

# NO CRYSTAL STAIR

a novel



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PREFACE BY DOROTHY W. WILLIAMS

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## CHAPTER I

Marion Willow had less than thirty-five minutes to get to the Westmount Y on Sherbrooke Street. Normally, it was a brisk but invigorating stroll under the tall elms that shade Westmount Boulevard, past ostentatious homes built by Scottish robber barons who'd made their fortunes building railroads. But today, Mademoiselle Laroche, Marion's morning employer, had delayed her, equating the situation of the French in Canada with the plight of Blacks in the United States. Only when an old gentleman doffed his bowler, murmuring "Good afternoon," did her resentment begin to seep away.

"*Les nègres blancs*, indeed!" Marion huffed, without breaking her stride.

In faraway Europe, that spring of 1942, the Second World War was raging. France had fallen, Britain was being blitzkrieged, and North Africa was Hitler's battleground of choice. Many of Denise Laroche's contemporaries, including the former mayor of Montreal, Camillien Houde, considered Canada's involvement in the war an af-

front to its French population. But in English upper-crust Westmount, apart from finding rationing a bit of a nuisance, the citizens considered the war a great opportunity to fly the Union Jack, carry on for “King and Country,” and listen to speeches by that wily old warhorse, Winston Churchill.

Marion picked up her pace across St. Stephen’s Park. She envied the mothers whose children could roll on fresh-cut lawns and build castles in clean sandboxes. Below the park and to the west, Lansdowne Avenue wound steeply downhill. Its halfway mark was the mock-Tudor duplex where she had once worked for a miserly woman. Rushing past did not blur the memory of the time when Efuah, the younger of her two children, had been so feverish that Marion had dared not leave her at the day nursery, so brought both girls with her to work. On the Friday, the woman had deducted what she considered the cost of the children’s food from Marion’s twelve-dollar-a-week wage. Five years had passed, but Marion still bristled at the injustice of it.

Lansdowne’s hill ended at Sherbrooke Street, where the broad expanse of Westmount Park, with its Gothic library, greenhouse gardens, cricket pitch, and Philippa’s favourite storytale duck pond, faced the handsome red-brick and stone building with the imposing double front doors that housed the Westmount Y. To bolster her flagging spirit, she pictured the residence wing on the top floor; its twenty-one single and five double bedrooms, and their five white-tiled bathrooms, were part of her domain. On the second floor were a teakwood indoor run-

ning track, two conference rooms, two dining rooms, and Amelia Hall's kitchen.

Amelia, born and bred in New Orleans, ran the Y's spacious kitchen as if it were her very own. Her Creole cooking skills had made the Y's lunch a must for businessmen, as well as Rotary Club and Lions Club members throughout Montreal. The lower-floor gymnasium and swimming pool, linked to the teakwood running track by an iron stairwell, were the fiefdom of Sven Svenson, a charming Norwegian who, because he adored Amelia's cooking, worked himself and everyone else into a sweat to keep their mutual weight problems under control.

Marion sprinted through the lobby—past its deep, maroon-leather chairs, oak reception desk, and lending library, which was watched over by the kilt-proud Thaddeus McGregor. The big hand of the clock over the information desk clicked to twelve fifty-five.

"G'day, Mister McGregor," she called to the reception desk as she raced up the second-floor stairs two at a time.

"God love us, lass. Why such a hurry?" But Marion had disappeared before Thaddeus McGregor could finish his sentence. "Such a bonnie lass," he said softly. "Make some man a fine wife."

His smile hovered, then faded. He closed his lips firmly. Never do for a man who intended someday to become the executive director of the YMCA to marry a coloured lady. Yet she was powerfully attractive and winsome. He went back to his desk, his blue eyes sparkling.

Marion went directly into the kitchen where Amelia Hall was stirring a cauldron of Creole fish. "Good Lord,

Marion, you musta run all the way from your morning job! Catch yo' breath, child. Working two jobs at your age! T'ain't right! Now jes' set yo'self down and sample this. Gatehouse delivered some Cuban shrimp and some red snapper this morning that cried to be part of a New Orleans gumbo."

