

KEEPER *of* LOST CHILDREN

ALSO BY
SADEQA JOHNSON

The House of Eve
Yellow Wife
And Then There Was Me
Second House from the Corner
Love in a Carry-On Bag

KEEPER *of* LOST CHILDREN

SADEQA JOHNSON

**RENE
GADE**

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For my father, Tyrone Murray—
my forever example of love.
I am because of you.



PROLOGUE

Mannheim, Germany, 1946

A hand pounded against the front door. Startled from her morning prayers, Sister Proba clutched the cross hanging around her neck, hoping it was just the wind. But then she heard it again.

Rap, rap, rap.

Wearing only her thin nightgown, she quickly got to her feet and grabbed her robe.

The knocking got louder and more aggressive as she moved down the winding back stairs, draping her veil over her wispy hair and pinning it in place. At the bottom of the steps, Junior Sister was dressed just as haphazardly, brow furrowed with concern. With only a look between them, the two nuns moved down the long hall, passing the dining room, and then through the foyer.

After flipping on the light in the small vestibule, Sister Proba looked through the peephole. She touched her forehead and then made the sign of the cross before unlatching the door.

Under the portico stood a woman with pasty skin and slightly wrinkled clothes. Streaks of dried tears stained her hollow cheeks.

A child's legs wrapped around the woman's waist, and tiny arms were tightly fastened against her neck.

"Help me," the woman croaked.

The nun stepped aside and ushered the pair into the parlor, where Junior Sister was already at work starting a fire.

"I cannot keep him." The woman's eyes were filled with shame.

The child stayed fitted around her so tightly, it was hard to see where one began and the other ended. Sister Proba gestured for the woman to take a seat.

"My father banished me from our village." The young woman repositioned the boy in her lap, and when he faced forward, his sweater was a size too small and his thick hair unruly. It was just as the nun had suspected.

Mischlingskinder.

The two nuns exchanged a look but said nothing.

"He threatened to sell him to the traveling human zoo as an exotic for twenty-five deutsche marks. My son would be kept in a cage and put on display." She wrapped her arms more tightly around the brown-skinned boy. "We ran away to a shelter, but the conditions . . ." The woman dropped her eyes. "Deplorable."

The billows made a whooshing sound as Junior Sister stoked the fire.

"I have found work as a live-in housekeeper, but I cannot bring a child. You are my last hope. Please, take him."

Sister Proba stood and reached for the boy, who was so sleepy he didn't put up a fuss. "Write down the usual information before she goes," she directed Junior Sister, then squeezed the frail woman's shoulders. "May God be with you."

The boy grew heavier in Sister Proba's arms as she ascended the steps to the second floor. This child would be number twenty-two at the orphanage. All occupation children, all of mixed-race parentage and a result of war.

The large dormitory room smelled of babies' breath and pillow drool. She lay the sleeping boy down on an empty cot and tucked the gray wool cover around him. Just as she turned to go, the boy lifted his head and clutched the hem of her robe.

"Mummy?"

"Shh, go back to sleep. You are safe," she cooed.

But the boy wouldn't be mollified. "Mummy. Mummy," he said, louder this time. The child next to him stirred, then the one in front of him. Harmonious cries of "Mummy. Where's Mummy?" echoed throughout the room.

"Go back to bed, children, it is okay." The nun moved from one child to the next, tucking them back under the covers, rubbing backs, and whispering sweet words of affection.

Still the boy would not be pacified. He pushed off the bed and started running across the floor. "Mummy. Don't go. Please, no!"



Part 1

*When I discover who I am,
I'll be free.*

—RALPH ELLISON



CHAPTER 1

Prince Frederick, MD, September 1965

SOPHIA

On the morning of her first day of tenth grade, Sophia Clark lay in a damp nightshirt, cowering at the sound of roof rats eating through the plaster walls of the farmhouse's kitchen. Through the tiny window, she could see that it was still purple outside, and although she wanted to stall a bit, she could hear Ma Deary's nagging voice, *If you want to eat, then you got to work*. The sole rooster in the barn began to crow like he was being paid to warn farmers within a five-mile radius that the sun was coming. Although his *cock-a-doodle* was the constant start to her mornings, today his cawing plucked against her temple.

