

Color Me
Butterfly

A true story of courage, hope, and transformation

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This book spans over a sixty year period and is based on the author's memories, years of research, and stories told to her by her mother and grandmother. As a way to bring life to the story and protect identities, occasionally the author changed names, rearranged dates, compressed events, invented dialogue and scenery, and created certain episodes to accommodate narrative flow. All events described herein actually happened, though on occasion the author has taken certain liberties, and those liberties are not intended to portray actual events; no events of abuse, so integral to the story, have been magnified.

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Some would say that I've lived a sad life, a pained life.

The room where I sit is beautiful, blanketed in my favorite colors—lavender and white. Colors that I so often dreamt about since I was old enough to appreciate color, to appreciate life.

I sit at the head of the table, a table surrounded by my most prized possessions, my most precious gifts—my family. The family I have often thought about in my darkest moments, my brightest hours. They are the saving grace that has kept me whole for as long as I can remember.

My mind was once full of memories of times when time seemed to have caved in on itself, like a rainbow that has lost its arch, its color. Memories I recall having been so bad that I once prayed for death. But those times are forever lost in my mind like a tiny dust particle. And as odd as it may seem, it is those memories that I have come to be thankful for. I now know and believe with all that exists within me that certain things are put in your path as a way to strengthen you, to bring you to your center. I have since gained many memories

that far surpass those that once lay at the core of my being.

My life? Well, it is one that I cannot explain. You see, my life has never been the kind that one reads about in a romance novel or a Cinderella story. In fact, it is a life that many have shed tears over. But I would say to them, don't cry. Don't cry for me. Don't shed tears for something that I have come to be so grateful for. Yes, I've had my share of ups and downs—more downs than one lifetime might absorb. I've loved. I've lost. I've grieved. I've gained. And for this, I am grateful.

The nonbelievers would call this a sad story; but I like to see it as grace. In my heart of hearts, I am wise enough to know that God don't give you nothin' that don't serve a purpose or reason to make you appreciate all that has come to pass.

I have no complaints about my life, even though there still rests in the deepest part of my soul a craving to have known better things. But each time these thoughts cross my mind, I say a silent prayer and smile. I smile because I've come through the rain, pulled through many of storms, and still I can't help but wonder as I sit here surrounded by my chi'ren, my chi'ren's chi'ren, and their chi'ren, how it is that I can be so blessed. My blessings have been sixty years in the making.

I smile, and through my tears I see the smile in every pair of eyes, feel the love vibrating from each heart. "You are the reason for keeping this family together," my eldest son says to me in a voice that reminds me of his youth. "We love you, Ma, and we thank you for all that you've done for us." This I hear from my eldest daughter as she takes me into her arms. My second son's eyes hold my own as he hands me a single

white rose, and all that he wants to say rests solely in his tear-stained eyes. I stand from my seat, wanting so much to lift up and spread all the grace that holds me, as words that are stuck in my heart push their way up to my lips, but I cannot speak. Humility has overtaken my heart and my mind. And it is now my youngest daughter who comes to me and folds me into her arms as she lets this serve as her words to me and my words to her. When her embrace releases me, I turn and look at a table that's covered in a silk white cloth and silver picture frames: frames that hold the photographs of those who are still deep within me, those who I've loved, those who I've lost.

All are here today, in spirit or in flesh. They have all come to celebrate me, to celebrate my life. And today, for this, I am grateful.

I am grateful for living. I am grateful for loving. And most of all, I am grateful for just being who I am.