"I only have five minutes, Aunt Amelia," Marion protested in vain. A steaming bowl of thick soup was placed before her and a finger poked in her ribs, with the remark, "You kinda skinny. No wonder yo' all can't catch yo'self 'nother husband." Amelia plunked in a spoonful of aioli croutons when the bowl was half empty, scolding, "Don' woof it down so! Them rooms upstairs can wait. Sides, Vashti Dobson in a eeevil mood. Ah don't understand those Geechee wimmen. They's so sometimey." While Amelia fussed, Marion marvelled at the food being dished up for customers. Delicious odours from Amelia's sugar-bronzed yams, roast pork with herb stuffing, string beans and braised celery, as well as her New Orleans fish chowder, permeated the kitchen's warm air. Obviously, Amelia knew how to circumvent the government's ration program. Little Clara, who was serving a Rotary luncheon, came in, complaining that everyone was asking for roast pork.

"Wha's de matter wid those social worker men? Ah ain't heard any calls for seconds of my Creole chowder," Amelia complained.

"They prefers the roast pork, tha's why," Clara informed her.

"Well, they's only getting' two slices apiece. What

they ‘spect for forty-five cents?”

“They’s kinda ‘fraid of the pow’ful smell of yo’ garlic,” Clara suggested. “they still gots to do they social work dis afternoon.”

“That’s not it at all.” The prim voice of Gertrude Martin, the senior waitress, cut through the speculation. “They prefer the pork so they can wrap one piece up and sneak it home for their supper. For some, this is their only decent meal. We may be working in hoity-toity Westmount, but there’s many a poverty-stricken member of the gentry living here, too.” Gertrude’s broad bottom pushed against the swinging doors to allow her string-bean figure and four-plate tray to go through. “As I see it,” she concluded, “in Canada, poverty’s colour-blind and the Depression’s not class-conscious.” The three women chuckled sympathetically. Had Gertrude not been a Negro, she might have been a schoolteacher or a social worker. As it was, she was a vigorous “Letters to the Editor” contributor.

Amelia moved her ample frame about quickly, for there were two dining areas to serve and both were crowded. Marion slipped out and went upstairs. Her afternoon job was to help the housekeeper, Vashti Dobson, make beds, dust, clean rooms, and sort linen. An outside man came to clean the five showers and the toilet rooms, and polish the building’s brass. All the Westmount Y housekeepers, their assistants and the kitchen staff were drawn from Montreal’s Black community. Any openings on staff were carefully stage-managed by Vashti to ensure the inclusion of only those she described as “the right people.” Diminutive in stature, Vashti was meticulous about her

work, yet usually so full of good-natured gossip about the Y residents, the church and the local community that Thaddeus McGregor could hear Marion's tinkling laughter whenever he came up during the afternoon to check on their progress and receive Vashti's understated report on any irregularities among the residents.

But there was something wrong that afternoon. Vashti, although sparing with words, was generous with those sounds of tooth-sucking disapproval employed by the West Indian segment of the Montreal community. Marion was not an integral part of that earthy community, any more than she was of Amelia's circle of elegant American ladies who had begun an active, busy-bee-like social group in 1902 called the Coloured Ladies Club. They were mostly wives of Pullman porters, relocated from the southern United States because their college-educated husbands could only find respectable, well-paid jobs on the railway. Highly educated and very literate, with charmingly genteel upper-class pretensions and concern for the well-being of "the Race," many of these women did not have to work outside their own homes.

Marion felt herself a hybrid, neither American nor West Indian. Her ancestors had been whalers, bold men whose home port was Bermuda. "Black Richard" and his brother "Yellow Richard" landed there in 1802 seeking freedom. Having fought slave owners during the revolution, when France would not give Haiti the same equality, fraternity, and liberty that Napoleon proudly boasted of, they escaped in a fishing boat, sailing skillfully into Bermuda's hidden Tobacco Bay. For generations after-

wards, they roamed the Seven Seas, following the blue whale. They fell in love with women from Fiji to Finland, from Mombasa to Martinique, and brought them home to Bermuda each season to breed another sailor for the clan. They served as pilots, guiding ocean liners and other vessels past Bermuda's treacherous coral reefs, occasionally indulging in looting when an arrogant foreign captain, ignoring their warnings, grounded his ship.

In the 1850s, her grandfather skipped ship in Halifax, responding to Canada's call for workers to level more roadbeds and lay rails for the expansion of the Canadian Pacific Railway, first at Wolfville, Nova Scotia, and later at Sault Ste. Marie in Ontario. Her father and Uncle John had joined the polyglot railroad crew as they dug through Kicking Horse Pass in the Rocky Mountains of British Columbia.

