

Chapter 1

Virginia 1929

The ole cock Archibald crows his heart out as the sun reaches its robust arms across Milltown. I sit up and look over at Mama's bed. Of course she's up and out. Sun aint got nothing on her. She working towards something. Got plans, saving her wages to live the life. Whatever the hell that mean? Shoot, I got plans too. Been saving my own money too. I want to get the hell up out of Milltown. I already told Mama I'm leaving. I got dreams, and they way bigger than hers. I'm going to New York, going to sing in Harlem's very own Cotton Club. I stand and walk over to one of the three windows in our one room shack. Told Mama she should leave with me. But all she say is: "Girl I don't know nothing bout no city life". I guess she happy with the way our life is. Work, eat, sleep and on Sunday sprinkle in church for good measure. Just thinking about it makes me want to spit. Milltown's dying. Colored people been abandoning the south for

the North's big cities for years now. Shoot aint like we got any family left down here. Mama could suit herself. But me.. I can't risk staying. I'm Penelope, Penelope Nichols, folks call me Penny for short. Yeah I know right long fancy name. Sound as white as I look. Bet you wondering how I get a white girl name. Well I aint white but man, if I had a penny for every time someone thought I was, I'd be rich by now. Shoot, I'd a took my money and been ran to New York already, but I aint white and aint no one giving me no money for looking the part. My skin color be tripping up people on both sides of the color line. Can't see why it wouldn't though. With Mama already being light brown and my daddy being a white man. Well you can just go on and imagine for yourself how white I look.

Mama says she was gonna just name me Penny. That is until she saw how white I was. Says when she saw her very own baby was lily white, with blue eyes, looking every bit as white as a white woman's baby, she figured I needed to have a fancier name than just Penny. Says Penelope sounded like it suited me more. Personally I

don't think a fancy name makes one bit a difference,
everyone still call me Penny. Shoot I call myself
Penny.

I stand, walk over to the window, and look out at the flat
desolate town I call home. Aint much to Milltown
Virginia. It be all flat and sprawled out; laying out like a
lazy dog; I just can't imagine living here longer than I
have too. If you aint never heard of Milltown, I
wouldn't be surprised one bit. Town only bout ten
miles wide and fifteen miles long. Got its name from the
ole Mill still standing in the middle of Elton Square.
All our big shops, bank and court house is in Elton
Square. The Old Mill been shut down since before the
depression start. People been losing they jobs and
leaving town since then. Especially black folk. But not
my Mama, she still holding on.

As I look out of the window I cant believe how much
nothing we got here. I can see the sky kissing the
ground way out on the horizon. Bet in New York only
place you can see across; is the street. Wonder what it

be like to live somewhere that's always alive with lights. Must be so inspiring. One day I'm a get out of Milltown. Soon as the right opportunity present itself.

I got a cousin named Thelma. She moved up to New York two years ago. Thelma writes me every month. I love her letters. Getting them be like getting a piece of the Big Apple in the mail. Wonder why they call it the Big Apple? Wonder if they even got apple trees up there. I mean when I think of New York all I can think of; is buildings and night clubs. But they must have trees. Everywhere's got trees. Be something else if they had Apple trees lining the streets.

Thelma says in Harlem they got big houses that's the size of the Courthouse in Elton Square. I can't even imagine living in a building like that. Must feel so modern, so important to go about your day in a city like that. According to Thelma New York don't never sleep. She work in a small night club that be open till 5:00 am. She says she works at the counter, selling cigarettes to the customers. It's what they call a

speakeasy. According to Thelma the alcohol flows in steady streams. Prohibition don't stop them one bit. She so lucky, I can't wait to get to New York. I just know that's where I'm supposed to be. I'm craving that big city glamour and possibility. I mean I might not be that fancy now, but that's only cause I'm stuck here in Milltown. When I get to New York; man I might just be a mess! Way Thelma tell it they got big stores that's stories high. At first I didn't even know what she was talking about. Aint nothing in Milltown stories high. And she says they got so many ready made clothes wont be no need to stich nothing. Man I can't even imagine. Living there must be magical. Almost as magical as my desire to sing.