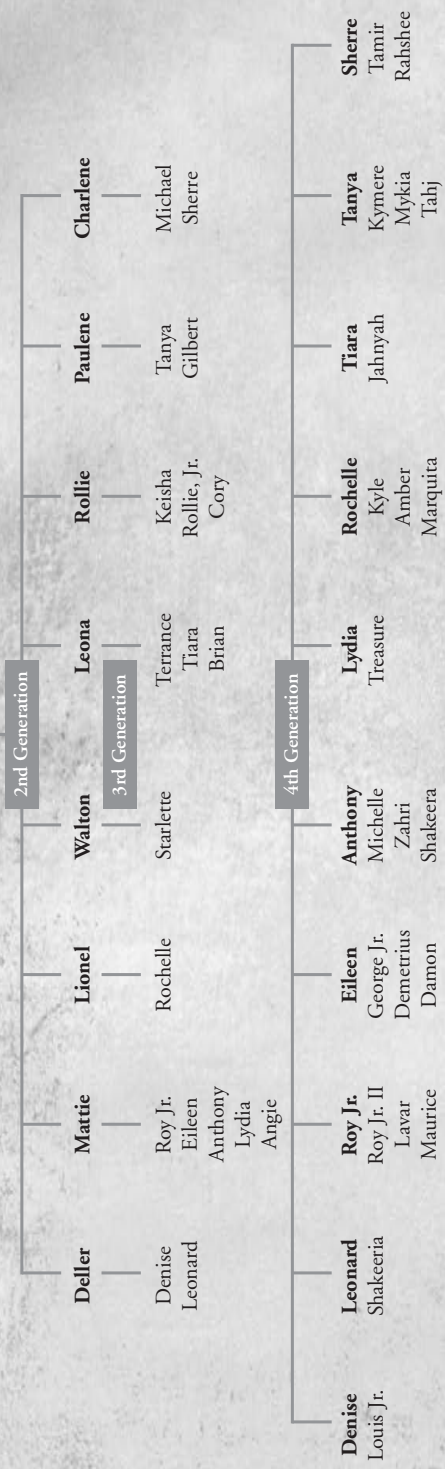
Who am I? you wonder.

I am Mattie.

COLOR ME BUTTERFLY ❖❖ Five Generations



Eloise & Isaac



2nd Generation

3rd Generation

4th Generation

5th Generation

Charlene

Paulene

Rollie

Leona

Walton

Lionel

Mattie

Deller

Michael
Sherre

Tanya
Gilbert

Keisha
Rollie, Jr.
Cory

Terrance
Tiara
Brian

Starlette

Rochelle

Roy Jr.
Eileen
Anthony
Lydia
Angie

Denise
Leonard

Tanya
Kymere
Mykia
Tabj

Tiara
Jahnyah

Rochelle
Kyle
Amber
Marquita

Lydia
Treasure

Anthony
Michelle
Zahri
Shakeera

Eileen
George Jr.
Demetrius
Damon

Roy Jr.
Roy Jr. II
Lavar
Maurice

Denise
Louis Jr.

Sherre
Tamir
Rahshee

Michelle
Tonajja
Charles Jr.
Maurice

Roy Jr. II
Kaleem
Samir

George Jr.
Brandon

Maurice
Selena

Shakeeria
Johnaysia
Johkei
Iran

Maurice

Shakeeria

PART ONE

Mattie



1

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND: 1941

The cost of the Greyhound bus ticket and his new suit would set him back for weeks, and Isaac Bingham knew it.

From the moment he got the letter from his mother that Aunt Isabel had passed, things had started to deteriorate. *Gon' so quik we ain't ev'n no what ail her*, his mother had written. Now the bus was pulling out of downtown Baltimore at eight p.m., and he was due to arrive in Kingstree, South Carolina, early the next morning, just in time for the funeral.

The night was black and cloudy, thick with a misty rain. The smell of urine and heavy liquor that reeked from the man sitting next to him made Isaac sick. He didn't like riding the bus with its odor, and the way it bounced him around made him feel dizzy. He would have preferred driving home, but it would be a long time before he saved enough money to buy the car he'd been dreaming about since he was a young boy.

He was only fifteen when he left home. His friend Willie convinced him to move up north. "You need to go back to Baltimore with me," Willie had told him while home one weekend for a visit. "That NAACP thing done figured a way to make it better for us coloreds, and you'll be able to fend for ya'self with a job in the city." Isaac didn't know the least bit about no NAACP, but Willie had said two words that got him to thinking—*Colored People*—and if this NAACP was something that was gonna help coloreds, then it sounded to him like Baltimore was where he needed to be if he was ever gonna make something of himself.

