

Wardaddy

Spiritual Battles in a World of Flesh



WARDADDY:
A Man at War
with Himself
and His Family.

*Inspired by
a True Story!*

James Anthony Allen

WARDADDY

Welcome to Willie's World

James Anthony Allen

A family's thirteen year struggle
for peace, love, and joy.



an eBlessings book

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I want to thank God for making it possible for me to write this book by surviving the years our family embattled the dangers inherent with those whose lives are impacted by a relative, friend, or neighbor diagnosed with schizophrenia or its angrier cousin, paranoid schizophrenia.

Bless and keep my family and extended family members for helping me piece this puzzle of our numerous years together in the madness of my father. It is my hope that this book and others like it will help societies realize that we have to confront this evil and not hide it tucked away in the institutions of the world.

Perhaps families will open their eyes as well as their mouths to the necessity of monitored medication therapies, group discussions in an atmosphere of love, and for family members to communicate openly concerning their concerns and not ignoring the very present harsh realities of mentally challenging illnesses and conditions in those we love.

WARDADDY

Welcome to Willie's World

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CHAPTER

1

Olivia sat rigidly in the high-backed, heavily lacquered wooden chair asking her beloved Mabel to tell her what really happened that tumultuous day, during those stormy times; those unspeakable times of which Olivia never knew the full details. Something inside of her yearned to know what actually happened to her father, what went on inside his head, inside his psyche. She had spoken with his doctors and they had naturally evoked their doctor-patient privilege.

His mother would know... she was the only one who might really know. The one to tell the tale properly. Would she allow Olivia to venture into that dark shadowy world? Would she tell her the secrets of his lifetime? Or would she take it to her grave, the guardian of a family shame too deep, too dark to reveal? Olivia *needed* to know. Her siblings didn't want to talk about it. And when they did speak, they singularly or collectively only danced around what Olivia assumed to be the genuine issues. Could she

extract the horrifying details before her grandmother was too old to remember, before her death? Before she too passed into the next realm?

What pulled at his mind? Olivia agonized. Was it something real? Had her father imagined some ill-conceived pain? And how was Grandmama living with the pain of his loss? Could he have possibly known what was happening to him and his family? Or was it something dark which her grandmother never wanted to acknowledge? Was she now about to break some mysterious barrier within herself, to forge on to a new quiet place at this late age?

Mabel Jones, eighty-five, a pitifully frail frame of a woman with a strong, steadfast soul, sat up in the bed staring at her aching wrinkled hands. These ghoulish, arthritis-twisted instruments once nurtured her son so tenderly, but also witnessed and abetted a heinous crime. Haunted, Mabel's gray head shook from a touch of Parkinson's disease.

Francesca, her great grand-daughter, Olivia's daughter, looked out the window at the stirring wind. A lone bird feeder swung forlornly in the growing gust. The vibrant four year old was mesmerized by the whirling sand and the flying leaves on the other side of the pane.

She was bored by the grown-up talk. Her great-grandmother's pain was of little interest to her. She found more interest in the mixture of dust, wind, and leaves. She had flattened her Kente cloth clothed doll against the window to share the view. She turned from the window upon hearing the serious shrill of her mother's voice.

“Grandmama, Grandmama!” Olivia said, shaking her grandmother's shoulder.

She startled Mabel out of her daydream. She struggled fitfully to escape the overwhelming pull of memory, to remain in the present, having been momentarily caught between the two.

“Girl... I remember that day... like it was yesta'dy.” She said, solemnly. “I could'a died.”

“I'm sorry for bringing it up.”

“It could'a killed me. I would've died for him, you know.”

She looked at Olivia with tender eyes. The look of a mother holding a newborn baby after being informed that the baby had a terminal illness.

“Earl was a planner-- knew what he wanted... When his life didn't turn out like he 'spected... He just unraveled.”

She glared past Olivia, over to the window, seemingly right through Francesca. It was a long hard stare, as if she could see a storm which neither Olivia nor Francesca could see. But she saw it; she saw something larger, more deadly than the storm that approached. She saw something that had already been. It was the lives of her past loved ones. And one more life, her life perhaps; no, not her life but the life of her dearest... her most prized...

“I never saw it... never saw it comin'.” Mabel' gaze shifted from the window to her hands. She strummed her fingers on their tips. “Everybody thought he was mean like his Daddy-- like your papa, you know.”

“I still can't believe it,” Olivia said in a slow quiet voice. “No one really explained to me what really happened.”

“Papa always said, 'The old man said, that if you didn't plan to go no where, you'd be surprised how fast you got there.'” She paused to think. “That's one thing about my Earl... he knew.”

A uniformed nurse came into the room. She was harried, angry because Mabel was sitting up in bed.

“Mrs. Jones, you shouldn't be sitting up like that.”

“I know, darling,” Mabel said.

“Let the bed do the work Mrs. Jones,” the nurse said as she inclined the bed and fluffed Mabel's pillows.

Mabel lay back, sinking deeply into the comfort of the pillows.

“Grandmama,” said Olivia.

She hesitated on getting her grandmother started on a subject she had evidently avoided for so many years. She had noted Mabel's harsh response to the mere mention of the circumstances surrounding her father's death. Olivia, however, operated out of a sense of urgency. Now desperate for information, she was afraid she might already be too late.

“Would you tell me the whole story from the beginning?”

“The beginning,” Mabel stopped to think. “Too doting, they said...”

Mabel looked painfully, slowly, deeply into Olivia's eyes. She spoke softly, “What do you think?”

She was afraid to answer the question herself, fearful of the truth, unwilling to fight the demons.

It was one of those haunting questions with which we often live. It was a grave question-- one which if not handled properly, if not discussed, haunts us to the grave-- oftentimes with us following into it. But now,

she listened for an answer from deep within-- within her blood line. Within the spirit of God's nature that lived inside of her.

Olivia pondered the question. She wondered where she was heading with these questions. How could this have anything to do with the events that she wanted to know about? Was Mabel going to a place I don't expect, or was this her attempt to throw me off course? Either way, she thought, I must get her to talk; she must tell me the truth-- before it's too late.

"Classic text book, they said..." Mabel trailed off.

Now Olivia's eyes had a questioning look, a sincere desire to understand Mabel. Her preoccupation, she hoped, was about to be appeased. She didn't know what to think about the things to which Mabel had alluded, or the questions she asked. Olivia was just hopeful that her trip was not in vain.

I'm not quite with her, Olivia thought. I'm not up to speed with where she's going or where she's coming from. Maybe it's her generation. But I'm here, and I have nothing to lose.

"I don't think it was that, dear," Mabel continued. "He built his own house before he was thirty. Did you know that?"

"No ma'am."

"They did without for a long time until they moved out. They made do. But you wouldn't know nothin' 'bout doing without," Mabel said disdainfully. "He took good care of y'all!"

Mabel's face transitioned to a distant place, to a weary time. She remembered her tiresome, dusty days as a sharecropper's daughter. Working in the steamy, hot cotton fields, slopping the "massive special

occasion hogs” (that’s what she used to call them), hoeing the garden with its assortment of vegetables from sun up to sun down. Then she would have to come in the big house and do household chores. She couldn’t wait to get out of there.

There never was any time for her. That’s what prompted her to leave home, getting married at an early age. That and Willie Sr. was such a lady’s man. He’d come over to the house swaggering, with nothing but flattery for Mabel and her Mama, dressed sharp as a carpenter’s tack with his Dobb’s straw hat jauntily cocked to one side. She never saw him without a suit on until she married him. Fine. Just fine. He and his friends.

“‘Buddy’,” Mabel murmured, reminiscing out loud. “They used to call him ‘Buddy,’” she said, giggling sheepishly.

“Who, Daddy? They used to call Daddy ‘Buddy?’” Mabel didn’t hear her.

“Grandmama, they used to call Daddy ‘Buddy?’” Olivia asked, breaking Mabel’s concentration.

“No, darling,” Mabel said gruffly, “yo’ papa, they used to call yo’ papa ‘Buddy’.”

Mabel then remembered Willie Sr.’s tendencies towards violence. She pondered her recurring question of how odd it seemed for Willie Jr. to have similar inclinations, though he had such a pleasant disposition.

Her lips quivered, moist with the beat of events neither too current nor too distant. In her eyes flowed the long forgotten emotions of her loving heart. The difficult events of which she would speak were as real to her now as they were when they had actually happened. Olivia wondered if Mabel would have the

strength to take her back to those horrific events and return safely. Olivia didn't know her grandmother as well as she thought.

"Papa was too rigid, and Willie too soft," she forged ahead taking her time, "that's what they said, you know. What do you think, honey?"

Olivia didn't know what to think. She only shrugged her shoulders. After all, that's why she was here. She wanted to know more about what happened to her father while she was away in college. She never could get anything out of anybody. No, she didn't know what to think; that's why she listened so attentively.

"I don't know," Olivia mumbled through pursed lips.

Mabel became very animated. "Seems like yesta'dy when Willie became a master mason. I'd tell him, 'You can't wait 'til you 40 years old to be a promising young man. What you think of most of the time is what you will be.'" She turned from Olivia to Francesca, "And that goes for you too, young lady."

Francesca wasn't paying attention. Olivia was surprised how all of a sudden Mabel was animated, full of energy. Mabel leaned forward to put more energy in her voice.

"Girlie! Francesca! Listen to your great-grandmother."

Francesca turned on her heels, not knowing whether she was in trouble for something or not. "Yes, Grandma. Uh-huh, great grand-Mama."

"Girlie, you're not too young to start planting those thought seeds in your head. You can be a doctor, you know."

"Yes ma'am."

Mabel leaned back to relax, after seeing that Francesca was paying attention.

Planning what you wanted to be was something Olivia could relate to. She had always planned to be a lawyer, a corporate lawyer. She had planned and worked very hard. And her hard work and planning finally paid off.

She was practicing law with the largest corporate firm in New York, a practice group responsible for some of the largest take-overs, mergers, and acquisitions in the country. Olivia couldn't believe her good fortune sometimes; she being a young black woman entrusted with such responsibility. And the money was good, too. Her Fifth Avenue apartment and garaged Mercedes were testament to that.

But despite her success, the great gaping hole left by her father perpetually gnawed at her gut. She wondered whether he was responsible for the string of bad relationships she had been in: the powerful firm partner, who tried to fire her when she finally broke free from him; the judge, whose horrified wife refused him sex after learning of the affair, and who left her voice mail messages to the "nigga b*%#h"; and the several sweet, gentle men to whom she cooled despite their eligibility.

Mabel settled down into a more solemn demeanor. "He knew what he wanted, my boy, he did," she shrugged, "now this..."

An uncomfortable drain of energy caused her shoulders to droop.

"Maybe Willie Sr. was too hard. Maybe I was too soft. Maybe Willie Jr. was sick. I don't know what to

think. People at church seemed to think it was a demon. But there was trouble from the start. And it got worse.”

Mabel’s thoughts, as did she faded, into the yester-world. She sighed deeply as her head weighed heavily upon the pillows.

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CHAPTER

2

It was daybreak. The temperature was steadily rising. An acute ear could hear the evaporation leaching the moisture from the dampened surfaces of nearby grass. The North Carolina sun heated the lingering dew that lay lazily on the gnarly and tangled kudzu weeds dotting the landscape. Dawn's moisture turned into minuscule waifs of steam which rose so dutifully towards heaven. The construction site continually fought a courageous battle to keep the kudzu's exponential growth from any available soil. Soon it wouldn't matter; in six months, the project would be complete.

Two pairs of boots walked through one of the many mud puddles. The worn work pants legs of Willie Jr. and Bubba Johnson, Willie's friend flapped and spread flecks forward and backward as they moved. Bubba and Willie walked briskly to their area of the construction site. They greeted assembled collections of younger African-American brick masons and apprentices as they passed.

“Good morning,” Bubba said.

“How y’all doin’ today?” Willie asked, with the confident assurance of a man of great pride.

Willie Thomas Jones, Jr. knew he had gained the respect and admiration of most of the brick masons on the job site; and this included that of both the whites and African-Americans. He was among the best in the State. He was as efficient as he was fast with his tools; and he was smart too. A handsome man cutting a dash with the ladies, Willie’s work ethic was exemplary. It was never an issue to stay late if necessary, and he had no problem going the extra mile.

He wouldn’t want to stop at day’s end if his section of the wall or structure wasn’t complete. It was rumored that if the lights would stay on all night and there was someone to mix the cement, Willie Thomas Jones Jr. would stay at the job site all day and night until the job was finished. That’s the sort of kind of guy Willie was--a hard working fool.

The guys just found it hard to understand why a man with such a beautiful wife and family would want to work so long and hard, at such a difficult job. They knew this because he had to leave for work so early, and on larger construction sites, which were often pressed for time, he would have to work without days off for weeks on end.

Most of the other masons had concluded that the job was just that: a job, nothing but a whole lot of work. But it was exactly this that stood Willie out from the rest of the crowd, what made him special.

To Willie, his work was a chance to create something concrete, a masterpiece, an object of beauty,

a solid, tangible *something*. It was a way to leave a legacy. Something people couldn't discount.

His confidence was often boosted when he drove by a building on which he had worked; one which he knew his sweat, his labor, his hands had assisted in constructing. It was both a satisfying and grounding experience for him. It made him feel like a part of the world, not like a second class citizen, but a part of the community in a way that would outlast his short stay.

"Good morning," said the younger guys aching for a moment of Willie's attention, "how y'all doing?"

"Jus' fine, jus' fine."

As they approached their destination, Willie spotted Jimmy Bugg, known as the 'Bug Man' in his circle. He received this moniker because he was always buggin'. Jimmy, for one reason or another, harbored a tasteless disdain for Willie. Not reserved for Willie alone, but for *all* Jimmy Bugg thought Willie represented. Jimmy held Willie's world in contempt.

Jimmy Bugg wasn't married and the guys assumed that's why he had such a nasty attitude--because he wasn't getting any. He was a dark-skinned, husky man who wasn't liked very much by his supervisors. But they all had to admit that Jimmy was one hell of a brick mason though. So he was allowed to strut his stuff around at the job site, virtually unchallenged. Bugg knew he wasn't the best African-American mason of the construction site, but he wanted to be.

Jimmy believed Willie to be a Mama's boy, too soft--not a rugged ladies' man like himself. The soft dark curls on Willie's head (which he tended so carefully) coupled with the tight swirls of hair which covered his thick chest and washboard stomach were to

Bugg a sign that Willie wasn't all man. Bugg thought any man who took too much care of himself was probably suspect, maybe even *gay*. And Bugg couldn't stomach such a thought.

Willie was a strapping six feet two inches tall. The years of hard, grueling labor had afforded Willie a taut, buff body with bulging muscles. Their ripples strained against his clothes as he worked, showing the efficiency of a stallion, bred and trained by the best. Bugg, on the other hand was sloppy in appearance, tending minimally to his physical appearance, his grooming habits.

Willie's hands revealed his work but he kept the hard nature of his labor secret by using lotion on them. They were large with square palms, like the long, strong fingers of a surgeon. He kept care of his fingernails, frequently filing them and cleaning them. Unlike most masons, his hands were surprisingly soft and free from scars. He kept his hands for his loving Jackie.

Bugg believed many things about Willie which were not true. He believed many things about himself which were not true as well. Jimmy's allies were equally envious and resentful of Willie. They looked on in disgust.

Willie ignored the bunch as he and Bubba got closer.

"How you boys doing?" Bubba said anticipating some type of antagonizing comment or body movement.

"Just fine," said Jimmy's cohorts.

"If it's any yo' business," Jimmy retorted.

“Can it Jimmy.” Bubba knew he had to curb any confrontation. “Nobody wants it, or needs it from you this early in the morning.”

“Cept maybe you, huh, Willie boy?” Jimmy taunted. “Don’t you want it, Willie?” Jimmy asked, holding his crouch.

A few guys chuckled but more were silent in respect for Willie.

“I know you sweet Willie. I’m sweet too. I’m sweet for the honeys—sweet for Jackie. You’re sweet ‘cause you’re a weak Mama’s boy.”

“I said can it Jimmy,” Bubba said rushing to get in Jimmy’s face.

Bubba knew the best way to handle these guys was to go for the jugular of Jimmy, or whoever was commanding attention at that particular time, and shoot him down like a World War II fighter.

Willie and Bubba moved steadfastly towards their work area.

Toothless Mitchell, an apprentice, his crooked smile revealing a large space where his front teeth should be, brought up the rear. “M-m-morning y’all!”

“Good morning, ‘T’,” Bubba said, noting that Willie had copped an attitude from the encounter with Bugg.

It was time for an attitude adjustment. Bubba knew that Willie had a short fuse connected to a soft spot. And Jimmy had lit it. Now it was up to Bubba, as had been the case since he had grown to know and respect Willie, to either lengthen the fuse or put out the sparks.

“Hey, Willie,” Bubba said, “How you liking the new room you added on?”

“Y-y-yeah!” added Toothless, “d-d-didn’t take you long to b-b-build it.”

“Jackie’s decorating it and I love it,” Willie said, with a gratifying light entering his eyes. “Oh, I tell you man, life couldn’t be better... mighty fine, things are mighty fine.”

That was enough to get his mind off the pain caused by Jimmy and onto something more pleasant. He knew every day he came to a job site on which Jimmy Bugg was also working, there would be a malicious, conscious effort to stir up trouble from the “Bugg Man”.

“Well she sure is a beauty,” Bubba said, stroking Willie’s ego.

If Willie didn’t know Bubba better, he would have thought that he was making reference to Jackie, his wife, but this was his buddy Bubba. If it had been Bugg, he would have to come to the defense of his family by confronting him. Willie shot Bubba a curious little glance-- a peculiar look which Bubba had seen before, but directed to others, not himself.

“W-W-Willie, you c-c-could of built a house,” Toothless said oblivious to any tension in the air, “in a m-m-month if you’d wanted t-t-to, couldn’t you?”

Toothless was as serious as a blood clot talking to a heart attack and dumber than the dullest pair of scissors in the drawer. He really truly loved and respected Willie. Willie was as honest as he was fast with his tools. It was hard for him to listen to Toothless and his nonsense sometimes. Bubba had taught Willie to take what ‘T’ said with a grain of salt, because it wasn’t Toothless’ fault that he was slower than tree sap in the freezer.

Willie shook his head at Toothless’ idiocy. “Come on, let’s get to work!”

The sun baked the arms and necks of the brick masons as they labored in the brutality of its heat. The summer days were unmerciful. A baking brick mason only had to think about the cold winter days when there would be no work, to appreciate the days when money was hard earned. There was plenty of work now. Willie Jr. and Jimmy Bugg were working towards the middle on the same wall. They moved dangerously closer... and closer still.

“Willie, my boy,” Jimmy said contemptuously, “you think you’re so good,” Jimmy taunted, “I’m a better man than you’ll ever be.” Jimmy chuckled, brimming over with confidence. He continued, “Better man than you ever dreamed of.”

“Come off it Bugg. Don’t start nothin’,” Willie said. “You buggin’!”

The younger masons laughed at Willie Jr.’s comment.

Toothless laughed, “B-b-buggin’!? Buggin’!”

Winnie, a brick mason neutral to all causes except his own, joined in the laughter. He laughed hysterically, “Did you hear what Willie said, “buggin’?! Bugg’s buggin’!”

Toothless continued to laugh, pointing to Bugg. “Yeah, J-J-Jimmy the bug man, b-b-buggin’!”

“That sounds like a dance!” Winnie said.

Winnie did a comical dance. He wiggled his butt, as he jumped around like a chicken with its head cut off. This really irritated Jimmy to no end.

Bugg voiced more loudly, “You think you’re better than the rest of us. You’re tryin’ to be like the Man, ain’t you Willie boy?”

“I ain’t got time for this,” Willie Jr. barked. “What you tryin’ to prove Bugg?”

“I’m tryin’ to prove that a Mama’s boy can’t do a man’s job!”

The younger masons in the background said “Uuuhhhh”.

Willie could never figure out what he had done to Jimmy Bugg to cause him to be so confrontational. *It must be jealousy. If that wasn’t the cause, Willie thought, or the root of a larger problem, then Jimmy wanted a challenge.* Jimmy’s testosterone level was high, as always. *He just needs to get laid.* Willie giggled to himself strangely. Realistically, Willie thought, it must be the by-product of continental tribalism. Willie believed a great deal of the black on black violence was due to ancient tribal rivalries which long ago had been imbedded into African genetic codes. Willie, however, had not discounted societal pressures. He believed societal pressures acted as a catalyst for discord in a contrary world. Jimmy was from the wrong tribe. He was from the slave trader’s tribe.

It was a long standing belief which Willie held closely; the tribal conflicts which existed hundreds of years ago in Africa persisted through the generations in the subtle and brutal way people of color fought among themselves. Instead of fighting the thorn in their sides, plucking it out carefully, they chose instead to scratch at it and to pull at one another like cats in heat, exorcising screams in the middle of a hot summer night. And so it was with the people of color who were in America. Willie believed they were destined to struggle with their genetic composition to overcome themselves until their vision became unimpeded and focused.

Deep within his psyche, Willie truly admired Bugg. He had a genuine appreciation of his strength; the way he spoke his mind about circumstances which seemed relevant to him. Sometimes, though, it did not matter what the other person thought about him, or how much it would hurt their feelings, Bugg would let it fly. He would tell them what he thought as if what he thought really mattered.

How many times has Bugg stepped on my toes and got away clean? Willie's thoughts were focused, intent on keeping the peace. No abuse, no hassle-- I'm trying to do the right thing and all. The more Willie thought about Jimmy, the angrier he became. Angry with Jimmy, angry with anyone who tried to bring him down--to hunt, er... hurt him or his family, Willie thought. Willie's eyes became fixed.

It was all spelled out for Willie. He had everything planned out to the 'T'. He knew what he wanted in life and no one was going to interfere with it. Becoming a supervisor, then a foreman, and finally becoming a contractor with his own crew were his goals. He had two beautiful children and wanted no more. He had a lovely wife, Jackie, who attracted attention like a fine Arabian mare on parade, with muscles lean and firm, head held high and proud.

And proud she was; proud regardless of her lack of college education or her impoverished upbringing. She was filled with pride, though she and Willie lived with his parents for the first years of their marriage. Yet she struggled everyday, with pride as her ally, to keep Willie's parents from choking her, from smothering him; from strangling their relationship. Her pride showed in her face, perfectly made up at all times, even

at home. She changed clothes obsessively because as a child she had few. She acted as if what she wore in the morning would be old and soiled by afternoon.

She chose her jewelry, although costume at best, with care. Each piece of jewelry, each dress or blouse she wore, complemented her chiseled features, her fine-boned frame perfectly. And it was her pride that would betray her in time; causing her to ignore the signs which signaled her perfect world was in serious trouble.

Willie refused to let her work; not even in a department store where she would have fit in divinely. She diligently, lovingly cared for the children, the house, and Willie, whom she adored. She was as happy as she thought any individual could be. Until Nicholas.

Willie built his house before he was thirty. This alone required a great deal of sacrifice. He and Jackie lived with his parents until his house was complete. And he was just grateful to the Almighty for allowing Jackie to have the patience to endure the constant pampering he received from his mother. This pampering, its hellish nature grieved Jackie. She never wanted anyone, much less another woman, to put her hands on her Willie's face. She wanted to be the only person to take care of her man, to do everything for him. Mabel was in the way of Jackie's compulsive desire to spoil her man, to do everything for him. Jackie clashed with Mabel's uncontrollable need to pamper Willie as she had his entire life, that is until Willie met Jackie. Jackie did not want anyone, not even his mother to do anything for him which Jackie could do.

Jackie wanted to spoil him with her cooking. She couldn't do that while they stayed with Willie's parents. She wanted to spoil him with her lovemaking. She wanted to love Willie tenderly, sweetly, rough and hard, at all times and in all places. She wanted to make love in every room at all hours. She wanted to cast her clothes aside with abandon, have him take her when he was home sweaty and dirty; and when he was fresh from the bath.

She wanted to step naked from the shower, display her perfect body with her firm, well-rounded buttocks and perky, full breasts for him. And for him alone. She wanted to lie on the sofa in the after-glow of their lovemaking and feel his sweat on her. She wanted most of all, the freedom to love her man at any time in any way.

Jackie loathed having to cover up from the bath, having to stifle her cries of ecstasy and subdue their love. She disliked Mabel's knowing looks, Willie Sr.'s leering eyes. She knew, or imagined they listened to them as they made love. The thought of which was a bitterness which no words could heal. It frightened her to think that a drop of it was bitterness towards her beloved Willie.

Jackie longed to have her own house, to make it a home. She wanted to make it the best place a young family like theirs could have. When they finally moved out, they did so hastily. Moving was breaking free of Mabel's bonds for Jackie and Willie Sr.'s bonds for Willie Jr. It meant moving into a cozy place-- their paradise. And it was. Willie and Jackie felt as though they had walked out of a cave into the sunlight. Although the bitterness she felt towards Mabel and

Willie Sr. never left her, the bitterness towards Willie was at least buried, if not forgotten.

An inordinate amount of the negative emotion that surrounded his thoughts concerning his parents soon became focused on the situation at hand.

Turn the other cheek, don't start trouble at work; after all, I got a wife and two children to feed now. Willie tried to convince himself not to get involved, but his emotions were getting the best of him-- or was it emotion? He hadn't felt this new rush of strength, of mental energy. It was different. It was strong, not easily controlled. Jimmy Bugg was bringing it forth in him-- the anger, the exasperation.

And here he comes, bringing trouble. *But am I squirming too much under Bugg's thumb? Am I really a Mama's boy?*

Bugg had gotten under Willie's skin. Willie had to do something. His pride was demanding him to stand up, be a man... to fight.

This has to stop. I'm starting to look like the person Bugg was always ridiculing-- but I know I'm not that person-- or am I?

Willie pulled his trowel across a brick with a zing! His eyes darkened and cut into Bugg. "What'll it be, Buggman?"

Bubba stepped in between them. "Three rows, starting at opposite ends. The first man to hit the middle the second time down is the winner," he said anticipating the suggestion.

