

Vanilla, Cinnamon,  
and  
Dark Chocolate  
The Color of Love  
by  
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A Sample Segment

## Chapter 1

The murky gray elevator doors parted on the ground floor of the Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services, and a cinnamon-colored woman stepped out.

“Hey, Sonnie.” A Hispanic guard the height and width of a doorway nodded at the woman. He stood with one hand rubbing the side of his mustache and the other resting on his pistol.

“How you doin’?” She patted him on the arm, displaying even ivory teeth. Her black-and-white silk scarf fluttered at her side as she walked, filling his nostrils with the warm aroma of Tatiana perfume.

He wondered if she was part Native American as he admired her long and shapely legs. Her high cheekbones and the straightness of her spine suggested that she had been a clever and strategic warrior in a prior life, but the dimples in her cheeks challenged that idea. Her face changed daily, like a picture he’d seen in a psychology class at night school. The picture was of a beautiful or ugly woman depending upon the way one turned their head or the features they concentrated on. These were contradictory features: sweet and sour, hawk and dove, saint and sinner.

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Sonnie stepped inside a compartment created to protect county workers—an area made of plaster at the bottom and glass at the top. A wiry, ashy, frog-faced woman in a matted wig sat on an elevated stool, phone receiver to her ear and a frown on her face. Hugging the woman’s shoulders, Sonnie leaned over and spoke into her microphone. “Lisa Steel.” Sonnie heard her own voice magnified as she looked out into a sea of dazed and sour faces. The room was filled with row after row of haggard people sitting in gray metal chairs, waiting for various kinds of government assistance—

food stamps, medical stickers, and bus passes. Lisa, a dark chocolate woman, stood, dressed in black stretch pants and a yellow sleeveless blouse. Her black and-gold braids swung in her face as she wrestled with a toddler held in her arms. Her full mahogany lips, which were perpetually parted, showed a gold-rimmed front tooth among an otherwise perfect set of thick ivory teeth. Three gold pinhead earrings lined her ears, and her inch-long plastic fingernails were painted metallic blue.

Her baby's father, Frankie, sat next to her, dressed in heavily starched and creased khaki pants, a black Banlon shirt, and a pair of soft Bally loafers. His hair was not tight, dry curls but loose, wispy-looking ones. His long, thin upper lip was outlined by a mustache of equally fine black hair. Arms across the backs of the chairs on either side of him, legs spread wide, and a toothpick in his mouth, he eyed Lisa's round hips and thin waist with pride and possessiveness as she walked to the interview room.

The people in the room reminded Sonnie of film versions of European immigrants on boats fleeing to America. They wore odd combinations of clothing: black dress pants combined with white high-top tennis shoes, orange velvet jackets paired with green corduroy pants, and tan bell-bottom suits matched with red knit hats.

As she waited for Lisa at the entrance to the interview room, an ebony-colored man with a Haitian accent entered behind his social worker. As he passed by her, she inhaled his pungent body odor. Overwhelmed by his odor, she dropped her pencil and reached to get it. She smelled urine near the wall and recoiled. An elderly Mexican woman in a red scarf, flowered apron, and black leather boots picked Sonnie's pencil up and handed it to her.

"Gracias, Abuela." She bowed her head, thanking the woman.

"De nada." The woman returned a toothless grin, breathing gin into Sonnie's face.