In 1910, in Montreal, waiting for the last ship to sail back to the Islands before the port froze up, Marion's father was introduced to the dewy-eyed daughter of an exiled Haitian poet. Immediately, he surrendered his wanderlust for the joys of Clothilde's homemaking. Having apprenticed during his youth as an electrician in the Royal Navy Dockyards in Bermuda and now flaunting a Creole-tinted French, he had no trouble getting a job in Montreal's east-end shipyards. Clothilde presented him with a little daughter, but both parents died of tuberculosis before the child was four. The tiny Black community rallied around and somehow Baby Marion grew into adulthood surrounded by an extended family of uncles and aunts she had to obey and honour, but who in turn

loved and protected her. Vashti Dobson was one of those “kissing cousins” or token aunts, as was Amelia Hall, who had taught her how to cook.

To pacify Vashti’s grumpy hissing, Marion sped through the bed-making, hoping the older woman would go down for tea and perhaps relax. “No good you tryin’ to get ’round me, child,” Vashti said as they met in the linen room. “I don’ approve of the way you carryin’ on with Edmond Thompson and tha’s that.”

The pillowcases dropped from Marion’s hands. “What?”

“Huh. Not much is hidden from those who have eyes to see.”

“Aunt Vashti, what do you mean? Mr. Thompson has been a friend for years, but no more than that.”

“Then why he nephew livin’ in your new house, eh?”

Marion breathed a deep sigh of relief. “Oh, that! Otis is a nice young man and the children adore him. And now that I have a three-bedroom house, he’ll pay rent for a room to use when he’s in town. Goodness knows, we need the money—you know that. Aunt Vashti, why are you attacking me?”

The eyes of Vashti Dobson rolled twice. “Play with puppy, puppy lick you mouf,” she murmured.

“Aunt Vashti, how can you be so crude? It just happens that we both belong to the Marcus Garvey Debating Society, but Edmond Thompson has his own home and his own life. We’re only friends.”

“No, child. No longer. I hear tell he done packed up Mistress Torrie Delacourt’s overnight knick-knacks and

returned 'em to her own abode.”

Marion froze. Hearing Vashti mention the Delacourt woman was like listening to a serpent about to strike. She tasted fear.

“I wouldn’t mess around with those high-yella, high-steppin’ ladies if’n I was you. They know more voodoo tricks than a Yoruba market woman.”

“But I don’t even know her. And she can have Edmond Thompson for all I care! Why are people talking?” Horror released her tears. “What have I done? I had to have someone sign the rental lease and he did it, that’s all.”

“Hush now, child. I believes you.”

Vashti, chastened as Marion’s normally proud shoulders cringed pathetically, dug into the pocket of her coverall apron and pulled out her hanky. “Hush, I say. Next thing you know, ole Highland McGregor be trudg-in’ up here. Nothin’ to cry about. You too proud, girl. You should marry and let some man take care of you. Deacon Stevens been interested in you since your husband died.”

“Ralph Stevens is a ninny,” Marion hiccupped. “He thinks just because he’s got an office job at Canadair, he’s the cat’s whiskers. He doesn’t even read hardcover books!”

Vashti’s arms circled Marion’s shoulders. “Child, I don’ blame you, but you too proud. Those carry-go-bring-home folks goin’ to destroy you. Rock stone at river bottom never feel hot sun.”

Marion sniffed. “What does that mean?”

“Means, only those who have suffered know how to sympathize. Most women in your position go on welfare.”

“Welfare! Me? Never! There’s no need. I work, I could earn as much as any man if the system was fair. I could be a dietician, but when you’re coloured, they call you a cook.”

They each returned to sorting the linen. Ironing the last of the pillowcases, Marion tried to mend fences with Vashti. “Now that I’ve rented a bigger place, I could run a lovely rooming house and stay home. You know, a bed and breakfast. I even have a dining room. Now, when it’s my turn to entertain the Coloured Ladies Club, we can have a proper tea sitting around a table.”

Vashti’s grunts abated as Marion’s enthusiasm grew.

“It would be perfect for tourists in the summer, or for our folks who come to the Royal Vic for medical treatment. Best of all, I could cater to those nice African and West Indian college students who can’t find rooms around McGill. It would pay.”