Willie Jr. and Bugg became locked in indignant stares. They fixed angrily into each others eyes, not turning to acknowledge Bubba's suggestion. Just

staring defiantly at one another. If anger had a charge, both men would have been electrocuted.

“Right!” said both Willie and Bugg.

The job site was in pandemonium. Willie and Bugg marched off to the end of the wall. The younger masons made bets on who was going to win. Not that they really cared, but it got them away from the difficult labor at hand. And it broke up yet another monotonous day. Besides, there was money to be made from this foray.

Money and cigarettes exchanged hands. White workers in the distance looked on with curious indifference towards the excitement. The younger masons held their crotches, laughed, and slapped each other on the back.

Willie and Bugg squared off.

Toothless, filled with the exhilaration of the moment said, “On your m-m-mark...”

Willie, tense and nervous, prepared to begin.

“Get s-s-set.”

Bugg was angry because he couldn't believe this wimp had dared to challenge him. He was happy also because he could finally realize his foreseen destiny; to show everybody how much better he was than Willie. He sneered fiendishly.

Toothless faked as if he was going to say go, hesitated, then shouted, “G-G-Go!”

Their trowels zinged as they slapped cement onto the waiting bricks. The black masons rooted, cheered, and slapped their hands with both low and high fives. They hit hard hats together which heightened not only the tension on the job site, but also affected the performance of their respective leaders. For the

masons, it was entertainment. For the participants, it was war.

Willie Jr.'s hands and eyes concentrated with rapt attention on the bricks as he laid one after the other. Bugg's hands and eyes were filled with malice. He turned around to glare back at Willie.

Bugg worked to the middle first. Bugg's alliance of masons laughed, cheering with loud exuberance, slapped each other on the back. Profuse sweat poured into Willie Jr.'s eyes as he reached the middle and had to cut a brick in half with his trowel to fit it into space left by Bugg. The wall had to be perfect and functional; after all, they were at work. Willie's alliance showed concern for their hero who had dropped a number of bricks and scrambled frantically to retrieve them as he craned his neck to see Jimmy.

On the second row Bugg was ahead, but not by much. Willie had gained his composure. By the end of the second row, Willie Jr. had caught Bugg. Willie's alliance of masons slapped each other on their backs as their excitement rose. Willie Jr.'s eyes remained fastened on the bricks.

Bugg kept looking back at Willie. On the third and final row, the cheering increased. Willie kept slamming the bricks onto the mortar. Scooping the mortar with the trowel. Slinging mortar on the growing wall and smacking the bricks onto the mortar. Bugg kept looking up at Willie.

Jimmy's nervous glances towards Willie and Willie's superior skills ultimately gave the lead in this rivalry to Willie. Willie Jr. was seven bricks ahead. He tapped his last brick into place with his trowel, crushing Jimmy with a defenseless defeat. Jimmy Bugg

was tough. It would only take a short while for him to bounce back with more lip service.

The job site erupted in jubilation. Bubba rushed over to congratulate Willie Jr. Willie turns to Bubba who stood with his trowel in the air. They smack trowels ceremoniously. The young masons whooped and hollered as, once again, more cigarettes and money changed hands in the redistribution of wealth and alliances.

Bugg's men were sullen, yet underneath most knew Willie to be the better mason. It was his superior attitude and demeanor they hated the most—his confidence in himself. On that basis, they allied with Bugg. Bugg was defeated, but only for the moment. In Bugg's eyes was the cool calm of one giving birth to a plan for revenge.

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CHAPTER

3

Willie Jr.'s truck moved energetically down the bumpy dirt road. Dogs barked alongside as the truck passed, some giving a show of chasing the truck, yet quitting quickly the summer sun stealing their ambition. *When is the city gonna pave this road?* Willie thought momentarily, determined to keep any negative thoughts from his mind. This was one of the happiest days of Willie's life. He finally got to humiliate the person who he saw as his rival--his nemesis. And it was in front of the world to see.

Boy, if I could only do it again. If only Jackie had been there to see what happened; to see it all, her man! Her man in action. Willie laughed out loud.

"I'll never forget the look on Bugg's face when he turned to see me coming up the row before he finished his. I could have died!" Willie said aloud to himself. "And after he had me beat. That was sweet." Willie was in stitches laughing joyfully. He spoke only to his ego, his words ringing pleasantly in his ears.

Willie laughed harder and louder, slapping his knee. He had to get a grip. Tears were filling his eyes. It was becoming difficult to drive. He laughed the most laborious laughter he could remember in a quite a long time; sweet relief washed his soul.

Willie calmed himself and started to sing “Let’s Stay Together” with Al Green on the radio. His eyes, full of life, he checked his rear view mirror, pulling it to see himself. He straightened his thick eyebrows with a heavy swipe of his thumb. He reached down in the seat, picked up a small hair brush, and brushed his moustache.

“Good Lord! This must be how it feels to win the super bowl.”

Willie was extremely happy, particularly exhilarated with the outcome of his run-in with Jimmy Bugg. Willie was unusually full of himself. His ego had gotten a booster shot. He checked the mirror once more and put it back in its proper position.

After a quick turn and he pulled into the driveway of Willie Sr.’s house. Willie switched off the ignition, resolving to himself, *I’m not going to let them get to me.*

Willie got out of the truck somberly, snatching his level, a brick mason’s tool used for ensuring a level surface, from the back window. He reached into the truck bed to get his bag of other brick mason’s tools. He walked pensively, being light of heart from his victory, but highly aware of the upcoming challenge as he neared the doorway to his childhood home.

“I’m comin’ in!”

Mabel rushed to cuddle him as if he were a long lost sister, having seen him only days before. She gingerly picked lint from his hair as he walked.

“That’s all right Mama, I’ll get it.”

“No, honey. That’s what Mamas are for!”

Her eyes searched his face for pimples, blackheads and whiteheads. His face was already marked by her past pillages with darkened bruised spots, resented by Jackie and Willie alike--but he couldn’t stop her.

“C’mon, Mama, please!” He made a feeble attempt to brush her hand away, but she was his Mama. And they, Willie Sr. and Mabel had done so much for him.

He kissed her on the cheek. His hands were full. She tried to help him with his load.

“How’s my baby?”

“I’m just fine.” *I was*, Willie thought, until I walked in here!

“Let me help you with that.”

“I got it Mama, that’s alright.” Willie could feel the pressure in the back of his head begin to grow.

He stepped around her but her finger got caught in one of the dangling straps on the bag. He tugged at the bag releasing her. She immediately brushed off his shoulders as if there was dandruff there. But there was none.

“Mama, I got it! I got it!” The joy of his earlier success was made less sweet by the annoyance of his mother.

Willie Jr., spotted a place to set the tools in the hallway. He spoke loudly enough for Willie Sr. to hear him in another room. “Papa, I’m returning your tools. Thank you very much.”

Willie Jr. set the tools down on the highly polished wooden floor which led down the hallway. Mabel

grabbed Willie by the arm moving him to the living room sofa.

She had fussed over him ever since he was born, ever since he could remember. She had two daughters before Willie, but Willie was the man-child that she knew Willie Sr. wanted.

Mabel was always a ramrod of sorts, pushy; bent on having her way, except when it came to Willie Sr., her man. Mabel would do just about anything for him. The Jones men had that effect on their women.

Long ago, Mabel had ceased to wonder why they had that effect. Why a determined woman like herself would become so docile for him. To outsiders, Mabel might have seemed to be the quintessential Southern woman--cooking, cleaning, sweet and lovely. Always the woman, always the submissive--yet she lacked that southern trait of truly controlling her man with her love, as most southern woman believe they do. Southern women with their womanly control, albeit so subtle and carefully executed that men either didn't know it mastered them or they merely didn't care because the love so enveloped them.

Mabel was controlled by Willie, Sr. She knew it and didn't care. She was content in her place and found comfort in his authority and control. She loved him. He was her man and she did whatever it took to keep it that way.

Willie had that effect on Jackie too. Yet she often wondered how and why she felt so comfortable with him. Jackie wasn't yet wholly settled as Mabel was in her role as the submissive southern woman. She still felt a vague disappointment with herself for falling so

completely in love with him. But when he came through the door with all the strength and beauty of an African prince, her doubts vanished to an ever more distant place where she carefully and steadily laid them to rest. She loved Willie. He was her everything.

“Willie, sit down,” Mabel said anxiously, “I’ll get you somethin’ to drink, um... some lemonade?”

Exasperated, Willie sat on the edge of the couch shaking his head no. He might as well have been talking to the blue jay he could see through the large picture window.

“Yes, lemonade,” she muttered almost to herself, “you just sit here and rest. You shouldn’t work so much--not so hard.” She hummed a soft gospel song as her love-filled heart bounced out of the room.

“Mama, that’s okay. I just came by to drop the tools off.”

Willie said this as much to himself as to Mabel, as he slumped down into the couch.

Willie Sr., 58, strode into the room. He was a striking man, with broad shoulders and a thick, wide, powerful-looking chest. His skin was leathery from sun-baked days on the masonry sites. His peers always expected him to become a construction supervisor, but he never did and no one ever knew why. Nor did anyone question him concerning it. He had a tough veneer but Mabel knew he could be as gentle as a lamb. She also knew he could be cruel—a lion out of control. She would often say that he was a cruel man, but he was fair.

“Boy, why you bringing these tools in the house?” Willie Sr. uttered sternly. “Sometimes, I don’t know if

you got goat sense!” He didn’t look at Willie Jr. as he spoke. “You know, boy, I been thinking. If you’d built that house like I told you to, you’d have somethin’ to be proud of.” Willie Sr. picked up his pipe and went to the kitchen.

Willie Jr. shook his head and fought the pain from his father’s verbal assault. He thought at some point in his life he would become numb to the put downs. It never happened. Willie Jr. became more sullen.

“Well, Daddy, I’m sure you’re right.” Willie Jr. spoke slowly, resentfully, but loud enough for his father to hear him. Inside he was reaching boiling point, but he also feared angering his father further. He did not want to continue as the catcher’s mitt for his father’s brutal insults.

Mabel came in with super-sweet lemonade drinks, more ice than lemonade. She delicately gave him a glass, placing a glass coaster on the coffee table. “This is sweetened and fresh, just the way you like it.”

He composed himself before placing the cup down, smoothing its descent, without drinking any. She put it on the coaster. Mabel sat down beside Willie Jr. and started to preen him. She turned his head towards her away from Willie Sr.’s direction.

“Listen, sugar bear, don’t let your papa worry you,” she whispered in a pampering, loving, motherly way.

She noticed a minuscule cut which he was made while shaving that morning. It was well on its way to being healed.

“You cut yourself shaving?”

She pulled a paper tissue from a box, wetted it with saliva from her tongue and rubbed the dried blood from his face.

“Well, Earl, how’s the house comin’?” she said proudly.

“Everything’s comin’ along just fine.” Willie Jr. ignored his feelings towards Willie Sr. and ignored Mabel the person, but not the question.

Willie’s thought were captivated by thinking about how to get out of there without hurting Mabel’s feelings. He really wanted to go to his father and confront him about what he had just said. But he knew this would upset his mother too much. This was one of the few times Willie Jr. would have the courage to confront him. Today was his big triumph, so he was feeling victorious. He had felt that way when he had first come in. Now escape was the plan of the day.

“I’ve got just the perfect curtains for you!” Mabel said barely able to contain her bubbling excitement. “They just beautiful, a beautiful royal purple.”

“Oh, that’s okay Mama. Jackie’s got some picked out.”

Willie Jr. wondered why his mother always wanted to go to this place. She knew Jackie thought she was sticking her nose into her business when she started doing things like telling her what type of perfume to wear or telling her what’s wrong with some tie she had bought Willie. And heaven forbid her trying to bring over something to hang up or put up in the house that would be a constant reminder to Jackie of her mother-in-law’s influence. Not to mention the fact that it would be a direct insult to Jackie. But her mother-in-law’s influence was there to stay! It was in Willie.

“Oh, no, Willie,” Mabel said shaking her head.

She held one of Willie’s hands in hers. With her other hand she patted Willie’s gently.

“Now listen, Willie, these are just wonderful. I saw them in the window of the Five-N-Dime. They’re polyester, they’re purple, and they’re just perfect.”

Willie Jr. shook his head in disbelief and sighed.

Willie Sr. spoke from the kitchen, just loud enough for them to hear. “You know, the old man said it’d be days like this,” he said sarcastically. “Boy, it sure would’ve been nice, if you had put my tools up. You know where the key is to the old house. Like the old man said, ‘No matter how hard you polish horse sh#, it just won’t shine.’” Willie Sr. never gave Willie Jr. any slack. He rode him hard like a swayback horse from the day he was born.

Willie Jr. subconsciously avoided all thoughts of the old house. He never put tools in there—though that is where they belonged. For reasons unknown to him, he would forget to put things there that needed to go there; or worse yet, he would forget the existence of any of his personal belongings which ended up there.

Willie Jr., his face set in anger, slowly turned to his mother, the plastic on the sofa screeched under him.

“I can’t do nothin’ to please that man,” he said angrily, holding back the brunt of his hostility and disgust. Suppressing his anger to a deep, silent place within his psyche.

His innermost desire was to charge into the kitchen and punch his father in the face as hard as he could. He imagined it; he could see it as clear as daylight. His blow would knock his father to the floor. Then he would kick him savagely until he stopped moving.

Willie couldn’t believe he had such a violently heated thought. It was more than a thought. It was a fantasy. He didn’t have the heart to do anything as

violent and ignorant as he fantasized. Willie Jr. could see Willie Sr.'s blood spattering on the cleanly swept floor from his blows. Willie Jr. extracted himself from his thoughts. Anyway, he wasn't raised that way. He didn't understand why he wanted to do bodily harm to his abusive father. He wanted to hurt Willie Sr. as much as he was hurt by him.

He stood in a huff, shook his arms in what appeared to be an effort to drop his imaginary shirt sleeves. This "shaking of the arms" motion would go unnoticed by most family members, but quickly noted by those new to Willie Jr. It was a curious behavior, since he had on short sleeves. Exasperated, he spoke in the direction of the kitchen.

"I could do everythin' you asked me to and that wouldn't be enough."

Mabel stood with him in one smooth motion with her hands moving across his chest and back again in an effort to calm him. She moved between the kitchen and Willie.

Willie Jr. turned and stormed quickly past Mabel towards the front door in an angry rage before Mabel could say a word.

Mabel looked towards the kitchen angrily. "Willie Sr.! That's your son! Don't treat him that way!" She focused her attention to her departing son. "Willie, please don't be angry. I'll bring the curtains over soon."

Willie Jr. was out of the door with the quickness.

She hurried over to catch the screen door before it slammed, marking another brick in the divisive wall between Willie and his parents. It was too late.

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CHAPTER

4

Jackie Jones was at the stove cooking. She hummed to a song on the radio. “How good it feels to be in love with you...” played in her head, bubbling at her lips.

She was quite a beauty. She looked almost Hawaiian with her long flowing dark brown hair. The natural wave of her locks made her the envy of most girlfriends. Her girlfriends used a straightening iron to get that long wavy look. They told her she had ‘good’ hair. Her shapely body was the jealous concern of women and the formidable lust of many men. Though she had two children, one wouldn’t know by looking at her shape. Her body was a declaration of Mother Nature’s genius of resiliency.

Olivia, 9, her daughter, and Mane, 7, her hard-headed son, could be heard outside playing on their new swing set.

Willie Jr. crept into the kitchen unnoticed. He slipped his arms around her from behind squeezing her

breasts. She turned around in his arms, kissed him hard on his full lips and grabbed his behind digging her nails into his buttocks playfully.

“Give it to me baby!” Jackie said teasingly.

“Yeah,” Willie said responding to her playfulness. “How’s my babycakes?”

“I’m fine.”

“I know that’s right,” Willie swung her into his arms with his hips pressed sensually into hers. “You’re as fine as a new Indian head nickel... Nah!... Finer than that! Finer than a crisp hundred dollar bill.”

She rubbed her nose on his neck, then licked his chin. Willie was too tired from work to start anything sexual, so he had to think fast. He changed the subject.

“Ah, baby you’re just too fine. What’s smellin’ so good?”

“Besides me?”

He nodded his head and lifted his eyebrows. He directed his eyes and her attention towards the stove. *No, the food, sweetheart, don’t get your motor started ‘cause I’m too tired,* he thought.

She spun from Willie and forked a pork chop playfully. She opened the lids on the simmering pots. Willie surveyed the meal anxiously.

“Pork chops, cabbage, stewed tomatoes and in the oven we’ve got some cornbread and corn pudding,” Jackie said. She looked at Willie from over her shoulder and said lustfully, “and you know what’s for dessert.”

Willie Jr. responded bashfully and with embarrassment. His aching muscles responded sluggishly, as he back-pedaled in retreat. He was determined not to fall into her gaze. As he withdrew, he slowly pulled a pocket knife to the lip of his pants

pocket in an attempt to distract her. It fell to the floor with a “thud”! When he stood up after retrieving the knife, he moved to the window to look at the children.

He wanted to make love to Jackie, but now just to entertain the thought was all too consuming. He was dog-tired. The distraction worked.

“I took the tools back to papa. You know, they can really get on your nerves.”

“Can they ever.” Just the thought of Willie’s parents was enough to cool Jackie.

Willie Jr. ignored the comment. They both knew either of his parents could get on the nerves of an ant, but Willie couldn’t bear to hear Jackie “bad mouthing” his parents.

“Mama said she’s got some curtains for you.”

Jackie turned with the fork in her hand. “I already have some picked out,” she said resentfully, her emotions escalated. “Didn’t you tell her?”

“But I-- ”

“Didn’t you tell her that I had some picked out?”

“Well Jackie-- ”

“Willie, this is our place. You built it, I’m gonna fix it up!”

He drew closer to embrace her. She brushed him off.

“But Jackie, she’s just tryin’ to help,” he said weakly, “that’s all.”

“Well I’m trying to help too Willie!”

Her anger intensified. She could just hear Mabel and Willie Sr. in Willie’s words. Her train then jumped tracks while her emotions retrieved old wounds.

“Why don’t you let me get a job?”

Willie couldn't believe his ears. One minute they were discussing what was for dinner, the next minute, curtains from Mabel, and now they were talking about the job issue. And what an issue it was for Willie. He wasn't going to allow his woman to work. After all, he was the provider. The job issue was his 'hot' button and Jackie knew it. Only heaven knows why she brought up the subject. Willie couldn't figure her out. He had long ago given up trying to understand women. Now he was upset.

"You know I don't want you to work!" Willie nearly shouted. "I'm the provider! You want me to save, save, save! Sure that's fine, but I'm trying to do something here! Success is about sacrifice."

"Willie, why do you carry on like this? We need some money to meet these bills!"

In his silence, Willie tried without success to calm himself.

"I have got to work! I already checked it out."

"You the one having babies like rabbits!" he scorned as he pointed to her sharply, but quickly reeled back his hand. This comical move allowed Willie to collect himself.

"It takes two Willie Jones Jr.!" she said angrily. "It takes two! Babies don't come out of thin air."

"Jackie, baby," his tone grew pleasingly mellow and loving as he eased over to her. "We were talking about Mama helping with the curtains."

He gently placed his hand over hers. He held her hand in his, squeezing it softly, like only he could.

"How did we get so off track?"

"Well, you brought it up," she said half smiling. She suddenly pulled away more seriously. "Now about

your Mama. I don't want it to feel like we're still living there with them. It was hard enough when we did. Don't you remember?" She poked him in the chest. "Papa—rode—you—plenty."

He drew closer again... this time with success. He held her in his arms.

"Forget about those times" he said impassioned. "Don't worry about anythin' baby," Willie said emphatically. "This is our place... our castle... and you my dear, are my queen."

They kissed long and hard and passionately.

Mane burst through the back door. He sniffed the air. "Mom you the most bestest cook ever!" he announced emphatically.

He loved to smell food cooking, especially his moms. He knew soon it would be tantalizing his tongue with its unique southern flavor. He headed for the stove and his Daddy. Mane embraced Willie's leg and held on tightly.

Just then Olivia waltzed in. She saw them. She shook her head, "Kissing again." *If I got a nickel for every time I saw them kissing, I would be a millionaire,* Olivia thought.

She had seen them kissing in almost every room of the house. Kissing and hugging to no end. And she had even caught them making love. They thought they were being secret. She hadn't seen the latter, but the sounds they made had fueled her imagination enough for her. She imagined two dogs stuck together in heat. And that she had seen before.

She wondered if she would be like her mother when she grew up— chasing after her husband's kisses, patting him on his behind, and stroking his back as if

she were taking care of a lost cat just brought in from the cold. Or worse, would her husband be like her father, chasing her down for kisses every time she turned around. Only time would tell, because now just the thought of boys were enough to produce a 'yuck.'

"This is disgusting!" she said turning to leave her doorway perch, Jackie's eyes reaching out to her. Olivia's expression created a ripple in the calm lake of love created by Willie and Jackie. Being the loving mother that she was, Jackie noticed every nuance of her children. She observed Olivia's quiet entrance. Jackie knew her affection towards Willie made Olivia jealous. A child's covetousness, her love for her father, but jealousy none the less. Jackie handled Olivia's ripple with a possessive wink. *You'll have your chance with your man one day, young lady,* Jackie thought. She then kissed Willie ever more passionately.

CHAPTER

5

The modest, red brick African Methodist Episcopal Zion church was typical of numerous African-American churches in small communities which dotted the southeastern United States. It was a small church with a high steeple and a small meandering creek which filled to overflowing with the rain from the tenacious spring thunderheads. The steeple's rusting bell no longer sang out to its dying congregation, the faithful women and their dutiful children who dared to grace its pews. One generation of God-fearing members were not being replaced by the promise of a new generation of younger members and community workers.

Many of the members' children only attended until their freshman or sophomore years in high school. About that time, their attention was re-directed from the slow, hypocritical Christian social themes to more hip or engaging activities that certainly wouldn't be found in church. They were hanging out at public parks, the local lakes and watching television. Even

playing card games in the seclusion of a forest or the woods often brought more satisfaction than organized religion.

The Jones' children were always at church. When the doors of the church opened for Sunday school, their young clean faces were one of the first to enter. Jackie had dredged the cold from the corners of their defenseless eyes and wiped their bushy eyebrows down. Both children had thick eyebrows which subtly connected into one long brow. Mane and Olivia always wore stylish new clothes. Willie was dapper in his suits as was Jackie with her smart hats. Willie, Jackie, and their children made quite a marvelous impression. They were a handsome little family just like Willie had planned; perfection in the first degree.

Willie often taught the young people's Sunday school class. On a good day, the class consisted of ten participants. If Willie wasn't teaching the young folks, he was listening to Reverend Moyd teach the dwindling adult class. The adult class never had over ten participants. Willie Sr. and Mabel also attended Sunday school. And they were always prompt and eager participants.

Willie was a member of the adult choir and the men's chorus group. The adult choir was singing "Jacob's Ladder" in its slow, monotonous, droning manner. For this ineffective choir, for this church in decline, this was the norm.

The old church was like an old slave ship. It was filled beyond capacity with good intentions. The untrained voices of the adult choir, their singing, likened to the ship's moaning cargo, whose cries went unanswered. Pressed by their new owners and pounded

by the thoughts of a new world of slavery, the slaves in this symphony of madness fought for an opportunity to jump ship. They jumped knowing it meant their own destruction. In its own way, with its esteemed traditions, that old church pressed its youth, the few men, and the single mothers to jump ship.

The less than enthusiastic congregation sang along automatically as the choir stood proudly and moaned the echoes of the ages. The singing weighed heavily on many people, young and old alike. Little children wiggled and twisted in hard pine seats. The church didn't have a nursery for the small children, so the occasional cries of a baby piped in at the most inopportune moments.

The young people who were in church never seemed to pay attention. Their disinterest showed on their faces. Very often, they acted out their disinterest. They were coerced to come and didn't want to be there. They often talked among themselves, just below disturbance level. They kept themselves busy with anything of interest, covering their mouths as they yawned. They laughed and giggled and pointed accusing fingers at churchgoers who amused them.

Mane and Olivia always sat with their mother or grandmother. Mane would sit close to his grandmother, looking like an extension of her armpit. Olivia sat on the other side of her. Mabel sat proud and high with her beautiful grandchildren. She was so delighted with her grandchildren. Mabel sat on the pews up front with a small group of older women thinking about what her great-grandchildren would look like. Thus was the nature of the small, disintegrating, Southern African-American church by the side of the road with its dying songs and dwindling congregation.

Willie Jr. was a sparkling contribution to the feeble, but well-meaning, adult choir. His baritone voice boomed clearly over the other older members. He knew why his Adam's apple was larger than most. He thought it was due to genetics, but every time he sang, he believed his voice's tonal qualities flowed from it.

The youngest member of the choir at thirty-three, he was exceedingly handsome, standing a head high over the others in the choir stand. No matter how many times women parishioners saw him before them, it was not enough. He was quite a looker and women's imaginations ran wild and high enough to reach the church steeple.

A small nosy group of older church ladies whispered in admiration of Willie Jr. They looked forward to his turn in the solo perch. They thought the world of him. They were proud enough for both his parents and they respected them as much. They wished their children had turned out like him; now they prayed that their grand-children would be as handsome and industrious as Willie.

The old women were intrusive biddies who craned their wrinkled necks disapprovingly in Jackie's general direction. How did she catch Willie? was the undertone of their stares. They imagined it was kinky sex, real kinky sex with wild abandon—perverted. They had heard stories. Jackie was at the height of fashion and commanded rapt attention, especially from the men. Jealousy in the women was an understatement. Lies were created to detract from Jackie's self-assured presence. There was no one in church to compete with Jackie's beauty; except maybe Willie, or their children. Today, Jackie and the children sat near Willie Sr. and Mabel.

Church service was finally over. Thank God! None too soon for the children or those who stayed out a little too late the night before at Hot Rod's, or on of the other local disco dance clubs. Restless little children bounded out of their seats and left the church playing with one another. Some children parked on the cement exterior church steps. Women followed, having greeted the minister at the back of the church, at the foyer doors. Some women held their toddlers closely, others followed with children and husbands in tow—but mostly the women were alone.

