Chapter 12

The junior year was when students selected their major at NYU. James asked Mrs. Howard for her opinion. First, she reiterated her disdain for politics and politicians. She even went so far as to imply he could not stay in her building if he chose that path. Then she noted her observations of him during the 2+ years she had known him.

"Your love of *Dieu*, your desire to teach. It seems a good start for a preacher or pastor. The Bible the Smiths gave you is now filled with your notes and folded corners, hmm."

James thought about the Bible, how worn it had become during his years of limited freedom. His "Holy Webster" helped him through the tough times while leading him to the better times. His new favorite scripture, Jeremiah 29:11, gave him hope that he, and all Negroes, have the future God promises in that scripture.

"Yeah, sharing God's Word would be purposeful. I don't know about it being a job, though."

"You explain yourself well. And you love to teach others, hmm. What about being a teacher, or perhaps a professor?"

"Interesting thought, one I have had as well. That's one way I can honor Miss Moses' request to help others whenever I can."

"You are also very good at seeing things that have not yet been done or built. You love Arithmetic and Science—I think maybe your favorite subjects. And again, your ability to share your ideas with others who cannot see it. Sounds like an engineer to me, hmm."

"You are definitely right about Arithmetic being my favorite subject."

"*Oui*, James. I will say this and then say no more. You could be a lawyer—but please, not a politician. You could be a writer, but

please, not a politician. The lessons you have shared with me—*tres magnifique, oui*. Your mind, your education, your life, has prepared you for so many things. It is nice to have so many choices, hmm? You have choices not many have. Choose the one for you, not for anyone else. I know you will succeed."

"Thank you, Mrs. Howard. I will sleep and pray on it."

". . . These classes will be tougher than the ones before. Much more arithmetic, including The Calculus. Huh—I heard about that. Folks say Geometry and Trigonometry ain't nothing! That's why they call it—The Calculus. Showing it respect! It's going to be tough, but I'm confident. I'm ready. The teachers and many of the students will change. The area I go to class will change as well. Please, God, don't let me run into Carlton," James mumbled as he walked to a building to get his books for the semester. Looking around for the building, he realized something that had been hiding in plain sight.

"On the plantation at Penelope Farms, even though Whites owned everything, there were more Negroes than Whites living there. Well, existing there. I was actually part of a majority on Penelope Farms. It never felt that way because the Whites had all the power—and weapons. I guess that's what Nat Turner realized as well.

"And I'm part of a majority at Mrs. Howard's building. Kind of like and nothing like the shacks at Penelope Farms. There are more Whites at work, but I'm definitely a minority here at the University. A minor minority" he mumbled to himself as he entered the bookstore.

Eyeing a sign, he mumbled, "Uh—yes. Textbooks that way, so I guess I'll go that way."

He continued walking, observing his surroundings, while he mused, "But the thing is, I never realized White people came in so many different—different colors. And shades. I thought they

would all be—uh, White! There are dark ones with light hair. Light ones with dark hair. In-between ones with in-between hair! And vice versa and versa vice! And various eye colors. This is part of my ongoing transition."

Anytime James saw a Negro on campus, he took notice. He met one in the library. Jeff from Philadelphia. Maybe like I'm from Ohio, James had supposed. They never went beyond hellos, though.

To his surprise, a Negro man was in another line slightly ahead of him. Their eyes met, and both nodded. They arrived at the counter at the same time, handing their lists of books to the workers.

Could be a runner. I'm not asking. Won't even look that way—

"Hey. Bobby—from Boston. Bobby Harris," the man said as he turned toward James.

"Hey. James. My name is James—from Ohio."

An uncomfortable silence erupted between them amid the bustle of the book store. Their minds raced with warnings from their families until the workers came back with identical stacks of books.

"Looks like we'll be seeing a lot of each other, huh, James?"

"Yeah, it seems. You're an engineer?"

"Not yet. But soon to be. Where you live?"

