



] Chapter 12 [

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[Felicia ran outside. Velvet was standing with the screen door open to the servant's house. Her eyes were filled with tears and she was ring+ing her hands.

"What is it?" Felicia asked breathlessly.

"Isaiah! I think he dyin'!"

"Oh!" Felicia stepped back and put her hand to her mouth. The doctor! She must get a doctor!

"Mamma!" came the voice from inside.

Velvet turned. "Isaiah?" "Honey?" She hurried inside and Felicia followed.

There on the wooden bathroom floor Isaiah was on his knees, his head hanging down and his fist doubled to his chest.

Velvet went to her knees beside him. "Isaiah?"

Felicia stood there, rigid; there was something about the back of Isaiah's head, almost like a young boy's, the colored boy's head, so

pathetically sure in youth somehow, so happy with living.

"Hep me." He was having difficulty breathing. He jerked his head back; the nostrils flared and his eyes were wide with fright.

Felicia's mind whirled! "Let's try to get him to the bed, Velvet." She went over to him. "Isaiah," she said softly.

"Lawd, he dyin'," Velvet half shouted. She had her wide hand on his back.

"No, Velvet," Felicia said. "He's just ~~---~~" She leaned down. "Come, Isaiah, let us help you to the bed."

Velvet's bedroom, with the high brass bed and sinking ~~m~~ mattress dominating everything else, was only a few feet away. "Let us help you up, Isaiah. Come, Velvet."

Velvet stood up and Felicia took hold of one arm and Velvet the other. Isaiah was breathing heavily and his face, strained almost to breaking, streamed with sweat. His whole body shook.

He sat on the bed, moving his head jerkily.

"Is you cold, Isaiah?"

His hands trembled as he tried to bring them to his face. He looked at Felicia ~~---~~ his breath struggling to come ~~---~~ and his eyes seemed to be pleading.

"Let's put a blanket over him," Felicia said. "Where's a blanket?"

Velvet ran over to a bureau and brought out a patch quilt, one Felicia had seen her working on for months.

"Don't you want to lie down, Isaiah?" She tried to put the quilt over him.

He sat up straighter, his nostrils extended wider. He tried to stand.

Felicia's throat was dry. "I'm going to get the doctor! Keep him warm, Velvet!" She ran.

Her mother was standing in the hall. She was dressed for the after-
noon in a black wool dress. "Felicia, did you⁷---

"It's Isaiah! Call a doctor!"

"What's the matter?"

"He may be dying. Quick! Quick!" Felicia began dialing the telephone.

"Here, I know the number," her mother said. She took the receiver.

Dr. Mathey would be there in a few minutes. Felicia followed her mother out the door and back into Velvet's room. The room was dark and smelled pungently of snuff and hair oils.

The first thing that came to Felicia was the calmness of her mother. Velvet was wringing her hands and looking up at the ceiling. She seemed bigger somehow in the small, lowceilinged room.

"It's all right now, Velvet," said her mother. "Just be calm." And she went over to Isaiah. She bent nearer the bed post. "Now, Isaiah, what is it?" She sounded almost angry.

Isaiah looked up, sweat now streaming in rivulets down his face.

"Where ~~does~~ it pain you?" she asked matter-of-factly.

Isaiah pointed to his chest and then stretched his neck backward, his chest expanding in an effort to breathe. *gal 53*

"Are you cold?" The door by the bed was open to the out side.

"He couldn't git no air," Velvet said. "I opened the do."

Sarah Whitfield calmly closed the door. "Dr. Mathey is on the way, Isaiah," she said softly. "You're all right now. I think it would be best for you to sit in front of the heater."

The heater was in the small fireplace and Felicia brought over a rocking chair. Over the mantel was a large calendar with "God Bless This Home" written in blue script. The blue flames of the gas heater flickered below.

Isaiah, Velvet's patch quilt round his knees and shoulders, sat hunched

over in the rocking chair. He was still shaking.

"Have you ever had attacks like this before?" Sarah Whitfield asked him.