At first, Isaac's parents wouldn't hear of it. "Boy, we can't afford to lose another pair of farm hands," his father, Jessup, had told him. "Sides, what you gon' do in some big city anyway?" But Isaac convinced Jessup and his mother, Ruby, that he'd be better off up north; he'd make plenty more in a big city than the little he earned sharecropping; he'd even be able to send them something from time to time.

After weeks of pleading and making promises, Isaac had made his case. He worked from sunup to sundown to earn enough cash for a one-way ticket to Baltimore. On the day of his leaving, he packed a small wooden suitcase that his father had lent him and confiscated an old Prince Albert Tobacco can, which he would use to stash all the money he'd managed to save.

Isaac stared out into the blackness. He couldn't sleep, and he couldn't keep his mind off of wanting to get back to Baltimore even though he'd just left. He'd missed his family the six years he'd been gone, but thoughts of returning to a

place with few good memories and no future just didn't sit well with his stomach. Still, he'd be there soon. *Fourteen hours from door to door*, the driver had announced before leaving the terminal.

As the bus eased its way along 95 South at thirty-five miles an hour, Isaac stirred from a fitful sleep that had kept him awake most of the night. He stretched the kinks from his neck and back and peered out the window, hoping to recognize someone that could give him a lift into Kingstree, his hometown, about five miles away. He saw many eager faces waiting to welcome loved ones, but no face to welcome him. He figured anyone who might have come was probably over at the church helping to prepare for Aunt Isabel's funeral.

He grabbed the wooden suitcase and walked along the side of the road, passing shanty homes that sat back in the distance and rows of cotton fields and crops that covered the land for miles. To this day, the sight of it still made his knees feel wobbly.

Isaac slowed as he neared his parents' home, a tiny wooden shack surrounded by oak trees and cornfields. He had often shut his eyes to his surroundings and imagined being somewhere else, anywhere other than this place, which had made his heart yearn for something better and his head fill with possibilities. Now he was twenty-one years old. He looked like the man he'd become since he left Kingstree, no longer the boy who was once afraid to dream. He had made a way for himself in Baltimore and managed to push this measly living from his mind. His legs ached and his stomach let out a growl, reminding him that he hadn't eaten since this time yesterday. His mind drifted as he pondered why a death

had to be the only reason to bring him back this way.

He poked his chest out a bit when his eyes caught sight of his father rocking slowly on the porch in the same old rustic chair. Jessup Bingham, a man of few thoughts and words, was as stubborn as a mule and as set in his ways as hardened cement. By virtue of the thirteen children he'd reared, and the countless years he broke his back sharecropping somebody else's farm, he didn't see the need for wanting anything much beyond the life he lived. He saw no need in colored folks being overproud or too good for their own senses, he used to tell Isaac. And when Isaac made the choice to seek a better life, Jessup had all but pushed him out of his mind and heart.

Jessup's ashen, gray-brown face revealed his age, as he watched his youngest son approach him. "Looks like you done finally made it, boy. We didn't spect to see you till we done put Isabel in the ground," he said, his words rocking with the motion of the chair.

Isaac gave his father a weak smile. "I took a late bus out last evenin'," he stammered. "I figured I could make it in plenty of time befo' she be laid to rest."

Jessup's eyes swept over his son, inspecting him. "Well, I spose you must be hungry then. Gon' in there and fix you a plate. I reckon the grits should still be warm."

"Yes, sir," Isaac said as he walked up onto the porch and gave his father a nod, the best gesture he could summon to say that he was glad to see him again.

Isaac was sitting in the kitchen slopping up grits and eggs, when his brother Henry came through the door.

"Hey man, it sho' good to see you." Henry grabbed Isaac

in a bear hug as soon as Isaac stood to greet him. “How you been, city boy?”

Isaac coughed and tried to release himself from his brother’s grip. “I’m fine, but everything is so different now.” He looked around, feeling like a stranger. And in a way, he was.

