

THE
SKIN I'M IN

A Novel



WEAR IT LIKE SUNDAY

PETER SHEPPARD

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MBP² Press

The Skin I'm In: A Novel

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This is a work of fiction. The Moffett, Bankston, Freeman, Scott, Dunn, Ellery, and Petit families, Little Zion Missionary Baptist Church, Tuck's Bar-B-Q & Cold Drinks, Deacon's Cuts, the band And Cold Drinks, the plant on the river, and every character in these pages are products of the author's imagination. Slaughter, Zachary, Clinton, and East Feliciana Parish are real places, and details of the town's history come from the public sources listed in the Notes; the people in this story are not real. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

"Skin I'm In" was written by Larry Blackmon and recorded by Cameo. No lyrics from the song are reproduced in this book. The song's title is used with respect, as the music that carries this story.

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*For every child who was ever called a name for the color God gave them,
and for the ones who stood up in the crowd
so that child could see them through the lights.*

Contents



Prologue: The Filter	I
Part One: The Record	5
1. Midnight	6
2. Long Sleeves	13
3. Uncle Tuck's	19
4. Picture Day	25
5. Saturday at Ruby's	31
6. And Cold Drinks	38
7. Second Place	45
8. The Last Plate	52
Part Two: The Letters	58
9. Rodney	59
10. Mother Hattie's Letter	66
11. Short Sleeves	75
12. Two Names on a Stone	81
13. The Skin I'm In	89
Epilogue: Top of the Clock	99
Author's Note	105
For Book Clubs and Classrooms	107
Notes	109
About the Author	110

The Family

The Moffetts, Bankstons, and Freemans of Slaughter, Louisiana

Hattie Collins Bankston (1918–1996)

“Mother Hattie.” Light-skinned, gray-eyed, the prettiest girl in the parish in 1935.

Elijah Tucker Freeman (1936–1989)

*“Uncle Tuck.” Raised by Hattie’s sister Corinne as Tucker Spears. Owner of Tuck’s Bar-B-Q ☞
Cold Drinks on Highway 19.*

Ruby Bankston Moffett (b. 1950)

Hattie’s daughter. Pressed hair in her kitchen on the Highway from 1971 to 2019.

Otis Lee Moffett (1945–2003)

Ruby’s husband. Thirty-five years on the railroad through Slaughter.

Darnell “Dee” Moffett (b. 1972)

Their son. Bass player, millwright, retired maintenance superintendent.

Lisa Moffett (b. 1974)

Their daughter. Pharmacist in Zachary.

Tonya Scott Moffett (b. 1971)

Darnell’s wife. Singer. Retired fourth-grade teacher.

Kendra Moffett Hill (b. 1996)

Darnell and Tonya’s daughter. Night-shift nurse. Married to Andre Hill.

Zuri Hill (b. 2015)

Kendra’s daughter. Eleven years old.

And the friends: Kenny Dunn, drummer, later a barber and deacon; Marcus Ellery, piano, later a band director; Rodney Petit, the boy on the bus; his granddaughter Brielle; and Luis, who was standing twelve feet away.

PROLOGUE

The Filter

Slaughter, Louisiana. October 2026.

THE BATHROOM DOOR in his mother's house had never locked right, not in fifty years, and Darnell Moffett knew exactly how to lean on it so the latch slipped. He did not do it. He stood in the hall with his hand flat on the painted wood and listened to his granddaughter cry.

It was not a loud cry. That was what bothered him. Zuri was eleven, and when she was hurt in the ordinary ways, a skinned knee, a lost tablet charger, a cousin who cheated at Uno, she let the whole of East Feliciana Parish know about it. This was a different sound. This was the cry of somebody who did not want to be found.

"Zu," he said. "It's Paw-Paw."

The crying stopped the way a faucet stops when you shut it too fast, with a little knock in the pipes.

"I'm fine."

"I know you're fine. I'm not asking if you're fine. I'm asking if you want a honey bun. Your great-grandmother hid two in the bread box behind the light bread, and I'm the only one in this house who knows it, and I'm willing to split."

Nothing. Then the toilet flushed, which meant she was buying time, and the faucet ran, which meant she was washing her face, and the door opened four inches.

She had her mother's long neck and her great-grandmother's mouth and his skin. Everybody said so. Everybody had always said so, from the day she was born at the hospital in Zachary and the nurse held her up and said, *Lord,*

look at that pretty dark baby, and Darnell, who had been waiting thirty years to hear somebody say *pretty* and *dark* in the same breath without a *but* in the middle, had to go out to the parking lot and sit in his truck for a while.

Her eyes were swollen. She held her phone face-down against her chest like a hymnal.

“What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing made your eyes look like that?”