"In the city. You?"

"Same. Give me your address. I'll come by."

"Nah, I'm gonna be moving soon. I'll give you my new address then. We can just meet here on campus. In the library—and, of course, in class, okay?"

"All right," Bobby replied as they walked away. "So, what kind of Engineer you want to be?"

"I don't know. The kind that builds stuff. Buildings, bridges, roads. Things like that."

"Yeah? Me, too."

"James, James be careful, *si'l vous plaît*. That is all I can say."

"You said I should get a friend, a best friend."

"Will you tell him you are a runner? *Le fugitif*, hmm?"

"No. No, not yet. I don't know—"

"James, wait. Listen, hmm. Uh, some people may not—"

"I know, Mrs. Howard. He could be helping slave catchers. I won't ever forget that."

"*Oui*, that could be. But I—"

"Mrs. Howard. You were right. I need a friend. Honestly, I always realized it. I just needed to admit it to myself. I do—I need a friend. I'm lonely. Amazing, huh? In a city of one million people, I'm—I'm lonely. I want a friend. This is my best chance. It may be my only chance. Someone who does the things I do, goes to the places I go, shares the dreams I have."

"*Oui*, James. I do understand. But what I am saying—if you allow me—is that uh, some people may not wish to be your friend. Be friends with *le fugitif*, hmm. It is a big decision for them also. A chance for danger for them. That is what I am saying. You be careful. Do not go so fast. Listen carefully to what he says and does not say, hmm."

"I—huh! I didn't—I never thought about that."

"I am not saying he feels that way. But you need to know this. It is dangerous for you, *oui*. It is dangerous for him, also. For any Negro man in this country to be your friend."

"Huh, now *that* I understand."

"And James, *oui*, sometimes they work with slave catchers, too. All I am saying is be careful, *si'l vous plaît*!"

"*Oui, oui*, Mrs. Howard. I remember you and Mr. Bill saying that. I'll be careful. I'll get to know him first. How do you say—uh, *mieux vout agir que parler*."

"Hmm, not bad James, and *oui, oui*. Actions do—they always do speak louder than words. Take time. Look closely. Listen carefully. Hear with your heart, with your spirit, *si'l vous plaît*!"

"See-voo-play, see-voo-play! Don't worry. How do you say 'Don't worry' in French?"

"Alas, James. When it comes to you, 'Do not worry' is not in my vocabulary, hmm."

The chess games were going strong as two men stood off to themselves. Winnie, his back pressed against a wide tree trunk, continually scanned all around and past Officer Palmer, who was animated in his tone.

". . . that goddamn sonuvabitch got away! My goddamn money jest ran off!"

"Our money. Shit!" exclaimed Winnie as he pointed to the throng in general and to several Negroes in particular.

He spewed, "Shit, we oughtta jest grab one of these boys right here!"

"Yeah. I been talkin' to a couple. One don't know nobody 'round here. He come fo' the chess. Let's try later tonight."

"Good. Bosch gonna be here tommora'. Shit! How the hell that boy got out?"

"Don't know, Winnie."

"Shit! That boy saw me. Knows my face!"

"Hell, he most likely long gone by now. In Canada. Might've run past Canada," Officer Palmer replied and then chuckled at his attempted humor.

"Yeah—Canada."

James struggled for oxygen. The combination of the thick rope wrapped around his neck and the soiled rag stuffed in his mouth made getting anything more than a whisper of a gasp of air impossible. He was lying face down on the floor of the wagon, bound at the ankles and wrists. The creak of the wagon wheels took him back 14 years to his initial journey to Penelope Farms. A strident, tormenting monologue served as a companion for him on this journey back to the past.

Oh, my Lord! He got me. Carlton caught me!

"Hey, hey, hey. Finally caught yo' ass, huh, James. My daddy gone be so glad. He gone let me stay 'cause I got yo' ass! He gone whup you somethin' good, too," Carlton crowed with glee as he rode on the buckboard alongside a white-haired driver. "I can't wait to see that!"

