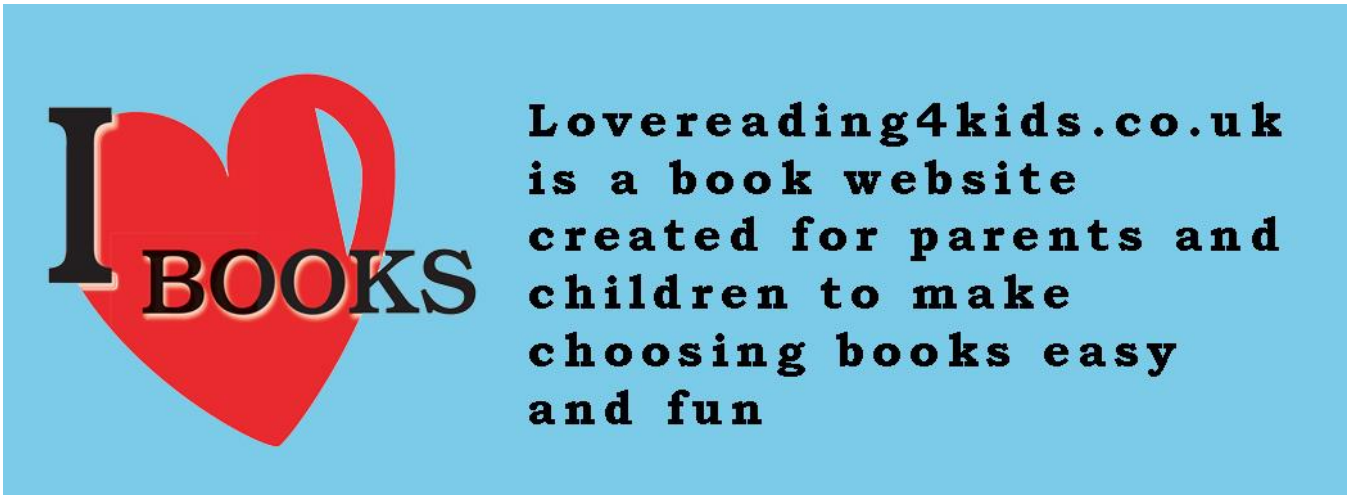


Opening extract from

Passing for White

Written by

Tanya Landman

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"I had much rather starve in England, a free woman, than be a slave for the best man that ever breathed upon the American continent."

Ellen Craft

PART 1

November 19th, 1847
Macon, Georgia, USA

Benjamin

She was standing on the step.

Scaring me to death.

A white woman.

Talking nice. Acting polite.

Looking at me.

Looking at me, straight in the eye.

Looking at me, straight in the eye and smiling.

What in the name of God was going on?

The Cornwells were new in town. Husband and wife had taken the big house on the corner by the church. I'd been sent along to measure up for new cabinets and shelves – there was a whole heap of work to do. My master told me their girl would show me the rooms.

"Rosa," he said. "She's called Rosa. That's who you got to ask for, boy."

I went to the back door. Knocked. When it opened, I was expecting to see a slave.

So I looked her full in the face. She sure was a beautiful thing, tall, with straight black hair. Brown eyes. White skin.

White skin. White skin. White, white, white.

Hellfire!

Not Rosa. No slave. She was the lady of the house! Oh Lord! And I was looking right at her! A man like me could get himself killed for less than that.

I dropped my head, my heart bang, bang, banging against my ribs. I felt sick to the stomach.

"You must be Benjamin," she said. Polite. Warm. I could feel her smile burning into the top of my head. "Won't you come on in?"

I was expecting her to call the girl, Rosa, but maybe she was running errands. It was just the two of us.

She led and I followed. We went down along the corridor to the parlour, where she pointed to the fireplace.

"Right there," she said. "Mr Cornwell wants two cabinets about so high, either side. And shelves just here. Think you can manage that?"

"Yes, ma'am."

My mind was pumping like a steam train. I'd seen ladies like her before. They acted kind. Generous. But put a foot wrong and they'd be calling for a whipping. Heck! It didn't have to be a foot wrong. It could be a toe. A toenail. The hair on a big toe. Not even that.

Sometimes, you didn't know what set them off. They'd go at you for no reason at all.

White folks could do whatever the hell they pleased. I knew that. And then they'd say it was your own damned fault. They'd lie so well they'd have themselves believing it. I was praying for that woman to go away. Thinking, 'Get out of here. Go someplace else. Leave me alone to do my work.'

But she stayed to watch me. And out of the corner of my eye I could see she was smiling again.

Then she started talking.

I couldn't make any sense of it. I was too darned scared.

I was on my own in a room with a white woman.

One word of hers could kill me.

My hands were shaking. When I got out my tape measure I dropped it. I had it wound into a ball and it rolled across the floor. Stopped right at her feet.

"Here, let me." She picked it up. Came on over. Held it out for me to take.

I froze. Couldn't move a muscle.

So she reached out. Took my hand in one of hers.

Her white palm cupping the back of my hand. Giving me the tape measure, the tips of her white fingers brushing my brown skin. Standing so close I could smell her sweet breath.

And her touch did something to me. I was feeling all those things you're not supposed to feel. All those things you're not allowed to feel.

"There you go," she said.

Then she was smiling again.

Talking. Chattering. The words didn't make any more sense than birds screeching.

What the devil was she doing? Playing with me? Testing me? Trying me out? Was this some kind of trap?

I wanted to get away! My heart was thumping so hard I thought my ribs would crack.

Then I heard a creak of floorboards upstairs. A voice called, "Rosa? Where are you?"

And the woman whose hands had touched mine was saying, "I'm down in the parlour, Miss Abigail. The boy's here about the cabinets like Mr Cornwell said."

"Well, come up here." The upstairs voice whined. "My hair needs fixing."

She turned to go. But before she did I said, "Rosa? You're Rosa? The house girl?"

"Yes." She was already on her way out of the door. But she looked back at me. "Who'd you think I was?"

I couldn't reply. She was already running up the stairs.

To Miss Abigail.

Her mistress? Her owner?

Everything flipped on its head.

Rosa.

She may have looked white. But to them?

That woman was as black as me.