Chapter 4

"The white man's got his foot on your throat," roared the shave-skulled man on the stepladder. "You gonna lick his shoe?"

"Noooo, brother," chanted the street-corner crowd.

"He shoots you down in the street. You gonna keep turning the other cheek?"

"Hell-o, that's tellin' it."

Aunt Pearl sailed serenely past the nationalist rally, the three girls clustered around her like starched white tugboats escorting a blue cotton ocean liner. She looked neither right nor left, eyes focused straight ahead, her face glowing with the quiet joys of Sunday, her day. Alfred trailed a few steps behind, a strange new excitement bubbling in his stomach. He had hardly slept, the time in Donatelli's gym running through his mind all night, like a movie. But he felt more awake than he usually did on Sunday morning, and the streets seemed more alive than ever before.

The nationalist on the stepladder, his quick hands slashing through the air, was whipping his growing audience out of its morning listlessness.

"You gonna keep beggin' Whitey for crumbs off his table?"

"No."

"You gonna . . . Well, look at that." His forefinger stabbed out toward Alfred. "Ain't that sweet? On his way to pray to Whitey's God, learn to Tom and turn the other cheek . . ."

Alfred hurried on, away from the crowd's nervous laughter, past young men leaning against padlocked

shop doors, tapping their shiny shoes and nodding their heads to silent music. He pushed through chattering families, past cool Ivy-League types and their light-skinned girl friends. He had almost caught up to his aunt's bobbing white hat when someone yelled, "Brooksy, hey Brooksy."

A stocky boy with horn-rimmed glasses came out of a crowd of young people lining up at the corner. He had a thick sheaf of leaflets under his arm. Alfred pretended he hadn't heard him, a big-shot politician he had never liked in high school.

"Come on with us, Brooksy, we're having a march," he said, grabbing Alfred's sleeve.

"Can't," said Alfred. "I'm going to church."

"We need you, man, come on," he said. Alfred shook his arm free. "Come on, we have to wake our people up, things are happening, man."

"Maybe later," said Alfred, starting to edge away as a slim girl joined the boy. "Not now."

"Now," she said firmly. "We want our rights now, and you can be part of this . . ."

"Save your breath, Lynn," said the boy. "Can't you see that Alfred Brooks is a happy little darky."

"Harold," snapped Lynn, "that's no way to get new . . ."

Alfred moved on, faster, angry at the sudden sting in his eyes, the sudden emptiness in his stomach. He brushed past the outstretched hand of a wino and caught up to his aunt and cousins. The serene look on Aunt Pearl's face calmed him at first, then made him angrier. Sometimes you'd think she was deaf, dumb, and blind, he thought.

The little store-front church was only half filled when they walked in, but Reverend Price was already behind the lectern, thumbing through his Bible. His wife, Sister Lucille, was in her tall wooden chair on

one side of the pulpit. Aunt Pearl took her place up front with the choir, and the girls picked up their tambourines and sat in metal folding chairs behind her. Alfred took a chair toward the rear.

He tried to slide into his soft, dreamy Sunday morning trance, but it didn't come even when the hymns began and Aunt Pearl's pure, sweet voice rose above the others, filling the little room with a sound like golden honey. The other members of the congregation turned to watch her, as they always did, and most of them were smiling.

Reverend Price began to speak in his deep, heavy voice, the words booming out like beats on a muffled drum. Sister Lucille waved her arms, leading the congregation in the response.

". . . Amen, preacher, say it again," they chanted.

Somebody poked Alfred in the ribs. He turned. A man sitting near him pointed toward the back door. Alfred twisted around in his seat.

Major was standing in the doorway, his muscular hands clamped to his wide leather belt. Behind him Hollis was grinning, his big teeth hanging out over his lower lip. Alfred turned away quickly. The back of his neck began to itch and burn. He tried not to, but he had to turn around again. They were gone.

Services had never seemed so long, the metal chairs never seemed to have so many digging edges. He forced himself to listen to the sermon just to blot out the picture of Major and Hollis.