As her eyes adjusted to the dark room, she touched her forearms, inflamed with welts that had sprouted like blades of wheat. Her throat felt parched, but when she reached for the mug of water she had placed on the milk crate beside her bed, she discovered that it had been tipped over by the wild flailing of her limbs through the night.

Sophia rose carefully to avoid hitting her head on the low ceiling. Her bedroom was so small she couldn't even cuss a cat without getting fur in her mouth. It really wasn't a bedroom. More like a space

meant for storage adjacent to the kitchen. Ma Deary had forced her into the tiny space so her night screams would stop waking the rest of the house.

Stepping out of her faded nightshirt and into threadbare overalls, Sophia fastened them at her shoulders with safety pins. Then she used the rubber band on her wrist to tie back her ginger hair. As she opened the door to the kitchen, she stomped her feet to scare the rats into their hiding place.

Sophia moved to the sink and turned on the faucet. The basin was tarnished with rusted copper streaks. The pipes shook, then sputtered out brown water. After about fifteen seconds, the water ran clear, and she dipped her mug and drank. From the front bedroom drifted the hard snorts of Ma Deary, which somehow harmonized with the soft snores of the Old Man. Sophia gritted her teeth.

She shuffled across the scuffed plank floors to the back of the house, where her twin brothers, Karl and Lu, were curled head to toe on a mattress that smelled of piss no matter how many times Sophia sprinkled it with baking soda.

"Boys. Time to get up," she coaxed, but when neither moved, she pulled the blanket, pocked with moth holes, down to their waists.

Karl tugged the covers back over his thick head and mumbled, "Five more minutes."

Sophia tapped his back. "Can't, bud. Today is the first day of fifth grade, remember?"

"We gotta do chores on the first day a school?" Lu sat up, rubbing his hazel eyes. "No fair."

"You know the men aren't here to help, and we gotta take care of the chickens and the cows before we head off to school. Now move it." Sophia shoved the blanket to their ankles to show she meant business. Both boys groaned, and she understood why. They were dog-tired.

The summer had been hard as shoe leather on all of them. In the past, Ma Deary's brother, Uncle Wayon, had hired recently released

convicts in conjunction with a government program to do some of the more strenuous work on the farm. But this past spring, Unc had spent all of his time in D.C. chasing tail—Ma Deary’s words, not Sophia’s—and had forgotten to reapply for the program before the May 15 deadline. So all fifty acres had fallen on Sophia and her brothers. While their classmates had enjoyed lazy lake swims, the kids had worked their tails off.

They spent each day with their backs crouched, hauling heavy buckets of produce, grinding tubs of feed, dragging sprinklers across the massive fields, feeding the animals, and fighting with faulty machinery under the merciless sun. In the evenings, they heaved debris until their shoulder blades screamed, and shoveled animal manure until what little they had in their stomachs threatened to come back up. Before bed, they scrubbed every surface clean, and disinfected the farm tools and equipment until their heads were dizzy from the smell of Peridox, a concentrated cleaner which prevented bacteria, viruses, and the outbreak of disease.

For the past three months, Sophia and her brothers had labored twelve-hour days, and now that school was starting, she wasn’t sure how they would manage it all.

“Hurry, boys.” She flicked on the light. “Time’s a-wastin.”

When she was satisfied that the twins were slipping into their sweatpants, Sophia went through to the kitchen and pushed open the screen back door. A cool breeze caressed her cheeks, and the burst of crisp air awakened all her senses.

Her older brother, Walter, sat on the porch in a corroded metal rocking chair, chewing on a piece of straw. “Morning.” He tipped his wide-brimmed panama hat to her.

“How’d you sleep?” Sophia dropped in the seat beside him while reaching for her mud-caked boots.

“Nothing like breathing in all that fresh open air.” He smiled, showing off the gap between his two front teeth. Walter’s skin was so

tanned that his nose was peeling. When it was hot like it had been, Walter preferred to sleep in a hammock outside rather than on the sagging sofa in the living room of their two-bedroom house. “You?”

