

2: Alma Stone

That early Monday morning when Willie Earle was taken, Alma dreamed of the Promised Land.

I am bound for the Promise' Land, I am bound for the Promise' Land. Oh who will come and go with me, I am bound for the Promise' Land.

They had sung that hymn at the Sunday service. Alma stood next to her short, sturdy mama Bessie, their voices harmonizing in a perfect blend of high and low. The choir members were clapping and reaching to Heaven, the congregation too, all their faces known to Alma, young and old, some light-skinned, others dark as a slave just off the boat, with every shade in between. On their feet, swaying to the music, *Promise' Land, Promise' Land! Oh who will come and go with me . . .* The joy Alma had felt then, their voices and souls joined together, lifted up in song! *In belief!*

In the dream she was weightless, soaring, flying out over the muddy waters of the Reedy River below, out beyond Main Street, the Poinsett Hotel and Court Square, past the fine homes along McDaniel Avenue (She spotted the Chastains' house on Crescent, Miz Chastain in the backyard, lifting her arms toward Alma). On past the green spine of Paris Mountain at the edge of town, out into the countryside, dense with pines and kudzu, the bottomlands lying fallow now in winter. Up over the mountains, Table Rock, Caesar's Head, Mount Pisgah. She was leaving it all behind, free and joyful in her flight. She could see in the far distance the Promised Land, more beautiful than anything she'd ever imagined. Bright and shining, gold and glitter.

Then suddenly she was plummeting toward earth and certain death. The wind whistled by her, the air turned bitter cold when before it had been balmy, and her nightgown—blue silk like Miz Chastain wore—clung to her like a heavy second skin, dragging her down. She woke

right before she hit their red clay yard on Sycamore Street. But it was not relief she felt. Tears had come then, copious, soaking her flannel nightgown when her hands could not contain them.

Beside her, Huff woke with a start. He took her in his arms and leaned the two of them back against the plank wall, stroking the tears away with his knuckles. He was a big, silent man, not given to much talk. Alma felt comforted by his body's solid mass, his familiar musk.

"What's wrong, baby?" he asked, his voice disembodied in the dark. Alma could only shake her head. She didn't know, then. Just something, something . . . Already the Promised Land was fading. She longed to see it again, just one more time! She sheltered in his arms, feeling strangely bereft.

Five thirty, time to rise. She rubbed her hands over her face to break the spell. She asked Huff what he had going that day. There wasn't much to do in February. He did yard work for six white families. This time of year, things were slow. She wasn't sure how he spent his time, and she didn't ask. A man had to have some privacy, some dignity.

"Hawkins got some brush out back he want me to clear up," he said in his bass voice. He was getting out of bed, leaving Alma cold when he took his warmth away. When he switched on the overhead bulb, she curled around herself, wanting to burrow into bed, not face the day. The room took shape in the stark light: the stove against the north wall, Pretty's crib in the corner, a picture of Jesus on the cross on the wall by the front door, the small wood table in the middle of the room directly under the light bulb. There was a blue oilcloth on the table, aluminum salt and pepper shakers, the heavy crystal sugar bowl Miz Chastain had given her after Betsy dropped the top and broke it. She rested her eyes on these familiar objects, her things. Huff started the kettle on the woodstove to heat water to shave, poured cold water from the pitcher into the basin on the

washstand. As he washed his face and armpits, Alma studied his strong back and arms, the result of manual labor all his life. *A proud man who has to keep that under wraps.* The thought materialized in her head, as if she were reading the words there.

Her mind skipped ahead. Today Miz Chastain was going to her church circle in the morning, meeting ladies for lunch, and getting a perm in the afternoon. Alma would be alone most of the day, the way she liked it. Miz Chastain would want her to vacuum and dust the whole house, make everything perfect that was already perfect. Mr. Chastain's birthday was coming up Thursday. Polish the silver, though it was never tarnished, make sure the cocktail and sherry glasses were spotless, dust the liquor cabinet, iron the white linen tablecloth and Mr. Chastain's shirts like always. If she put off ironing the sheets, maybe she could sneak a few minutes at the piano, trying to pick out more of that tune Miz Chastain was always playing, the one about moonlight.

Alma got along well enough with Miz Chastain. She was like every other white woman Alma knew, only maybe unhappier. That came out sometimes when she played the piano. She'd ask Alma to stop whatever she was doing and come listen—even though Alma was always busy. She never sat down in that house, not in the living room or den, not ever anywhere, except when she ate in the kitchen on a stool after the Chastains had eaten. But sometimes when Miz Chastain played, she'd insist Alma sit down in the living room. It felt wrong to be sitting there on a white person's velvet sofa, but Alma did as she was told. At those times, Alma saw Miz Chastain differently, not as the spoiled child she usually was, but as someone lost.

No matter what else Miz Chastain played, she always ended with the moonlight song. It reached right into Alma's heart, music as sad and serious as life itself. Miz Chastain told her a

German man had written the music long ago and that he was going deaf when he wrote it. That was as sad as life too.

There was a rustling in the corner. Alma went to Pretty, uncovering her from the patchwork quilt made from green dress scraps, and lifted her out. She'd turned two in January, almost too big now for the crib. Alma breathed in her sweet and spicy smell, something indescribably Pretty that she would know anywhere. She brushed her lips across Pretty's smooth, round forehead and cupped her small head in her palm. Pretty's hair stuck out in six little braids every-which-way. She was the color of caramel, sweet as sugar candy but developing a will of her own. "Good morning, Sunshine," Alma whispered into her ear, which made Pretty bat at her. But here was something else different about the day. Alma took her into the bed for a stolen minute, something she never did. She cradled Pretty tightly against her body, as if somehow knowing.

But she couldn't linger long. She sat Pretty on the rag rug with BooBoo, her stuffed bear that was missing an arm, and gave her a pile of brightly colored wooden blocks to stack and crash. She washed her face at the basin, put on coffee to brew and a pot of grits. Huff had on his overalls now, and a blue work shirt so worn it might rip at the elbows at any moment. He gathered Pretty in his arms and sat down at the table with her on his lap.

The room was chilly, but Alma didn't want to add more wood to the stove, letting it burn out. They'd all be leaving soon, Pretty to Rosa Mae's down the block, Alma to the Chastains, and Huff—he'd go down to the barbershop to hang out with the other men until it was time to go to the Hawkins' place. Alma glanced at him, his dark face which revealed nothing, and tears welled up in her. *His life as a Negro man!* She didn't know where all those feelings were coming from today.

She and Huff held hands to say their blessing in unison. They ate in silence, gospel music on the radio in the background, Pretty singing a nonsense song to BooBoo. Alma let her mind float free, trying to capture a piece of the Promised Land. It had dissipated like the early morning fog when the sun rose in the bottomlands around the homeplace, leaving behind a longing, the same mournful note the old gospels sounded, like the slaves used to sing. Like her great-grandmother Callie still did. She spooned cool grits into Pretty's mouth.

When Huff left, she got Pretty dressed, hurrying, paying now for that extra minute when she'd taken her back to bed. But she took time to empty the coffee can she kept on the top cupboard shelf, money she was saving for Pretty's college. There was one hundred and seventy-five dollars in the can today, down five from yesterday. He never took more than five, though that was a lot, considering. When he could, he repaid it. Neither of them ever mentioned it.