Most Sundays, the minister, the six-foot-seven, self-righteous Reverend Moyd, a dark, leathery-skinned man with large bulging eyes, and an apparent thyroid condition, would end his service with a few choice words in his tired, raspy voice. This was followed by a song, then an epilogue delivered from the back of the church devoid of any electronic amplification. The upbeat song ended by the time he was standing at the doorway of the church, soon afterward, or upon his authoritative gesture. The congregation in unison with the minister would repeat, “May the Lord watch between me and thee while we are absent one from another. Amen.”

This activity positioned the minister to greet everyone before they left. He wanted to look them straight in the eye. His eyes would say, “Come back next Sunday, please!” but his mouth would say, “Do bring a friend or your husband.” He desperately desired to reverse the attrition rate of his members before the General Conference, at which time the conference could banish him to an even more deadly church than this tired, but small dedicated congregation. Today, the Reverend had other responsibilities which had called

him away, not allowing him to perform this benediction, but relegating it to the junior pastor.

The same circle of older African-American women in their fashionable wide brim Sunday hats and Sunday-go-to-meeting, ankle-length dresses, who so admired Willie Jr., congregated before the entrance of the church, in the foyer, just behind the junior pastor. They were keeping an eye out for gossip worthiness, noting every movement, every sachet, each misplaced curl, inappropriate gesture, comment; and, for God's sake, they missed no one!

They noted who wasn't dressed prim and proper. And whispered among themselves, as if God couldn't hear, about everything everyone was wearing, colors, clashes, dashes, strings. They would wait until they left the church though, to talk openly and brazenly about what they saw; because it would be unGod-like to do so in the House of the Lord. Anywhere outside of the church was fair game.

Those pesky, meaning-no-harm matriarchs acted and carried themselves as though they were judging the finalists for the Ebony Fashion Fair.

Jackie waited impatiently for Willie Jr. at the bottom of the well-worn steps making sure she didn't rub her face, pick her nose, or step on a bug for there were a half-dozen or so eagle eyes peering through the church doorway like a piercing beam from a lighthouse, cutting through the innocent early morning sky. They eyed her with stale resentment.

Mabel came out of church briskly, her eyes searching for Willie Jr. Mabel had gotten used to Willie and his small family living with them. When

they moved out, Mabel was left with a void which had yet to be filled. Mabel felt neglected by her son. She had long since been ignored by her husband, relegated to the station of a piece of furniture by Willie Sr. Deep within her subconscious, she wanted Jackie to leave, but not Willie and the children. The children often were an annoyance, as were their mother, but she could see her and Willie Sr.'s mannerisms in the children. It broke Mabel's heart not to have her son and his offspring around for her to give them her undying love and affection.

Now she resented Willie Jr. and her resentment towards Jackie re-kindled because they had taken away all the love, the joyful noise and the attention she both gave and received from her beloved grand-children. She had only Willie Sr. upon which to bestow her love, to share her home life -- gruff, often un-loving Willie Sr.

She felt as though Willie Jr. didn't come over to see her as often as before. This was true. He hadn't come over to visit, with or without his family, as often as she expected. Willie and Jackie would sit with Mabel and Willie Sr. at church when they all lived together. These days, Jackie and Willie relinquished their seats next to Mabel, meandering to pews of their own preference, resolving to maintain their own personal space.

When Willie Jr. and Jackie first moved out from Mabel's and Willie Sr.'s dominance, Willie Jr. would continuously and routinely go over to his parents home to get insignificant items; a long lost mug or his Oriental back scratcher. Or, he'd ask meaningless questions; questions which, most of the time, could have been answered over the telephone. Mabel always

was happy as a pig in pink when Willie came over. She thought that he loved her so much that he just couldn't stay away. As time progressed, he visited his homestead on an as-needed basis. His father had become increasingly more belligerent towards him. Since he had started to visit less often, Mabel was fearful that he loved her less.

She knew that Sunday was the one day she could expect to see her beloved son. He wouldn't be working on Sunday, God forbid! Willie had the opportunity to do so, but he always refused. It was his home training, she told herself smugly.

Most Sundays, Willie Jr. and his esteemed family would go to his parents house after church, or in the afternoon, for a nice family visit. A family visit, no invitation required, attendance expected, but these tumultuous days the nice impromptu family visit had been modified to a structured scheduled event on the Willie Jones Sr. itinerary.

Mabel smelled the heated aroma of trouble brewing. On this particular sparkling, sunny Sunday, no immediate plans had been made, no visits arranged, so it was unclear whether she would see her extended family this beautiful Sunday afternoon. In church, Mabel had already pictured drinking iced tea adorned with fresh mint leaves while the family played croquet on the freshly cut grass in the front yard.

The incessantly chattering group of church ladies shot strikingly condescending looks in Jackie's direction with jealous eyes. Mabel brushed past them on her way down the well worn church steps to a patiently waiting Jackie. Jackie welcomed a wanted spring breeze that cooled her head and almost took off

her hat. Her children had gone to meet Willie in the basement of the church where the choir robes were stored.

The church ladies were steadily gossiping about this one's hat, that one's lipstick, this man's shoes, or that child looking like he has no Daddy. It never stopped. As a group, with no one missing a step, the church ladies steadily maneuvered down the steps, oh so slowly, to eavesdrop. As a group that was no stranger to the Jones family, they had felt the winds of change. An errant storm was brewing and they wanted to witness every lightning bolt.

"Well hello, Mama!" Jackie brightened with feigned enthusiasm and enough attitude to raise the dead. She expected the worse when Mabel displayed a certain attitude. And it always came with sweet subtlety.

"I hear you still pushin' that school issue, girl," Mabel said disdainfully.

"Yeah, Mama, that's right! How do you expect us to keep up with the Perry's?" Jackie paused for Mabel's reaction, but her tense face went unchanged. "Thelma is going now, you know."

Jackie knew in her heart that her mother-in-law was right. But being right never put food on the table. She added with a more serious tone, clothed in the emotion of the moment, "You know how much better it would be financially, if we had two incomes." Again Jackie waited a moment for Mabel's response. Then, not able to contain herself any longer, Jackie blurted, "I'm not too old, either."

The church ladies were not at all gracious about eavesdropping on the two. The information they just overheard was juicy. They had to offer feedback among themselves. They were being disrespectful to Jackie and Mabel, who could clearly hear what they were saying. Jackie found herself listening both to Mabel and to the church ladies.

Mrs. Hayes, the lead conspirator, commented, "Lord ha'mercy, did you hear what that girl just said?"

"Uh huh!" said Mrs. Johnson, who was cut off by Mrs. Smith.

Mrs. Smith, the oldest of the three women, proclaimed in agreement, "Uh-huh, sho' did. Who she think she is?"

"This new generation. They got it so easy," Mrs. Hayes snickered.

"And girlfriend, they're so self-centered," Mrs. Smith concluded.

"Uh-huh," Mrs. Johnson started, "in my day -".

"Wanna go to school to keep up with the Perrys, huh," Mrs. Hayes said, "Please! She couldn't keep up with the Perrys if she wanted to. Ought to be keepin' up wit' her man, is what."

"Willie Jr. makes enough money for y'all to live," Mabel said, "Besides who's gonna take care of the kids while you at school, girl?"

"Well, Mama, I've been meaning to talk to you about that", Jackie joked with real intentions.

Jackie poked Mabel in the shoulder. Mabel gave her a sharp incredulous stare.

Mrs. Smith continued, "Yeah, she wouldn't leave them babies either."

“Uh, just take care of her man, she would. What a fine man too,” Mrs. Johnson pined. “Fine man,” she smacked her dentures.

“It ain’t no wonder chil’ren growing up like they do these days,” Mrs. Hayes said.

“Jackie, what you want with going ta school, girl?! Leavin’ yo’ man and yo’ babies at home,” cried Mabel, raising her voice.

Jackie looked at Mabel, flabbergasted, unbelieving. “Scuse me! Mama! I don’t think it’s any of yo’ business! Or their business either!” Jackie shot a glance at the church ladies. All but Mrs. Smith looked away with visible guilt.

She was letting Mabel get under her skin. Try as she did not to allow it to bother her, she knew Mabel understood how much she loved Willie Jr. Mabel also knew how much it upset Jackie to dictate anything to her, to make declarations of action to her or her man. To challenge her or her family since they had moved out was out of bounds as far as Jackie was concerned. And here Mabel stood, audacious in her approach, doing it, standing right here, out here in public. How dare she, Jackie thought, she must be crazy!

“My son and my grandchil’ren... that’s what makes it my business! You better leave well enough alone, Jackie Elizabeth.”

Jackie turned her head away from Mabel, out of frustration. She looked towards the ground to calm herself. She wanted to diffuse this. She had to play it passively here, because out of the corner of her eye, she saw Willie Jr. as he broke the plane of the church doorway. She didn’t want him to see her angry. Sure, his mother annoyed her sometimes, but he never really

understood. He would only say, "That's just how parents are." He could never realistically understand how much Mabel upset her. But he understood how his mother could upset him; he understood well how both Mabel and Willie Sr. could get on his last nerve.

Perhaps it was in the pretentiously proud way Mabel carried herself that aggravated Jackie. Or it could have been the freshly dry cleaned dress she wore every Sunday with matching hat. Mr. Thompson, who owned the local dry cleaning shop, would drop off the Jones' dry cleaning every Saturday morning, fresh and wrinkle-free. Whatever it was about Mabel that piqued Jackie's maligned grief, derived its roots in the strength of Mabel's love for Willie Jr. The subliminal, primal, innate desire for a woman to protect her man from another woman was driving Jackie's emotions.

Mabel had also seen Willie Jr., but she was more interested in wearing on Jackie's emotions. Mabel's real intentions were to position Jackie closer to, and somehow involve her with, Elma Johnson and the other church ladies. Maybe a conversation that included more mature heads would prevail. At least that is what Mabel considered to be an effective ploy. She probably would have been correct if Willie hadn't made such an untimely arrival.

The children ran to the car in bountiful joy, oblivious to any animosity. Willie Jr. walked up, having heard the end of the conversation from the top of the steps.

"We all ought'a be happy and not fight, shouldn't we?" He kissed Mabel on the cheek, and put his arm around Jackie.

“I love you, baby,” the words rolled off of Willie the peacemaker’s tender lips. “And Mama,” Willie said theatrically, “you know that I love you,” as he lovingly squeezed Mabel’s hand.

The venom in the air was thick enough for Willie to catch the sting of its fragrance. His attempt to detoxify the air was to no avail. He knew he had to separate the two.

“Well, baby, you ready to go home?”

“Yes. Definitely, yes,” Jackie said ceremoniously. “I’m ready.” “Unequivocally, yes,” Jackie giggled, “whatever that means. But I know this is the time to use it.”

Willie smiled weakly. Mabel started to preen Willie’s hair. She knew Jackie hated it when she did that.

“Junior, you got somethin’ in your hair.”

“Thanks Mama, I’ll get it. See ya later.”

“Goodbye Mabel.”

“We’ll talk later when I bring the curtains.”

She didn’t intend to bring the curtains over. She was just digging her nails into Jackie a little deeper.

Willie and Jackie walked off pointedly, while Mabel’s fingers were still in his hair. She trailed behind a few steps then stopped. She smiled triumphantly, glancing snobbishly at the church ladies.

“I wish that woman would keep her hands out’ta your hair-- and out’ta our business,” Jackie said, just under her breath.

“I know, Jackie, but that’s my Mama. She means well.”

The three church ladies huddled together, as Mabel walked purposefully towards them. She knew this little group well. They had been talking about everyone in

the church from toddlers to each other. She knew they could write a book about the congregation. Their huddle shifted to meet Mabel.

“Ain’t no family without a man,” Mrs. Smith said, “little missy need to be right at home, takin’ care of her man.”

“Sometimes ain’t no family with a man,” said Mrs. Hayes.

“Girl, you don’t know what you talkin’ ‘bout,” said Mrs. Johnson, rolling her eyes.

“Maybe I know mo’ than you think I know,” Mrs. Hayes replied, staring after Willie Jr. and his family as they walked happily away.

CHAPTER

6

The moderately-priced kitchen table with its thin metal legs was neatly cluttered with paper, pencils, and a used electronic calculating machine. Willie sat patiently crunching the weekly budget numbers. He was meticulous with his money. He directed the path of every penny, not missing a cent, orchestrating every turn.

Jackie, with her back to Willie, stood behind him at the stove cooking and floating. Endorphins raced through her body. She delighted in the warm afterglow that only good, good loving can give. She hummed a tune which reverberated tenderly through her body. It was akin to the purring of a kitten.

Willie was figuring out the finances earmarked for Jackie's education. He hadn't imagined when he married Jackie that it would be necessary to send her to college. He had been chided, coaxed, and badgered by Jackie and had capitulated to her plethora means of persuasion into saying it was okay for her to help bring home the bacon. It was discussed and agreed upon that

the money she received from her job wouldn't take away from any of his financial responsibilities.

At long last, Jackie had convinced Willie that two incomes would be better than one. But the avenue to two healthy incomes for the family, for Willie, was to send Jackie to school first. With several good work seasons under his belt, Willie could see the way financially to send her to a university or a community college.

So she could get a good job, Willie thought cunningly. *Hell, that's if she needs to get one by time she gets out of college.* Willie imagined he would be making enough money by the time she finished college that the need for two incomes would be moot. If he was lucky, as he often was, she wouldn't have to finish school either. Willie's masculinity was threatened by Jackie's desire for higher education. He hadn't gone to college himself, but he had learned a trade. That was the one thing he was grateful to Willie Sr. for; giving him the knowledge and expertise to make a living. Though it was a hard and arduous living. Willie often hated his father for sharing the knowledge. This love, hate relationship with his trade formed one of the many foundations for his love, hate relationship with his father.

Jackie set a stack of dime-store plates and shiny, new-looking flatware on the table. She called loudly over the maddening drone of the television which was in the den to the children who were buried in activity somewhere in their individual bedrooms.

"Olivia!" Jackie shouted while pedaling backwards, heading toward the den. She aimed for the pernicious television sound control knob, "you and Mane go wash

your hands so you can set the table.” The knob came off in her hand. She placed it back on and turned the volume down. “Do you hear me?”

“Yes ma’am!” Olivia and Mane shouted their replies from two different rooms. They dropped what they were doing and raced from their separate bedrooms only to crash at the bathroom’s entrance. Mane allowed his older sister the right of way. *After all I am a southern gentleman*, he thought. In reality, she had beaten him up enough to let her always go first.

Willie knew his current plan to get Jackie to go to a local college would redirect his money to a place he considered a non-investment opportunity. Ultimately, Willie expected to invest in profitable business ventures, so he could retire early. After all, who in their right mind would want to continue in the extremely physically demanding job of laying bricks?

I love the money, Willie thought. But his back and joints suffered daily at the work site. *And besides, I never know how much work I will get from month to month. I remember last year*—his thoughts were interrupted, as he concluded that, by his calculations, they had enough money to get Jackie through her first semester.

Willie ripped the sheet from the pad. “Hey, hey, hey...” Displaying a wide smile on his face, he turned to Jackie, arching one of his eyebrows, completing a perfect Groucho Marx impression.

“Well, baby, we’ve got enough money to get you started in school.”

Jackie turned from the stove inquisitively. Joyfully, she hugged his neck. “Sweet cheeks, I just love you! I really do. I can’t wait to get into school!”

He leaned back, putting the side of his face into Jackie's bosom.

"Let's see, when does the next semester start? Cantrell College, here I come!" she extolled. "Baby, you've made my day, my week, and my life!"

Jackie danced a waltz around the kitchen with a make believe partner. Willie did not bother to join her. He sat lustfully basking in the suppleness of her movements. She bumped into the kitchen furniture because the kitchen was built just a tad too small.

The children charged in with a pleasant temperament, wondering what all the excitement was about.

"What's going on in here?" Olivia asked curiously.

"Yeah," Mane joined in, "Why y'all so excited?"

Olivia set the plates while Mane set the flatware on the table. They waited for an answer. Jackie and Willie were lost in their own thoughts. Their spirits danced in the clouds. They didn't hear a word the children uttered.

"If it makes you happy, I'm happy too." These words rolled off Willie's tongue like a man whose sexual fantasies were about to be realized again. "Like the old man said, 'If you work hard and plan, things will work out.'"

Drooling, Willie leaned precariously far back in his chair, folding his hands behind his head. He felt cocky and confident. Two lovely children, a beautiful wife, and my own home all before I'm thirty. *I couldn't have planned it any better*, Willie thought. His plans were coming true, but he knew he had to persist and endure through fruition, for he and his family to enjoy the benefits of his efforts. He couldn't let up. He planned

for an early retirement; in his mind lay the beaches of the Bahamas.

Willie rocked back in his chair with arms folded. His two beautiful children devoted to their mother's wishes. And his beautiful wife, whose devotion to him was like that between a monk and God.

Jackie waltzed over to Willie and nibbled at his ear. She believed the Lord had blessed her with the perfect man in lieu of the injustice of losing her natural family at an early age. She had unknowingly caught, in her opinion, the man of any woman's dreams. Not only did this dreamboat provide the most extraordinary sex she ever had in her life, but he also was smart and brought home the bacon—fat, juicy, heart-stopping bacon.

“You know I'm a happy man,” he said smiling broadly. “God has really blessed us! I sure do love you guys! C'mere and give me a big sugar bear hug!”

They all embraced with Willie as the centerpiece.

“Why are they so happy?” Mane asked Olivia.

“I don't know. But I know we will find out later.”

“You know I gotta buy me some new clothes,” Jackie stated.

Willie reacted comically, “What you need with new clothes?”

“Honey...”

“I'm just kidding, babycakes. You can have all that I have to give.”

Do Not Copy

CHAPTER

7

Jackie's aching heart walked in a painful hurry across the wind-swept Cantrell College campus. Cantrell College was a predominantly African-American junior college that once had the dubious privilege of being a tobacco plantation during an era not long forgotten by many in the South. She held her scarf and sweater tightly about her neck. The fallen leaves danced in chilly swirls across the sidewalk.

That was the last thing I wanted to hear, she thought through waves of panic. Mabel would be ecstatic. Willie Sr. would be indifferent. But Willie... it would kill Willie. *It will kill him alright,* Jackie thought, *but not before he strangled the last bit of life from me.* The thoughts raced through her head as she fought back the anxiety. She knew it would destroy his perfect plan, his dreams.

The collegiate cinder-block infirmary faded behind her as the heart-felt pace of her nerve-racked steps quickened, drawing her closer to an agonizing confrontation. Her troubled heart was swollen with

undeniable grief. The painful grief that consciously spelled her unanticipated disaster—the heartache of a late menstrual cycle—an unwanted pregnancy. Her self-pity choked her matronly instincts as it moved up her throat, causing her breathing to be labored, urging tears to fill her refined eyes. She desperately held them back. Not out here on the campus lawn for all to see. She was so conscious of being older than the other students that she constantly tried not to draw any hint of attention to herself. Her composure was all she had right now; she couldn't afford to lose that.

“Willie won't believe that I allowed this to happen, that it was an accident. We used the rhythm method. How could I have let this happen, knowing how strongly Willie believes in his plans?” She spoke quietly to herself.

Her thoughts spiraled around inside her brain like killer bees circling their next victim. Her soul-piercing thoughts were momentarily interrupted. *Isn't that Paulette? Oh God no! She's seen me! Not Paulette!* Jackie got off the sidewalk, and walked ever more briskly across the uneven lawn.

Paulette cut across the Maple leaf strewn lawn to catch Jackie who was speed walking. Jackie's face was shrouded with an incomprehensible concern which increased Paulette's apprehension and curiosity.

“Jackie,” Paulette called out with her hazel-green eyes.

Jackie didn't stop. She didn't even think about stopping. Paulette quickened her pace. Jackie continued her hurried pace holding her head low. Paulette finally caught up to her, having to hold Jackie by the arm to halt her advance.

“Jackie! What in the world's wrong with you, girl?”

Jackie didn't bother to look up, her eyes fixed on nothing at her feet.

"What were you doing at the infirmary?"

"Nothing," Jackie finally managed. She couldn't tell anyone. How could she? She owed it to Willie to tell him first.

"Look like you lost your best friend in the world!"

"I don't know what I'm gonna do," Jackie said, as she talked through her sniffles. She tried to distance herself from Paulette, but Paulette held Jackie by the elbow.

"Do about what?"

"Willie gonna kill me when he finds out."

"Find what out?" Paulette pulled her closer, holding her tightly, but Jackie twisted free. "Come on, girl, tell me what's happenin'!"

"I can't tell you!"

Jackie began to run.

Paulette called to Jackie, "What is it? Talk to me Jackie! Don't run away!"

"I just can't tell anyone!" Jackie darted down the sidewalk like an experienced athlete. A moment later she was out of sight.

Paulette stood alone on the old, worn-down sidewalk, staring in bewilderment, emotionally charged.

Jackie daydreamed while ironing Willie's 100% cotton, white, button-down shirt. She had to do anything to get her mind off her current dilemma. She had washed two loads of clothes, hung them out to dry, and now she fought the overwhelming darkness in her mind as she ironed. She had already picked up the

house, washed a few stray dishes, and twice dusted the furniture. Her reflection peered back at her as she stood in front of a mirror in one of the children's room, feet aching, ironing to keep her mind off of things.

She kept looking at her perfectly flat belly and thinking about the surprising misery of an unwanted pregnancy. She looked at each piece of furniture in Olivia's room which she had meticulously picked out. She practically had to beg, borrow, and steal the money from Willie so she could get just what she had wanted. She thought about how Olivia would now have to share her room with her little sister, or how Mane would if the child was a boy. It would no longer be Olivia's room, or Mane's room, but their room.

"God, please let this child be a girl," she whispered to herself. Boys are so... so... hard to deal with, she thought quietly. A glimmer of joy graced her delicate tear-stained cheeks. She imagined the baby in a bassinet, sharing their room for the first months on its life; she, Willie, and the baby in a space not quite large enough. Her joy diminished. Willie wouldn't get enough sleep because of the baby. His early morning starts would start even earlier will little sleep in between.

Their three-bedroom house with its low ceilings would get a little smaller. She was thrust again against the brick wall of her fertility. The looming question lay before her. How was Willie going to react to her pregnancy? The only real answer was within Willie—only Willie.

"Willie's shirt!" Jackie cried loudly. Smoke rose from the steam iron as she burned one of Willie's favorite Sunday shirts. "Oh sh#!!"

The acrid smell of Willie's rapidly charring cotton shirt poked Jackie like an electric cattle prod, bringing her screeching back to her shocking dilemma, to her present reality. Startled, she blew her stale breath upon the shirt, dispersing the intense odor away from her nostrils with her waving hand. She stood flat-footed, empty, blank as an open book with no words printed on the pages.

She stared with tear-swollen eyes at the smoldering partially charred shirt— one of Willie's favorites. It was now adorned with a fresh permanent iron print.

"I've done it again," she quivered, "I have screwed up again. I'm pregnant as hell and about to die as soon as Willie gets home. And when he finds out... ah, I mean... when I tell him." She looked down at the floor and imagined how swollen her feet would be during her pregnancy, then whispered, "When I tell him."

Jackie was having thoughts of half-truths, of deceit. Perhaps, she imagined hopelessly, she didn't have to tell him right away. Maybe she could delay for four months because she was only six weeks pregnant. But she didn't have it in her spirit to lie or delay. Their relationship was stronger than that. Especially not to the man she loved immeasurably. She couldn't cover up anything as important as this. It wasn't in her. She couldn't deny her pregnancy. She couldn't deny the child. She loved Willie with all her heart and soul. He would understand, she hoped, her thoughts acutely focused on the man. *He would understand, wouldn't he?*

Jackie's natural parents died in a devastating house fire when she was only five years old. She had been

miraculously rescued by their next door neighbors, the Robinsons, and eventually taken under their watchful care. Jackie had been a lonely, precocious little girl, whose eyes betrayed the dejected weakened state of her inner self.

Dorothy Robinson restored Jackie's heart and more. Mrs. Robinson was a strict, structured Christian woman who was very moral, full of integrity, and unpretentious. She made sure Jackie followed stringent moral and biblical standards. She ensured Jackie was growing uprightly by imposing all manner of controlling restrictions.

At a hurried pace, one could walk from the local high school to Mrs. Robinson's modest wooden frame house in four minutes. That was exactly how long young Jackie had to walk from high school to home every school day, rain or shine. On rainy days, if Jackie didn't take an umbrella to school, she couldn't wait for the rain to subside, or wait for a ride. She had to hurry home. If she was late for any reason, she would be on the receiving end of a terrible verbal wrath which ended in the scourge of a beating from amiable Dorothy Robinson. Mrs. Robinson was adamant about not having to take care of any babies. She already had her share of diapers and she wasn't "gonna stand fo' no mo'!"

Jackie loved Mrs. Robinson in spite of how she was sometimes mistreated. Jackie genuinely believed in the goodness of people. And deep within herself, she knew Dorothy Robinson loved her. In no uncertain terms, Jackie understood that Mrs. Robinson didn't know how to show her love, except the way she had learned. Only through strict Christian discipline could Mrs. Dorothy Robinson express her love.

She kept Jackie on the straight and narrow. And for that reason Jackie had been truly blessed. Mrs. Robinson beat the boys off of Jackie and kept her locked privately away in the security of her house. Jackie flourished even though she was a social recluse because she was an adorable, caring person with a beautiful smile and an innocent heart. Her innocence and lack of social skills often made her open pray for young heartless boys. No matter how often or how difficult it was to fight off the pernicious, hormone-driven boys, it seemed one of them was forever falling hopelessly in love with her every other month.

Even though she had to rush home from school everyday, her eyes always found Willie Jr. with his erect posture and clean pressed clothes. He wore the right color combinations and his sweaters hit the top of his button down shirts just so. If Willie would only notice her, she would have been in paradise. She thought that she was not good enough for Willie Jr. or his family. Heaven knew she could not very well approach him with any forward conversation; he would never give her any never-mind after that. She would have been tagged as “loose” and any relationship would not have lasted. She had heard from what little grapevine she was exposed to that Willie Jr. was learning to be a brick mason from his father. Everyone knew how much money masons made. So Willie Jr. represented what Jackie wanted and needed in life: a successful man with the promise of having the ideal family which Jackie believed she never experienced.