She looked at the floor. The linoleum in the hall was the same pattern it had been when he was a boy, little gold squares inside brown squares, worn pale in a path from the bathroom to the kitchen by three generations of feet.

“Can I see it?” he said, and nodded at the phone.

She thought about it a long time. Then she turned the phone over and held it up.

It was a picture of Zuri. Or it was a picture of a girl who had been built out of Zuri by somebody who did not love her. The face was Zuri’s face, but the nose had been narrowed and the lips thinned and the eyes made bigger and lighter, almost hazel. And the skin. The skin had been washed. That was the only word he had for it. Somebody had taken his granddaughter’s brown, the deep warm brown of pecan shells in November, and run it through a machine until it came out the color of weak coffee with too much milk.

Under the picture somebody had typed: *glow up!!! u look SO much better like this fr.*

And under that, a row of laughing faces.

“Who sent this?”

“Nobody. It’s a filter. Everybody uses it. Brielle did it to everybody in the group chat.” She swallowed. “She just did mine twice.”

“Twice.”

“She said the first one didn’t work. She said it needed to be stronger for me.” Zuri’s voice cracked down the middle. “And then everybody said I looked better. Even Kayla. Kayla’s my *friend*, Paw-Paw.”

Darnell Moffett was fifty-four years old. He had spent thirty years as a millwright and then a maintenance supervisor at a chemical plant on the

river, and in that time he had seen men lose fingers and seen a man lose more than that, and he had learned to keep his face still when the news was bad because a still face kept other people calm. He kept it still now. It cost him.

“Give me that phone a minute.”

She handed it over. He did not look at the picture again. He turned the screen off and put the phone in the pocket of his shirt, the long-sleeved work shirt he wore even in October, even in August, even to the beach the one time Tonya got him to go to the beach, and he put his hand on top of his granddaughter’s head.

Her hair was in two puffs. Kendra had done them that morning before school.

“You want to know a secret?”

She shrugged.

“When I was a little older than you, there was a boy on the school bus who called me Midnight. Every single day. For two years. *Midnight, Midnight, they gon’ have to put a light on you so we can see you in the picture.* And the whole bus laughed.”

Zuri looked up at him. In her face he saw the thing he had been afraid of, which was that she had never once thought of him as somebody who could be laughed at.

“What did you do?”

“For a long time? Nothing. I sat in the back and looked out the window at the pulpwood trucks and wished I was somebody else.” He took his hand off her head. “And then my Uncle Tuck gave me a cassette tape.”

“A what?”

“Lord, have mercy. Come on. Let’s go get those honey buns.”

In the kitchen, his mother was asleep in her recliner by the window with the TV on a game show and her reading glasses pushed up into her silver hair. Ruby Bankston Moffett would be seventy-six in five weeks. She had pressed and curled the hair of every Black woman in the south end of the parish for forty years out of this very kitchen, and the room still smelled faintly, under the coffee and the Pine-Sol, of hot combs and Royal Crown pomade, a smell that lived in the cabinets now and would outlive them all.

He found the honey buns where he had hidden them. While Zuri tore the plastic, he opened the junk drawer by the stove, the drawer that every Black grandmother in America keeps, with the rubber bands and the twist ties and the dead batteries and the funeral programs and the takeout menus from restaurants that closed during the first Bush administration.

It was still there. He had known it would be.

A cassette tape in a cracked plastic case. The cover had faded almost to nothing, but you could still make out the red and the gold, and the word across the top.

CAMEO.

And under it, smaller: *MACHISMO.*

He opened the case. On the inside of the paper insert, in blue ballpoint, in handwriting he would have known in the dark, somebody had written: *For Dee. Track 5. Play it loud. — Uncle Tuck. 10-17-88.*

He stood there holding it a long time.

“What is that?” Zuri said, with her mouth full.

“That,” said Darnell, “is the skin I’m in.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“It will.” He looked over at his mother, asleep in the chair, her hands folded on her stomach like she was already practicing for her own funeral, which she had planned down to the hymns and had shown him twice. Then he looked at his own arm, at the cuff of the long sleeve buttoned tight at the wrist, at the edge of the shiny pink scar that showed just below it no matter how tight he buttoned.

“Does Maw-Maw Ruby still have that old boom box in the closet?”

“The big silver thing? With the handle?”

“That’s the one.”

“It’s in the back room. Under the Christmas stuff.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Why?”

“Because,” Darnell said, “I’m about to tell you a story, and it’s got a soundtrack.”



PART ONE

The Record



Slaughter, Louisiana · 1988 and 2026

CHAPTER ONE

Midnight

Slaughter, Louisiana. October 1988.

THE SCHOOL BUS came up Highway 19 in the gray of six-forty, and Darnell Moffett heard it before he saw it, the old diesel downshifting at the curve by the co-op with a sound like a man clearing his throat before he says something you don't want to hear.

