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

[SNEAK PREVIEW BONUS CHAPTERS]

AN UNEXPECTED ENDING

CHAPTER 1

Stunned, Charles had watched the beautiful young lady he had just met rush out of the juke joint and, possibly, his life.

When he came to his senses, he'd tried to run after her. But once outside, Charles found no one in sight. A patch of white had caught his eye.

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

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

Charles 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. 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 felt himself calm down, yet his nerves were shot. He had held her in his arms just a short time ago and everything felt right. Then he lost her!

Taking a swig of his soda led his thoughts down another path, another night in the past. Something he hadn’t thought about in years. It was a time that he remembered with the same excitement for this visit and lingering remorse.

He had visited a juke joint in the big city of Montgomery when he was just a teen. As it had been at Bessemer, loud music was playing when he first entered the building. He remembered how his feet found the downbeat while he kept time by snapping his fingers to the upbeat.

The other young men were sharply dressed. He wore his clean dungarees and the pressed shirt he wore to Sunday meetings.

Like this juke joint, the other had a bar, too. He had noticed the huge counter as soon as he entered the place.

“What’ll ya have?”

The man tending the bar was matter-of-fact in his questioning Charles. It was as though he expected Charles to place an order.

In a way, the man’s easy manner calmed Charles’ anxiety in being there. It made him feel like a regular.

A young lady standing nearby turned toward Charles with interest. Her eyes appraised him in a thorough, worldly manner. She was both curious and sensual.

“I’d suggest the Coca-Cola soda pop with a splash of gin.”

Charles felt uncomfortable. It wasn’t as though he hadn’t been around hard liquor before. His Aunt Nellie had many customers for her hooch. But she had also warned him against touching it.

He had come to town with Adam to buy the seed that their feed store had run out of.

The overnight stay in the big city was a treat for Charles, but his big brother had reservations about his city visit. He knew of Charles's love for music, that he was a good dancer, and that Charles wanted to go to the joint in the evening.

"Them type of places ain't nothin' but trouble. But suit ya'self. Ya got to make ya' own choices."

Feeling even more out of place, Charles hastily ordered the drink.

Both the drink and the young lady's smile had melted any of his reserves. Charles had asked her for a dance and she accepted.

While that was a long time ago, as Charles reflected back, the music and juke joint brought back vivid memories. However, the only thing notably different was the Bessemer juke joint's amazing jukebox.

The craft of this machine, however, was unlike anything he had ever seen in Billingsley or Montgomery. The shiny red

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

Earlier that evening, Todd had shown off this machine with the pride of ownership. It held twenty-four, 78-rpm records, which could be selected after dropping in a coin and pushing two separate buttons.

“Okay, now which tune would you like me to play on this grand occasion celebrating your new life in the big city?” Todd had asked him.

Charles had selected the same song that reminded him of Montgomery.

“I’ll take that one, B-6.”

Todd had 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 knew that he would always remember that it was at that moment, when Todd made the selection, that he saw her. The young lady, Dee Dee, that he couldn’t get off his mind!

She had looked as sweet and lovely as he had remembered her earlier in the day.

But when he saw a young man escorting her off the floor he was concerned. Charles had wondered, was that her date?

He saw the young man look over her shoulder at someone. He wore a rakish grin and had made a “thumbs-up” sign.

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

“Where you goin’?” Todd looked over Charles’s shoulder and spied the couple.

“Oh, your dream girl! Fancy seeing her here!”

At that moment, Todd looked over Charles’ shoulder and saw the couple. Then, noticing Charles’ expression, he shook his head.

“Uh-uh,” he said, holding Charles’s arm.

“I know that look anywhere. Don’t start something you can’t finish. She obviously came with him.”

But Charles shook free from Todd’s grip.

“I’ll just check on it. Be back in a minute.”

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

Charles had bristled. He strode swiftly over to them, pulled the fellow away. When he tried to brush off Charles's arm, Charles clipped him on the chin.

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

Charles remembered staring down at him with no remorse. His eyes flashed with anger, daring the young man to get up.

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

Angrily, the young man had stared up at Charles. He seemed to assess Charles's size and build before speaking.

"But she came with me . . ."

Dee Dee had adjusted her dress and smoothed her hair before replying. It was her manner that touched Charles' heart.

"I think you should go, Bill," she simply stated in an elegant manner.

Bill looked at her in surprise. Then, he took stole a quick glance at Charles, who stood solidly, his feet planted in a stance ready for a fight, if need be.

Dee Dee tilted her head up, in angry defiance.

Without acting on the threat of Charles, or Dee Dee's defiance, Bill slunk away without saying a word.

"May I have this dance?"

Charles had offered Dee Dee his forearm. Thinking back, he knew he would never forget that smile of hers as she placed her hand lightly on his arm. It was one of relief and anticipation, as if she had been waiting for his rescue. Her touch sent a charge through his body.

As they danced, Charles had been amazed. Dancing with her was one of the best experiences he had ever had with a partner. She 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 recalled holding her tiny waist and guiding her around the floor. It was as if he were dancing on air.