Along came the one boy for whom Jackie grew to care too deeply, though her one true love all along was Willie Jr. She believed there was finally someone who had truly fallen in love with her; who had noticed her

for who she was and not her outward appearance. His actions and his silken words suggested that he was madly in love with her. She believed his lips; she wanted to believe his love was true. And yet she knew he was only a pretty playboy. But psychologically, she desired escape; escape from the pressures of living with Mrs. Robinson. Jackie was a senior now and was exploring the idea of life after high school. She couldn't imagine living as an adult in the Robinson's care. Mrs. Robinson's structure had served Jackie well, but it would crush her very being after she finished high school. No preparations had been made for Jackie to go to college. So getting a job and contributing her share to the financial responsibilities around the Robinson family home seemed all that was left.

Jackie knew Calvin James wasn't really in love with her, but she melted when he espoused, "Jackie, I love you to the moon." That made it easy; easy for him to take advantage of her. What made it even easier was that she knew she could never have Willie Jr. so she desperately imagined being madly in love with him.

Calvin James. The name rolled off her tongue like butter off of hot toast. He was a sizzling hot ticket in the local city high school they both attended. He wasn't a jock, but he could have been, if he had wanted to. At least, that was what he would always tell her when she pressed the sport issue. He was six feet tall, with long, natural-looking, curly hair. It must have been processed, but Jackie didn't care. What Jackie didn't know was Calvin had cousins in New York City. They had sent him the latest hair products for African-Americans that wouldn't reach their small community for a few years yet. She loved to run her fingers

through his hair. She would wipe her hand off on his back when she kissed him.

Calvin had large, beautiful, brown doe eyes, dressed with thick, streamlined eyebrows, which looked plucked and long, “to die for” eyelashes. Eyelashes girls only dreamed of owning—and he had them. She wasn’t allowed telephone calls at night, so she would lay in her bed admiring Calvin’s picture to the point of idolatry. For the first time in her life she was in love. Hopelessly in love. Maybe that was why she decided not to finish her last year of high school and elope with Calvin. She couldn’t believe her lonely ears when Calvin had suggested it.

“Babe, why don’t we go to Jersey and get married?”

For a brief moment which lasted an eternity, Jackie had passion shock while what he had asked registered with her emotions and played in her brain.

“Yes, yes, yes!” she said emphatically, nearly screaming her answer. She hadn’t thought about anything except what he had asked, and what her response had been. From that moment on, until the actual event was to occur she revisited his exquisite words, his Old Spice cologne, his pink polyester shirt with its wide collar. She exhibited total disregard for how Mrs. Robinson would react.

She lived in unrestricted bliss until the next great emotional moment concerning her Calvin James. He left her standing in the lurch with only great expectations and no hope of marriage. He never showed up or called on the day they were to drive to Jersey to elope.

Upon reflection, after weeks of tears and remorse, Mrs. Robinson convinced her to be glad the scum was

gone out her life. Jackie was glad that all he left her was a short-lived romance and a good time in the back seat of his Buick Skylark.

Jackie couldn't remember another time, except for this one, when so many emotions had to be contained by so little courage. Maybe that's why she sent the children who were playing outside, walking the two miles across town to Willie's parents. She didn't want the children to see her get beat up, nor did she want to have Mabel see her. Willie would never raise his hand to hit her, though he had a really bad temper. It seldom, if ever, erupted when things were going well. And when it did erupt, the evidence of his violence was always directed towards something inanimate— like something metal, wood, or brick: breaking a broom handle or throwing flatware through a wall. But most of the time, his anger was directed towards bricks.

And how appropriate— the things that gave him the most pain during most of his working days became the brunt of his fury. She never in a million years expected him to ever hit her under any circumstances. Somehow this was different. Upon careful consideration, she loved him and after all he loved her. She hoped that he continued to love her after she told him the news. She hadn't expected this pregnancy. They had two beautiful children and a wonderful family life together. She hoped that nothing as cruel as she could imagine would ever happen.

Just then, she heard Willie's truck pull up. She unplugged the iron in a rush, placing it on the dresser top. She grabbed the smoldering shirt. Into the bathroom she ran, throwing the shirt into the sink, holding it close under the faucet. Her hand nervously

turned the water on full pressure. Water splashed everywhere with bits of Willie's charred shirt. She fumbled with the faucet to turn it off.

She scurried to the security of the front door and leaned on it for support. The doorway had a closet opposite it which made the area a cozy, warm refuge where emotions and a person could be hidden, if only temporarily. She stood there distressed, her light make-up smeared. She cried silently into her handkerchief.

Willie Jr. performed his regular routine of taking off his dirty shoes on the back porch. His dirty clothes went into a laundry hamper on the porch.

"Babycakes, I'm home!" Willie moved through the kitchen, before he realized there was no reply from Jackie, but he gave it no attention.

He had survived another harsh day at the job. Dealing with Jimmy Bugg and that bunch was a real pain. Deep inside, Willie felt that working as a brick mason was a menial job for which he was overqualified mentally. Willie wanted to start a business of some type. But he could make more money working a full-time brick mason job, so he continued to do so until the opportunity presented itself for him to exercise his entrepreneurial muscles. First, he needed to make the seed money. So, psychologically, he thought he was more aristocratic than his peers. To this end, Jimmy Bugg was correct. Jimmy knew Willie thought he was better than the other guys were. Willie knew he was better.

Willie's time with his family seemed to make him more like he knew he was inside. Looking at his family reinforced his belief that he was better than his peers.

Yet he was down-to-earth, not egotistical, not stuck up, in spite of his beliefs.

The flat-roofed house appeared unusually quiet for this time of day. He heard the radio playing distantly in one of the children's rooms, but heard no arguments or noise from the children. He smelled something burnt in the air.

Jackie quietly cried a host of tears into her handkerchief. She knew his routine dutifully. She listened between her sniffles for his every footfall. She knew each step and which direction it would be heading. She heard him sniff the irritating air. She imagined his nostrils flaring. It had started unceremoniously. His mundane routine was about to change; it's all about to change. It's all my fault, Jackie thought mournfully. It was starting with his search for the burning smell. He followed his olfactory sense. His course was truly about to change unlike anything any of them could have expected.

Willie walked inquisitively into the small blue bathroom. The last of his stale cigarette smoke from the morning shaving routine clung to the walls breathing their last breath. He discovered his favorite shirt in the sink, brutally burned. Immediately, Willie was exceedingly angry.

"I paid good money fo' 'dis shirt!" Willie exclaimed squeezing the shirt in a death grip. "Damnit, Jackie," he mumbled in a muffled tone. "Jackie!" he yelled angrily. "Where are you?"

Turning abruptly, he stormed into Olivia's room, where Jackie had been ironing. The ironing board beckoned him over. He spotted the iron. He checked it; it was still hot to the touch. He realized that Jackie was

keeping her distance. Willie became overly concerned for Jackie's welfare as he turned to leave the room. His anger subsided and his demeanor changed as his tender affection for Jackie overwhelmed him.

He began checking the rooms diligently looking for her, maybe there had been an intruder. Each room was checked more frantically than the last. Finally, he stopped for a minute to think.

"Jackie, Jackie," Willie called, with sweetness flowing from his lips. "Where are you, babycakes? Are you alright?" He spoke almost under his breath, just above a whisper, believing her to be close.

His mind began to fill with thoughts of malice from an undisclosed source, perhaps from Jimmy Bugg, directed towards his family, designed to get at him. But it did not add up.

For a moment, Willie thought he heard something up front, in the living room. He remained calm. Willie walked quietly, apprehensively into the living room.

There Jackie was, pressed against the front door. Her face was buried in a handkerchief with the door providing her with much needed support. From across the room, he faintly heard her weeping, her subdued anguish. Walking towards her slowly, he said nothing as his spirit shared her apparent pain. He gently placed his masculine, callous-tough hand on Jackie's trembling petite shoulder, softly speaking her name.

"Jackie, it's ok." The words flowed from his mouth like a fresh spring shower. She thirsted for the gentleness of his voice. She longed for the tender strength of his arms. She wished for the nectar of his full lips, the hardness of his loins. She desired the spontaneous comfort, the full ecstasy of him throbbing deep inside of her. But now was a time of reckoning.

“Baby, don’t worry about the shirt. I can always buy another one.”

Jackie slowly turned around into his awaiting arms, afraid to look into his eyes. She put her head on his chest. Through her sniffles she tried to gain enough composure and courage to talk to him.

“It’s not the shirt.”

“What is it, then?” He felt the passion leave his tensely affected body. His concern for her welfare melted away. Willie’s anger forced its re-kindle, despite his having controlled it well up until this point. He thought he was being remarkably understanding in this matter. But the more she delayed, the more difficult it was for him to contain the fumes of his mounting anger. Anger’s raging waters were being held back by his undying love for his beloved Jackie. His temper became more inflamed with each passing moment, but he remained calm.

After what seemed to be a long pause Jackie said, “Willie...” She allowed there to be silence as she composed herself further.

This was a stifled silence. A malignant, explosively penetrating silence was expanding rapidly inside of Willie, changing his raging waters into pressure cooker steam.

“I don’t know... I don’t know how to tell you this.”

Willie collected himself, if only momentarily, when she spoke. Her viscerally pleasing voice could be as soothing as warm, fragrant lotion on hot, dry, cracking skin, or as violent as treacherous, rock-laden, white-water rapids.

“The shirt is nothin’,” she said faint of heart.

On the edge of a maniacal explosion, Willie expected the worse. *She must be sleeping around on*

me, he thought. *I'll kill this woman. What if she wants to get a divorce? I'll kill both of them!* Willie's thoughts were flighty as they bounced inside his skull.

"What is something?" he entreated. His inquisition was followed by trepidation-filled stillness, his tone and demeanor fluctuating through a mountain range of imaginations. He could clearly hear his thoughts. It sounded to him as though someone else had spoken his words; and spoken them from afar. He was barely able to get the electrified air from his lungs to pass through emotion-spiked vocal cords. The words pushed explosively past his heart. He pursed his lips.

"What is it then, Jackie?" He said tersely, his anger aching in his chest. "What is it? What the—" Willie forced himself into his usual habit of refraining from using profane language, but one had almost slipped.

Jackie pushed herself with the urging of heaven and wells of tears to tell him, but she couldn't. She wanted to tell him with all the passion she carried in her heart and soul, but she fell silent.

Her passion moved Willie to a station of calmness. Her emotion was overwhelming his fury; they were dutifully connected spiritually. Willie placed his hands on Jackie's shoulders as gently as he could manage. With the gentle nudging, he said, "You can tell me, baby. I love you." Passion arced between the two of them like a rainbow. Tears filled Willie's eyes as he continued to press her.

"I know how you feel about this." Willie became a blur as an avalanche of tears filled her eyes, having noted the tears in her husband's intense eyes. Her heart throbbed with the pain she knew her words would cause Willie.

“I went by the infirmary today... and...” Jackie trailed off. Her tears dotted the throw rug at her feet. She couldn’t do it; how could she tell him? She tried to turn back to the door. Willie became physical with her, jerking her back forcibly. The tension in his loins overtook his attempts and intent to exhibit a gentle Christian spirit.

“You killin’ me, Jackie,” he said through gritting teeth. The rage returned, growing with each passing second. “What is it?” He asked shaking her hard, “What is it?”

This created a downpour of emotion from Jackie. Again captivated by her passionate expression, Willie took a moment to calm down— but he didn’t— he couldn’t. He felt a rush of power. He didn’t know how angry he had actually become.

“Nothin’ could be that bad, baby. I love you!”

Mustering all the strength she had left, Jackie looked deeply into his eyes into his soul. “Willie,” she moaned passionately, “you know I love you, don’t you?”

Willie nodded.

“Willie... I’m pregnant.”

Taken aback, his head rocked backwards. Willie Jr. dropped his heavy arms to his side. The blood drained from his face. He was stunned into silence, stiffened onto a century old zombie. As quick as a flash, the anger, the rage, the madness was gone; and also, Willie thought, so were his dreams.

Anything but this, he thought. *I can cope with many things, her angry venom, her petty jealousy, or even a little infidelity which would be tough, but this...* Willie didn’t know what to say or how to say, it. He just stared through her into the window of his future, her

future, the children's futures. *How was he going to pay for the education of three children? How could she do this to him? When did it happen? How pregnant is she? What could she have been thinking about?* Questions raced through his painfully feeble mind.

He knew his mother would love it. Willie thought his father would hate him a little more because of it, or would he? Wouldn't this make Willie Sr. happy, having another grandchild sitting on his knee? Or would Willie Sr. inwardly resent the coming of an unexpected child into his son's perfectly planned family? The "I told you, you couldn't handle your affairs" verbal onslaught he felt coming seemed too much for him to bear. Willie's spirit groaned.

Willie thought about the Saturday mornings as a child when his father would allow him to tag along with him on his errands. One particular day that always stood out in Willie Jr.'s mind, Willie Sr. was explaining the "economics of mouths." That's what he called it. "The more mouths you have in a family, boy, the more bucks you need in the bank and in your back pocket." He took Willie to the home of a family living on modest incomes with two children. They had a nice house with a trimmed yard, a nice car, and everyone well dressed and clean.

He then took Willie to a family with four children and relatively the same income. The yard was worn down to dirt in most places, with only islands of grass. The car was run down and the children wore old worn clothes.

"The economics of mouths," Willie Sr. would say, "You get it?"

Willie Jr. had gotten it, gotten it quite clearly all before becoming a teenager.

Dark destruction crossed Willie Jr.'s brow. Jackie saw it. She saw what she had feared more than a violent beating. Far worst than any beating that would have been over after several brutal moments. What Jackie feared the most was his rejection of her. She reached a hand out to him. A hand that was more like a life preserver than she knew. *I could kill you for this*, he thought.

“Don’t hurt me Willie.”

Willie did not respond, but slowly backed away from her.

“I’m sorry Willie, I’m sorry,” Jackie moaned, tears streaming down her grief-streaked face.

She perceived what she saw on his face moments earlier, the anger, the rage, moving on, only to be replaced by a more hideous demon. *Was it despair?*, she thought, *No it couldn’t be*. But she knew she had shattered his dreams, diminishing him as a person.

He would unknowingly wait for the other shoe to fall; and that shoe was self-pity. Willie walked away solemnly with newly arrived demons in tow. Life had given Willie the old one-two punch. Life had delivered Willie a knockout blow.

That night Jackie slept with her tears.

CHAPTER

8

A lone passerby listened attentively from under his weather-beaten umbrella. Through the tinny rain drops, he could hear the thunderous argument in progress inside Willie Sr.'s three-bedroom, flat-topped house.

"I'm just not gonna have it! No way!" Jackie said wrathfully to staunch opposition.

She had had it with Willie Sr.'s unmoving attitude and Mabel's smothering ways. She had put up with them for the longest time when they shared their home. She danced to their tune when Willie lovingly and she painfully lived with them. Now she was not going to have it, not the baby, not the harassment, none of this. But she played it cool. She didn't want to upset Willie Jr. any more than he already was. He was caught between a rock and his parents. She imagined what must be going through his mind right now. She felt pain for Willie Jr.

The situation was tenuous at best. Her unexpected pregnancy, after all, was the reason there was this

reprehensible meeting. And she wondered why they were really there in the first place. She knew she was here because deep inside she held the belief that Willie Jr. was a weak but caring man, a mama's boy. She believed Willie had never fully cut his mother's apron strings. He therefore brought everything, except their sexual practices, to his parents for their approval—more correctly, for them to pass judgement. She tired of this routine, time and time again.

These meetings often occurred after the Sunday supper at Willie Sr.'s house, filled sleepily to the brim with food as they always were, sitting around the dining room table or in the living room. The living room set the stage for this particular meeting. No matter how many times these conferences were held, Jackie couldn't get used to them. This was absolutely the last one.

One past meeting she remembered quite well. It was the committee meeting held to discuss the type of protection she should use for birth control. She couldn't believe it then nor could she believe it now! She was having a conversation with his parents about how they were to control the coming forth of any more grandchildren? How absurd, she had thought then and still believed now. But she loved Willie regardless of this absurdity and that was all that really mattered. In the past, she had told herself that she would just endure until it all blew over; until Willie Jr. finally grew up. That was then, but this is now.

"And that's it," Willie said defiantly, defending his and Jackie's position. He was trying to stand his ground with his deaf-eared parents—against his stone-willed father, like a hundred times before. It never worked then, so how could it work now? He had to

stand his ground this time even though he was standing in quicksand.

Having a third child will negatively impact our lives and our children's lives in a big way, a very big way. Her pregnancy wasn't planned. If we want to live with the consequences of our choices, that's fine; but don't make us live out your desires, Willie thought, though his lips sang a different song.

"No way can we afford it, anyway." Willie Jr. said, addressing Willie Sr. "I mean we can't afford another child," he said sheepishly, sensing Jackie's lasers on his neck.

"You only have yourself to blame for not 'complishin' yo' dreams," Willie Sr. seared.

Willie Sr. was a big husky brawn of a man. He was attractive to the ladies and a threat to most men's masculinity. It was easy to see where Willie Jr. got his good looks. He was someone whom you would rather not get angry. To Willie Jr., Willie Sr. was quite an angry person. A person who portrayed anger or bitterness all the time—at least, whenever Willie was around. Willie Sr. stayed on Jr.'s back whenever he was around, aggravating him to no end. That was his way of teaching his son to be strong, to be a man.

Willie Sr. was smart, full of common sense knowledge. He had long ago discovered there seemed to be a better way to get things done; a way around doing things with a conventional approach. He did things "the Willie Sr." way. More often than not, his way was the way everyone found to be best.

Everyone had expected Willie Sr. to become one of the first, if not the very first, African-American contractors in the state. The reason he told everyone he

had not become a contractor was he wanted to spend as much time with his family as possible. Insiders knew the real reason was that he could help novice African-American masons learn their trade more effectively in his current status. It would not be as easy as a contractor to teach them the tricks of the trade. He would have been much too busy.

The argument was a boisterous, volcanic eruption of emotions, as it pulsed against the rain-soaked night. The peaks were thunderous with no one holding their tongues and the valleys a foreboding stillness with thoughts flying meandering courses. The misty rain was thick with opinions and self-righteousness pourings forth from inside the house. The pinned-up suggestions flowed from well-meaning hearts, their deep-held resentments, showered down between each of them. Anyone opening the front door would have been bowled over by a flood of pain, distrust, sadness, and spittle.

The children were supposedly in the back bedroom asleep. At first their little ears were pressed against the wall. Then Olivia suggested they move to the door, which proved to be a more preferable medium. That was in the beginning of the conversation, if one could call it that. But now, one didn't have to press face or ear against any surface to hear the angry words roll off hard-worded lips. Their sad little faces ushered in the happy expectation of a new life growing deep inside their mother's womb. They imagined the baby might not have wanted to come into this world, into their family, not just yet, if it could hear what was going on.

Willie Sr. reached for a matchbook on the end table so he could re-light his pipe. He resented not having his strike-anywhere matches which Mabel forbade him from having in the house after the grandchildren were born. He was reminded of it every time he lit his pipe. Willie Sr. tired of this conversation and it showed on his leathery, weather-worn face.

Jackie sat impatiently but quietly on the couch. She held her stomach and looked deeply into her lap. All of this was making her sick. Willie Sr. blew out the match, leaning way back in his favorite rocking chair, smoking his favorite pipe, a gift from Mabel's long deceased father. Willie Jr. braced himself against the fireplace mantle awaiting the next assault.

Mabel viewed Willie Sr. as a gem that only needed polishing. She had been polishing him for well over three decades. But only a glimmer came from her gem. One of Willie's Sr.'s sayings came to her mind, *"Like the old man said, 'No matter how much you polish horsesh#, it won't shine.'*" But as for anything that diminished her man, she only dismissed it. Turning her gaze from Willie Sr., Mabel stood with one hand on her hip, an Ebony magazine rolled up in the other. "You can't kill my grandbaby!" Mabel steamed, tapping the magazine nervously into her free hand.

"Damn it, Mama," Willie Jr. yelled tiring of this masquerade in selfishness, as he turned briskly towards her, "this is my life!"

Willie Sr. was disturbed at Willie's brashness and language, but no one noticed. Mabel pointed with an air of disgust to Jackie.

"I thought we were talkin' 'bout that life inside her," Mabel said pointedly. "You know that baby's got a life! You know, it ain't Christian to kill Earl!"

“Bullsh#t Mama!” Willie Jr. yelled, “We’re talkin’ ‘bout—”

Willie Sr. interrupted vehemently, bringing his chair forward. “Boy, don’t you talk to your Mama like that. Don’t you ever talk to your Mama like that.”

An awkward silence suspended the moment. All eyes were cast downward but for Willie Sr.’s. All were silent except for the squeaking of Willie Sr.’s rocking chair. Outside the rain ceased. A booming clap of thunder ruptured their silence.

“Like the old man said,” Willie Sr. continued, “if you hadn’t let the horse outta the stable, you wouldn’t be in this trouble.” Once again, Willie Sr. stabbed at his son.

Willie Jr. ran his hand across the mantle as if looking for dust. At the end of his trail, he picked up the photo that was sitting on the mantle. He looked intently at it. It was a picture of himself, Jackie, and the two children on one of their trips to the Appalachian Mountains.

Willie Sr. said, “Boy, all of this is your fault! You made your own bed, so now you gotta sleep in it.” Willie Sr. chuckled. “And look like you stepped in it too!”

“Give me a break, Daddy!” Willie Jr. said, exasperated. “Help me out here. You had two kids yourself. You know that’s enough.”

“Don’t try to blow smoke up my be’hind, boy!” Willie Sr. looked at Mabel, “excuse me Mama, I was just trying to make my point.”

Mabel only nodded, staring hard at him and rolled her eyes to the ceiling to the Lord.

“If you had listened to me, and had her fixed like I told you, you wouldn’t be in this mess. Yeah, boy, looks to me like you got a real tough row to hoe.”

Jackie glanced past Mabel, staring hard at Willie Sr., then looked down at her belly, at her baby. She twisted a handkerchief in her hand.

Willie Jr. spoke calmly, but firmly, to Willie Sr.

“Daddy, can’t you see... I try to make you happy, but you ain’t never gonna be satisfied.” He paused to keep his composure. “I bust my back laying bricks, because you wanted me to be a mason like you. I built my own house, with not much help from you, I might add; and you still won’t get off my back.”

Willie Sr. slowly turned his face away from Willie Jr. and shifted his eyes.

“I am the best brick mason in the state.” Willie Jr. said proudly. He walked over to Jackie, and placed his hands on her shoulders. Willie Sr. leisurely puffed on his pipe. The curtain of smoke wafted in Jackie’s direction. She fanned it away before it got a chance to get close to her or her unwanted baby.

“I’ve got the perfect lil’ family, and I don’t want to ruin it!” Mabel tried to look at Willie Jr. and Jackie. But she could not restrain herself enough emotionally. When she looked at the two of them tears would overtake her. She had raised Willie better than this. And she knew Willie Jr.’s behavior, his thinking must have been Jackie’s undoing. Mabel could only tap the magazine on her knee in disgust.

“And you of all people should understand that!” Willie finished. “You’d do the same thing if you were in my shoes.”

Exasperation rushed from Mabel's heart and onto her lips as she declared, "But you're talkin' about killing my grandbaby!"

"Wait a minute, Mama!" Willie Jr. roared pointing to Willie Sr. "He knows the only way our chil'ren can have a college education and for us to get ahead is to have only two chil'ren."

He waited for Willie Sr. to retort. Willie Sr. was not interested in this conversation. He picked up a Jet magazine, thumbing through it slowly to voice his disinterest.

"Financially, how am I gonna take care of three babies?" Willie Jr. asked in a more controlled tone of voice.

Jackie cut her eyes up at Willie Jr. He didn't acknowledge her. He only moved from his refuge behind Jackie having sensed her rage.

"I've got this thing planned out, and ain't no three babies in it!" Willie Jr. felt courage running through his veins now. "And I'm gonna be somebody!"

Jackie couldn't believe that she was being treated like a child. This was all about her, but she was given little voice in the matter. Her pregnancy was the subject of their disdain, not Willie Jr.'s pregnancy, or Mabel's pregnancy, nor Willie Sr.'s. They were not allowing her choice to matter. She slowly rose, seething, pulling herself up from the deep-sitting chair.

"What y'all talkin' about?" Jackie nearly screamed. All eyes focused on her, even Willie Sr. "You not the one who's pregnant. Y'all talk as if I'm not even here! But I am. And this is my choice. This is our choice and we will live with the consequences!"

All the pent up emotion relating to her having lived with his parents, coupled with the current situation erupted in the form of tears. She paused to gain her composure as Mabel and Willie Jr. looked on. Willie Sr. only buried his head once again into the magazine, hiding his face a little deeper.

“Y’all don’t know what y’all talkin’ ‘bout.” Jackie espoused through painted sniffles. Jackie didn’t know what she was screaming, or what she was saying. What she knew was her lips were moving and words were flying out.

“Y’all act like y’all own us. Like we’ve gotta do what you say. Well, we’re gonna do what we gotta do, and if that’s what we gotta do or gonna do, that’s just what we gonna do! Period! And we gonna do it! End of conversation.”

Olivia and Mane were locked in a teary embrace. Their handsome faces were twisted with sadness. Their tear-tracked faces expressed their desire for the noise to stop. The noise, the fighting created within them disrespect for their parents and grand-parents alike.

Mane resented being born because he wondered if they had really wanted him. He pondered whether they had had a discussion like this one before he was born.

Olivia didn’t want to cause her parents any financial hardships, so within her at that very moment was birthed the desire to move out of her parents house when the opportunity presented itself. She didn’t want to run away, she only wanted not to be a burden to her parents.

Small chins rested on the tear-soaked shoulders.