He was sixteen years old. He was five foot eleven and still growing, all elbows and Adam's apple, and he was, as his grandmother Hattie liked to remind him, the darkest child she had ever held in her arms. She did not say it like a compliment. She did not say it like an insult, either. She said it the way you would report the weather. *That boy came out black as a Sunday shoe. Got it from his daddy's side. Wasn't nothing nobody could do.*

As if somebody had tried.

He climbed on with his books under his arm and his head down and walked the aisle toward the back, past the little ones from Ethel Road, past the Hornsby twins who never said anything to anybody, past the seat where Tonya Scott sat by herself reading a paperback with the cover folded back so nobody could see the title. She did not look up. She never looked up. He had decided this was because she was too good for everybody, and he respected it.

He had almost made it to his seat when Rodney Petit said it.

"Ay. Ay, y'all. It's dark in here. Somebody cut the light on."

Rodney was a year older and a shade lighter than the inside of a biscuit, with hazel eyes and good hair, which in 1988 in East Feliciana Parish meant hair that moved when you ran your hand through it, and he ran his hand through it constantly, as if to make sure it was still there. His daddy sold

insurance in Zachary. His mama sang the solos at Little Zion. Rodney had never in his life been told that he was anything but a blessing.

“Oh, wait. That’s just Midnight.”

The bus laughed. Not all of it. Enough of it.

“Midnight, smile so we can find you.”

More laughter. Darnell sat down. He put his books on his lap and looked out the window. The sky over the pastures was turning from gray to the color of a peeled peach, and a pulpwood truck went by heading south toward the mill, stacked high with pine, chains rattling. He made himself count the logs. He got to thirty-one before the truck was gone.

“Midnight, what you gon’ do for the school picture? They gon’ have to use the flash twice.”

He counted fence posts. He counted cows. He counted the seconds until the bus stopped at the next driveway and the Kent boys got on and Rodney found somebody else to work on.

He had done the math, once, in his notebook, during a slow day in Algebra II. A hundred and eighty school days a year. Two rides a day. Two years now since Rodney had moved up from the elementary bus and found him. That was seven hundred and twenty bus rides. He figured Rodney had said it on maybe five hundred of them. Five hundred times. He did not know what to do with a number like that, so he folded the paper into a small square and threw it in the trash can by the pencil sharpener and never did the math again.

At the back of the bus, Kenny Dunn slid into the seat beside him with a smell of Care Free Curl activator so strong it made Darnell’s eyes water.

“Man, ignore that clown.”

“I’m ignoring him.”

“No, you ain’t. You doing that thing with your jaw.” Kenny popped his gum. He was short and round and brown as a pecan pie, and he wore a Jheri curl that he maintained with a devotion other boys reserved for their cars. There was a damp spot on the back of the bus seat in front of them, permanently, at the exact height of Kenny’s head. “You know what your

problem is? You too quiet. You let a fool talk long enough, he start to believe he a preacher.”

“What I’m supposed to say?”

“Say something about his mama.”

“His mama sings at church.”

“So? She sing *flat*.” Kenny grinned. “Everybody know she sing flat. Reverend Haynes be wincing.”

Darnell almost laughed. Almost.



At home that evening he went in through the kitchen, because the front room was where the women were.

His mother ran her shop out of the kitchen five days a week and half of Saturday. There was no sign out front. There did not need to be a sign. Everybody in the south end of the parish knew that if you wanted your hair pressed and curled by somebody who would not burn your ears and would tell you the truth about your husband, you went to Ruby Moffett’s kitchen on the Highway, and you brought cash, and you brought patience, because Ruby took her time and Ruby talked.

Today it was Miss Earline Kent in the chair, with her head tipped back over the sink and her eyes closed, and two more women waiting on the couch in the front room with their pocketbooks on their knees, and his grandmother Hattie in the good chair by the window, supervising.

Mother Hattie was sixty-nine and light enough that white people at the bank in Zachary had sometimes, in the old days, called her *ma’am* before they got a good look at her hair. She had gray eyes. She had been, by every account, including her own, the prettiest girl in East Feliciana Parish in 1935. She kept her figure by eating half of everything and her standards by never lowering them, and she believed, as she had been raised to believe, that there was a ladder in this world and the rungs were colored, and that a sensible family climbed.

“Darnell,” she said. “Come here and let me look at you.”

He came. She looked.

“You been out in that sun again.”

"No, ma'am. I been at school."

"You walked home from the bus stop with no hat. I saw you from the window." She shook her head. "You know you get darker in the sun. You got to take care of your skin, baby. Nobody else gon' do it for you."

"Mama," Ruby said from the sink, without turning around.

"I'm just telling him."

"I know what you telling him."

Mother Hattie reached into her pocketbook, which she carried even inside the house, even to the bathroom, and came out with a small white jar. She pressed it into Darnell's hand.