Sophia shook her head and pulled her shirtsleeves down over the red marks on her arms, but she knew that Walter had already seen them.

“The dream again?” He wrinkled his brows with concern, but she changed the subject.

“Any word from Unc? He knows today is the first day of school, right?”

“He’ll be by soon.” Walter stretched his long legs out in front of him and then stood.

“If you don’t see those boys in the next five minutes—”

“I’ll wrangle them and send them your way.”

Sophia mumbled her thanks as her boots sank into the soft earth. She could smell the morning dew and could already hear the dawn chorus of hens summoning her to the coop. As she rolled back the barn door, the stench of chicken feces and ammonia greeted her. “*Buck-buck-buck-badaack*,” clucked the hens.

“Morning to you too.” Sophia sneezed while picking up one of several white pails stacked next to the pallet of hay.

Along each side of the barn walls were wooden raised coops stacked in rows of three and four. Each contained individual nesting boxes for the nearly five hundred hens that Sophia was responsible for. Some of the boxes cradled brown eggs abandoned by the hens, already out foraging the barn for food.

Sophia collected the eggs off the floor, from the empty nests and the dark corners where some hens liked to lay them, and put them atop the hay she’d collected earlier. There were always a few broody hens who honored their motherly instincts and refused to move from their nests, and she gently scooped them up and out of her way to secure the eggs. As she gathered eggs from nest to nest, rotating full pails

for empty ones, Sophia tried to let the squawks of the hens drown out the talking picture that had been playing through her head all morning, but the noise just kept getting louder.

Sophia had never told Ma Deary or the Old Man about her school counselor, Mrs. Brown, pulling her from the school's breakfast line to meet the white woman in the pillbox hat.

The visit had taken place on the first Monday after Christmas break, last school year. Sophia's toes had still been cold from her walk to school when Mrs. Brown invited her to sit in her office. Every person at W. S. Brooks High School was Negro, and Sophia remembered being taken aback to see a white woman with gold rings on most every finger smiling up at her.

Mrs. Brown had introduced the woman as Mrs. Winston from the Prosser Foundation, explaining that she had come to Brooks High School searching for the brightest Negro student in the county to offer the privilege of attending an elite boarding school to continue high school education. Sophia had been selected along with Kathy Baker and Alonzo Morton to sit in the library and take the three-hour placement test.

"Today? Without studying?" Sophia sputtered, but Mrs. Brown assured her that she would be fine.

"There is nothing to prep. It's a standard test."

They were each ushered to a different table in the library, given two pencils, a question booklet, and a bubble sheet. Once the exam had concluded, the three students were lined up outside of Mrs. Brown's office and called in one at a time for an interview with Mrs. Winston.

During Sophia's interview, Mrs. Winston offered her a cup of peppermint tea and shortbread cookies on a paper doily while asking questions about her family life, education, hobbies, and future aspirations.

Sophia got stuck on the notion of hobbies and told the woman

frankly, "There isn't much free time on the farm. 'Cept maybe a quick game of catch in between milking the cows and composting the dung."

Mrs. Winston's stricken look made Sophia wish she had made something up. She left school that day with a small bag of goodies that had included a keychain with "West Oak Forest Academy" on it and a brochure slathered with pictures of smiling students in brightly decorated classrooms holding brand-new books. The glossy pamphlet provided a portal into a new world that Sophia had never imagined existed. On the farm, she had told only Walter. To which he'd smiled and said he'd pray on it for her. She didn't have the heart to share the idea of West Oak Forest Academy with Ma Deary: She would be the weed to Sophia's seedling, choking out the life of her dream and depriving it the light to grow.

What had gotten Sophia through her gruesome summer days cleaning the horse stalls, watering and feeding the chickens, cows, cats, and goat, collecting eggs on top of eggs, and harvesting and grinding corn for feed, was knowing that at the end of each night, she had the shiny pages of the school's brochure waiting for her. Against Sophia's will, hope had seeped in, and a deep yearning had taken root. Her whole body had begun to crave a life away from the farm.