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CHAPTER

9

A light reflector swung towards Dr. Singleton, 68, a mole of a man, a graying Caucasian General Practitioner, who had performed as many abortions as the number of his natural years. He was dressed in a smock and was just about ready to prep Jackie. The nurse would return any moment now.

Jackie sat on the prepping table, Willie on a backless stool. Passion flowed like a river through Willie's hand, forming his and Jackie's hands into the perfect mold. He held her hand with the firmness of a dying man. With high reservation, they looked deeply into each other's loving eyes.

"You'll have to leave now, Mr. Jones," Dr. Singleton said with a tone that expressed his years of professional medical school training.

Willie stroked Jackie's hand. "This is what we wanted isn't it, babycakes?" Willie asked passionately. He spoke with a finality that questioned his very Christian moral upbringing.

She nodded. With the reservation of angels playing across her face, she sighed deeply, nodding yes. Softly, almost inaudibly, she said, "Yes... yes."

Willie pierced Jackie's eyes with his own, looking deeply with her soul. He saw her unconscious desire to keep the life born within her and from that moment which touched on eternity, understood how important it was for her to nurture it. He accepted her maternal desire to give birth to the child was as important as his plans, his dreams, and his hopes.

She examined Willie's bristling eyes with triumphant love. Her own eyes brimmed with the painful tears of life's difficult decisions. Her petite hands trembled in his.

"Willie, I can't do it," Jackie mumbled through trembling lips.

Willie nodded his okay. He also was teary-eyed as he resolved to be the father to yet another child.

"I know baby, let's go home."

"Home? Are you sure?"

Willie Jr. nodded yes.

"I love you," she said through smiling tears.

He smiled. "I love you, too, baby."

The birds sang softly, quietly as if it were the dawning of a new day. The storm clouds dissipated.

The sun peaked apprehensively in and out of what clouds were left of the thunderhead. The air fresh with the fragrance of new rain graced the room as Olivia opened the window.

“Livy, for the life of me”, Mabel said, “I can’t figure why they came over to tell us about the killin’.”

She thought long and hard. Her face was beset by a puzzled humor.

“They could have just done it, we never woulda’ know’d nothin’.”

“The killin’?” Olivia said, pausing for a moment to think. “The abortion.”

“Yeah, the killin’.” She said enthusiastically. “They got fancy names for everythin’ now. Good you got an education. You a testimony to your Mama. Did a fine job, yes she did. Went through a lot, she did, plus she had all them boys. All them boys, and no man to speak of really. To teach them...”

Mabel sighed deeply. She gathered her thoughts as she twisted a strand of hair around her finger.

“I only know ‘bout ‘dis from what little I saw and was told even less.”

“I know even less.”

“You went to school,” Mabel said, “you were away.”

“But no one talks about it.”

“Uh-huh. Nobody never had much to say. Who coulda believed it.”

“As though everyone denied it ever happened... but it did.” Mabel nodded. “I only wish I had been around to experience it. Maybe I would better understand why it all happened.”

Mabel contemplated what she had told Olivia up to this point. And she thought about how much more she should or could tell her.

“Wasn’t much we could say. But I didn’t get ‘dese wrinkles by being an ignorant.” She chuckled. “Member this, child, if you don’t ‘member nothin’

else. Don't ignore the obvious. Don't ignore the obvious because it leads you down the path of denial." She looked with penetrating wisdom into Olivia's eyes, diving deeply into the inner depths of her soul to leave her message. "Francesca, my darling," Mabel spoke delicately turning from Olivia.

"Yes, great-grand Mama," Francesca replied, spinning from her spot at the hospital window.

"You know the difference between us and other animals?"

"No ma'am."

"One, we hold life sacred. And two, we got thumbs." Mabel shook her thumbs up at Francesca, grinning a wild, toothless smile. "We got thumbs! And we suppose to learn from our mistakes. Remember that, girlie! Learn from your mistakes, Francesca, learn from your mistakes."

Mabel smacked her weak wrinkled lips, retreating heavily into thought, touching the deep recesses of her mind, reaching into her past. Her fragile shoulders slumped. She delicately wiped a familiar hand across a steeled face. With it, an odd but well-known sadness washed over her, obscuring the time-wrinkled face. The distressing self-reproach was familiar to her face, to her soul, to her entire psyche. It had long ago become an intimate part of her make-up. And at the same time, this grief was less than a part of her, because it never stayed with her. But it also was a greater part of her because it came from her. She never allowed it to stay too long. Maybe, it was, that she was afraid of it. Very afraid of it. It made her weak. She knew it could destroy her. She denied its existence

when it rose to the surface. Here she was calling its very name to come to her... she overflowed viscerally.

Mabel, tears primed for an emotional explosion, looked deeply into Olivia's eyes and said despairingly, "That boy didn't learn from his mistakes. He just went to 'da pit." A single tear caressed her sweet cheeks. Sniffling to hold back the downpour, she tasted the salty drop as it entered the corner of her mouth. This helped her to maintain control.

She turned with authority to Francesca, keeping her emotions in check. "Francesca."

Francesca looked up at her great-grandmother but didn't say a word. It was the unspoken sadness that kept Francesca silent. Even Francesca noticed that her great-grandmother looked older now.

"That a place you don't go girlie... 'da pit... not even for a spell." Mabel shook her head and shuddered. "Dark... ugly... 'dat place. Sometimes... it's jus' a place in our heads. Sometimes we make it something unreal, not real... don't do 'dat... don't do 'dat."

Olivia listened intently. She noticed Mabel's nervousness.

Mabel's hands began to wring the thin, over-washed institutional sheets.

"Never was the same...," Mabel recalled, barely audible, as if talking to herself. "After Nicholas... he never was... went to 'dat place..." With furrowed brows, Mabel twisted the pale sheets with passionate denial and went into another world.

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CHAPTER

10

Several years twisted with vines of agony had passed unobtrusively for the Jones family. Tree branches swayed in the delicious summer breeze. It had been one of a series of hot, sweltering days. The coolness of the night would be welcomed with much anticipated relief. There was no air conditioning to cool the sweat, nor was there enough love or money to ease the financial or emotional pain.

Dusk descended slowly upon the small middle-class, African-American neighborhood. The Jones' children now numbered five. The new additions were Nicholas, 12, Jackie's third child; Marcus, 11, the fourth; and August, 9, her last. They were still playing with boyish vigor in the back yard as they had all afternoon with the neighborhood children.

Earl, 13, Rusty, 12, A.J., 12, were playing football in the back yard finding it more and more difficult to see the ball when it was thrown.

“Keep the ball on the ground,” was what Rusty kept saying through his Bazooka bubble gum, suggesting a running game instead of a passing one. They were doing things like hiding the ball behind their backs, or tucking it under their shirts when they ran. Or the center, the hiker, would hike the ball and keep it, confusing all, adding to the delight of their play.

Nicholas took a quick pause in the action to admire the framed beauty of the woman illuminated in the kitchen window, his mother. She was quite beautiful in spite of having five children pass through her womb. Her character was as strong as her features were a pleasure to look upon. To him, she looked like she was half Hawaiian and American Indian. She could have been ugly as a frog or as temperamental as an egg over easy, but he would have loved her just as much. He thought, When I get married, I want to marry someone just like her. He thought the world of his mother.

Jackie diligently prepared the evening dinner; stove burners were full of steaming pots. It was the usual way she cooked dinner, especially since she was preparing for a much larger audience. It wasn't about cooking one or two entrees and cooking the others. No, it had to be everything at once. It was a process. If you came in when she was cooking, you had to give way to the cook- not disturb the process. The tops of pots rattled from the escaping steam. A pot of hot water bubbled. It was kitchen madness, but she always had the perfect meal prepared. When Willie made it home from work, he washed up and sat down for dinner to a meal right out of Culinary Delights magazine and kitchen madness.

It had been that way before she got her new job at Hosiery Mills. It had been a supreme joy for Jackie to stay home and take care of the children. The household chores weren't so bad especially with the escape to the soaps. But those times were long gone. Now it was like working two jobs- one at home and the other at the Hosiery Mills. It was awfully tough on Jackie to have Olivia leave for college on a full scholarship. Olivia had been an integral component of the routine Jackie had devised for managing it all. Now she juggled work and home with four energetic boys and a contrary husband. Life had become a real bear after Olivia left for college. The boys just couldn't replace her, no matter how hard they tried. Only Nicholas had the compassion and understanding to know that Jackie needed some real assistance with household chores. He found himself ironing clothes, vacuuming, polishing the furniture, and doing myriad household chores. He had helped, but he was no Olivia.

This dual responsibility of work and home made her both stronger and weaker. Strong because of the love she carried for her children and weak from all the effort she put into both occupations. Jackie was still a great cook though. There was no reason to doubt why Willie was considered to be so lucky to have her. In gossip circles she was thought of as "the perfect catch" for any man. She was beautiful. She could cook, take care of her home and she made beautiful babies. She had good genes in addition to her thick locks of flowing hair. Many a man watched her when she was out and about, with or without Willie.

Today was Saturday. Willie worked on many Saturdays, but today he had off. So dinner tonight did not have to be timed with his arrival. Willie Jr. was

watching the end of the CBS afternoon movie on television in the den. The old television had been in bad shape. It was hard to convince Willie to purchase a new one. The tuning knob was hanging on for dear life and the picture was often filled with rainbow colors. The den was adjacent to the kitchen. In fact, you could sit in the kitchen and look at the new twenty-five inch color television. The same television that took 18 months to save and scrape enough money to purchase. This meant whoever sat at the end of the table with their backs to the television had to move over so Willie could see.

Willie often watched television while he ate dinner. His face was often buried in the tube along with his consciousness. The entire family watched, except for Jackie, who was always busy working around the house. The children learned to view and appreciate his television watching habit as somewhat of a relief. It offered an opportunity for stress-free time for both Willie and the children.

“Come on, Willie, dinner’s ready,” Jackie said hurriedly.

Willie did not respond. He sat silently staring blindly in his favorite lazy boy chair. He had long ago been wounded by Nicholas’ untimely arrival. For years now, he nursed a deep, aching, sucking wound. Rehearsing his dilemma only compounded the pain, causing it to grow and fester further into his being like the kudzu vines which slowly envelop a tree, smothering out its very life. His pain was just as deadly as the kudzu-encasing its victims-bringing a sure death if not checked. Before you would know it, if you didn’t cut it down or weed it out, it would have grown over

all the trees, plants and any surface around it, burying evidence that a plant or tree ever existed. It would only leave growth in the shape of what once was.

This was what had happened to Willie Jr. He was being enveloped by the lack of hope, despair, and self-pity. The lack of hope of the possibility to fulfill his dreams invited despair. His plans to have this small lovely family with lots of disposable income had all but faded away- been consumed- inviting self-pity. What could he do? He was perplexed, confused- he needed to talk about his issues which trouble him. He needed professional help. But to come to that conclusion was distant to his realm of reasoning.

All was lost. What next? How will she unravel any other plans that I made? Plethora negative thoughts plagued Willie's mind. He rehearsed them over and over again in his mind, like an old Marvin Gaye song. There was still the potential for success as a contractor, but with no hope, with the kudzu around his bosom he saw little light- only darkness. Gone was his joy, gone was the twinkle in his eyes. Gone were the sweet words from his lips, the playful taps on Jackie's buttocks or his head resting on her breasts. He had become a dark man in a dark place.

Willie was not the only one suffering though. No one could understand his darkness, so no one gave place for him to heal; not at home, nor a church and surely not at work. The kudzu reached out to his family from him, grasping menacingly at their unsuspecting hearts. The children had become silent victims in Willie's passion play. There was nothing for them to do but try to love him. What else was there?

Staring blankly at television, Willie saw his future and it was null. Lethargically he got up, heading to the

bathroom to wash his hands. Every footstep echoed his self-encouraged despair.

The children ceased their play in the dusk of the coming night. They now stood around the picnic table telling jokes, laughing boisterously. Jackie put her head out of the back door and yelled to the children.

“August, Marcus, I mean, ah, Nicholas, you know who I mean. C'mon in the house now. Dinner's ready!” Jackie said leaning out the back door. In frustration she stepped outside to show more authority. “You boys come on in.”

Jackie would often call two or three different children's names before she called the right name. “It's time to eat!” She couldn't believe other folk's children would stay at her house until all times of the night if she didn't run them off. She just hoped her children showed more home training than the neighbor's children displayed when they were away from home. “Earl, Rusty, A.J., you need to go on home now, they gotta eat dinner.”

Jackie went back inside where she put the finishing touches on the meal. Willie wandered into the kitchen, dragging his chair out from the table, dropping hard into the chair like a spoiled only child. Jackie just ignored him. The children came in the back door which was the entrance to the kitchen. Rambunctiously, they headed to the bathroom. They argued laughed and joked noisily.

Willie looked down the length of the table with his eyes aiming for the television. “Hee-hee he-haw-haw,

hee-hee he-haw-haw,” blared from the television set. It could be seen, and most definitely heard, from the kitchen. “Hee Haw” the television show was on.

Willie didn't take his eyes off the television. He looked as if in a trance. He wasn't looking at the show with an eye of interest. Clearly, he was in a zone, with the television as his candle upon which he fastened his monk-like gaze.

The children entered the kitchen from the hallway that ran the length of the kitchen. Sitting down unusually rambunctiously, Nicholas sat at the end of the table opposite Willie. He scooted his chair over swiftly, so as not to block Willie's view. Willie didn't flinch. All the children were especially sensitive to Willie's desire to be able to clearly see the television. The family understood that they lived with an unhappy man.

How many times, Nicholas thought, does he have to yell at us for us to understand not to get in the way of his view? Nicholas reflected on the numerous times his father had stood and yelled presumably at the top of his lungs for the children to behave as he expected. It didn't take too long to get his message. It was a message of fear, terror, and intimidation.

Jackie placed the food on the table. Everyone served themselves, digging in heartily. Jackie stood because there were not enough seats. Willie started to put the food into his mouth as if he didn't really want to but had to.

Nicholas looked at Willie Jr. with anticipation. “Is somebody gonna bless the table?” Nicholas asked. He looked at his mother who eyed his father, then he directed his question to his father. “Daddy, is

somebody gonna say grace?" This was an issue Nicholas continually pursued.

Willie looked down at his plate then up again, observing each of the children. Then he deferred to Mane.

"Mane, you bless the table." Willie Jr. said.

"Bless oh Lord this food to our use, and us to Thy service," Mane said, "and make us ever mindful of the needs of others, in Jesus' name, we pray, Amen."

Everyone started to eat. Willie ate methodically and faster than the rest. His eyes still fixed on the television. He wanted to finish eating and escape back into the television.

"Mama, you can have my seat," Marcus said.

"Naw, honey. I'm getting ready to lay down before I gotta go to work. I wanta' finish the pots before I lay down."

All the children watched television except Mane. He was thinking about sneaking out. Sneaking out of the house late at night had become his escape from the menagerie of too many bodies and too few beds.

"Oh Mama, you're on third shift again, huh?" Mane asked. He shoved a forkful of mashed potatoes into his mouth.

Jackie quietly washed the pots while everyone else ate. "Right," she said with reserved anger. "And before you go to bed, this kitchen better be cleaned up!" Jackie turned halfway around to make her next point stronger. Her hands covered with the suds of dish washing detergent, "And when I come in, in the morning Mane, this place best be cleaned up, and you help feed these boys in the morning, too."

In the mornings when Jackie came in from the night shift, she was dog-tired. At the Hosiery Mill where thread was spun into cloth and synthetic chemicals were transformed into tough elastic nylon, the work was monotonous and difficult. The number of bundles of cloth required daily now was thirty, up from twenty-five. It was always difficult to get twenty-five done—now management wanted more.

She would be too tired to help the children eat breakfast and get out of the house to catch the school bus, but she did it anyway. The children often only had molasses and biscuits for breakfast. But they left the house with full tummies. Willie would have left for work by five or five thirty in the morning. The children basically had to manage on their own when Jackie was on third shift.

Mane was surprised to hear his name on the roster of dishwashing specialists. He thought he could skip out of it or bribe one of his younger brothers with candy to do the dirty deed. If he had to, he would use some maniacal avenue of getting his way.

“Aw, Ma, it’s not my turn,” Mane said trying to somehow get out of his responsibility, “I mean like, I did ’em last night!”

“Didn’t you do the dishes last night?” August asked Nicholas. Nicholas did not answer.

“I’ll do the pots,” Mane said to Marcus and Nicholas, “but the rest is y’all’s.”

Jackie shot him a cynical look. She was too tired to address the incorrectness of his statement.

Marcus feeling playful and evidently bold, reached across the table and took three or four spoonfuls of young August’s mashed potatoes and quickly shoved them into his mouth. He put it in his mouth real fast.

Nicholas watched nervously as the scene unfolded, anticipating trouble from his Daddy. Nicholas expected the tension between his brothers to escalate. He could see that Willie Jr. was becoming perturbed with the noise level and the incessant chatter.

Normally, all would sit silently watching television until Willie had left the table, then the talking would begin. Sometimes after Willie left the table, when Jackie wasn't in the kitchen, and the door between the den and kitchen was closed, all hell would break loose at the table. Nothing as elaborate as a food fight occurred, but the door to the den where the television was located provided enough of a buffer so as not to disturb Willie Jr. and his television mantra.

Marcus quickly reached across the table taking more of August's mashed potatoes. He shoved them in his mouth real fast. His mouth was full of unswallowed potatoes. Mane reached across the table, this time grabbing Marcus's glass of Kool-Aid. He momentarily interrupted Willie's view of the television.

"Marcus, stop eating that boy's mashed potatoes," Nicholas said strongly but not so loud as to disturb his Daddy.

August turned abruptly. "You bedda' stop eating my food," August said fierceness of a rodent, "What you think you doing, boy?"

"I'm not eating yo' food," Marcus mumbled, opening his mouth revealing the mashed potatoes. "See, I'm jus' holdin' 'em here for you," he mumbled closing his mouth. Marcus went for the potatoes again.

"Mama, tell Marcus to leave my food alone!" August exclaimed wrapping his arms around his plate.

By now Willie was thoroughly annoyed by the two. He jumped up knocking his chair over. In an extremely loud voice, Willie Jr. yelled, "Didn't he tell you to stop eating his freakin' mashed potatoes! Now shut the f#@k up and eat your f#@kin' food so you can get your little a##es outta here!"

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Marcus sprayed his potatoes across the table, with Mane playing the catcher's mitt for them.

With the quickness and veracity of a mountain lion, Willie smacked Marcus across his mouth, smashing the remnants of the potatoes across his face, and knocking him out of his chair. Everyone froze. Jackie rushed over to Marcus with wet soapy hands. She looked pathetically at Willie. Picking his chair off the floor, Willie sat down as if nothing had happened. She helped Marcus up then started to clean away the potatoes.

Under his breath Mane muttered, "I know you washing the dishes now." And his brothers heard him clearly.

The children sat tacitly until the uncomfortable silence was broken when Willie said gruffly, "Did you boys clean out the chinchilla pen like I told you to?"

"Yes sir, we did." The boys piped up anxiously, ready to let him know that they had. They didn't want any more of his wrath and they wanted him to know it. He had their rapt attention.

The children were always relegated to a place of shock and dismay when Willie's behavior became contrary. The children, all but Mane, looked at each other in silent fear. *If this behavior is normal, Nicholas thought, I don't think I want to be.*

Jackie wiped her hands on a dish towel walking over to Willie.

“Willie,” she said, believing Willie was reacting only to the stress in his life, at his work. She thought that during times like these he just needed to be loved. “Willie, are we really gonna make some money from those chinchillas?”

The thought of making money with the chinchillas eased Willie’s pain, if only temporarily. The chinchillas were his new plan for hope. All that was needed for success was time and chinchilla babies.

“As soon as the new babies grow up, I’ll sell them and make a killing.”

Jackie put her arms lovingly around Willie. She stooped down giving him a sympathetic tender hug. He seemed disinterested but she couldn’t see his face. She knew he acted as if he didn’t care, but she loved him and he needed a hug.

Mane’s mind was focused on his nocturnal activities. I’ve got to get out of here, he thought, but compassion for his brothers swept over him. This was crazy. What a weak man. He resorts to scaring little kids, Mane thought. He tried to understand where Willie Jr. could possibly be coming from with his contrary nature. He wondered whether he would grow to be this way when he became a dad. Never! I guess, Mane conjectured, he thinks he’s at war with his family.

To Mane, Willie Jr. had become Wardaddy.

CHAPTER

11

Late afternoon. Tall pines gently swayed in the restlessness of a hot summer breeze. The children were in the carport, playing as Willie Jr. pulled in. Nicholas thought this to be somewhat peculiar unless his Daddy had some emergency. There was a dirt roadway, Montgomery Street, to the right of the house, which lead around to the back of the house. Montgomery Street had never been completed into a usable thoroughfare for vehicular traffic, except for Willie Jr.'s entrance to the back yard and foot traffic through a community path. When he came home, Willie parked in the back of the house under a small cluster of short-needle pine trees. Willie almost never pulled into the carport located in the front of the house, unless he was driving the Chevrolet station wagon. Jackie drove the wagon most of the time. Willie would drive the Chevrolet, or on Saturday trips to Kerr Lake.

Kerr Lake was a place of peace for Willie. Wooden shelters with barbeque pits stood beyond the granite blocks guarding the entrance. Children played on swings and in sand pits, while adults relaxed in the shade. It was a place for fishing, boating and general relaxation. It was a sanctuary.

Willie always parked in the back yard with the truck. The truck was used primarily for work. To get near the truck meant you would get dirty. There was probably more dirt inside the truck than on the ground surrounding it. It had long ago become too much work to keep the truck clean. The dirt from Willie's work pants settled into the cushions of the cab seats. The back of the truck was filled with dirt, sand, old hardened cement, and an assortment of tools. He had one special tool bag in which he carried the tools of a master mason. Willie Jr. was a master mason. He was one of the best in the state, if not the best.

When Nicholas saw his father go past the turn to the rear of the house, he immediately surmised that something was wrong. He had been keeping a watchful eye on his father lately. Since his sister Olivia had gone off to school, his mother had delegated some of the responsibility for taking care of the two younger children to him in her absence. He had taken it seriously, unlike his older brother Mane.

"Look out!" Nicholas yelled, "Here comes Wardaddy!"

The truck scattered the children like bowling pins. Willie stopped just short of their playing area. It was a good that he had because August, his youngest, was unaware of the truck. His focused play continued until

the sound of the screeching tires broke his concentration. He looked up to see the truck's bumper inches from his face. Nicholas snatched him up by his collar.

Willie Jr. got out of the truck, wiping his brow in his dog-tired after work manner. He dropped his keys as he stepped out. "Damn," he said picking them up.

The children ran over to the Willie. Willie was exhausted today. The noise and chatter from the children wouldn't sit well with him now. He tended to stay clear of them at least until well after his first beer or until he had relaxed, whichever came first. Marcus reached for the canvas tool bag.

"Don't touch them tools," Willie Jr. barked loudly with much agitation, "they stay in the truck."

Willie picked up a smaller bag carrying the bag around back to the tool shed. A trowel, a spatula-type tool, fell out.

"What about this, Daddy?" Marcus said with genuine curiosity,

"I told you it stays in the truck!" Willie said angrily, "Don't you listen boy?!"

Willie Jr. was tired. But part of his anger was generated by his frustration with his sons' disinterest in his trade. It was honest work for an honest dollar, but it was painstakingly difficult work. In the summer heat, the work could drain the heart and soul out of a man. Whenever Willie picked up his tools, he was reminded of their indifference. Today his anxiety was so high concerning his financial state, that he missed his opportunity to build on his Marcus's interest. With diminished enthusiasm, Marcus picked it up and headed for the truck.

“Hey, boy,” Willie said in a demeaning tone, “where you goin’ with that? Damn it! Bring it here, and I mean now!”

“But I- I thought you said-” Marcus said fearfully, handing his father the trowel.

“Be quiet, Marcus!” Nicholas said frenzied, his fear mounting. “Come here boy!” he continued more adamantly, waving him over with short choppy circular hand movements. “Marcus will you come here,” Nicholas calmly asked. “Come here!”

Marcus moved reluctantly towards him dragging his feet in the grass, his bean shooter hanging lazily out of his worn jeans. He knew he hadn’t done anything wrong.

“Get over here,” Nicholas lovingly demanded. Nicholas put Marcus by his side and placed his arm around him. “Just stand here beside me for a minute. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Nicholas eyed Willie as he lumbered with a low affect around to the back of the house. Marcus just looked up at Nicholas in anticipation. The other children stood around absentmindedly for the few moments it took Willie Jr. to leave the front yard.

“Go on,” said Rusty popping his Bazooka bubblegum as he nodded to Nicholas.

Responding to Rusty’s nudging,, Nicholas followed Willie down the gentle slope to the back yard. The other children trailed distantly.

“Daddy,” said Nicholas, “Rusty and A.J. are gonna camp out with us in the back yard tonight! Is that okay?”

The rest of the children stopped at the corner of the house hanging back, keeping their distance, waiting for an answer. All anticipating approval from Willie.

“Uh-huh,” Willie Jr. said responding automatically not realizing that Nicholas was standing there or what he was asking.

“That’s alright ain’t it?”

Willie walked unresponsively to his tool shed with the tool bag in hand. He unlocked the door and walked inside.

The children looked to Nicholas with open arms as if to say, ‘Well, what did he say?’ Nicholas just held up one finger to suggest to them to wait.

Willie came out of the shed walking in a bee line to the water hose. Nicholas tagged along. Turning on the water nonchalantly, Willie was still unaware of Nicholas. If Nicholas had said something loudly or softly, it would have frightened the hell out of Willie. He started to wash off his dirt-stricken boots.

Nicholas cocked his head to the right, smiling a big can’t-say-no-to-this smile.

“How about it, Dad? Please?”

Willie almost urinated in his pants. “Boy! Don’t you ever sneak up behind me!”

“Yes sir.”

“Go on,” Willie exclaimed, “just go on.”

Nicholas disguised his enthusiasm, believing his father had agreed with their plans. He walked solemnly over to the other children.

