

SELMA

CHAPTER 1

The lost ones

Birmingham, Alabama

The girls ran down the stairs laughing. They were excited about their big day in church.

‘My mama took two hours to do my hair this morning,’ said one girl.

Suddenly, there was a white light and a loud bang. Pieces of wood and glass flew everywhere, and then slowly fell to the ground. When the smoke cleared, the bodies of the girls lay dead.

Selma, Alabama

About a hundred miles* away, in a town called Selma, a woman was filling in a form in the Selma Courthouse. “Name – Annie Lee Cooper. Age – 54. Race – Negro,” she wrote. It was a year after white men killed the four girls in the church. Annie waited. She was wearing her best clothes.

‘Annie Lee Cooper,’ called the white man in the office.

Annie walked slowly towards the man. She wasn’t smiling and the man wasn’t smiling either.

‘Come on now,’ said the man. ‘I ain’t got all day.’

Annie handed her form to him.

‘You again,’ said the man. This was Annie’s fourth form.

* 1 mile = 1.6 kilometres; miles are still used in the U.S.

'I'd like to register to vote,' she said. 'The form's all right this time.'

'It's right when I say it's right,' said the man. 'What are the first words of the American Constitution*?'

Annie knew the words and she started to say them. The man stopped her with another question.

'How many judges are there in Alabama?'

She knew that too.

'Sixty-seven,' she said.

The man looked hard at her. Annie looked into his eyes. She saw that he hated her. He hated her because she was black.

* The American Constitution tells you the rights of the American people.





'Name them,' he said.

She couldn't name them. The man smiled. He never asked white people these questions.

'Then you cannot register to vote,' he said.

Oslo, Norway

Martin Luther King looked at himself in the hotel mirror.

'This ain't right, Coretta,' he said. 'What will the folks back home think? These clothes, this expensive hotel, the dinner ... '

'It's not wrong to spend a few days away,' said Coretta, doing up his jacket. 'There, you look good.'

Martin knew that life was hard for his wife. He was always away on protests, and sometimes they were dangerous. She worked on the protests too, but she was usually at home with the children. She worried about him. It was nice for them to be away together, even for a short time.

They talked about the future.

'We'll live in a small town,' he said. 'I'll have a little church and maybe teach a class.'

'And we'll get our own house.' Coretta smiled a little sadly. She knew her husband. It just wasn't possible. Their

world was all about the fight for civil rights. It was bigger than them and their small lives.

Later, they sat next to each other in a large room at the University of Oslo. Reporters from around the world were there.

‘This man has a dream,’ said the Nobel President. ‘He dreams of a world where people of all colours are equal. We believe in his dream. The 1964 Nobel Peace Prize goes to Dr Martin Luther King.’

Dr King came forward.

‘I thank you for this prize, but it is not for me,’ he said. ‘This prize is for our lost ones. They died in a church in Alabama on a dark day. They died to show us the way. This prize is not for me. It is for more than twenty million American negroes, who are fighting for equal rights with white Americans.’

Dr King looked up. He saw hope in the people’s faces. But were they right to hope?