"No'm, but ~~---~~" He looked up and his face was almost haggard. "Some times at night, mah heart gits to beatin'. I'ze even looked under the pillow t'see if somethin' wasn't under theah beatin'."

"I see," said Sarah Whitfield.

Velvet, wiping her forehead with a red handkerchief, was leaning against the brass poster of the bed saying nothing.

Felicia stood in the bathroom entrance. It was mostly fright, she reasoned. Isaiah had always been afraid of things. "Chicken hearted", Velvet had called him. He was afraid even to step on a grasshopper or to drive through traffic in cities. He avoided the army by gulping aspirins and coca-cola. He was delighted when he was declared Four-F. It had been a kind of joke, ~~Isaiah's fears~~ ^{which} even ~~one~~ he shared.

Dr. Mathey arrived with the same calmness. He was a slender, dark haired man with an almost ^{an} aesthetic face. He talked softly to Isaiah, asking him questions, taking his blood pressure, listening to his heart, and looking into his eyes.

There seemed to be nothing wrong with his heart, he declared.

"Praise Jesus!" Velvet said.

Relief even calmed Isaiah's face.

"But I would like to make a series of tests," said Dr. Mathey. He looked at Sarah Whitfield. "Would you have him at the hospital?"

"Do you want him there now?"

"Yes."

"Why, of couse. I'll drive him right over." She glanced at Velvet.

"Can you get some of his things together?"

"Yes'm," Velvet went over to Isaiah. "You'ze gonna be all right, heah Isaiah."

"Of course he is," said Sarah Whitfield.

Isaiah smiled at them then, almost gratefully, but Felicia noticed the look in his eyes, something almost distant and wistful; it was the first time she had ever seen this look on anyone before, and somehow it seemed to speak of things far and away. She wondered for a moment.

Dr. Mathey left, mumbling something about an intestinal upset and panic.

Velvet and Felicia tried to help Isaiah as he walked to the car. But he didn't want their help, and he started to sit in the driver's seat.

"No, now don't you drive," said her mother.

The car drove out of the driveway. "He's going to be all right," Felicia said to Velvet.

Velvet didn't say anything. She started back to the kitchen.

Felicia followed her across the lawn. "Don't worry, Velvet. Dr. Mathey's a wonderful doctor and they'll do everything for him."

"Lawd, honey¹⁵" Velvet started to say. Her voice was trembling. "I¹⁷" She started sobbing. "Velvet hears death BELLS!" she shouted into the twilight. "I hears death bells rangin' in mah EARS!"

But in two days Isaiah was back from the hospital, beaming with the good news that all the reports had been favorable. Dr. Mathey had given him some pills to take in case a similar attack should occur.

"These thangs is like gold," said Isaiah, speaking of the pills.

"I wouldn't ^{take} ~~see~~ nothin' for 'em!"

It was truly good news, Isaiah's recovery! Velvet was again happily talking to herself and the whole tempo of the house eased back into Christmas again.

Now the main thought in Felicia's mind was the dance Marilyn Summers was giving tomorrow night. The day after Isaiah's attack Melissa Stewart had come by to see her. She ~~came in the house~~ ^{was} a giggling, short blond, her ~~brown~~ ^{red,} eyes sparkling ^{was} and her whole face radiant with the pure joy of living. She ~~was wearing~~ ^{wore} a straight tan skirt and sweater with a slender belt round her waist carefully calculated to emphasize the smallness of her waist.

After the initial greeting of appropriate giggles, an awkwardness Felicia had never quite accustomed herself to, they went into the library and Melissa fairly dropped onto the sofa, hugging one of the sofa pillows to her.

"I'm just ex-hawwwwwsted!" she said.

"Why, what have you been doing?" Felicia asked her. There was no doubt about it. Melissa was ~~even~~ prettier than she had been last summer. Her fair hair was short and curled naturally round her face.

"Mother has just been drivin' me cray-zeeeee." A small dimple played on her right cheek.

"What about?" Melissa's mother was a short, plump woman with small brown eyes ~~that~~ darted nervously, never missing anything. Melissa was her only child upon whom she had concentrated with the dedication of an artist, lavishing her with "sweets" of bedroom furniture, fluffy white curtains she had sewn on the sewing machine herself, and ellocution lessons which in no way added to her diminished Melissa's way of speaking by even one syllable.

