I'm trying to get information on an inmate who may or may not be living,” Amber said.

“Can I have the AIS number, ma'am?”

“I'm sorry, I don't have one.”

“Name?” the receptionist answered, irritated.

“Smith, Primrose Smith.”

“Please hold, ma’am.” Amber was placed on a brief hold while the receptionist searched for Primrose’s information. She knew the chances of Primrose still being alive were slim and anxiously waited.

The receptionist came back on minutes later. “The inmate is currently being held at the Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women.” Amber was at a loss for words. “Ma’am.... You still there?”

“Yes...yes. I’m sorry, I’m here. How can I see her?” she eagerly shot back.

“Are you a family member?” the receptionist asked.

“No, ma’am.”

“Are you her attorney?”

“No, ma’am, I’m not,” Amber responded in a saddened tone.

“Well, the only people who have access to inmates awaiting execution are immediate family members, attorneys, and the press.”

“I’m a reporter!” Amber excitedly shouted.

“Well, congratulations, ma’am. I’m assuming you’re not on the inmate’s visiting list. First thing you need to do is write the inmate a letter asking them to place you on that list. Once they place you on that list, you’ll then be able to meet with them if the inmate agrees to it.”

“I’ll do that right away!”

“You may want to make haste, ma’am. Mrs. Smith is scheduled to be sent to the slaughterhouse in two weeks.”

“Excuse me? What exactly is the slaughterhouse?” Amber asked.

“That’s where inmates on death row go to be executed, ma’am.”