But as the metal handle of the pail dug into the crevices of her dry palm, the reality of her life brought her back into the barn, and Sophia chided herself for being so foolish. Attending West Oak Forest Academy had been nothing more than a pipe dream.

Finished with pulling the eggs, she lifted the garden hoe hanging from the wall and scraped the roosting bars from left to right until all the waste had fallen to the ground. While she swabbed the bars with a sponge she kept soaked in vinegar, Karl and Lu entered the barn with the chicken feed and fresh buckets of water.

The boys were fraternal twins but looked nothing alike. Karl was tall and big-boned, with skin the color of toast, and had inky eyes. Lu

was short and willowy, with eyes so see-through he reminded her of a kitten.

Sophia wanted to give them the job of carrying the eggs down to the mudroom, but she didn't trust them not to break them.

"Lu, while Karl fills the feeders, you grab the pitchfork and turn the bedding in each nest. If it looks soggy, just replace it with clean straw from the pallet."

"Why can't I feed the hens?" Lu whined.

"You did it yesterday," said Karl.

"Boys, we don't have time for arguing."

"He started it," said Lu.

"It was you," said Karl.

"You have twenty minutes, so make haste. We still gotta milk the cows." Sophia headed for the barn door and then remembered, "And don't forget to close up all the nests so the chickens can't get back inside."

Sophia lugged two pails of eggs at a time to the small mudroom at the back of the farmhouse. It was more like a shed with a refrigerator and a long aluminum prep table. It took her several trips to get all the pails inside. Sophia then examined each egg, checking for cracks, and then wiped them all down with a clean rag before placing them into the cartons.

Satisfied with her work, she stacked the cartons in the refrigerator. The Old Man would carry some to their local customers in town later, but the bulk of the egg production was delivered to three restaurants in Washington, D.C., on Thursdays, just in time for the weekend rush.

Next she had to milk the cows, the chore that she abhorred most. As she rounded the corner to the milking parlor, she hoped the cows were in a good mood.

Inside the parlor, she found Walter already perched on the milking stool, cleaning the cow's udders.

"Don't you have to water the fields?" she asked.

"I'll do it after this. You go get ready for the first day of school."

"You have school too, Walter." Sophia put her hands on her hips. "Just 'cause you're a senior don't mean you can skip."

He swatted at a fly in the air. "I don't need to go on the first day. It's more or less the same. 'Sides, I promised Unc that I'd have the milk ready for the morning pickup. He said he should have two or three hands by tomorrow, and then I'll go."

Not having to fool with the cows would give her time to freshen up before the three-mile walk to school. "You sure?"

"Go on, now." He turned his face back and started lubricating the teats.

Walter did not have to tell Sophia again. As she headed back to the house, she couldn't understand how Walter could be so content with farmwork. Sophia could not wait to grow up and wear classy dresses with high heels and perfume like the pretty girlfriends Unc brought around.

Sophia washed her hands at the spigot that ran on the side of the house. Cracked and calloused, her fingers looked like they belonged to someone twice her age. The Old Man was already out on one of the tractors—she could hear the motor chugging from around back—but Ma Deary continued to snort and snore.

As Sophia set the eggs to boil, she thought lovingly of her television mother, Margaret Anderson from *Father Knows Best*. Margaret would never let her children go off to school without presenting a beautifully set dining table, covered with bacon, eggs, toast, and freshly squeezed orange juice. Sophia rolled her eyes in the direction of Ma Deary with disgust.

She walked down into her bedroom. An octagonal window the size of two fists let in a stream of sunlight. There were no electrical sockets in her room, and the only other light that came through was when she left the kitchen door ajar.

Sophia pulled her school skirt out of the trunk in the corner.

Last school year, the skirt fell below her knee, as required. She must have grown at least two inches over the summer, because now the skirt stopped above her knee. Seeing that it was all she had to wear, it would have to do.