My Lord! I—I didn't—I couldn't run fast enough! How—why did You let him catch me, Lord? Why? I knew I should've gone the other way. Why . . .

"Yeah, he gone be so happy. He gone let me stay, hee, hee. I ain't gonna hafta' go back to New Yawk City no mo'. All these heah goddamn Nawtherners make me sick. And I gits to see ya' git yo' ass whupped—ag'in!"

Hee, hee. Git yo' ass whupped! Hee, hee. Git yo' ass whupped! Oh, my Lord! Carlton got me! He—he got me! Hee, hee. Git yo' ass whupped! He—he got me! . . .

James rolled over, his face soaked from tears and his body dripping with perspiration. He got out of bed, steadied himself on his trembling legs, and tried to settle his queasy stomach.

"My Lord, Jesus. I—I can't—I just can't keep on living like this. I can't—" he muttered between halted breaths. "I can't live like this. May—maybe I should go—to Canada. Maybe I should. How, how can I do so well one day, and then the next day be like this? I got to do better. I got to—or go to Canada."

James and Bobby ended up being the only Negroes in their classes, which cemented their bond. They had their first choice of partners now when the situations arose instead of being forcibly paired with whoever was left. Even after both had proven their academic acumen, classmates resisted their partnerships.

"Calculus is a bitch," Bobby whispered to James during Prof. Martin's lecture.

"I'm not sure, but I think I get it. If his answer is 15—"

". . . so, when you take the first derivative, you multiply the exponent by the coefficient, and then subtract one from the exponent," Prof. Martin elucidated as the sound of chalk scraping slate filled the room. He completed his writing on the chalkboard and calmly commented, "And your answer is 15. Just that simple. Are there any questions?"

"Simple? Huh, for who? Him? And you, Mr. Brain. Yeah, James, the Brain."

"I just got it right this time."

Leaving school, they talked about weekend plans. "Yeah, I'm going to see Frederick Douglass over at the Faraway Club in Brooklyn," Bobby said as James' eyes went back and forth, scanning the area and people ahead of them.

"Frederick Douglass!" James exclaimed as he stopped in his tracks.

"Yeah. Do you like him?"

Calm down, James, calm down. Hoo!

"Yeah, I uh, really like him. When is it? And where is the Faraway Club? I'll meet you there."

I got to keep calm.

"Just come by my place on Saturday. We can hang out and go there later in the evening. Ever heard of the Luca Family Singers?"

"Nah."

"They're gospel singers. They gonna be there, too."

"C'mon. It's right up here," Bobby said as he and James approached his apartment building. James followed him onto the elevator, and they went up to the 8th floor. Entering Bobby's spacious apartment, he was immediately impressed with its size.

"You got your own bathroom?" James exclaimed as he walked around.

"Yeah."

"We got two on each floor. Uh, that's one reason why I'm moving soon," he replied as he bounced up and down in a cushiony chair. "This is a nice place, Bobby. Nice chair, too."

"Thanks."

"What do you do around here?" James asked. He bounced up and strode to the window.

"Hang out mostly. Go over to the park."

"That park down there?" James asked as he pointed out of the window.

"Huh—yeah," Bobby answered as he looked up from his digging through a desk drawer. "It'll be full soon. Uh, do you play chess?"

"Uh, no. I've read about it, but I've never played."

"I'll show it to ya'," Bobby said as he stood up with a box in his arms. "They play over at the park I go to. They got this man—uh, over there. He plays 20 or 30 people at one time!"

"You can do that?"

"Yeah—if you're good enough! You got to be real good."

"Oh."

"What do you know about chess?"

"I know the piece names. Uh, the pawn, rook, bishop, uh, king, queen. Oh, and the knight. Some of the moves."

"Good. We got some time before the ferry leaves. You set it up like this. The queen always goes on her color, and . . ."