“Need licence for that, don’ it?” asked Vashti.

The zephyr breeze evaporated, the chill set in again. Vashti was right. Marion couldn’t get a licence in her own right, any more than she could borrow money to buy extra furnishings—no matter how sound a business proposition she had. Denise Laroche was right about the inequality of women. The Napoleonic Code reigned supreme in French Canada. Women, widows, and cripples were not persons under the law. Images of Mademoiselle Laroche preparing her male colleagues’ law briefs at home made her wince. She hit her fist against the cupboard shelf.

“There has to be a way. I won’t give in.”

“Honey, they a lot of orphan children in Montreal

needin' homes. Now, if'n you'd board two or three, they pays fifteen dollars a month, I hear, and all they clothin's provided. That way you could stay home wif yours. Don' need no licence for that. City too glad to farm out mu-latto babies. Nobody's goin' to adopt *them*. They fly-by-night fathers was Black."

"I say, am I intruding?" Thaddeus McGregor's raised bare knee pushed open the door. His kilt flipped down again. "Wondered if you'd care to join me in the kitchen for a spot of tea. Miss Amelia baked some scones."

Vashti sucked her teeth. "Um, must finish this list first."

"Come, now. Tomorrow's a special day. May the twenty-fourth—Victoria Day, you know."

"Special?" Vashti mocked. "Don' we havta work? Ain't there always beds waitin' to be made up?"

"Certainly, certainly. That's why we should celebrate Queen Victoria's birthday today while we're all here. It's a national holiday on Sunday."

"Huh. Go 'long! We soon come."

"Right-o. Don't tarry." Thaddeus backed out of the room and marched down the hall in step with an imaginary bagpiper.

Vashti suppressed a laugh. "Never call alligator 'long mouf' till you pass 'im," she advised, as they finished putting the clean linen away.

Pushing Marion ahead of her, she hobbled down to Amelia Hall's kitchen. Seated at the large central work-table, McGregor was holding forth, touting the achievements of Queen Victoria's reign, doing his patriotic best

for King and Country against a battery of sceptics.

“That Victoria. Didn’t she allow slavery?” Clara hissed as she buttered one of Amelia Hall’s cornbread scones.

“No,” McGregor declared. “She abolished it!”

Marion was not listening. Having foster children in her home instead of a male boarder might just help solve her money problems. A month before she had moved from the small flat on rue St. Antoine, a social worker had approached her to ask if she could accommodate Emily Capriccio, a little almond-hued, freckle-faced girl who had gone to the same nursery school as her own daughters. “Couldn’t consider it,” Marion remembered telling the social worker. “I have neither enough room, nor the time to give her.” Racing home in the late afternoon after a full day’s work, collecting her two girls, feeding and mothering them—that was worry enough. “Impossible,” she decided.

Why should she penalize Otis? He was proving such good company for the girls and was always willing to fix things around the house. No, he was an ideal boarder. Edmond Thompson had done her no harm. Her resolve to ignore the community gossip propelled her through the rest of the day’s work.

She left the Y shortly after four, still agitated. Arguing with herself as she walked briskly down des Seigneurs hill, she noticed in the distance a bright yellow convertible parked in front of her section of the street. Could that be her daughter Pippa, talking to someone in the car? She quickened her pace, a sense of foreboding tightening her stomach. The girls had been told not to talk to strangers.

The house was still so far away. She began to trot. Suddenly, the yellow convertible moved forwards. Pippa, balancing her load of books, moved back to join her younger sister, who was spinning a yo-yo on the front steps. The convertible glided into the lane and out of sight. With a relieved sigh, Marion broke into a run. Seeing her, the girls sprang down the steps to meet her.

“What treasures you are,” Marion murmured as she knelt to hug them. “Now, tell me about your day,” she coaxed, as they walked hand in hand into the house.

Pippa’s recital at the supper table did not include the yellow car, and even at bedtime, her “God bless” litany did not include its occupant. “Maybe it’s nothing, but I’m sure I’ve seen that car in the neighbourhood before,” Marion thought, as she monitored her daughter’s endless chant. When it seemed to be winding down at last, Marion asked, “Pippa, who was in the yellow convertible?”

Pippa hastily ended her prayer, not with an answer, but with a fervent plea: “God, please bless Emily and help find her a home.”