“Well, what’d he say?” A.J. said. “What’d he say?”

“He said, ah, he said, ah... we could!”

Nicholas lead the children in a chorus of hoops and hollers.

“All right!” they yelled.

“Okay,” remarked Rusty in a subdued, cool tone.

“This gonna be fun, man,” A.J. piped.

“Alright!”

“We can play cowboys and Indians,” Marcus said, “Just like da wild, wild west!”

“Yeah, man,” Nicholas agreed, “I’m gonna be an Indian ‘cause an Indian can walk like a ghost. He’s spiritual.”

“Look man,” Rusty argued as he got in Nicholas’ face, “don’t nobody wanna play no little boy games.”

“Yeah man,” said A.J. in agreement. “Nobody wanna play ‘dose little boy games.”

Nicholas and Marcus always had to stick up for what they wanted to do or play because Rusty and A.J. hung out together and always seemed to be on the same wavelength. If Rusty was the quarterback and A.J. was the receiver on a pass play during a game of football, A.J. would know just where to go to get the ball. And Rusty always knew where to throw it. Nicholas shot Marcus the knowing look that said ‘if you want to do this, we must stick up for what we want.’

“Let’s go check out that electric fence,” Rusty said with increased vigor. “Dat would be fresh!”

“Let’s go check out Mr. Perry’s wife,” A.J. espoused with sexual overtones, shaking his butt as he paraded in front of them.

“Ummm,” they said in unison. That was an enticing proposition. Mrs. Perry was a sexy bombshell. She knew it and so did everyone else in the neighborhood. She flaunted her sexuality and good looks. And the boys knew all too well how she did. If any other female

in the community compared to Jackie in the looks department, it was Mrs. Perry.

“It’s too late for that,” Nicholas said.

Willie dug his pinky finger as far into his left ear as possible. He shook his entire hand vigorously as he attempted to scratch the itch in his ear. Sometimes, it seemed as if a bug had crawled up his ear canal. He would scratch and dig and stick his smallest finger as far into his ear canal as possible. A stranger would have thought that he was a strange fellow, but this was Willie’s tick, his idiosyncrasy that occurred every now and again. It was a behavioral tick, a signal of potential trouble.

He washed the mortar off his boots. Using a trowel, he picked mortar out of the welt of his boots, and then wiped the trowel off on a brick.

Just then, Willie heard, “Everybody knows your wife gets around, Willie! You’re not man enough for her!”

With the quickness of angels, Willie became instantly infuriated. His head snapped to attention heated with the vengeance of demons. He looked in the direction of the boys, his eyes as one possessed.

“Damn those kids!”

He walked menacingly toward the children. The trowel gripped fiercely in his aching hand, struck a threatening pose.

The children sat on the ground oblivious to Willie. They continued to try to figure out what they were going to do.

Willie walked up to the unsuspecting children and threw the trowel down. It stuck painfully into the ground by A.J.'s hand. The children became instantly silent.

"Who said that? Who said that?"

The children were confused. Searching through their fear, trying to remember the last words any of them had spoken. But the words escaped them. They looked at each other innocently. A.J., whose hand was nearest to the trowel, cautiously inched his hand away. He looked at Willie with fear.

Rusty's eyes stared at Willie with unfettered courage. Rusty wasn't one to mince any words. His body coiled tightly. His hands, small in comparison to Willie's, made tight little fists. He understood this was a time to choose silence and inaction, in spite of his indignation.

"Did you say 'dat?'" Willie asked, staring hard at A.J..

A.J. was too scared to answer. He only shook his head no.

"I heard y'all over here talkin' about Jackie." Willie turned to Nicholas. "Boy, why you let 'dem talk about your Mama like 'dat?'"

"But Daddy, we didn't say nothin'. Honest ta' truth."

"Don't lie to me, boy. I heard what one of them boys said."

"But Daddy..."

"I'm not gonna have you hoodlums talkin' about my wife like that. Y'all gonna get hurt. Gonna get hurt real bad if you keep on talkin' that crap. Start some mess and I'm gonna rip a hole in your ass."

Enraged, Willie stormed up the back porch steps and into the house, slamming the door behind him.

“Did somebody say somethin’?” Marcus asked. “Who said somethin’?”

Rusty stood, making a gesture to leave. “Man, I didn’t say nothin’,” his nervousness apparant in his voice. “I don’t know what he’s talkin’ about.”

“Me neither,” said A.J., his lips softly quivering.

Nicholas was trying to make heads or tails of the situation. “Well I didn’t hear nobody say nothin’ wrong.” How could his dad be wrong? Someone must have said something. “Okay, what’d somebody say?”

It’s not going to end right here and now. It will continue inside well after the other children have departed to the peace of their houses, Marcus thought fearfully. Lately he had been spanked very hard indeed. Beaten up. For nothing that he did wrong. Nothing. But he was just a kid, what did he know, who could he tell, who would listen?

“We weren’t even talkin’ about Mama,” Marcus said now near tears. “What was Daddy talkin’ about?”

In an effort to relieve the tension that hung gelatinous in the air, Nicholas said, “Nobody said nothin’ about my Mama,” turning to Rusty, “but yo’ Mama...” Nicholas put his hand on his chin, turning his head. Facing away from Rusty, he mumbled “yo’ Mama... is another matter.”

Rusty pushed Nicholas, grabbing his arm. Each one pushed and grabbed each other until they all were on the ground laughing. They all laughed in their uneasiness.

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CHAPTER

12

Willie walked into the house in a mad rage, digging feverishly in his ear. Pressing, wiggling his pinky finger deeply into the reddening cavity of his ear. By the time he walked to the bathroom and stepped across its threshold, his anger had subsided. He began the process of questioning his actions. He stared into the mirror at his confused reflection.

What had just happened? Had he reacted appropriately? He contemplated his actions not knowing if what he heard was real or perhaps one of the children had said something else. What else? He didn't want to think about it.

He was completely spent. Work had been unusually difficult today. His back ached from bending over handling the bricks with his calloused hands, hands toughened by the bricks. He ached with their discomfort. But he was home now. Time to relax. He wanted rest. He felt that only he knew how fast 5:30 in

the morning came. That was the time he had to leave for work. He would have to get up at 4:30 to make it out of the door on time.

He rinsed his leathery face in the blue sink with cupped hands. The sink, as everything in the bathroom, was a shade darker than Carolina blue. As he came up from the sink, moving his hands from his face, the reflection that he saw was that of Willie Sr. It startled him, unnerving his very confidence. He grabbed a towel, shaking his head in disbelief.

Maybe it's my conscience, he thought. It could be an anxiety attack. After composing himself, he pulled up the dark brown leather strap which hung next to the toilet. It was used to sharpen his straight-edged razor. He got the strap and razor from Mabel a number of Christmases ago.

Willie had always wanted one like his father had. But Willie Sr. had made no attempt to give one to Willie Jr. Willie Jr. had discovered from his Aunt June that one of the few family traditions had been the handing down of the straight-edged razor and the leather strap from generation to generation.

It was said that they had belonged to the slave owner who owned his great-great grandfather. It was also rumored that both items, the razor and the strap, had been replaced because they had worn out. He believed that only the strap had been replaced. It didn't really matter to him because Willie Sr. was still in possession of the items. So what did it matter? Willie thought.

And what if anything had one of the children said? Willie's thoughts were lost in the movement of the razor as he sharpened it. The straight-edged razor, back and forth, back and forth. His thoughts drifted further

and further away from the boys. He was lost in the slicing movement of the razor.

He could see his father moving the blade across the leathery surface. A much younger Willie stood watching his father sharpening the straight razor. Always wondering how something hard could be sharpened by something notably softer. He imagined the answer to be similar to that of the relationship between a woman to a man; his mother and father. The softer object sharpening, shaping the harder one. Or was it that the softer object took minuscule parts from the harder object, making it less than it was? Consequently, the softer object instilled the harder object with the ability to be better.

Willie slowly mixed the shaving soap in a mug in pensive, circular strokes. He began to shave, and nicked his face with an “Ouch!” It was a shallow groove, but viscous blood trickled out. He rubbed the cold blade across his rough face ever so cautiously, but he nicked himself again. This time the nick was more akin to a deep gorge at the bottom of his cheekbones. Angry warm blood raced through his steeled fingers. He didn’t say a word. He just started to shave again. Changing the angle of razor as it addressed his face, Willie cut himself slowly and deliberately. Against his skin, the razor labored, creating a valley of blood. Blood dripped from his face, down his chiseled chin. Blood splattered in the sink mixing with the running water and water droplets which danced in the blue basin. Blood ran down his elbows collecting in small pools on the floor. And again, slowly, deliberately, he placed the razor on the other side of his face. Time and

time again, the razor split his perfect princely face. The escaping blood poured into the awaiting sink.

Just then the back door slammed loudly. It broke Willie from his hallucination. Greatly disturbed, he wiped his face in search of the blood, the cuts, frantically checking the sink, his washcloth, and his face again. Willie's face was normal and shaved, no cuts or blood to be seen. Willie was a confused and frightened man.

Willie dashed into his bedroom, aghast. He sat on the edge of the bed as he composed himself. He got the clothes that he had laid out to take into of the shower. He wanted to rush in and tell Jackie what had happened, but he was afraid. He thought it best to wait, at least until he had given it more thought. At least until after his shower. Well, at the latest, until after dinner or sometime when the children were not around to hear.

Unbeknownst to Willie, by the time he had gotten his clothes and returned to the bathroom, he had forgotten about what, if anything, the children had said out in the yard or what had happened in the bathroom. It wasn't just that he had forgotten about it; for Willie it had never existed. If one of the children had asked him about someone talking badly about Jackie, Willie would not have known what the child was talking about.

They had gone. The events had been placed in the darkest recesses of his mind; a dark place that should not have existed, and would not have existed, but for a chemical imbalance in his brain. Apparently, up until ten years ago it hadn't existed. But slowly, the vulnerable section of his brain allowed a disease to

fester. It would allow more trouble than Willie knew could exist for him in his once perfect little world. Perfected by a malicious chemical imbalance, his brain, on that very day, had made a deadly transition out of normalcy.

He needed help, but he didn't know it. By the time Willie got out of the shower, he had forgotten about the shaving episode in its entirety. His brain had simply dismissed the hallucination. It was as if his life were a television. Once his brain, acting as the videotape machine, had stopped playing that particular movie, it no longer showed on the television. It therefore no longer existed. And the television, Willie Jr., no longer had any knowledge of the activity. The VCR just waited for the next movie to be popped in.

Willie went into his bedroom searching for a sock. He had one sock on his foot and was looking for the other. He heard the telephone ring. Maybe Jackie knows where the other sock is, Willie thought.

Willie walked out of his bedroom, down the hallway past the telephone, expecting someone to answer it from another extension. It rang again. He turned back in an unsettled rush and picked up the telephone.

"Hello," Willie said waiting for a response. He realized the only sound he heard was the dial tone. "Hello... huh!" He hung up the telephone a little miffed.

The telephone hadn't rang at all. Willie had imagined it. What had happened in the back yard and in the bathroom had faded out of his memory, and soon this would as well.

Jackie was cooking diligently at the stove when Willie walked into the room with one sock in his hand. She lifted the lids from the pots, stirred one food item, then moved on to the next. Just after she opened then closed the oven door, he hugged her from behind.

“Have you seen my other sock baby?” Willie was distraught from not having found his other sock. “I’ve been lookin’ all over-”

“You better get that stinking sock outta here!”

She pushed him away with earnest. He was interrupting the cooking process.

“You should put safety pins in them so you can keep track of them.”

Jackie had learned long ago with the children, that the only way to keep track of all the socks in her family was to pin them together, marking them with the initial of each child. Willie was sometimes slow to listen to Jackie’s ideas, no matter how ingenious and inventive they might have been. So, when Willie failed to follow one of her unique time-saving, money-saving, or frustration-saving ideas, she was impatient, as well as perturbed with her grown child.

“I ain’t seen yo’ socks.”

Willie’s demeanor changed because of her apparent arrogant nature. “Well, how ‘bout some breasts then?” Willie asserted angrily. She had pissed him off.

He wanted to exert his power over her and show her who was the boss. He loathed it when she over-stepped her bounds as his wife, treating him like one of the children. Here it was again, she was talking down to him. Like she had spewed him out of her womb.

I wish she had, he thought, with anger in his spirit, all one hundred and ninety-eight pounds. She would

have really liked that, he thought caustically. Maybe I would have had on socks- Hey! And guess what? They would have been pinned together. And the pins would have come undone when I was delivered.

Within himself, Willie grinned broadly as he heard his devious thoughts. His leathery, bronze face showed the insidious pleasure that he savored religiously in his mind. Jackie hadn't glanced his way, so she hadn't noticed his contrary spirit. She hadn't noticed a lot lately.

Willie forced his arms under her shoulders, grabbing her breasts firmly with both hands. Jackie noted that there was little love in his hands now. Unlike before, before the children, before Nicholas. There had been plethora love and joy. Such satisfying tenderness in his pleasing touch. Sweet emotion inundated his thoughts flowing from his passionate heart to his soft tender sugar lips.

She often thought of the way they used to make love, the things which she would do and which she had planned to do during their exuberant lovemaking. It was during those blissful "great sex" times she would have the best ideas about doing something different to the house. She recalled that her very best ideas came in the after glow of their love-making, as she lay in the stillness of his aura, of his love.

Now she couldn't remember the last time they had made love like they used to, or even had sex, for that matter. Tuesday, three weeks ago. Or was it a two weeks from last Thursday? Whenever it was, it wasn't memorable. The thought filled her breast with bitter ire.

Nowadays, while Willie was taking care of his business on top of her, she would drift off into the busied world of child-rearing and free-willed thinking.

At this moment, all the love had been replaced.

Jackie brushed his hands away. "Get outta here!"

She was focused on the food, thinking about what to wear to work and which child's turn it was to do what job tonight. There were a million chores that had to be done. Unlike before she started working, she had all the time in the world. Actually, she did not have all the time in the world before she started working, but now, it seemed like it. It always seemed there was not enough time to get everything done. And everything never got done.

"Ain't nothin' but drumsticks in this pan, Willie Jr."

"I got your drumstick baby!" He reached down with one hand and squeezed her butt. "Come on Jackie, let's go lay down. It won't take long."

Yeah, I know it won't, Jackie thought as she brushed his hand from her butt. She swung around in an angry tiff. She dared not say what she was thinking nor get too far out of line with Willie; he was Willie Sr.'s son, after all.

"Come on, baby, can't you see I'm tryin' to cook?"

She didn't think he would go for the "headache" routine but she really was trying to get this food cooked so she could go on to something else, her next family responsibility.

She was a woman. She didn't have the luxury that men afforded themselves, to lounge around and watch sports on television. Sitting around doing nothing but drinking beer after beer, as if beer drinking while

watching sports was a national past time in which only men could partake.

Willie grabbed her hand firmly. With an abrupt twist, he brought it up to his lips to kiss. She tried to jerk her hand away. He seemed stronger, more masculine. She wasn't interested in any come on. But her hand stayed steadfast in his, no matter how hard she struggled.

Up until then, she thought that he was just playing around; just playing it a little rougher than she was accustomed. But now she was getting angry. She didn't want any part of this. This wasn't funny. She was being hurt.

"Come on, baby! I said let's go lay down!"

Willie was not being cute or playful. He sometimes would play near this level of activity, but it was only in jest, exerting his more masculine nature when his testosterone levels were high.

She knew when he acted out this nature he was more horny than usual. Knowing this, she would often give in to his advances. When she did, he became less rough, more like a little school boy who was talking with a teacher with whom he was quite enamored. She was cooking now and that was that.

"No, Willie, not now! This isn't funny."

Jackie's emotions were rising. She wrestled with him to no avail, trying to get away, to get free. Tears began to swell in her eyes from the pain of his grip.

"You comin' with me!"

She noticed his face. It somehow was different.

"Stop, Willie, we can do something later."

Gone was the gentle affection in his cheeks. And his eyes, there was something queer about them. She couldn't quite put her finger on it. The pain of his grip

felt as if it were crushing her bones. She began to offer more and more resistance.

His eyes were quite different now. They almost glowed with a wild wide-eyed stare. His eyes were immersed in an unfocused stare that didn't match the focus of his actions.

"B#@*h, stop struggling so much!"

He was very angry now. If it meant hurting her to get his way, then so be it. He really wanted her to capitulate, to act like she was going to cooperate or at least act as if she loved him. If she would give him some much needed attention that always went to the children, the job or anything but him, then he would probably let her go. He was going to get some attention from her now, one way or another.

Willie had Jackie's undivided attention. She elbowed him in the gut.

"Willie Jr., what is wrong with you? Stop it now!"

Enraged, Willie pulled Jackie out of the kitchen and into the narrow hallway. They struggled together down the hallway, groaning and moaning, cursing and scratching; their hearts being torn further apart with each step.

Jackie struggled to get away from Willie Jr., but she couldn't get free though she fought him with all her might.

"Woman, when I want it, I want it! And I want it now!"

"Willie, you gotta control yourself! Just wait!"

She was trying to reason with a man who was beyond reason. Both his manhood and his madness were driving him at this vicious intercourse. Perhaps before this very moment, the strangeness which Jackie had noticed compelled the man. But now, he was being

driven by both hormones and unknown chemicals in his brain. He was fed by Jackie's resistance to his will.

She stopped struggling for a minute because she had grown tired. And she believed that she could reason with him.

"Come on Willie, this isn't funny. Come on now," she said in a calm, soft manner.

She spoke to him like he was a life-weary jumper who needed to be coaxed down from a twenty story building. She saw him as a person trying to find one lonely thread of hope that was the avenue of their escape for which they had been desperately searching.

In this case, it was hopeless. He was not looking for any avenues, much less one of escape or hope. It didn't work.

"I'm serious," she said shouted adamantly, "let me go!"

With the urgency of desperation, Jackie kicked, scratched and bit Willie with all the energy she could muster.

"F#@k you, b#@*h." Willie voiced loudly as he kicked the bedroom door open, sending it crashing against the wall. They had become loud and ugly in their struggle.

Jackie continued to struggle. She held onto the door frame, resisting every step of the way.

He broke her grasp, dragging her into their bedroom. He held her arms tightly now because she was pulling at everything she could lay her hands on. She had scratched his face in her last rally to free herself. His face was a place of pride, so he wrapped his muscular arms tightly around her, squeezing her

130 pound petite frame hard. Her breathing became labored.

“Willie, this is crazy!” she managed to say. They moved backwards into the bedroom, Jackie’s feet dragging the floor.

“Just get your ass in here, b#@*h!” He threw her down hard on the bed. “I’m tired of you playin’ games with me! I know what you been up to!”

“What the hell you talkin’ ‘bout?”

Jackie couldn’t believe her ears. She didn’t know what had gotten into Willie Jr. If she was more of a religious person she would have declared that he had been possessed. Maybe, it was the stress of being African American in a racist American society in the South. Who knew?

She could blame it on anything, but she didn’t appreciate what was happening to her. She couldn’t believe her eyes. It was bizarre and frightening. Where were the children?

“Nigga’, please. What you talking about? What are you doin’?”

Willie Jr. slammed the bedroom door.

August was hiding behind the sofa in the living room, peaking out from a position where he thought he wouldn’t be seen. Tears ran down his small round face, past the tear trails previously left when this life-changing event started in the kitchen. He came out of hiding and went for his brothers. They would know what to do.

Jackie was wide-eyed and scared as hell. She had never been in a situation where she had to be totally submissive when it was not her desire, and not by choice. She tried time and time again to get off the bed.

Tiring of pushing her back down on the bed, Willie backslapped Jackie. She fell down hard. As she sat up, he threw her onto the bed again. She tasted the unwelcome warmth on her tongue. Blood trickled from the corner of her mouth. Her pain became focused.

As he unbuckled his pants, he stopped as he heard the voice of Jimmy Bugg.

“Hey Willie, man. You ain’t got your b#@*h in check?”

Willie Jr. snickered, “Yeah, you’re right. Every once in a while, a man’s gotta put his b#@*h in check!”

Jackie, sat still for the moment of frightening silence watching her husband speak strangely, as if he were speaking to someone else in the room. This frightened her more than her struggles with him. She knew she had to get away from him. Her life was possibly in danger. What had she witnessed in that split second?

“Willie! What’s gotten into you?” she screamed fearfully.

He ripped her top by the shoulders as he tried to pin her to the bed. Jackie fought back. Willie drew back to hit her.

“Shut the f#@k up b#@*h. And hold still!”

Jackie cried nervously. “Willie!” she declared between sobs “I’m gonna have you up for this.”

That was the last thing you could hear Jackie say clearly, because Willie placed his rough hand over her mouth, pressing her head deeply into the bed. It kept her screams from echoing out into the neighborhood. The last thing he needed was someone from the outside telling him how to live his life and manage his family. This was his domain.

The sounds of their struggle grew louder and louder from the bedroom as Mane, Nicholas, Marcus, and August charged to the door. With the consternation of youthful angels confronted by a powerful demon, they made a mad stop at the door with all intentions to enter. Being brave of heart and full of chivalry, they intended to rush into the room with a violent blast of youthful masculinity and overwhelm the situation, overwhelm their crazy father, the adversary. But instead, they made a maddening stop at the door to listen, preparing for the precise moment to attack.

Mane's hand was about to grab the knob and turn it, when Nicholas, the younger of the two, grabbed him by the wrist. Nicholas' eyes said to wait, to think about it. To think about their actions; after all, they were only children and the people on the other side of the door were adults, their parents.

"What you doing?" Mane whispered urgently.

"You bedda think 'bout what you 'bout to do," Nicholas fervently suggested with raised eyebrows and a nodding, cocked head. "We all gonna have to pay dearly for 'dis action. Think about it." Nicholas loved his mom, but he imagined the times he and his younger brothers would be left alone with the man behind the door. His fear was for the youngest, August, who could not escape the punishment of his father. August, whose waves of agonizing tears had swept them all to action.

Mane had to play the role of the brave big brother, but inside, he was scared as hell. He knew any attempt to interrupt his father or control the situation would be met with an overpowering dominate force. This force was believed to have the potential to be deadly. In this case for the interrupters, namely Mane and Nicholas, because they would be considered the leaders of this

military action. And there would be hell to pay for any incursion into his fathers domain. His house was one thing; he shared that with the rest of them. But his bedroom, the present danger zone, was his and Jackie's alone. The point had been adamantly reinforced over time.

Mane couldn't just stand there and listen to his mother getting beat by his father. He couldn't let his brothers see their big brother as a weak person, a weak man. A weak man like his father. The image he had been portraying to his brothers was that of a tough guy, a guy who wouldn't put up with any bull. This was pure, unadulterated bullsh#. After all, that was why he wasn't playing any outdoor games with them any more. He was too grown. He was a man.

What would a real man do in this situation? How was he to handle this challenge? He was grown enough to know what to do in this circumstance, but he wasn't big and strong enough to overpower his father. Even with the help of the other boys, it would not be enough absolute power to take the man down. Their combined physical strength was not sufficient. It would only prove to make a bad situation worse for all of them if they rushed into the room. He imagined that his dad would throw and punch, he and his brothers around the room like the children they were. Punching them, kicking them like ten pound bags of flour. It would hurt. It would hurt real bad. It would hurt for days.

"I don't think it's a good idea for all of us to go inside," Mane said nervously.

"We could get killed in there," Nicholas said, anger and hopelessness rolling off his tongue.

"But we gotta do somethin'," August pleaded, "Mama's in there! Please Mane please!" August's

pleading eyes turned to Nicholas who hunched his shoulders.

“Shhh. Be quiet. Things have quieted down in there.” Marcus said.

Mane tried to think of the best thing to do. He did not want to get his younger brothers hurt, but he knew that he couldn't do anything by himself. If he did, he would probably end up being sent to the hospital.

August and Marcus had their ears pressed against the door. Small tears rolled down August's tender face. Tears swelled up the emotion-weary eyes of Marcus. Mane looked down at the two smaller boys.

“This is a tough one.” Mane said reluctantly. “I think you may be right on this one,” he agreed with Nicholas. “Hey, guys, back away from the door. Let's back up over here and re-group.”

“What!” August exclaimed. “You're not going in to help Mama?” he asked incredulously.

He looked up at Mane with mature innocence. His large, questioning eyes dripped tears on the hard wood floor. He looked at Nicholas who shook his head. He spun to face Marcus who only looked down at his legs, which were shaking from fear and anxiety.

“C'mon August, c'mon y'all.” Mane said with affected hesitation, as he attempted to corral them into moving away from the door.

“I'm not scared! I'm going in!” August said defiantly.

“No, you're not,” Mane objected, disgusted with himself.

Mane grabbed him by the seat of his pants, dragging him hurriedly from the door. Nicholas placed his hand over August's mouth to muffle his opposition to Mane's refusal to go to his mother's rescue.

They hadn't much of an opportunity to move far from the door before they heard the heavy stomping of feet heading in their direction. The children scattered. Jackie, disheveled, flung the bedroom door open wide. The door banged against the wall, swinging back violently and hitting Jackie before she cleared the doorway.

"Willie! I'm gonna have you up for this!" she screamed as she stormed out of the bedroom. Jackie loudly slammed the door behind her.

"I'm gonna kill that Wardaddy!" Mane whispered under his breath.

With bridled hostility, the other boys' thoughts mirrored Mane's words. The thoughts emanated from the end of the narrow wooden hallway, where the boys were huddled behind the security of the living room sofa.

Do Not Copy

CHAPTER

13

Cassandra, a thin, nerdy-looking girl wearing heavy horn-rimmed glasses, yawned wide enough to suck in fifty gnats. Robin and Keisha, her slightly overweight girlfriends with their 4'10" frames, walked home from school diligently looking for boys. They gossiped as usual about the things that had happened at school that day. What trashy clothes some girl was wearing, which weave should have been taken out, a girl who had put too much bleach in her hair, and the like. None of the girls had any ambition beyond finding a boyfriend who could later become a husband and who could get a decent job making \$17,000 a year in this small Southern town. It was questionable whether they would get good jobs based on the current grades they had been receiving.