“You almost ready?” Henry asked. “We gon’ be late.”

“Yeah. I just need to change into my suit.”

The funeral was held at the First Baptist Church of Kingstree, the one Isaac and his family had attended since he was a little boy, the one he had been baptized in. Isabel seemed peaceful, lying there in her lavender dress, a wig, and makeup that made her look better than she did when she was alive. Isabel was Ruby’s eldest sister, the one sister that Ruby was most fond of, and Isaac would have been banned from the family if he weren’t there. It was a sad funeral, the way all funerals in the South are—with lots of hollering, Amens, fake fainting, and prayer, followed by the gathering.

After the burial, they all returned to the house that Isabel had shared with her husband, Herbert. As was the custom, the women went to the kitchen to prepare the feast while the men sat on the porch, smoking cigarette sticks and drinking moonshine that Henry had made.

Isaac was standing near a tree talking to his cousin Chuck when he first noticed Eloise. This beautiful young girl was gazing at him from across the yard, but each time he turned to look at her, she quickly lowered her eyes. She looked familiar to Isaac, but he just couldn’t place her name. He was sure he’d seen her somewhere before. Maybe in church, just before he’d left for Baltimore. Most likely, she was one of the many girls who had chased after him.

“Hey, Chuck, who that gal over there?” Isaac asked.

Chuck turned and looked at the girls standing across the yard from them. “You mean the one in the yellow dress?”

“Yeah, that one,” Isaac answered.

“Oh, that’s one of George and Affie’s girls. You rememba’, they have six girls. That one’s Eloise.”

George and Affie had six daughters and three sons. Eloise was the third eldest daughter. Affie had known Isabel for twenty years, and when she heard about her death, she thought it only proper for her family to attend the funeral. That was the way of life for coloreds in the South. If someone died, every family member and friend within a hundred miles was expected to attend.

A look of surprise flashed across Isaac’s face. He had known their family for years but had never much noticed Eloise before. He guessed that she was younger than he, by only a few years perhaps. She was pretty. Pretty in a natural kind of way, he thought.

Eloise was still unaware of the allure and effect she had on men, especially men like Isaac, who knew a good thing when he saw it. Isaac had fancied many girls, but he had never seen one as beautiful as Eloise, with her coppery brown skin and innocent eyes. Her beauty was magnetic. And Isaac was hooked.

After circling the yard like a lion stalking its prey, Isaac worked up enough nerve to approach her. “Hello ma’am. You may not rememba’ me, but I used to live in these parts befo’ I moved to Baltimore.” Isaac flicked the cigarette he was smoking and mashed it in the dirt with the toe of his worn wing-tip shoe. A twinkle sparkled in his left eye. “You one of George and Affie’s gals, right?”

Eloise turned to Isaac and nodded. “Yes,” she said, her eyes shifting nervously toward the ground as though she were too afraid to look at him. He was the handsome boy that all the girls had a crush on, including her. She used to go out of her way to get Isaac’s attention whenever he happened to be at their shared family events; he would always nod and smile at her as though she were a child, which she was. But today was different. Today, he’d been staring at her for the better half of the afternoon, and she had noticed him the moment he walked into the church with Henry.

Isaac smiled boyishly and pressed his hazel eyes into hers. “I’m Isaac,” he said. “Isaac Bingham. I’m one of Jessup and Ruby’s boys.” He stepped in closer and held out his hand. Eloise took it and shook it lightly.

Isaac knew all too well the effect he had on girls. His Cherokee Indian mother had blessed him with unusually long, wavy hair, caramel color skin, and high cheekbones. All the girls in the South, not to mention Baltimore, were always flocking to be his next girlfriend, but Eloise needn’t flock. On this day, she had caught his eye and his heart.

“You look very pretty today,” Isaac said, turning on the charm he had picked up in Baltimore.

Eloise looked up at him and smiled. “Thank you,” she said.

“How old are you?”

Eloise’s eyes lit up. “I just turned sixteen,” she offered.

“Is that right? Well, you are a very pretty sixteen-year-old.”