". . . The devil's agents wear new uniforms these trying days, but their poisons are the same. They say go out and hate the white man. They say go set yourself down in places where you are not wanted. They say . . ."

Alfred let the words wash over him. Devil's agents. What did they look like? Shaven skulls maybe, or big

muscles. That pretty girl, Lynn, at the march. Was she a devil's agent? He'd have to ask James. James would roll his eyes that comical way he had and say, Alfred, my man, if she's a devil's agent I'm gonna go right down and apply for a . . . James. In jail now, maybe thinking I put him there. Pray they don't beat him too bad.

The morning services finally ended. The children turned their tambourines upside down and took the collection. Aunt Pearl was the last one out, telling the Reverend how much she enjoyed his sermon, how sad she was at having to miss his afternoon teachings. She probably is, thought Alfred.

The subway ride out to Jamaica took more than an hour. Aunt Pearl kept her eyes closed, as if she were still in prayer, except when Charlene, Sandra, and Paula got restless and started giggling among themselves. Then she opened her eyes and scowled them into silence. It was hot in the subway car. Big black fans turned slowly on the ceiling, moving the hot air around and spinning off bits of soot. The splintery wicker of the subway seat pressed through his damp pants.

A pretty girl his age came aboard wearing a fresh-looking pink dress, and sat opposite him. Her skin was smooth and cocoa-colored, and she stared right back at him through oversized sunglasses. Alfred looked away first, wishing something would happen, the train would get stuck between stations, the girl would fall down and need help, anything so he could walk over, suave and sophisticated, "I'm Alfred Brooks, may I be of service?"—just like in the movies.

But the train reached Jamaica without any trouble, and their bus was waiting at the corner. They rode

past grimy little factories and projects and, after a while, along clean, grassy streets lined with neat little houses. Aunt Pearl was always so proud that one of her sisters married a man with a good job who bought her a house in Queens. Just before they got off the bus, Aunt Pearl leaned over and whispered, "Lord help me, Alfred, but I told Dorothy and Wilson on the phone how you fell off that stone fence. Be no need to say nothing else."

Aunt Dorothy, tall and bony, was waiting at the front door with her own small daughter, Diane. She hugged the three little girls and Aunt Pearl, then hooked her arm into Alfred's, kissed him on the cheek, and pulled him inside. Uncle Wilson, tall and bony, too, loped across the front room and dropped a big hand on Alfred's shoulder. "You're getting taller, boy, you're gonna be big as Jeff one of these days."

They sat down to eat right away—cold chicken, thick slices of ham and cheese, potato salad, macaroni salad, bread, plenty of lemonade, a seven-layer cake. Uncle Wilson, Alfred, and the four girls dug in, but Pearl and Dorothy, acting as if they didn't talk on the phone at least twice a week, chattered away, picking daintily at their food. Afterwards the girls ran upstairs to Diane's room, and Aunt Dorothy and Aunt Pearl cleared the table and went into the kitchen. Alfred followed his uncle out to the back porch and watched him carefully fill his pipe and light it. The afternoon sun made shadows on his uncle's bony face, deepening the hollows under his cheekbones. Wilson rocked in his chair and pointed his pipe stem at Alfred.

"Still at the grocery store?"

"Yes."

"Like it there?"

"It's all right."

"Opportunity for advancement?"

Alfred shrugged.

"You got to be thinking ahead, Alfred. World is changing, opening up for colored people." He sucked on his pipe, staring out at a row of purple flowers.

"Yes, sir, Alfred, world is changing. Me, I never was past the county line until the war came. Now your cousin Jeff's been all over the country. Talkin' about joining the Peace Corps after college, go to Africa. Got a letter from him the other day, says he's going to be ready when the opportunities come." Uncle Wilson smiled into the cloud of smoke rising from his pipe, and he crossed his bony legs.

"Been thinking about your future, Alfred?"

"Some."