Visibly behind them were Rusty, A.J., Earl, Nicholas and Marcus. They had made a turn a block ago to shortcut to Mrs. Perry's house. And when the break in their conversation occurred, they looked up to

see the girls up ahead. They believed the girls wouldn't see them if they were quiet and if they slowed their hurried pace. But it was too late. The "boy-hungry" girls smelled the "hormone-driven" boys as soon as the boys hit the steaming hot asphalt. The street had no sidewalks, only uneven yard borders marked by the two feet wide strip of dirt and gravel running along side the black hardtop.

The boys were being watched even as they spoke.

"Slow down, slow down!" Cassandra said, anxiously powdering her nose. She looked into the small mirror of the compact to see the boys, who were about three blocks away.

"Cassandra," questioned Keisha. "I thought you said you go with Rusty."

"Shut up, Keisha, I do. Jus' slow down!"

"So why ain't he up here with you?" Robin uttered with feigned uncertainty.

"He's coming, just slow down." Cassandra chirped, putting away her compact.

Rusty, Nicholas, A.J., Earl and Marcus walked oh so slowly behind the girls. They walked at a baby snail's pace; as slow as humanly possible without stopping. Rusty made sure they moved slowly.

"Hey Rusty, ain't that yo' girl Cassandra up there?" A.J. said sarcastically.

Rusty had no response. He just shook his head, turning to A.J. with disgust in his voice.

"How many times do I have to tell y'all no? No how! No way! Now, y'all know bedda' doin' dat," Rusty said emphatically.

"She's looking good too!" Earl chipped in, barely containing his laughter. "Man, oh man, I wish I had some of that!" Earl was a boy Rusty's age. And he was

considered to be just as tough. He used to play with the Jones children more often until Willie started acting "different".

Earl always got a kick out of teasing Rusty. He knew Rusty was tough. He could take a good joshing.

Rusty was quick to respond, "Not!" Rusty knew that he had to change the subject or he wouldn't hear the end of it. "Hey y'all, we gotta hurry up. We 'bout to miss Mrs. Perry."

"But what about yo' girl?" A.J. asked facetiously.

"Who cares!" Rusty said wildly. "It's almost three thirty."

"Last one there is a farthead!" Nicholas said,

Knocking one of Rusty's books out of his arms, Nicholas took off running. All the boys started to run frantically in the direction of the girls. Rusty knew that if he lead the pack, it would seem to the girls that the other boys were chasing him and the girls wouldn't become wise to what they were about to do. Rusty was a really fast runner, and he had to catch and pass the other boys. He did it easily.

"Don't look now, but here comes Rusty." Robin said sounding an alarm. She was, after all, the lookout. She didn't miss anything. In fact, she glanced at her watch and knew the boys weren't running up to meet them. She instinctively knew they had a rendezvous somewhere else.

"I knew he would come soon enough." Cassandra said, hurrying out her small compact again.

"Yeah, right," Keisha said sarcastically. She couldn't see what Cassandra saw in Rusty. After all, who wanted some boy whose skin was almost as red as his hair?

The boys caught and passed the girls, yelling salutations as they flew past.

Keisha's puzzled glance ricocheted off Cassandra onto Robin. Cassandra turned away sheepishly. What was going on?

The boys arrived at their destination; the bushes on the edge of an underdeveloped piece of property, which was adjacent to the front entrance of Mrs. Perry's home. Marcus was the last one to duck down behind the bushes.

Nicholas proclaimed to Marcus, "Farthead! You're a farthead!"

"You the only farthead around here," Marcus said angrily, "Ain't nobody playing your stupid game anyway."

"Shhh!!" Earl interrupted.

A.J. said, "Quiet guys, here she comes!"

Mrs. Perry's front door opened slowly, a preamble to the upcoming review. Rusty, Earl, A.J., Nicholas, and Marcus held their breath in heated anticipation.

"Man, I can smell her perfume from here!" Rusty said anxiously. "It's intoxicating!"

"Here we go!" Earl said.

A.J. and Nicholas drooled at their cheeks. "Yeah!" They spoke a little too loudly.

"Shut up!" Rusty said angrily. "Y'all little boys gonna ruin everythin'." Rusty was a foot taller than the rest of them.

Mrs. Perry walked out of her house. To the boys, she walked in slow motion. She wore an open bathrobe which revealed, as she moved towards the mailbox, her sexy Victoria's Secret lingerie. Her satiny lingerie clung desperately to what little flesh wasn't exposed.

She walked as if on a high fashion runway. She held her head held high and proud, her chest fully at attention, headlights glowing, beams on high. And it was all in slow motion!

The boys eyes widened. Their mouths opened in awe. A provocative breeze blew out of nowhere. It swirled her bathrobe in perfect baiting positions, showing her soft, fleshy, inner thighs.

“Yummy,” A.J. whispered.

“Pretty snazzy,” Marcus said, in lustful admiration.

Marcus moved around to get a better look. The other boys had the best view, and it kept getting better and better. Their positions kept him from getting the best view. They could smell her fragrance.

Their sole desire was for her to invite them into her house for some snacks. Some snacks! Right! That’s what they admired the most about her, she had really nice snacks.

Mrs. Perry walked seductively to her mailbox. She walked as if she knew the boys were watching, which she did.

“Now she looks good!” Rusty said lustfully.

“This is better than TV.” Earl said.

A.J., Nicholas, and Marcus stared in amazement. “Mmmmmm!” they said quietly, with electrified body movements.

“What a show!” Rusty exclaimed.

The boys gave each other quiet high-fives as Marcus finally got a good look.

“Yummy for my tummy,” Marcus said, in hushed excitement.

“It ain’t for your tummy, man,” Nicholas said, correcting him.

“Pretty snazzy,” A.J. said in hushed excitement.

Cassandra, Robin, and Keisha were quietly watching. They were standing in the street. If a big rig truck had driven down the street, it would have killed the three of them. They never would have known what hit them. They stood, there scrutinizing the entire scene as it played out right before their eyes. These little boys, acting out their petty little sexual fantasies. Keisha was flabbergasted. Cassandra was bitterly jealous, in the extreme. Robin had seen it all before. She was tickled at Keisha's and Cassandra's reaction; she ushered them out of the street.

"There goes your man!" Robin said.

"Yeah, I know," she sighed. Cassandra was outdone, and embarrassed. But she wasn't going to let some middle-aged, old goat get her man, even if he didn't know how to act. He just didn't know any better.

Mrs. Perry gingerly sauntered back towards her house, wearing the pleasure of her stroked ego on her high cheeks. Her dimples were now as deep as the grand canyon.

Cassandra announced her presence.

"Hi, Mrs. Perry."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Perry, almost collapsing in surprise. She directed her attention to the juvenile female voice. It was Cassandra! Cassandra Wilson!

"Hi, Cassandra." What does she want? Mrs. Perry thought.

The boys immediately took special notice of Cassandra, to say the least. All heads rushed in unison with a mighty wind towards she and her friends. Before Mrs. Perry turned to face Cassandra, the boys motioned to Cassandra to go away. With invisible whispers, their fingers pressed fast against their lips, begging quiet

from Cassandra's bosom. They fiercely objected to her unwelcome and hostile interference.

They vigorously shook their heads, no, no, no, in ever-widening waves. All in a split second, the boys looked at one another with the knowing look of one's own demise. They were sunk. They were dead in the water with the sharks circling.

No, Cassandra, no! was all they could think as they swung their attention to Mrs. Perry then back to Cassandra. They again pressed small index fingers to their full lips. Only moments earlier, they were dumbfounded with shock; and earlier yet, were filled with callow lust. But now, these youthful faces were pushing a long, flat, nearly silent shaft of air between their teeth.

"Cassandra, shhh!"

The boys whispered, trying extremely hard not to be vocal. "Cassandra", came out in a super quiet melody, but the "Shhh!" was louder and noticeable by any soul walking by; but it was a beautiful melody.

Out of the corner of Mrs. Perry's eyes, she could see the boys who stood in petrified horror of their predicament. She resented Cassandra for having put the boys in this entanglement.

The boys were paralyzed. Their feet were glued to the ground, their eyes were glued to Cassandra's thick, salivating lips. Her lips were pursed to form her next words. Her lips slowly opened. In slow motion, Cassandra's tongue wetted her lips, hopeful delight giggled up her throat, wandering loosely into her mouth, composing a devious smile on her face. The boys zoomed in and focused tightly on her lips, her big, fat traitorous lips.

As an eternity rolled past, they listened to the “thump”, “thump”, “thump” of their racing heartbeats, ringing thunderously in their ears. They would not be able to recognize the sound of their heartbeats because it played under the high-pitched, snickering sounds they heard clearly. They knew what or who was making those sounds, namely Keisha and Robin. This was one of those times people talked about, when you could have just sh- a brick. And if that had happened now, there would have been a new six foot wall just behind the boys.

“Mrs. Perry,” Cassandra said, “did those boys know you were over in the bushes watching at you?” Cassandra was so nervous and filled with mixed emotions that the words got mixed up.

The boys were stooped over behind the bushes, frozen; still like mortuary residents. They were immobilized as if not moving would make them invisible. They wanted to run. But that would mean Mrs. Perry would see them. If they stayed put, then she would have to come all the way over to where they hid to see them.

Mrs. Perry didn't appreciate Cassandra interrupting her toying with the young boys. The boys pleased her. They stroked her maturing ego. It was one of the pleasures of her slow existence here in this small southern town. To her, it was only a form of entertainment. She saw no harm in adding a little enthusiasm to the boy's budding manhood; as if their hormones hadn't added enough. She didn't want Cassandra to complicate matters any more than she already had.

“What boys Cassandra? What boys would that be?” Mrs. Perry asked innocently, twisting her head around.

“Right over there,” Cassandra said, ignoring Mrs. Perry’s obvious denial of the boy’s presence. The shrubbery wasn’t thick enough to hide the boys.

Marcus moved close to Nicholas and quietly whispered in his ear, “Busted.”

Marcus’ movement seem to loosen the heavy invisible chains which bound the boys. They moved to duck down lower. And lower. All of them but Rusty ducked down. When they looked at him from their cowardly stations, they could see that he had been negatively affected by Cassandra’s actions. He was infuriated. Evil eyes penetrated Cassandra’s bosom.

“Cassandra!” Rusty yelled out. He stormed out from behind the bushes. Rusty imagined walking up to Cassandra and slapping the spot out of her. But he wasn’t mean like that.

“You gone crazy, Rusty!” Nicholas couldn’t believe Rusty. “Rusty!”

“Rusty, come back here!” A.J. argued, “You gonna get us busted.”

“We already busted, A.J.,” Mane reminded him.

Rusty was courageous to the point of stupidity. If everyone else in the group was scared to do a certain task, Rusty was sure the one to end up doing it. He always ate his bowl of Cheerios in the morning. He was brave, filled with Cheerios, but he lacked common sense.

Once, the boys found a steel cable left by a construction company, in the woods where they often played. Rusty had the ingenious idea to turn it into something constructive. No one else had any desire to

be bothered with it, but not Rusty. Rusty climbed the nearest stand of 30 feet tall pine trees. He tied one end of the cable near the top of one tree, and tied the other end about four feet from the bottom of another tree. Before connecting the cable to the second tree, he found an eight inch long piece of steel pipe, approximately three inches in diameter.

No one could figure out what the pipe was for. To the boys, Rusty had become unduly excited when he found the short section of pipe. He then asked the other children to gather and place pine straw at the bottom of the second tree, while he climbed the first. Once he got into position on a limb and the children had gathered enough straw at the base of the second tree to act as a cushion, re-positioning the pile to his specifications; he directed A.J. to grab the small pipe and push it up the steel cable to him.

Suddenly the boys understood the feat he was attempting. Anxious eyes watched. Fear of Rusty's plunge to his death weighed heavily on their minds. A runner was picked to call 911 if it became necessary. The cable had yet to be tested for its strength, but the test was coming. Rusty leaned out under the cable with the pipe in his right hand slowly putting his weight on the cable. He fought the pipe to keep it from sliding down the cable before he was ready to propel himself with a leap of faith.

"Here goes nothing," he yelled, adrenaline racing through his veins.

He jumped religiously from the limb. From where he had stood, the boys looked like midgets. Clutching the pipe with both hands while holding on for dear life, the steel-spun cable sank under the pressure of his

weight. It pulled tenaciously at the tree trunks and in its tautness Rusty found euphoria.

“Geronimo!”

Rusty swished greasily down the cable with utmost speed and fury, yelling excitedly all the way down. The sound of metal scraping metal surged through the thick summer air. He crash-landed into the pine straw having let go of the pipe at the last second to avoid splitting his hard head on the tree. He was so thrilled he could hardly speak. Needless to say, all the children argued for the opportunity to be next up the tree and riding the cable.

Rusty always surprised the boys with his ingenuity. He was always a go-getter. Nicholas should have suspected that Rusty would stand up and give Cassandra a piece of his mind. What he didn't expect was Rusty turning quickly to Mrs. Perry, his demeanor now pleasant.

“Good day, Mrs. Perry.” Rusty tipped an imaginary hat.

“Good day, boys!”

“Please excuse us, Mrs. Perry.”

With an air of politeness, she tipped her head oh so delicately. Then he disregarded Mrs. Perry's presence, swinging his body towards Cassandra.

Mrs. Perry had planned to summarily dismiss Cassandra and return to the comforts of her cushioned home and life. Now, she had to speak to the issue of the boys. She never wanted to speak to them or look into their little hormone-filled eyes. Cassandra had forced her hand. For this she would have to pay.

“Shame on you, boys,” Mrs. Perry, trying not to embarrass the boys or herself any further declared with

feigned rebuke.”Didn’t your mothers teach you any better?”

A.J. and Nicholas stood up in shame, shoulders drooping.

Mane didn’t move. He just looked up at the two of them. I ain’t moving, Mane thought. No way. No how!

Mrs. Perry dropped her mail, oh so deliberately! She bent over sensually, ever so slowly... exposing her abundant cleavage to Nicholas and A.J.. She seductively picked up, one piece at a time, prolonging their flesh feast. Again, everything was in slow motion.

Marcus peeked up, not moving or missing a beat. “Uh, huh!” he exclaimed.

She went inside, looking back at Cassandra, signaling her mastery, then winked sensually to the boys. Until next time.

The boys, all except Rusty, whooped and hollered, throwing their baseball caps in the air!

Cassandra couldn’t believe the lecherous audacity of Mrs. Perry; after all, she was at least thirty years older than these boys. Robin and Keisha, who had now joined Cassandra, stopped their snickering because of the stinging barbed stare with which Cassandra speared them.

A.J., Nicholas, Earl and Marcus shrieked and bellowed, jumping and spinning around in circles.

“Cassandra,” Rusty shouted, “why you do that?”

“Cause you my man,” Cassandra snapped, “that’s why! You my man!”

“Oh yeah! Then come on, girlfriend,” Rusty taunted humorously, sucking her into his game. “I got something I want to give you baby. C’mon!” he urged erotically.

She looked victorious. This was what she wanted. The other boys looked at each other as if something was wrong with Rusty. Something must have fallen out of the sky while they were carrying on and knocked the sense out of Rusty.

They joined Rusty and the girls. They all walked down the street and around the corner. They came to a little-known corner of the neighborhood where there was a long-forgotten hog pen over-run with weeds. They stopped at the large oak tree near the three thin weed-shrouded bare wires of an electric fence.

It just so happened that in an obscure corner of the neighborhood, one of the residents owned three hogs. The hogs were secured in a large open field by an electric fence. The sign which read 'Electrical Fence' had long ago rusted from its post. Neighbors three of four homes away knew not of its existence, except when the wind changed and they smelled the waifs of hog stench. The boys would often use the fence on the new kid on the block or to initiate someone into their friendship. Sometimes, just for fun, they would grab the wire to feel the sharp sting of electricity. It didn't carry enough voltage to kill or incapacitate a person or a hog. But, it supplied enough discouragement for any animal or human who touched it. They would stay away from it.

"I got something really special to give you," Rusty said calmly. He had to say it calmly or else he would have spoiled everything. "Close your eyes, it's near here."

Cassandra closed her eyes, thinking Rusty was going to climb over the wires and carve an expression of his love for her on the old oak tree.

“Hold my hand, Cassandra,” Rusty said, “I’m gonna give it to you now.”

She didn’t know what he was really up to but thought maybe he needed her assistance getting over the wires. She didn’t care to know at this time she just wanted the surprise. Cassandra put her hand in his. Rusty reached for the electric fence wire which was partially hidden by the weeds.

Robin and Keisha saw the wire but didn’t know what Rusty was up to. Wait a minute, Cassandra, the girls thought. But it was too late.

“You can open your eyes now.”

Before her eyes opened completely, Rusty grabbed the electric wire with a devious satisfying smile. The current passed through his body to hers. She screamed.

Rusty held Cassandra’s hand vengefully, tightly, not letting go no matter how hard she wrangled her hand to get free.

The boys laughed! Robin and Keisha stared pitifully in amazement. They didn’t know what was happening; maybe Rusty squeezing her hand too hard. Cassandra’s thick hair stood straight up on her muddled head as she screamed. She looked like a bizarre science experiment. The boys stopped laughing and looked down at her feet. The girls eyes fixed on her feet, too. The misplaced sound of acrid urine sprinkling down Cassandra’s legs into a modest puddle punctuated their eardrums. Cassandra couldn’t believe it. Nor could any one of them.

After a prolonged awkward, shocking silence, everyone laughed! Rusty let go of Cassandra’s hand.

“You gonna pay for this Rusty!” Cassandra screamed, “All you gonna pay!”

“No! No!” Rusty yelled, “Now we’re even!”

Keisha's and Robin's laughter diminished into snickers as Cassandra screamed obscenities at the boys. Her girlfriends offered their vocal assistance, while searching their pockets for Kleenex. Cassandra screamed at them, jerking away.

The boys ran, jumping and celebrating all the way to Willie Jr.'s house.

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CHAPTER

14

The children were playing flag football in the street in front of Willie Jr.'s house. Flag or touch football and basketball were the favorite ways for the children to pass time and entertain themselves. It didn't cost anything. And money was always a factor.

The children played a great deal of basketball when it warmed up enough outside so the basketball didn't sting your fingers when you got a hot pass. They played basketball on a meager dirt court at the end of the street. The street began as asphalt from a main thoroughfare, then turned into gravel further down. The road transformed into hard-packed dirt about 50 yards before it ended. The road ran parallel to U.S. Interstate Number 1.

The road continued after the basketball court but was reduced to a dirt path big enough for a car and narrowed even further to a path for bikes and children to follow. The further one traveled down the

meandering path, the taller the weeds grew until they leveled off at some unconsciously agreed upon height.

The path lead to a large sewer pipe which came from Henderson, the small town in which they lived. The pipe emptied into a small stream on the other side of Interstate # 1. The pipe was four feet in diameter. The boys often followed it as it snaked through the high growth. They walked beside it, as it lay darkly idle in the tunnel which ran under the interstate. The tunnel was a larger pipe in which they could barely stand up in.

When the smaller pipe entered the light of day on the other side, the boys would have to climb on top of the moss-green slimy pipe. They imagined the captive slime inside the pipe, oozing out through the sides through osmosis. After they meticulously balanced themselves for approximately 25 yards, the boys would hop down, crushing the pristine marsh grasses under their highly-spirited young feet. They searched the small streams formed downstream by the flow from the pipe for small guppies, crayfish, and all sorts of boy stuff.

In the fall and winter months, flag football was played most often in the street, and touch or tackle football was played in someone's yard or in a field near the dirt basketball court. Playing football in the street had its challenges. The asphalt was unforgiving when the boys would slip down unexpectedly on its hard surface. Sliding on the asphalt occurred when sand would get between the worn soles of their sneakers and the road as someone tried to stop or 'juke' from someone's apparent tag. The boys had scraped elbows,

hands and knees from taking their share of turbulent falls.

Rusty never fell. And no one could understand why he hadn't. He said he was well balanced. When they played on the paved road they were constantly aware of the 'slip' factor. The worst would happen when someone slipped hard on the road surface and slid on their elbows for about two feet, removing the top layer of their skin, leaving the white fleshy under-surface exposed. Today it was Nicholas. He had acted tough though, in spite of throbbing pain and a gush of blood. And he did not stop playing.

Daydreaming about disturbing work issues, Willie Jr. drove down the street, unconscious of his actions. Methodically, he put on his turn signal, but didn't turn.

The children expected Willie Jr. to turn right just before the house and drive around back to park the truck. Instead, he plowed through the middle of them, slowing only enough to sharply turn into the driveway. The children scattered instantly to avoid being hit. They stood in disbelief at the near miss.

Willie Jr., eyes were glaring as he stepped angrily out of the truck, leaving a small dust cloud in his wake. He moved methodically to the back of the truck to get his brick mason tools. He picked up his tool bag, fine silt cascading off of it. His tools were always more dusty than he was. He was a dirt magnet when he had his work clothes on, but otherwise he was dressed to the "T".

Earl approached solicitously.

"Hello, Mr. Jones, how ya' doin' today?" Earl said, with a wide smile adorning his wide face.

Earl took pride in the care that he gave his teeth, and it showed. What Earl really wanted was to get an idea why Nicholas' father had done such a stupid thing. Driving recklessly like that could have gotten someone seriously injured. It must have shown on his face or in his voice.

Willie Jr. turned sharply, dropping the tools to the ground with a thud. Stone-faced, except for the glare in his eyes, Willie Jr., spoke gruffly, "Boy, I don't like your attitude."

"You mind us playin' ball in front of your house Mr. Jones?" Earl asked earnestly.

"Boy, you got a nasty mouth. Did yo' Mama teach you to talk like that?"

The world slowed to quarter speed. Attention became focused on Willie Jr. The children knew an episode had started.

It is inconceivable what motivated the words from Willie's mouth. They just flowed out. He was angry, maybe at the world, perhaps at the guys on the job. Who knew? Willie knew he was angry. He heard the words, but he didn't know why he was angry. The words didn't make any sense to him, but he was saying them. He was disturbed. Somehow, in Willie's sick, diminished way, it all made sense. He just responded in his insane way to a multitude of stimuli, and Earl just happened to be one right now.

"Didn't your Daddy teach you anythin'?"

"Sir?" Earl was confused. He craned his head back towards the other children in astonishment.

Nicholas shook his head with a silent warning. The other children made similar gestures. J.D., Earl's brother, motioned suggestively to Earl for them to leave.

This was not the first time J.D., Earl, and his brothers had a run-in with Willie. They lived a few blocks down the street and frequently visited the Jones children. The frequency of their visits had diminished greatly. The Jones children had been encouraged to come to their homes to play in the security of a sane household. It seemed to the children that neither their mother, nor adult relatives, nor adults in their community knew or cared to know that something was wrong with Willie Jr. They acted as though Willie wasn't sick, as if he wasn't a threat. The children overheard the grown-ups talking about how he was reacting to the stress of being African-American in the highly competitive American society.

The fact of the matter was that Willie wasn't sick most of the time, he was sick all the time. But to others, his mental illness only raised its ugly head occasionally. When it did, it lasted only a few minutes at a time. But if you were around during those few minutes, your life was truly in danger. At those times, Willie was not himself, he became a Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde. If one were not there to witness the event, one would swear on a stack of Bibles ten feet high, that Willie was as sane as the next person. In fact, his behavior, when he was not "acting-out" his illness, established him to be a perfect specimen of a human being and a wonderful provider. In addition to his illness, Willie was on a long slide into depression.

None of the adults in the neighborhood, church, or community at large had a clue that he was sick. Except from the sporadic comments from their children or from the Jones children, they were clueless. But most, if not all, of the children who frequented Willie's house

had been exposed to one act or another of strange behavior. Now only a handful of true friends would come by to play with the Jones children.

All of the children who had seen Willie Jr. “go off” knew that the one conclusive indication of upcoming strange behavior was Willie Jr.’s eyes. They would have a strange stare about them, a lack of human warmth. His eyes would seem to glare at you; they’d see right through you. There was a darkness about his eyes then, as if a thick curtain had been drawn across his soul. When the neighbor’s children saw his eyes transform, most of them knew to leave.

“Well sir,” Earl said, “we be going now. Hey, we’ll see you guys later.”

Earl and J.D. left, as their fear of bodily abuse intensified. Willie glared at Rusty and A.J..

“Ain’t you boys leaving, too?”

A.J. looked at Rusty, gesturing to him with nervous hands for them to ease away from this scene. Rusty did not retreat. He was not that kind of guy, one who would retreat in the face of danger. In any event, these were his friends, his “ace boon coons,” and besides, they were having a fun time playing. He wasn’t ready to go home. Who was this grownup anyway trying to tell them what they could, or couldn’t do? Willie Jones Jr. wasn’t his father or mother. They were playing in the street anyhow, so what was he going to say about that?

“Yes sir,” A.J. answered, retreat in his heart. He knew that Rusty could be stubborn, but he hoped that he would be wise enough not to make this one of those times. “Come on Rusty, let’s go.” A.J. feared Rusty’s Cheerios would come to the surface, and he was right.

Rusty's oats were rising. The hair on his back was at attention. Rusty spoke to A.J. with effeminate, high-pitched overtones. This he did habitually when he was extraordinarily angry. And he was now. It was then that A.J. became very scared. There was no telling what Rusty would do or say when he started speaking that way. And Mr. Jones, well, the children never knew what he would do or say at anytime. So the scene was ripe for disaster.

From time to time, Willie Jr. had been acting rather strangely towards his neighbors. Mr. Williams, the neighbor who lived a couple of houses down the street, was out back one day working in the small garden he had in his back yard. Willie started yelling and cursing like he was going to come down the street and viciously attack Mr. Williams.

Or the time Willie told the postman not to step his foot in Willie's yard again to deliver any mail or his backsides would suffer from shotgun pellets. The next day, Willie had moved the mailbox from next to the front door to the edge of the yard on a post.