James was apprehensive about bringing Bobby to Mrs. Howard's building. He fully realized the threat to his freedom, but that was not his primary concern. He feared exposing Mrs. Howard and her intrepid generosity. Or revealing to the wrong person the mysteries of the secretive Mr. Bill and his network of contacts. Or the 7 runaways currently living there. Or the scores of potential runaways that may come to live there in the future. Or any free Negroes who may be there.

Too much of a risk. I can't risk it. Or them. But what risk? Bobby's okay, isn't he? Yeah—but I don't know. I mean, sooner or later, I will have to. But when? I don't know. His actions—his words. They seem okay.

Mrs. Howard was torn also with her own reasoning.

"If you do not, he may become suspicious, hmm?" she said as she paced about his room.

"Yes, but we must pick a good time. A good time. Yeah."

"*Oui*, one weekend day would be good."

"We may want to have Mr. Bill here—and you leave."

"I do not understand why, James," she replied with surprise. "We will think on that, hmm."

"No, Mrs. Howard. I don't want to risk you. I respect you too much. 'Respect'?"

"*Respect*."

"Res-pet. I love our friendship. 'Friendship'?"

"*Amitié*."

"Ah-me-tee. My desire for Bobby's friendship doesn't mean I'm willing to risk your cause. "Desire'?"

"Uh, James. Why you choose these words, hmm?"

"Oh, no reason. Just asking questions. Making statements. Learning French."

"Okay. Uh, *souhait*."

"Soo-way. I want you to be safe."

"I, too, wish for you to be safe. You need to use Alfred's room as your own."

"Huh—why?"

"James! Your writings. Your assignments you cannot turn in, hmm."

"Oh, yeah! Well, I could take some of them down—"

"Which one, hmm? This will be better. Alfred will be gone, and you will be safe."

"We will be safe."

"And I will be here, hmm."

". . . I live near the Blue Ridge Building," James replied as he and his main workmate shared lunchtime conversations. James was honored that Empire Metal Works' most popular worker had befriended him. All the Negroes and many of the Whites wanted a friendship with Big Man.

As he dug into a bowl that had James' interest, he asked, "That's uptown, right?"

"Yeah, uptown. What is that you're eating?"

"This?" he asked, and then bellowed out that laughter. "This here is *real* food. Some rice. Tomaters. Lil' bit of okree. Some poke and chicken. Good eatin'."

Laughing, James replied, "Yeah. Makes this here chicken—and, and whatever Mrs. Howard put in here seem uh—ordinary."

"Huh. Mrs. Howard—where she from?"

"Uh, France, I think."

"Dang. You from Cincinatta. She from France. How the hell you end up there?"

Boy! Who do I trust? Who can I trust? How can I tell—who can I tell? Who can I risk everything on? Huh—nobody. Nobody! . . . What they're thinking. What kind of person they are. People—people can say anything. Just like politicians. They can act any way. . . . His actions—his words. They seem okay.

"James!"

"Huh—oh, uh, what you say?"

Big Man's grin eased James' worry as he added, "Who-wee. Boy, where yo' mind at? I said how you end up with this Howard lady?"

"My uncle knows her. Thought she could help me get in college."

Who can I trust? Who can I risk my secret to? Whose safety can I risk? Big Man? Bobby? Both? Neither? Big Man is friendly. Bobby and me spend lots of time together. Who can I trust? Who should I risk?

James scrutinized Bobby's face as he studied the chessboard. His chocolate-brown skin with his youthful texture. His round eyes with the pupils that matched his complexion. The way his forehead scrunched up when he was thinking. The look he got just before he sprang one of his jokes.

God, I hope I didn't make a mistake. How—how can you tell how someone is? Just to fool you. If Mrs. Howard is—God, I hope I didn't make a mistake. She said it was okay to do it, but I still didn't have to do it.

After months of classes, after weeks of discussions, after moments of vacillation, Bobby was at Mrs. Howard's building in Alfred's 3rd-floor apartment. Mrs. Howard made sure all the tenants were gone and wouldn't be back until after Bobby left.