People began clapping for them in time with the music. They seemed to enjoy watching an accomplished couple who knew the right steps.

Both he and Dee Dee were visibly disappointed when the music finally ended. Noting each other's expression, they had laughed.

When Charles led Dee Dee off the dance floor, he noticed that she had dabbed her neck with the delicate handkerchief.

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

Who would have known that this juke joint escapade would deliver a more promising future?

But would he ever find this young lady? And would it be as easy as Todd suggested?

UNEXPECTED CONSEQUENCES

CHAPTER 2

"Young lady, do ya have any idea what grief ya've put us through? Do ya realize how much we been worryin' about ya?"

I kept my eyes on my feet. I didn't have the nerve to look at my parents. Their anger and outrage at my poorly executed venture was understandable. I knew I deserved this tongue lashing, so I stood there and took my medicine.

"Look at ya mother, young lady!"

Daddy's orders confirmed what I already knew. Mother's eyes were darkened with rage. Daddy had been sitting quietly, but his straight back and level stare were confirmation that I was in more trouble than I had ever been in, in my life.

It was more than I could take. I had let them down.

"I, I'm sorry . . ." was all that I could get out. A flood of tears underscored my feelings.

Mother was dressed in her sleeping duster covered by a light, cotton robe.

Her hair was tied up in a matching scarf, ready for bed. That outfit of hers made it apparent that I had gotten in much later than I'd planned.

My eyes darted to the clock on the mantel. Nine o'clock!

It seemed that I had only danced one song with the young man and several with Bill. For the first time in my life, outside of reading a great novel, time had gotten away from me!

"I trusted ya, Delois Ann. Ya betrayed that trust by lyin' 'bout where you were goin', young lady."

"But I did go to Harriet's, Mother," I blurted out.

Just as quickly, I wondered why I had to say anything at this critical moment. Why didn't I just keep my mouth shut?

"But you didn't want me ta know you were goin' to the juke joint! So's, I started callin' around when ya didn't come home. It took my talkin' ta Harriet's mother ta find out where ya were!"

I felt so small. I didn't think I'd involve anyone other than myself. Now it seemed as though I had gotten Harriet in trouble, too.

"How could you do that, Dee Dee?" I chided myself silently.

I prayed that my friend wouldn't be punished for my wrongdoing. I also prayed that my consequences would be bearable.

"Whatcha Mother's sayin', is bein' the elder daughter, we put a lotta responsibility on ya shoulders. Yo's been such a reliable daughter up ta now, Dee Dee, what we tryin' ta understand is--what came over ya?"

My father's tone was reasonable. But I could tell that he was extremely disappointed in me.

That hurt me to my heart. But I couldn't explain to them what the evening had meant to me. How I had hoped it would help me in my healing.

I knew that it was going to be difficult to express my sense of loss for Sherrie Lee. The entire family was still hurting.

My need for freedom and relief from the overwhelming sadness that covered me like a wet blanket, the feeling of suffocation, didn't seem selfish. To explain my actions to them would be a prayerful challenge.

"How does that make us, as ya parents, look? Ta Harriet's parents? Ta her brothers? Yo's our responsibility, not that family's."

My head dropped. I was truly ashamed that I had pulled in Harriet's brothers, too. More than anything, I was embarrassed by my half-truth. My feelings had taken a back seat to reason. I had embarrassed my family.

"I'm sorry. I was only thinking about how much fun it would be to get out and dance for a few hours . . ."

"Fun! Humph! Tha's the problem. Ya weren't thinking. Child, how many times have I told ya that yo duties come first! How many fun activities did I have ta give up ta have all of y'all hardheaded chi'lins?"

Mother looked at me with an exasperated expression. She had been silent during Dad's comments. Perhaps Mother needed time to gather her thoughts because she launched into me with words that cut to the quick.

“Thas what it means to be responsible an’ trustworthy! An’ on top a that, ya sisters and brothers were all upset that ya weren’t here ta put ‘em ta bed.”

Oh! I had forgotten about my promise to the little ones! How quickly had all of my home responsibilities evaporated in the midst of dancing with that wonderful young man!

“Was that worth a night out?”

Mother’s question broke into my reverie. But as I thought back about being in the arms of the tall stranger, I almost said, “yes.”

My expression was for a brief second, unrepentant.

Mother caught it and fumed.

“Ya father and I done decided on top of you takin’ care of th’ house, ya losin’ ya datin’ privileges!"

Instantly, my face dropped. That was what this was all about! Me meeting the man of my dreams in my senior year! How could this be?

“But Mother! This is my senior year . . .”

Mother's expression had softened, ever so slightly.

“That is, until we see that ya prove yo’self trustworthy and responsible! Until then, ya have yo responsibilities around the house and ya schoolwork to take seriously.” She placed her hands on her hips.

With that gesture, I realized that this was an unchangeable decision.

“Daddy, please!”

I was desperate. I knew that whatever Mother said went for both her and Daddy. This time, I had to try any and every avenue to get a reprieve.

