

MAKING DO: GROWING UP COLORED IN THE JIM CROW SOUTH DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION VOL. 2 FAITH AND HOPE

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AN UNEXPECTED ENDING

CHAPTER 1

It was a moment Charles would never forget. In shock, he watched the beautiful young lady he had just met rush out of the juke joint and, possibly, out of his life.

When he came to his senses, he ran after her. Searching the darkened area, Charles found no one in sight. A patch of white caught his eye.

It was a handkerchief. Her handkerchief. He could tell by the scent of perfume. Her perfume.

He didn't know her entire name. He had heard her friend and one of the young men, perhaps her brother, call her "Dee Dee." Was it a nickname? How many young ladies in Bessemer had that name?

He walked back into the juke joint, stuffing the handkerchief in a pocket. Several other women smiled at him and a few approached him to dance. He declined, smiling apologetically.

Todd intercepted him. He tried to read Charles's expression.

"Lost her, huh?"

He slapped Charles on the back.

"She was a looker, wasn't she? I hope you at least got her last name . . ."

Charles gave his friend a searing gaze.

"If you're trying to make me feel better, it ain't working."

"Yes siree, bub! I knew it! You blew it! Had the dame in your hands and didn't even set the groundwork for meeting up with her again!"

Charles bristled at Todd's rankling. He showed him the handkerchief.

"Look, Todd, I'll find her. At least to give this back to her! I'm going to ask around. I'm sure someone knows "Dee Dee."

"Okay. Maybe start with your relatives. They might know someone who knows someone," Todd clapped Charles on the back, reassuringly. "Bessemer can be a small town in some ways."

Charles nodded. Todd had a good head on his shoulders.

"Todd, let me buy you a soda. I'll have to admit, that's an excellent idea."

Charles, calming down, took a swig of his soda.

He thought back and savored the earlier part of his special night.

He had never seen such lively dancing before. "Rug Cutter's Swing" was playing when they entered the joint and the tunes stayed lively all evening. His feet found the downbeat while he snapped his fingers to the upbeat.

The place was like many in Billingsley. The rough floorboards were filled with young people. But Bessemer had fancy-looking ladies being swung around by sharply dressed men.

Another difference from home-this juke joint had a bar. Its counter was the first thing seen upon entering. They served both

soft drinks and hard liquor. Finding liquor was never a problem. And if one looked hard enough, even hooch was readily available.

Even though the Prohibition was over, some folks, like Aunt Nelda still made their own corn liquor.

Todd pointed toward the end of the line of bar customers. Charles looked in the direction of his finger until he saw the joint's amazing jukebox.

The craft of the machine was unlike anything he had ever seen in Billingsley.

The shiny red paint job was eye-catching. It also had silver trim with silver peacocks. The birds lit up while records played.

The machine held twenty-four, 78-rpm records, which could be selected after dropping in a coin and pushing two separate buttons.

Charles had some change on him from his recent shopping trip. But Todd moved his hand out of the way and placed his nickel in the slot.

"You don't make as much as me and this is your first night out in Bessemer. My treat."

Charles held his hands up. He backed away laughing as his friend dropped the money in the silver slot.

"Okay, now which tune would you like to play on this grand occasion celebrating your new life in the big city?"

There were so many choices of songs. He didn't have the heart to tell Todd that he had no idea what song would be a good one for this "celebration."

Looking closely, he did recognize one title that he and his friends had danced to in the country.

"I'll take that one, B-6."

Todd laughed.

"I remember that one, Charlie. 'Flat Foot Floogie,' it is! That Louis Armstrong! He's some trumpet player, and that voice! Man's got my vote!"

Charles remembered it was at that moment when Todd made the selection that he saw her. The young lady he couldn't get off his mind! She was as lovely as he had remembered her in his mind's eye.

But there was a young man escorting the young lady off the floor. Was that her date, Charles wondered?

The young man looked over her shoulder at someone. He had a rakish grin on his face and made a thumbs-up sign.

Charles was alarmed. The young man was obviously up to no good, so he followed them.

"Where you goin'?" Todd looked over Charles's shoulder and saw the couple.

"Oh, your dream girl! Fancy seeing her here!"

He looked at Charles and shook his head.

"Uh-oh," Todd held Charles's arm.

"I know that look anywhere. Don't start something you cain't finish. She obviously came with him."

"I'll just check on it. Be back in a minute."

By the time Charles located them, Dee Dee was pushing the man off her in an attempt to break away. But the young man paid no attention to her pleas.

Charles bristled. He strode swiftly over to them, pulled the man away and clipped him on the chin.

The young man was so surprised by the blow, that he fell, releasing the young woman.

Charles stared down at the young man, glaring at him threateningly. It was as if he dared him to get back up.

"I believe the lady deserves to be treated like a lady."

Angrily, he stared at Charles. He seemed to assess Charles's size and build before speaking.

"She came with me . . ."

Dee Dee adjusted her dress and smoothed her hair before replying. Her manner was very elegant, which endeared her to Charles even more.

"I think you should go, Bill."

The young man looked at her in surprise. He took another look at Charles.

Charles stood solidly, his feet planted in a stance ready for a fight, if need be.

The young man looked from Charles to Dee Dee. Dee Dee tilted her head up in angry defiance.

Without acting or saying a word, he left them on the porch.

"May I have this dance?"

Charles had offered Dee Dee his forearm. He would never forget that smile of hers as she placed her hand lightly on his arm. Her touch sent a charge through his body.

Later, as they danced, Charles was amazed. Not only did she match his every step, but she also moved like an accomplished dancer and seemed to anticipate his every move.

Soon, they found themselves in the middle of the dance floor with others watching. Charles held her tiny waist and guided her around the floor.

People clapped for them in time with the music. They enjoyed seeing an accomplished dance team who knew the right steps.

They were both visibly disappointed when the music ended. Noting this, they both laughed.

Charles led Dee Dee off the dance floor. She dabbed her neck with a delicate handkerchief.

It came to him that he had forgotten to introduce himself in the midst of the excitement. He felt that he had Dee Dee at a disadvantage, having learned her name earlier.

It was time to clear up that imbalance. Charles cleared his throat.

"There you are! Mother's gonna be really upset to know this is where you were!"

Charles and Dee Dee spun around to find two young men, one stocky and one lithe and muscular, wearing angry expressions.

He saw Dee Dee's shocked expression. She was totally surprised to see these young men as she looked from them to the clock on the far wall.

It was eight o'clock. Dee Dee's hand flew to her mouth, aghast.

Without so much as an apology or a goodbye, she ran away!

On his way home from the club, Charles stared into the night. He held the handkerchief to his jaw.

Would he ever find this young lady? Would it be as easy as Todd suggested?