Eloise blushed.

“I rememba’ when you were a little girl. Now look at you: all grown up.”

Eloise smiled again as she searched for a reply.

“I live in Baltimore now. You eva’ been to a city?” Isaac asked.

“Uh—no,” Eloise stammered. She remembered seeing pictures in school of Chicago and New York and Philadelphia, but she had never thought seriously about anything beyond Kingstree.

“Baltimore’s real nice. Got lots of colored people and things to do. You’d like it there,” Isaac went on. “I didn’t much think about livin’ no where sides here till my friend Willie told me ‘bout it.”

Eloise nodded politely.

“I’m gonna be going back in a few days. I sho’ wish I could take you with me.”

Isaac’s flirting made butterflies flutter in Eloise’s belly.

“Maybe you’d be open to going out for a soda pop or somethin’ befo’ I go back to Baltimore,” Isaac said, after a moment.

“Okay,” she replied bashfully. “I’d like that.”

The next day when Isaac showed up on Eloise’s porch with two daisies that he had picked out of his mother’s garden, Eloise smiled from ear to ear. No boy had ever courted her before, and it was clear that Isaac Bingham intended to court her, especially after he asked her father in the proper way.

Eloise was fascinated by Isaac’s big dreams. She’d never known anyone who had been places like he’d been, and he dreamed of things she could not even fathom. He told her all about Baltimore and how he longed to save enough money to buy a house, “a big old house,” he bragged. “One that have plenty of rooms—and a car, too. I always wanted to get me a car so I won’t have to take no train or bus everywhere I go.”

Isaac Bingham was different. Different than any boy Eloise had ever laid eyes on. And she liked him, liked him more than he could ever know.



Isaac sat alone in the last seat at the back of the Greyhound bus, across the aisle from a young man and woman. He noticed the man fondling the girl's legs and her pushing his hand away. When the girl caught Isaac watching them, he tried to shift away, but she looked right at him and smiled. Newlyweds, Isaac thought. His suspicion was confirmed when the man turned, leaned toward Isaac, and whispered, "This hea' is my wife. We jus' got married." Isaac smiled and nodded, then stared into the night through the darkened window. He could still see their reflections, so he closed his eyes and thought of Eloise and how he was missing her already as the bus slowly made its way out of the terminal and headed back to Baltimore.

The past few days had been the finest Isaac had experienced in a long time. Being home made him realize how much he missed family and the simpler things in life. Meeting Eloise had stirred up feelings inside of him that had been dormant for a long time. For the first time ever, he thought of what it would be like to have his own family. It brought newfound comfort to his soul and spirit.

The night flickered through the window as he nuzzled deeper into his seat, and his mind drifted to a dream about Eloise.



Over the next few months, Isaac and Eloise wrote to each other every week. By spring, Isaac had saved enough money to make a trip back to Kingstree to see Eloise. While there, he told her how much he had missed her and how he wanted to make a life with her. “Maybe we can marry and you can move back to Baltimore with me,” he commented one evening while sitting on her porch.

“All my family is here, Isaac,” she responded. “I don’t know much ‘bout livin’ in no big city. I like it here. Maybe you can move back to Kingstree and we can have a life *here* together.”

Isaac didn’t put much stock in what Eloise proposed. Moving back to the South wasn’t something he wanted to do. He had worked long and hard to make a life for himself in Baltimore. He’d been working with a local construction company since he arrived. And he was good at what he did. As a young boy, he was always fascinated with fixing things, and it didn’t take long for others to notice how skilled he was with his hands. Even though he was a colored man, his boss treated him almost like an equal. He had come to depend on Isaac—asking his advice about almost everything. Isaac liked feeling important, and he liked the way his boss made him feel like a man, no matter his color. Just recently, his boss told him he’d been thinking about promoting him and would do so for sure if they won the new city construction contract that was to start soon. He didn’t want to give it all up to move back to a place that held no future for him.

Isaac spent day and night thinking of ways to convince Eloise to marry and move up north with him. But every time