But my father wasn’t bending any more than Mother.

“Young lady, there’s no time fo’ anyone in this here house ta be goin’ out an’ doin’ what they feels like doin’. Tellin’ the truth an’ bein’ honest is the only way this family can survive. Times are bad. Ya gots to follow our direction!

Daddy placed a hand on my shoulder to emphasize the point.

“Do ya understand?”

“Yes, Daddy,” I finally choked out.

“Now, go to bed!”

My tears continued streaming down as I left the room. I felt so ashamed.

They were right. God demanded my best and having integrity was always important. It always mattered. But I hadn't lived up to that standard. I had bent all of my parents' rules.

It was a relief to find the children were fast asleep. The next morning, I would have to apologize to them.

I hung up my clothes with so much on my mind. I could only think of my dreams of a fantastic senior year going up in smoke. It was going to be just like all the other years. Worse yet, it might end with me having only ol’ Penny Head as my prom date!

As I dressed for bed, I could still hear my parents discussing the incident and my fate. The thin walls of the house allowed me to hear a few snatches of conversation.

“. . .was worried out of ma mind, I thought o’ callin’ the police . . .” Mother was saying.

“Police! Mother, what could they do fo’ us?” Daddy said with a snort.

“I jess don’t want some Tom, Dick, or Harry ta talk holes in her clothes, Clare,” Daddy was saying. “I work hard ta give her an allowance so’s she can buy nice things fo’ herself and not want fo' anything.

“She’s a good girl, and it’s our job ta keep her that way until she gets outta school. Hopefully, depending on how things play out with my work an’ with this war in Europe, I’ll make enough so’s I can put her through college. That’ll help her ta make a life fo’ herself.”

“I know, H.P.,” Mother was saying. “Maybe I been short-sighted. I’m hopin’ we can set her up better than we could for Sherrie Lee . . .”

“Aw, Honey, we did our best for Sherrie Lee . . .[”

Then Mother began to cry.

I couldn’t bear hearing anymore. I was devastated. They had taken my flight of fancy very hard. I hadn’t known how hard Mother was still hurting.

Desperate to have some solace for myself, I had been selfish. That hurt my heart. I didn't want to be that person.

Yes, I had a wonderful evening. But was it worth it? It could have ended very differently.

The evening had changed once that handsome young man had arrived. I had not planned on meeting and dancing with him, but he came to my rescue and I felt so grateful and blessed by that experience. It was the highlight of an otherwise bad evening with Bill White.

My face burned with embarrassment at how commonly he had tried to treat me. Had his previously gentlemanly manner been a trick to get me alone to kiss me?

My guilty mind raced around the events of the past trying to trace back to any behavior on my part that might have led up to his actions. I could not think of any flirting or unladylike carriage that might have caused him to draw the wrong opinion of me.

Then it came to me. I thought of his forwardness that day at lunch when he escorted me back into the school. I had just wanted to get away from ol' Penny Head.

But that was it. He had not changed at all. Bill was being his true self. And I had not seen anything except what I wanted to see.

The next morning, I readied for church, but my feet were dragging. The late night and its dire consequences had sapped all my spunk.

With a new spirit of concern for Mother, I helped feed and dress the young ones. She didn't ask me to help, but I felt it was the least I could do.

Once they were ready, I had time to prepare myself. I didn't even pause to select something from my closet—I simply put on the first thing my hand rested on. It was a topaz dress of rayon fabric. I smoothed out the soft pleats that fell from the waistband. I regarded my reflection with a critical eye.

What could the young mysterious man have seen in me? Was it just in the magic of the night? Had he enjoyed the dance as much as I had?

Looking at my tiny waistline, I felt what had become a familiar feeling of goose bumps whenever I thought about the young, mysterious man. How I loved it when he held my

waist with one hand and kept the other on my shoulder as we sashayed to “Flat-Foot Floogie.”

What great fun that had been! He was a fantastic dancer! I was surprised how my feelings bounced around that morning—like a rubber ball!

“Lil’ Sister! Everybody was waitin’ for you. What happened to ya last night? Why didn’tcha tell us a story?”

My face burned as I turned toward Alice. Her expression was one of trust betrayed. I felt so embarrassed to have let her and the others down. How could I tell her that the hours just flew by?

“I . . . I didn’t mean to not tell you the story. I ran late and . . .”

“That’s okay, Lil’ Sister. Would you tell us one tonight?”

Somehow, in spite of the direness of my situation, this child had managed to squeeze a smile out of me. I hugged her and kissed her forehead. My offenses were forgotten in a moment!

“It’ll be twice as good as the story I was gonna tell you yesterday!”

“Really?”

“I sure can! This time, I think the Prince might be able to find the princess . . .”

“Oh boy!”

With that, Alice ran out of the room, shouting for the others.

I decided, then and there, I couldn’t spend the rest of my day dwelling on the unpleasant moments of the previous night’s conversation. My life had changed.

I determined that I would prove myself trustworthy to my parents. I resolved that these current winds and their consequences were not going to put a damper on my spirit.