Mrs. Howard entered the room with sandwiches and lemonade and asked, "How are things going, hmm?"

Looking up from the chessboard, sweat beading on his forehead on the cool afternoon, James said, "Okay, Mrs. Howard. I think I got him going."

"Huh, got me going? Pretty soon it'll be over. I'm givin' him a whippin', Mrs. Howard," Bobby gleefully replied. "C'mon, c'mon! It's your move, boy."

"How about that?" James replied as he made a move and glanced up at Mrs. Howard. "I think you taught me the game too well, Bobby."

"Oh, yeah, I gotcha' on the run now," Bobby said and quickly moved again.

"Well, I will leave you two to your game. Have fun and play nice, hmm."

. . . God. Please! Did I do the right thing? Is the risk worth it? Bobby or Big Man—who to trust? I've known Big Man longer, but Bobby and I have more in common. My God! Help me, Lord. Our Father Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name . . .

James' days in school were more tolerable with Bobby in his classes. They usually ate breakfast together and then spent the day learning. Many afternoons and some evenings, they were in the library studying or researching, like this evening. No matter the time or place, they were partners, supporters, and friends.

". . . So, you decided if you're comin'?" Bobby whispered.

"With all this work and studying, I don't know if I'm coming or going," replied James as he rubbed his forehead in contemplation of the assignment.

"Ha, ha. Very funny. You know what I mean. 'Bout comin' home, to meet my parents. My family."

"Should I write it with a cause-and-effect structure? Or perhaps, compare-and-contrast?"

"I'm not gonna stop asking you."

Never looking up, James whispered, "Tell me how this sounds, Bobby. Uh—in the belief that the proper scientific process demands that we determine the causal reasons for—"

Bobby reached over, snatched the paper out of James' hands, and glared at him.

"Huh—what? Bobby, what are you doing?"

"James! My family! Coming to Boston to meet my family!"

Are you crazy? I can't go there! What if they find out? My God, what if you find out? See my whip marks. Catch me in a lie. Many lies. Lose my school partner. Lose your trust. Lose your family's trust before they meet the real me. . . .

"I don't know, Bobby. Do you think it's all right? Do they even wanna meet me?"

"What! Do they want to meet you? The first Negro in my classes! My best friend? My only friend! Oh, yeah, they sho' want to meet you."

"I'll let you know tomorrow."

Walking straight home that night, James' mind raced over to under to around and around and back again. All the remarkable possibilities and disastrous ramifications of the upcoming decisions weighed on him. If he did go, complicated questions were sure to be posed to him. If he didn't go, possibly tougher questions would be asked. The persona he had created and lived over the past 2 years would soon become the role of his life. Boston would become the stage, with the Harris family becoming both audience and critics. And his nerves, taut with the inner tensions his secret brought, would be tested to no end. That night, he and Mrs. Howard talked into the dawn, after he awoke her with his pacing up and down the stairwell.

"I know it is just the weekend. Be very careful, *si'l vous plaît*. Do not let them see your back. I guess that is the main thing. And just stay calm, hmm. Because they will ask you questions. *Beaucoup* questions, hmm."

"So many things to remember. Wasn't it Shakespeare who wrote, 'The world's a stage?'"

"*Oui*, I believe so."

"I got to get my act together then. I'm James from Ohio. Cincinnati—no, no! Cincinatta. My folks are dead. Killed by Injuns. My aunt and uncle, they went west. I'm here, in New York, to go to school. I may go to meet them when I'm finished. My aunt and uncle, I mean. Don't know anyone back there. We moved a lot as a child. My favorite color is green. I like cats more than dogs. Steak over chicken. Coffee over tea—sweet. Arithmetic is my favorite subject. I broke my nose when I fell out of a tree—an apple tree. My favorite scripture is Jeremiah 29:11. . . ."