The farm sat a ways back from the main street, so Sophia and the twins traipsed through uncut grass for a quarter of a mile before reaching Double Oak Road. Sophia checked her brothers for ticks, then the three walked along in single file. After dropping the boys off at the big red barn that had been converted into a lower school, she walked the last mile alone to the high school, feeling her stomach slip from a loose loop into a tight knot.

W. S. Brooks was a single-story brick building that sat back on a large lot with a smattering of white ash and hickory trees. The grass smelled freshly mowed, and the high-pitched laughter of classmates reuniting after summer rang out loud. Sophia pushed her hand over her head, not sure why she had even wasted time with the brush and comb because the morning humidity had already puffed up her hair like a horse helmet.

As she crossed the parking lot, tugging her too-short skirt, she saw upperclassmen wearing their first-day best, posted against freshly washed vehicles, shooting the breeze. A group of sophomore boys tossed a football while blushing girls flashed their teeth, thirsting after the attention their two-hour morning routine deserved.

“Orangutan,” a shrilly voice called out.

Sophia’s shoulders stiffened. It was Maxine and her dreaded triad of flunkies. She picked up her pace.

“Don’t pretend like you don’t know your name all of a sudden.” Maxine spoke louder, and her acolytes scratched under their arms while producing monkey sounds: “Oo-oo-ah-ah.”

Sophia didn’t have to look at them to know that all four girls had on

brand-new A-line skirts, starched white blouses, and two-toned flats, with their hair pressed to a shine. Their flowery fragrances contrasted with her own aroma of egg yolk and the rotten-plant residue stuck to the bottoms of her shoes. The girls were on her heels by the time Sophia had reached for the school's front door with a trembling hand.

"Don't fall asleep in class this year, either. Wouldn't want the boogeyman to get you," Maxine hissed in her ear and cackled while the flunkies chorused their monkey sounds.

Sophia was about to run away from them like she had all last school year, but something deep inside of her rooted her to the ground. She turned and looked Maxine dead in the eye. "And don't you eat lunch. Might be a razor blade in your sandwich."

Maxine looked so stunned that, in the time it had taken for her to recover, Sophia was already down the hall ducking into her first-period class.

She had been assigned to eleventh-grade chemistry even though she was technically in tenth grade. While her teacher went over the year's objectives and what they would master, a student entered with a note for the teacher.

"Sophia Clark, report to the principal's office," her teacher said.

The knot was now so tight in her stomach, Sophia thought she would throw up. Swallowing hard, she gathered her things. It seemed like every eye in the room turned to watch her get out of her seat. Her knees wobbled so much that, right before she reached the door, she tripped over her own foot and grabbed the doorknob to catch herself from falling. The kids roared with laughter.

"Now, class, settle down." The teacher slapped her palm three times against her desk.

Sophia moved through the deserted halls, wondering if she was being summoned because Maxine had told on her about the razor-blade comment, or if one of the hall monitors had reported her for dress-code violation on account of her too-short skirt. If it were the

comment, she would deny it, and if it were the latter, she would assure Principal Travis that the short skirt was an accident. She'd say that her mother had bought the wrong size but would take her shopping over the weekend. Which was a bald-faced lie. Ma Deary never took them shopping. She simply brought home clothes from the hospital's lost-and-found box and told them to choose whatever passed as fitting. Unc's latest girlfriend had given Sophia what she wore now, probably out of sheer pity. She had looked Sophia over and said, "Sugar, you are way too pretty to be dressed like an old maid."

The school's office had a small reception area with a desk and two bookshelves.

"For heaven's sake, Sophia?" The white-haired receptionist looked up from her ledger.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Mrs. Brown's just about had a cow trying to locate you. Head on back now before you give that woman a full-fledged heart attack."

Sophia breathed a sigh of relief. Mrs. Brown would be easier to talk to about her circumstance than the principal. When she reached the end of the hall, she could hear Mrs. Brown's heels click against the vinyl-plank floor. Mrs. Brown was wearing a plaid blazer with a pleated skirt, and as she removed her reading glasses, her mouth hung agape. Sophia bristled. She could tell by the look on the woman's face what was coming next.