“Amen,” little Effie echoed.

Marion forced herself not to respond to the panic that began to build anew, but tucked the girls in bed, blew them a kiss goodnight, turned out the light, and went downstairs. Fretfully, she ignored the unwashed dishes. What did they matter, when something was going on—something she couldn’t put a finger on? Pacing the floor did nothing. Warily, she climbed back upstairs. Little Effie’s pillow was on the floor. Tucking it under her daughter’s sleeping head, she went over to sit in the window

seat. Pitti-Sing, the Siamese cat, jumped onto her lap. “Do you remember Emily?” Marion murmured, but the cat ignored her question.

Emily Capriccio—had it been four years since she had last seen the child, and the wonderful old Italian fruit peddler who had taken such good care of her? He seemed to believe she was his child, poor man. Perhaps if I agreed to be Emily’s foster mother, it would solve both our problems. Old Dominic must be ancient by now—far too old to bring up a half-coloured child. If Emily could live with a coloured family, at least for a year or two, she would perhaps learn how to cope in a world that punished people for being Black, or even half-Black—to say nothing of being illegitimate.

Marion’s inner fear spoke aloud. “No, I just can’t.” She forced herself to relax by breathing deeply, counting slowly to ten. Pitti-Sing, sensing turmoil inside her normally calm mistress, purred more loudly and massaged Marion’s stomach with paws, claws carefully withdrawn. “Pitti-Sing, what should I do?” she asked the cat. “The girl needs a stable home, but I can’t provide one—at least, not right away. I still have to get over the nightmare of moving.”

A soft, almost wistful smile slowly lit Marion’s high-cheeked, café-au-lait face, as she continued to talk quietly about her children. “You know, Pitti-Sing, only little Effie found moving to a new house exciting. At eight, her world is still wide open. Everything enriches it. But Pippa has hidden fears. I think perhaps she remembers her father too vividly, and resents that both her father and

grandfather have died. She doesn't talk about it; she has such forbearance. But I know she'd rather I marry her godfather Poppa Dad. What a silly name to call Edmond Thompson! He's such a Rock of Gibraltar."

Marion found herself withdrawing, even from the cat, as she reminisced. Pippa had not yet found a friend like young Trevor Wilson on rue des Seigneurs to make her feel proud about being different from other children, about being Black. Who would she find to share a love of poetry with her? "Why," she asked Pitti-Sing, "why is it so easy to develop an inferiority complex when you're from somewhere else? What should I do to make sure my girls grow up with self-confidence and pride?" The Siamese cat made no attempt to share her feline philosophy. Purring contentedly, she survived, as cats have for centuries, by being inscrutable. Marion raised her head and looked up into the sky to help check the self-pity that was threatening her equilibrium. "Dear God, how can I prepare them to defend their moral values? Is teaching them the Ten Commandments enough, when so few people feel they apply to everyone? Tell me, how does one stay whole in this crippling society? How?" There weren't any stars to provide a divine signal, but the tree outside waved its bare branches in sympathy. "Dear Lord," she pleaded, "give me strength."

Unbidden, the words of "Mother to Son" came into her head.

*Life for me ain't been no crystal stair  
It's had tacks in it*

*And splinters,  
And boards torn up;  
And places with no carpet on the floor—  
Bare ...*

Along with Tennyson, Langston Hughes was one of her favourite poets. “*But all the time I’s e been a-climbin’ on,*” she continued, reciting the lines in her mind.

*And reachin’ landin’s, and turnin’ corners, and sometimes  
goin’ in the dark where there ain’t been no light. So don’t  
you turn back. Don’t you set down on the steps ’cause you  
find it’s kinder hard. Don’t you fall now—for I’s e still  
goin’, honey, I’s e still climbin’. And life for me ain’t been  
no crystal stair.*

She breathed deeply. “Amen. Come on, Pitti-Sing. Time for bed.” Disdainfully, the Siamese cat refused to leave Marion’s warm lap with its faint scent of Yardley’s lavender. Scooping the cat up, Marion carted her down to the kitchen, explaining that she had to heat a kettle of water on the kerosene stove for both a cup of tea and a sponge bath. Easing her slight body into the old wooden rocker in front of the squat tube of liquid fire, Marion glanced at the calendar on the wall. It had been almost three weeks since May first, moving day in Montreal.