"The trades is opening up. Electricians, carpenters, bricklayers make good money these days. They'll be more places for colored people soon. But you have to be ready, have to have your education. Have to be qualified. You think about the trades at all?"

"Sometimes."

"Jeff says he might go into law, maybe teaching. He's going South this summer, work in those voter registration schools. Says once colored people are all voting the—what's he call it?—yeah, the white power structure going to find more jobs for them, more opportunities for advancement. World is changing."

They lapsed into silence, Wilson comparing his pipe clouds, Alfred slouching in the porch chair. He could hear the girls giggling upstairs, and the chatter of the women in the kitchen. He tried to remember Jeff. He must be nineteen or twenty now, very tall, taller than his father and bigger across the chest and shoulders. He had only seen Jeff a few times in the last three years since he went away to college. But he

always heard about Jeff, winning all the prizes at high school graduation, a scholarship to college. And he had to look at all the pictures—Jeff in a tuxedo at his freshman prom, Jeff being sworn in as president of his sophomore class, Jeff shaking hands with somebody important. He sank deeper into the chair, feeling all the good food lying heavily on his stomach.

Wilson rocked and smoked, and after a while they talked about the Yankees and how the Mets' pitching was perking up. Alfred felt better then. It was peaceful out here. Uncle Wilson and his pipe seemed so strong and wise. For one wild moment he wanted to tell him about Mr. Donatelli, but he swallowed it back and the moment passed. The light began to fade, and Dorothy called them in for more cake and lemonade, and then it was time to calm down the girls, who were cranky, say good-bye, and start back to Harlem.

"You think about the trades, Alfred," said Uncle Wilson, and then the bus came.

Aunt Pearl and the girls dozed on the subway, but Alfred wasn't tired. He watched a huge black man, drunk and bleeding from a cut on his head, sprawl out in the middle of the car and go to sleep. Twice, when the train lurched, he sat up, looking around fiercely. Alfred tensed, wondering how he could stop the man if he went crazy and attacked Aunt Pearl or the girls. But each time, the man lay down, smiling sweetly, and went back to sleep.

The streets seemed dirtier when they got out, and the apartment seemed smaller. It always happened after visiting in Queens. Alfred helped Aunt Pearl open the couch and put the girls to sleep. Then they sat down in the kitchen and drank some milk.

"What's troubling you, Alfred?"

"What made you ask that?"

"You been so quiet. You thinking about James?"

"Some."

"You want to talk about it?"

"Not right now."

"When you do, honey, you know you can always talk to me." She kissed him on the forehead and went into her bedroom.

Alfred unfolded his bed, and sat down on the edge, staring at the green-painted plaster beginning to crack over the kitchen sink. A roach scurried over the cabinet, paused, then scurried back into the wall. There was a scuffling noise out in the hall. The addicts.

Tomorrow was Monday, blue Monday, dirty Monday. The store would be filthy, there would be dozens of cartons and cans to stack. Opportunity for advancement? Sure, they might even let me deliver on the bicycle. He saw Major shuffle along the clubroom floor. Uncle Alfred. The Epsteins would be asking about the attempted robbery. About James. He would scratch his head and play dumb, like you always do when the white man asks those questions you better not answer. He's got his foot on your throat, you gonna lick his shoe? Come march with us, Alfred. Maybe later. Happy little darky. World is opening up for colored people. Devil's got new uniforms. We'll get you. Everybody wants to be a champion, Alfred. Slave. Nothing's promised you. Slave. Opportunity for advancement? You have to start by wanting to be a contender.

He stood up quietly, and tiptoed into his aunt's room. She was snoring. He took the alarm clock from her bureau and put it on the kitchen cabinet. He stared at it for a long time before he set it for five-thirty. Then he snapped off the light. He kept waking

up through the night, listening for the tick, staring at the glowing hands. Had he set it right, was it wound up enough, was the alarm button pulled out?

The last time he looked at the clock it was quarter to four, and the faintest tinge of pink was brushing the window.