Detention.

Mrs. Brown was the first lady of First Samuel's Baptist Church, and very no-nonsense about girls looking and behaving like young women: no short skirts, no fingernail polish, no earrings bigger than a hatpin, and no foul language permitted under any circumstances. Sophia was in violation of at least two of the hard-and-fast rules and braced herself for the consequences.

"Sophia. Why are you here?"

"A student pulled me from class with a note," she stuttered.

Mrs. Brown's dimples deepened as she shook her full head of Shirley Temple curls. "I mean here at Brooks High School. Did you not receive my message?"

Sophia touched her forehead. So she was not in trouble. Which meant that there was no detention, leaving ample time to get her evening chores done before the sun went down. It was near impossible to work in the barn in the dark, and she always worried about stepping on chicken snakes.

Then Mrs. Brown's words registered. Sophia asked, "What message?"

Mrs. Brown lifted a file folder from her desk with "Sophia Clark" written in red ink. "Your application to the Prosser Foundation was accepted. You've passed all the necessary tests and have been admitted to West Oak Forest Academy."

Sophia blinked her eyes, not sure she had heard correctly.

"The school's headmaster has called countless times looking for you. He said two letters were mailed out to you over the summer. I even called and left a message with your mother."

"I got in?" Sophia asked, stunned.

"Yes. You did it. Congratulations." Mrs. Brown's lips were stretched so wide with laughter that Sophia could see the gold crowns wrapped around her molars.

Sophia put her hand to her mouth as she sank into the chair opposite Mrs. Brown. Why hadn't Ma Deary given her the message?

"They were going to give your spot away to a boy from Richmond, but I told them that I would have you there before class tomorrow morning." Mrs. Brown slid the folder across the desk to Sophia. "I am certain that it was your mother I spoke with on"—she spun her chair toward the calendar hanging behind her head—"July 29, 1965."

July 29 had been the one day, all summer long, when Sophia had been away from the farm. Unc and one of his girlfriends had taken them to the bay for a picnic and a swim on Walter's eighteenth

birthday. Sophia thought to lie to cover for Ma Deary's negligence. She usually had something at the ready, but right now she was drawing a blank. She fidgeted with the hem of her skirt around her fingertip.

"Something told me to stop by your house, but I got so busy with the prep for the new school year." Mrs. Brown beamed. "Well, in any case, you've already missed a few days, so it is imperative that your parents drive you first thing tomorrow." She shuffled a few more papers. "Here's the packing list. You can head on home to prepare. Oh, and I almost forgot."

Sophia watched as Mrs. Brown reached under her desk and then handed her a silver gift bag tied with a white bow.

"A few of us in the office got you this. To get you started."

Underneath the shiny tissue paper was a white cotton nightgown with a matching robe and a pair of fuzzy slippers. A package of new panties, knee socks, and a pair of gently used loafers. Sophia could not remember ever receiving a gift, let alone one packaged so beautifully. Not even on Christmas.

"I had to guess your shoe size. I sincerely hope they fit. You will be given a school uniform upon your arrival, so you don't have to worry about that."

"Thank you," Sophia breathed, weightless with glee.

"Your parents won't have any issues getting you there tomorrow, will they?" Mrs. Brown eyed her pointedly. "I'd take you myself, but I have a meeting with the superintendent on the terrible condition of our textbooks."

"No, ma'am." Sophia swallowed hard.

"Good. Here is my telephone number. Call me if you have any problems at all." Mrs. Brown stood, and before Sophia knew what was happening, Mrs. Brown had swept her into her arms. She was big-breasted, smelled like peach cobbler, and her embrace was as comforting as anything Sophia had ever known.

“I don’t know how to thank you.” Sophia couldn’t remember the last time she had been hugged, and she didn’t want to let go.

Mrs. Brown patted her shoulder. “Doing your best is thanks enough. Now go on. Make Brooks proud.”

Sophia picked up her bag of goodies, and as she walked out the door, Mrs. Brown called behind her, “And for the love of God, do something with that hair.”