He knew what it was. He had seen the jars before, on her dresser, in the medicine cabinet, once in his sister Lisa's book bag, which had started a fight between his mother and grandmother that lasted through two Sunday dinners. A fade cream. The label promised to *brighten and even the complexion*. It smelled like lemons and something underneath the lemons that he did not have a name for, something chemical and sharp.

"Just at night," Mother Hattie said. "Just a little. On your face. It won't hurt you."

"Mama." Ruby turned around now, with the spray nozzle still in her hand, dripping on the floor. "I am not going to tell you again."

"Ruby, I'm trying to *help* that boy. You know how this world is. You know what they do to a dark boy in this world. I'm not saying nothing that ain't true."

"I know what's true. I married it."

The room went quiet. Miss Earline opened one eye, then wisely shut it again. On the couch, the two waiting women became very interested in their pocketbooks.

Darnell stood there with the jar in his hand. He did not know whether to give it back or put it in his pocket. He did not know which one would hurt somebody worse.

So he did what he always did. He went outside.

His father came home at a quarter to six, the way he always did, in the railroad truck with the yellow light bar on the roof, and parked it under the pecan tree, and sat a minute in the cab with the engine off before he got out. Darnell had asked him once why he did that. Otis Moffett had thought about it the way he thought about everything, slowly and all the way to the bottom, and said, *I'm leaving the railroad in the truck, so I don't bring it in the house.*

Otis had worked the line through Slaughter for twenty-two years. He had started on the section gang for the Illinois Central in 1966, swinging a spike maul in hundred-degree heat with men who called him *boy* when they were being polite, and he had stayed when the big railroad sold the line to the little one last year, and now he was a section foreman, the first Black section foreman anybody in the parish could remember. He was the darkest man Darnell knew. Darker than Darnell, even. His skin had a blue shine to it in certain light, like a crow's wing, like a new tire, and his hands were so thick with calluses that when he held Darnell's face as a little boy it had felt like being held by a tree.

He found Darnell sitting on the back steps with the white jar between his feet.

Otis did not say anything at first. He sat down on the step beside his son, which made the old boards complain, and took off his cap and wiped his forehead with the back of his wrist, and looked out at the field behind the house where the light was going gold and long.

Then he picked up the jar and read the label, moving his lips a little, the way he did.

"Your grandmother," he said.

"Yes, sir."

Otis nodded. He turned the jar over in his big hands a few times. Then he unscrewed the lid and smelled it and made a face, and screwed the lid back on.

"You know what that smell is?"

"No, sir."

"That's the smell of somebody telling you you wrong." He set the jar down on the step, carefully, the way you would set down something that might go off. "I smelled it before. My mama's sisters used it. One of them put it on so long her face went gray in patches. Looked like a map of somewhere nobody wanted to go."

Darnell did not know what to say to that.

"Boy on the bus still messing with you?"

He had never told his father about the bus. He looked up, startled.

"Kenny's mama talks to your mama," Otis said. "Your mama talks to me. That's how a town works." He looked at his son. "What he call you?"

It took Darnell a long time to say it. When he did, it came out small.

"Midnight."

Otis Moffett was quiet for a while. A mockingbird was going through its whole repertoire in the pecan tree, every song it knew, like it was trying to remember which one was its own.

"You know what midnight is?" his father said finally.

"It's dark."

"It's *twelve o'clock*. It's the top of the clock. It's the only time of day both hands point the same way, straight up to God." He put one of his tree-root hands on the back of Darnell's neck. "Midnight is when one day finishes and a new one starts. That's when the train comes through with the most freight on it, because the track is clear. That's when your mama went into labor with you, did you know that? Eleven fifty-eight at night. You came out right at the top of the clock."

"For real?"

"For real. Ask her." Otis squeezed his neck once and let go. "So when that boy call you Midnight, you just say *thank you*. Say, *That's right, I'm the top of the clock*. And keep walking."

"He gon' think I'm crazy."

"Let him. Ain't no law against a fool being confused." Otis stood up, knees popping, and put his cap back on. "And son."

"Sir?"

“That color you got. You got that from me. And I got it from my daddy, and he got it from his, all the way back to somewhere across the water we can’t even name no more. It’s been through some things. It’s been through more than that boy on the bus will ever see.” He picked up the jar of fade cream. “You don’t scrub that off. You don’t fade it. You wear it like Sunday.”

He carried the jar to the burn barrel at the edge of the yard and dropped it in, and went in the house to wash up for supper.

Darnell sat on the steps until the mockingbird quit and the first star came out over the pasture. He was thinking about the top of the clock. He was thinking it was the first time anybody had ever told him his color was a time of day instead of a problem.

He did not believe it yet. But he wanted to.

End of the free sample

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