"Weyull," Melissa went on to explain, "Thez Chriysmus and everythin' and Marilyn's dance and I've got to have about five thousand fittin's on this dress Mother just insists I weah. And last night that crazy old Bobby Phillips kept callin' me up awl hours of the night last night. I just

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couldn't sleep a-tall." She drew her legs up under her. "Finally, Daddy just out and out told him, sayaid 'Bobby Phillips, if you call up heah one moe time I'm goin' to have to speak to yo paaa-rints?"

She started giggling again and then sighed a sigh so satisfactory that bliss was written all over her face. "What are you goin' to wear to the dance?" She asked this quietly, a look of deadly seriousness on her face now.

"I really don't know," Felicia said. "I guess I actually haven't thought much about it." She strove for just the right Patsy Dedham intonation in her voice and sat up straighter, lifting her hand slightly.

"Oh!" Melissa looked at her oddly, cocking her head to the side.

"It's so kind of silly, isn't it?"

"Huh?" Melissa's face went blank.

"Silly little teen-age dances and everything." Excellent choice of words, she considered.

"Uh uh, I lack 'em," Melissa said. She began wagging her head and looked everywhere but at Felicia. She suddenly sat up straighter, almost like a bolt. "Hey, you remember Johnny Richardson?"

"Who?"

"You know. He used to be ahead of us in grammar school but moved away?" Her eyes were sparkling.

"Oh yes," Felicia said. But the surprise in her voice was decidedly forced. She would never forget Johnny Richardson ^{cl}~~---a~~ tall, slender boy with soulful, dark eyes who had a habit of sucking his cheeks in whenever he looked at you. The latter, plus a rather Irish tenor personality, made him the unquestionable darling of Ashton's grammar school when Felicia and Melissa were there.

"Weyull ^{cl}~~---~~" Melissa leaned forward. "Lemme tell you." She waved her

limp hand in the air. "He's back!"

"He is?"

"Yeayuh, and he's darlin'. I'm so miserable about him I could just dieeee."

Death and misery seemed remote possibilities as far as Melissa was concerned. But in the throes of agony she grabbed a second pillow and hugged it to her.

"D'you guess he'll be at the dance?" Felicia asked her. Melissa had worked her old magic again. Even with everything, Melissa had always had the gift of drawing you into the events of her own life. Every incident had the fascination of ~~nar~~narrative to it, a beginning, a middle, and an end, and this together with her own general enthusiasm for herself, gave added interest.

"I don't know," She said, her forehead creased into difficult wrinkles. "He said he was goin', but he and this other boy are goin' huntin' and if he doesn't get back I'll just criiii." She looked at her watch. "Whoops! I gotta go. Mother'll have a nuuvous break-down if I don't get that dress fitted!"

She stood up and clasping her hands together seemed to almost bounce, though her feet never actually left the floor. "I'll see you, heah. At the dance ~~any~~way, and just pray that adowrable boy is there!"

"I will. I really will."

"Weyull, I gotta go." She picked up her pocketbook, one with a long leather strap which also hinted of rich cosmetics inside. "Hey, who you going with?"

"To the dance?"

"Uh huh." Her face was serious again.

"Horace Jenkins," Felicia moaned. It was a humiliating confession.

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"Oh, Felicia! You're not! That goon. He's horrible! Miz Summers ought not to have put you with him." She glanced away for a second. "But I guess she thought it would be good counta, you know, both y'all go away to school and everythin'."

"Horace Jenkins goes away?"

"Uh huh. He's at some military school in Tennessee or some place. He wrote Marilyn and asked her to come up to some bawl they were giving, but Marilyn wouldn't go." She looked at her watch again. "Eeeeps! I really gotta go. I'll see you, heah!"

"Eye," Felicia said softly and closed the door. Melissa hadn't asked her one thing about school. She just wasn't interested, that was all. She just didn't care. No one did. They didn't care what she had been through. They only cared about themselves.