But Willie never did anything violent to anyone, except for his family members. He often threatened neighbors, but never acted. Though he may have said something off-kilter, he never did enough to warrant anyone telling or asking Jackie Jones whether there was a real problem with Willie, or if the danger their children had mentioned was real or imagined. In any event, the neighbors were too busy with their own lives. They didn't have time to worry about Willie Jones Jr. or his family. He would have to be a big boy and take care of himself.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Rusty steamed. “This is a public street!” Rusty turned to A.J., who by now was tugging annoyingly on his arm. “My Daddy pays taxes just like he does. Who does he think he is, anyway?” Rusty turned back to Willie Jr. pointing an agitated finger at him. “I’m tired of going through changes for him!”

Nicholas knew that his father was crazy, but now he knew that Rusty also was crazy. At that moment, an image flashed into Nicholas’s mind: it was that of a small mouse giving the finger to an oncoming eagle who was about to devour him. Rusty was the mouse about to be consumed. But Nicholas did not know how to keep events from escalating.

“Let me tell you somethin’, boy,” Willie Jr. said. “And you listen real good. If your Mama hadn’t been a whore, your Daddy wouldn’t have left her!”

If it had been anyone else but Rusty, they would have been catapulted into the realization that this man should be left alone; the raisins were not all in the cookies. But, instead, Rusty fired back.

“What? You just crazy man. My Mama said you, ah, you just paranoid.”

“Paranoid schizophrenic, Rusty,” A.J. whispered, “paranoid schizophrenic.” Willie Jr. stood on the edge of his lawn as if there was some invisible barrier holding him back. It was as if he were a dog at the end of his leash. “Boy, why don’t you come over here and say that?”

By now, A.J. had pulled Rusty into the middle of the street. A.J. struggled with Rusty, his hands clawing Rusty’s arm to keep him from getting in Willie’s face.

“Man, you been out in the sun too long!” Rusty yelled. “Yo’ brain is fried. You think everybody is tryin’ to screw your wife!”

A.J. tugged doggedly at Rusty’s arm, dragging him stubbornly down the road. Rusty talking all the while as he was being taken away.

“We can’t play in the yard when you get home, cause you too crazy!” Rusty took a long deep breath.

The other children were dumbfounded. The scene was both sad and funny.

“So we play in the street- now, we can’t even do that.”

“I know you always talkin’ behind my back,” Willie Jr. shouted, “why don’t you come back here, and say it to my face?”

A.J. had moved between Rusty and Willie with his shoulder buried in Rusty’s stomach. He pushed him decidedly harder now, almost to the point of tackling him.

“He keep running us away.” Rusty said to A.J. as he craned his head towards Willie’s sons. “He’s building a wall around them. That man need help, some professional help, I’m telling ya, A.J..” A.J. pushed Rusty retardedly down the street. “A.J., man,” Rusty said solemnly, “I hate to be in ‘dey shoes.” Rusty turned, his head hanging low, but his spirits were lower. He loved the Jones children and there was nothing he could do to help them.

Willie Jr. turned to Nicholas, Marcus and August and pointed condescendingly. “Those boys are no longer welcome here!” Willie Jr. bellowed. “You hear me?” Willie had to inhale large pockets of air because he was yelling with such rage. “I don’t believe you boys let them talk about your Mama like that!!”

“But Daddy,” Nicholas said, “ain’t nobody said nothin’ ‘bout Mama or you or-”

Willie’s head snapped awkwardly towards Nicholas like an ancient pre-historic bird. Deftly swinging his left arm in a backward motion, he grabbed Nicholas by the collar, pulling him around in front of him. Marcus and August ran around to the back of the house seeking refuge. They stopped momentarily at the corner of the house to steal looks. Willie started to slap Nicholas open handedly.

Tears mixed with despondent words, Nicholas pleaded, “Daddy, nobody said nothin’ about Mama, or you, or us, or anybody.”

His eyes were glazed over as he beat Nicholas. He pulled Nicholas’ arm while beating him with his open hand, back and forth, his heavy hand slapping Nicholas. Nicholas was beaten outside for a few minutes, crying and screaming for help.

Marcus and August went back to watch from the side of the house. They didn’t know what to do. They thought about calling the police. They ducked back out of sight when they saw Willie Jr. turn towards them.

Crying for help, Nicholas slipped away from Willie, running into the house. Willie Jr. followed close on his heels, pulling off his belt heatedly.

Cries of pain emanated from the house. Nicholas’ brothers hid behind some trees, moving from one hiding place to another, terrified of going into the house, and terrified of not helping Nicholas.

The slow sympathetic drip of the faucet reverberated in Nicholas’s ears when it was all over. He didn’t notice the damp rancor that enveloped him, nor was the mildew of any consequence to him. He

cowered in the bathroom, next to the sink, shaking, crying, confused. He petitioned God. He wanted to be brave. He wanted to love his father. And he did, but each day his love grew more estranged. He just didn't understand. He didn't understand why he had to receive such punishment, when neither he nor anyone else had done anything wrong. He would be able to understand, if someone had done something wrong and he was being admonished for it. But that was not the case.

He had tried to tell his mother about Willie; about what he and the other children thought was strange behavior. She did not understand. She would only continue to iron, or cook, or dust the furniture. Whatever she was doing at the time had more importance than what he was saying. At least it seemed that way to him.

Nicholas knew he and his brothers would have to contend with the situation. But he didn't know how. And who would help, which grown-up would he turn to for help? The preacher? His grandpapa, Willie Sr.? One of his teachers? He was at his wits end. He was too scared to be brave, but the necessity of courage weighed heavily upon him.

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CHAPTER

15

Nicholas, Marcus, and August were praying on their knees, all three against their small beds. Nicholas's hands tightly clasped in heartfelt prayer. His youthful arm, back, and chest was spotted with bruises. Hardening scabs from drying blood had started to form around the edges of his broken skin.

All three children were saying their prayers in unison, well, almost in unison. "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. Amen." Nicholas hurt so badly that he almost wished he were dead. Not from the pain of his wounds only, but from the dire situation in which he saw he and his brothers living. The futility of the children's plight was overwhelming.

Jackie came into the doorway, leaning against it. She was working a new job during the graveyard shift at the glass factory. She always went in early since she had also started selling Avon. She had to make her

rounds with the people who were about to get off from work. It was a great little side business- and she was just starting. She was dressed, ready to go.

She was alarmed when she saw Nicholas' lacerations. Jackie steeled herself. She didn't want to disturb the children in their moment of prayer, nor did she want them to see how upset she was.

"God bless Mama," the children said together, "God bless Daddy. And he needs a lot, God. Please, God. God bless Grandma and Papa."

Nicholas added solemnly, "And God keep Daddy from beating us when we ain't done nothin' wrong. Help us dear God, help us. Send an angel. Please."

A quiet tear stole down Jackie's face as she fought to control her emotions. And she was getting ready to go to work and leave her babies.

"Thanks, God. Please!" Marcus and August said, "Amen!" They nodded in agreement.

"And God," Nicholas finished, "we love you" they stretched out their arms like Jesus on the cross, "this much. Amen."

Jackie joined them in the room to kiss them goodnight. Nicholas pulled out the bottom trundle bed for his big brother Mane. He slept on the top bed while Mane slept on the bottom. August and Marcus climbed into one bed, and Nicholas into his bed. She tucked them in. She sat on one of the children's chairs.

"Don't worry, baby," Jackie said, "God's watching over us." She looked apprehensively at Nicholas' scars. "Let me see your arm, baby." She examined it closely. "What'd you do to deserve this?"

"Nothin'," Nicholas replied.

He saw her look at the scrape he got while playing football. He didn't tell her that he had gotten it that

way, because he thought she would be more accommodating, more apt to do something about Willie, about their predicament, if she thought the situation was urgent.

“All of these came from your beating?”

“Yep!”

Most of the fresh brutish scars and lacerations had come from beatings, but not all.

Nicholas wondered why Jackie didn't really know how Willie was. *She couldn't know, but then, how couldn't she know? She saw him go through his changes, hadn't she? That was it, he thought. The reason no one—why Jackie wasn't doing anything to ease their pain, to help them, to help Willie, was that Jackie didn't know, couldn't know, and was too busy to see. But how could she not know?* Nicholas was confused.

“Well, you must have done somethin’.”

“I didn't do anythin’,” Nicholas retorted, “We were just playin’, and then Wardaddy, uh, Daddy got upset about somethin’. His eyes got all weird looking.”

Jackie didn't know if the boys had done something wrong, but she knew about the strange look Willie Jr. got in his eyes from time to time. And he was always crazy angry when she had seen it.

“Well, what'd he say?” she asked.

“He didn't say nothin’,” Nicholas replied as convincing as he was energetic, “he just started hitting us.” He looked around at his brothers who wore apprehension on their night clothes. “Hitting me!” And they just ran.

“Yeah,” Marcus interjected, “we were scared. And today he said that Earl said somethin' bad about you, and that Nicholas didn't take up for you.”

“Uh-huh,” Nicholas said, “that’s right.”

“Yeah, and then he took his belt,” Marcus continued, “and beat him with it.” He was thinking how glad he was that it was Nicholas, not him, who got the beating. “And he used the buckle end of his belt too!”

“Mama, I’m scared,” August declared nervously, “I’m scared when you’re not here.”

The children all nodded in agreement.

Jackie showed serious concern, but just as quickly she repressed her thoughts. She recognized one of the scrapes as one she had seen before. She realized that it was from sliding on elbows while playing two-handed touch football in the street. She would have to deal with this partial fabrication another time because she had to get to work and collect money and orders from her Avon customers.

She felt the children were in no real physical danger from their father. If she thought they were, she would... she would. She thought a moment longer. What would she do if they were in real danger? They weren’t in any danger, so why worry? Why worry about nothing? She had other responsibilities to think about.

Mane came into the room unusually quiet with a bathrobe on and laid on the bottom trundle bed.

“Mane, what do you know about this boy getting a beating?” Jackie asked authoritatively.

Mane was despondent. He heard her but he thought she was talking to one of the other boys. His mind was elsewhere.

“Mane!” Jackie’s voice intensified. “I asked you what do you know about the scars this boy got?”

She hated these teenage years with Mane. Olivia wasn't bad, but Mane was a true challenge. She understood her future held three more teenage "hardheads" with whom to deal.

"Sorry Mama," Mane responded distractedly, "I didn't hear you. I don't know nothin' 'bout nothin'."

"Fine." Jackie said, "y'all just get in the bed now, I gotta get to work."

Jackie's maternal instincts for the children pressed against her calm facade. But whatever they had done to warrant such an inhumane beating surely wasn't going to happen while they slept. And with that, she repressed her anxiety, at least for tonight. She was on the night shift, from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m.

The children laid down, their fears temporarily quieted. Jackie stopped at the doorway and looked back at her pearls, her precious offspring. Mane made movements suggesting he was about to take his robe off and get under the covers.

"I love you guys!" Jackie said tenderly.

"We love you too, Mama!" the children said.

She clicked off the overhead light, gently closing the door as she left the small bedroom. Mane was up before the door closed tightly, taking off the robe and putting on his sneakers.

The room was awash with the light from the corner street light. It danced across Nicholas' face, showing his incredulous expression. He leaned on the uninjured area of his arm, staring hopelessly at Mane. He sat up in his bed marveling at his brother's boldness, or stupidity, depending on one's point of view. He pulled his knees out of the covers, wrapping his arms around them.

“I guess you want some of these?” he said, referring to his fresh injuries, hoping to talk some sense into his older brother.

“That’s just for you little boys. I don’t have to worry about nothing like that,” he said fearlessly.

“Mane, don’t you go making trouble for us.”

Mane could hear genuine, unbridled fear in his brother’s voice.

“You know Daddy hates it when you go hanging out.”

“I ain’t scared of him.”

“That’s alright,” Marcus interjected, “seriously, we’re scared enough for you, us and half the neighborhood.”

“Don’t get killed, Mane.” August said just above a whisper. “You know Daddy’s crazy.”

As soon as the younger boys settled down, Mane prepared his escape via the window. He would turn the stiff metal crank which opened the three-paned window at the head of the trunnel bed. He would unfasten the six clasps which held the screen. It was Nicholas’s duty to close the window and replace the screen behind Mane. At three o’clock in the morning, or thereabout, it was Nicholas’ precarious duty to open it; to let Mane back in. This made Nicholas Mane’s accomplice, and it spawned more trouble for Nicholas.

At the beginning of Mane’s escapades, Willie didn’t know he was sneaking out at night. But living in a small town had its benefits, one of which was that people talked. They talked about the hoodlums who hung out on street corners until all hours of night looking for trouble. It had come to Willie’s attention

that their child, Mane, had been one of those boys, one of those hoodlums, hanging out.

Mane frequently hung out with his delinquent friends. He had to sneak out. He had to escape. He was driven to do so because he could not cope with his father's weakness, his father's absurdities, or his mother's nagging for a more responsible Mane. The constant drone of noise in the house from his younger brothers was highly stressful for him. And worst of all, Olivia's chores had been relegated to him. This wouldn't do.

Olivia was the lucky one. She didn't have to put up with this maniacal nonsense, because she was not around. She was in college. Cantrell College. He could not wait to go to college, though his grades would have to improve drastically for him to get accepted into a four year school or even a junior college, for that matter. He didn't know how he was going to get there. But he knew somehow he would. He had heard the best and most outrageous parties were held on the college scene. He wouldn't dare ask his father to pay his tuition. He didn't want his father to do anything for him. Maybe, Olivia could help him to get into the school she attended. He would see.

First and foremost for Mane was to get away from the madness. He was tired of being hit for no reason. He was tired of cleaning up the house, ironing clothes, dusting the furniture, and other endless chores. He was tired of baby sitting the children. He was irritated by the situation in which he lived. That is why he stayed as far away from Willie Jr. as possible. That's why he didn't play with the kids. He was away from home as much as possible. He wanted out, he needed out. What

he desperately needed was counseling. But until he got someone to listen to him, he would talk to whoever would listen, and that was his hoodlum friends.

Jackie wanted to speak with Willie about Nicholas, about what the children had said before she left for work, however, as usual, Willie was sound asleep in the lazy boy recliner. The television was blaring, an empty Schlitz beer can sat next to a half-full ashtray full of cigarette butts. A half-full beer warmed in Willie's lap, nurtured, held there by his right hand. She just shook her head in dismay and left for work.

Willie Jr. was sitting in his favorite chair, glued to the front of the television. The 11 o'clock news was going off. The closing news jingle jarred him awake. He peeled himself out of the recliner and turned the television set off. He went to the children's bedroom to check on them before retiring.

Willie had mastered the technique of staying awake only enough to make it down the hall to the children's room, bathroom, and finally to his bed. Half awake, half conscious, he would practically stumble into the bathroom, and then into bed. He stayed as close as humanly possible to being asleep and awake at the same time.

He turned on the light in the children's room and saw that Mane was not in bed. He was immediately disturbed, negative emotions raging through his veins. Now he was more awake than asleep. This angered him more than Mane not being there.

It had always started as a low-pitched hum far out in the distance, a far off buzzing sound. It wasn't the

vibrating, buzzing sound like that of a bumble bee, but a dull monotonous, droning sound. This time it was no different. The hum would wax and wane, sounding as if it were wavering back and forth, oscillating. Its destructive nature heightened as did its loudness, and the pitch rose as the shrill increased.

Willie would note of the sound in his ears and consider it a change in barometric pressure, a storm front moving in. Often, he characterized the noise as the stress of the day, anxiety. But the real dilemma with the sound in his head was that he didn't hear it, but he did hear it. He would never remember hearing it, minutes or seconds after it was gone. He would go to tell Jackie about it or his mother about it; but when he approached them, he would have forgotten what he was about to tell them. It was the reason he dug in his ear. The strange look seen by others in his eyes became more menacing as the intensity of the buzzing in his ears increased. The buzzing, the droning, grew louder, as did his foreboding nature. The two were connected in a maniacal, senseless drama. It was his unforeseen debilitating madness. The darkness pervaded his mind. His life grew more grim as did his madness.

“Damn, that boy has snuck out again!” Willie snapped.

Mane's escapades were an ongoing challenge for Willie Jr., one his brain didn't want and his spirits didn't need. He loathed Mane's willful juvenile comings and goings. Mane had to obey him. Period. His father had instilled it into him, and now Willie was determined to drive the point home to Mane.

Mane would listen and obey, one way or another. If he had to tie him down at night or beat his brains out,

Mane would comply with his directives as long as he lived under his roof. He would conform, or die. He brought him into this world, and he would take him out. Willie was further upset because he could hear Willie Sr.'s words in his thoughts. Damn.

For the longest time, neither Willie nor Jackie had any idea that Mane was surreptitiously slipping out of the darkened house after everyone had gone to bed. Mane would slip back into the house before his father's alarm would go off, signaling Willie to get up to another grueling day.

Mane would ask Nicholas to close the window as he left, and he had Nicholas to open the window upon his return. Mane would knock on the window to wake Nicholas from his slumber. His gentle knocks would sometimes wake his mother, who held the topic close to her chest for fear of Willie's wrath. Heaven forbid his demon father ever catching him. Nicholas was indeed Mane's reluctant accomplice in his late night escapades. Nicholas knew he had to cease and desist because he wanted no part of his father's brutal punishments.

Once Willie heard what sounded like someone tapping on the front window pane. At the time, he didn't know what the sound was. He didn't know if it was real or imagined as he stirred half awake. He couldn't tell if the sound was coming from down the street or from the next room.

He had remembered the time Jackie's uncle came to visit. He had snored so loudly, it sounded as if workmen were pounding sledge hammers onto the paved street to break up the asphalt. This gentle tapping was only a trifling whisper in comparison, and

was of no real consequence. Willie ignored it, returning to his precious sleep.

Willie and Jackie had received reports from a friend on the local police force, the only African-American police officer, that Mane had been seen hanging out on street corners very late at night. He had done no wrong. But it was not like the Jones family to have one of their children out this time of night. Willie and Jackie were now on alert to determine if there was any truth to what their friend had said. They really found it hard to believe, but they would soon find out the truth.

The next time Willie heard the tap, tap, tap on the window, he eased himself out of bed so the springs wouldn't make much sound. He tip-toed to the door of the boys' room and listened. He could hear Nicholas stirring, then whispering. The springs on a bed made a tale-tell creaking sound, as if someone had just stepped on them. Confirmation was in the air.

The moment was perfect. Willie swung the door open, and turned on the overhead light in one swift motion. Both Nicholas and Mane froze like deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming vehicle.

After that incident, Mane had been warned not to go out late under the threat of extremely harsh consequences. And Nicholas was cautioned not to assist his brother on his late night escapades. Nicholas was caught in the middle. After helping on subsequent occasions and getting punished for it with both ends of Wardaddy's belt and four foot long weeping willow branches, Nicholas resolved not to be a part of Mane's rebellion. He had enough to worry about. And his bruises reflected that.

He could not help closing the window when Mane left in the winter, but in the summer he could leave it open. He didn't know how he had done it, but he had convinced his parents not to punish him for not telling them when Mane had left. He vowed not to let him back in- and he hadn't. He was quite afraid of Mane's wrath but considerably more afraid of Willie's madness.

Mane resorted to making a copy of the front door key, thus sauntering in and out of the house via the front door when everyone was in bed. When they were not in bed he would leave by the window, returning through the front door. He wouldn't use the back door because he didn't want to be mistaken for a burglar in the event his father was awake when he came in. Coming into this house unexpectedly in the middle of the night was an extremely dangerous thing for Mane to do- but so was hanging out.

Willie Jr. walked into his bedroom without turning on the lights. He stumbled on an errant shoe of Jackie's. He stepped more gingerly until reaching the head of the bed. He didn't want to turn on the lights because it might wake Jackie, plus he wanted to recover the sleepy state which he had lost in the children's room. He had forgotten that she was working the night shift. He started talking to Jackie, as if she was there. She was not there- but at work.

"That damn boy!" Willie said, steaming with consternation. "He must think he's grown. Done gone and stuck his wick in some wax and now he think he grown." Willie was furious, violently removing his clothes almost tearing them at the seams. "Damn boy,

can't even pee straight. He better do what I tell him to or he got to get the hell out of here!"

Willie couldn't keep his mind from racing. The inexplicable buzzing in his ear was pronounced now. He drove his finger into his right ear violently. He finished undressing, climbing irately into bed.

"Shiiit! All y'all better do like I say do. Y'all just don't know." Willie giggled like a giddy school girl. "I could kill everybody in this freakin' house, and nobody would know the freakin' difference. It would be a freakin' accident!"

Willie laughed insanely now. His laughing woke Marcus and Nicholas, who shared knowing looks in the moonlit darkness. Pertaining to their father's madness, they knew he was gone. They laid stoic heads on their worn five-n-dime pillows, staring at the ceiling for God's protection.

Willie moved to pat Jackie on the shoulder and realized she was not there. "What kinda work could she be doin' at night anyway?" Willie said thinking aloud.

Willie continued his mumbling, pulling the stubborn sheets over his shoulders. He laid flat on his back, his eyes locked on a minor crack on the ceiling. His thoughts bounced from Jackie to Mane and back again. His jaded body fell asleep quickly and soundly. His eyes began to twitch. Willie was dreaming.

Do Not Copy

CHAPTER

16

In the cutting darkness one would hardly know it was fall but for the small clouds of breath flowing from open mouths. The deciduous trees reached into the heavens with their prickly bare fingers, scratching at the full moon. Few evergreens were awake to watch the conflicting human souls. The ground was swollen with dead decaying leaves, losing their color, aching with each pounding footfall.

The perspective changed dramatically, chaotically, providing a momentary panoramic view of this open area of the forest. With the quickness of a chicken about to get its neck rung, moving rapidly forward, a young Willie Jr.'s feet were running... grinding... escaping... thrashing through the leaves, hardly able to be picked up and put down again. Several whip-like sounds echoed fiercely past him, following him, seeking their victim, calling his name. They whistled not too far off in the distance. Coming up fast.

“Yeah! Run boy, run!” Willie Sr. yelled. “When I catch your li'l ass... I'll teach you to talk bout yo' mamma! You ungrateful idiot!”

Young Willie Jr., exhausted, his young languid legs carrying him to the end of their capacity, stumbled, falling to the ground. He wiped leaves from his tear-painted face as he rolled over onto his elbows. Panic dressed his brow as the inevitable approached; the loved, the hated. The leaves moved under the approaching terror that followed him so closely.

“God help me, please,” he moaned pitifully, amid snuffles and crying, moving backwards clumsily on his elbows.

He knew there was no escape, there never was. He had to take it, what else could he do? He looked up with fear. He held his right arm over his face in self-defense. His body trembled miserably.

Tears streamed down young Willie's nervous, panicked-stricken face. Willie Sr. bared down upon him, cords spinning overhead. As an act of kindness, Willie Sr. had taken the heads off of two extension cords. With the spinning cords whirling menacingly overhead, Willie Sr. directed their full attention towards his son.

Willie Jr. closed his eyes in an effort to make it all go away. He screamed in anguish, “No! Please! No!”

The cords slashed maliciously across his arm. The pain echoed through the stand of trees, reinforcing his hopelessness; the agony of which filled the viscous night air. Where was his mother? The futility of it all.

In bed, Willie Jr. sprang into a sitting position. Intense fear awakened him. He struggled to recognize his surroundings. He slowly moved the sweat-soaked sheets off his legs. His eyes nervously surveyed the room. Chills rushed over his body as he attempted to calm himself. He placed his hand where Jackie would have been laying, had she not been at work.

“Jackie?”

Willie was filled with solemn trepidation, hoping for solace, longing for a mother’s nurturing, a wife’s compassion. He realized Jackie was not there. Before he could react to her not being there, he heard sounds. Quietly, as a lion, he slipped his feet over the edge of the bed, listening. He slid his body quietly off the bed, being careful to keep the bed springs from squeaking.

He picked his bathrobe up from the foot of the bed, absent-mindedly dragging his robe on the floor, putting it on as he moved. His momentum and curiosity was building with each stride. He moved slowly, deliberately, placing his bare feet with precision.

The sounds were real, he could hear them, but they were unintelligible. They became clearer as he moved closer to the door. The bedroom door was ajar. The closer he got to the bedroom door, the louder, the more distinct the sounds. Yet they sounded distant also. Willie paused at the doorway to listen, he perceived two distinct vocal qualities. He knew he heard more than just voices, but what could it be? He slipped between the door and the door frame, touching neither. He didn’t want them to hear the door squeak when it opened, when he slipped out.

Willie crept judiciously along the hallway. Long shadows cast from the weeping willow tree outside

cursed his face. Pressed against the blue hallway, he edged along walls so they couldn't see him. He definitely knew now that there were two people in the living room generating the noises he heard. Willie could only imagine what was going on at the hallway's end. He thought he knew who was making the sounds. He concluded he knew at least one of the parties involved. He eased closer to the living room with a particularly queer expression on his face.

Low moans and groans which sounded like a man and woman making love issued forth. As Willie Jr. got closer, the cacophony of moans grew louder and more sensual. Willie peered past the door frame which led from the hallway into the living room and beheld Jackie on the couch passionately entangled with Calvin James. Jackie's old high school sweetheart. A slightly younger version of Calvin James and of Jackie too, both clad only in intimate undergarments.

Willie Jr. almost fainted with delirium.

"Jackie!"

Jackie was scantily attired in a red Victoria's Secret teddy, her lipstick smeared in a most appealing way.

"Hey baby, can't you see I'm workin' here? How else can we keep up with the Perry's?"

She and Calvin laughed boisterously with snobbishly arrogant overtones!

Calvin James was wearing only tight red bikini briefs which were riding up his butt. His manhood pressing hard on the front to burst forth.

"Yeah, man. Get lost Jones. Can't you see we're busy?"

Calvin nibbled tenderly on Jackie's neck.

"Stop it! Can't you see I'm talking to my husband?"

She gave Calvin a love tap on his bare perspiration-dotted chest, snickering. They persisted in their antics, whispering in each others ears, mocking Willie. Jackie blew kisses to Willie, laughing in a demeaning way.

“Calm down, Willie baby, calm down,” she said to Willie half-heartedly. Then with a more serious tone and sternly, “You know I love you.” With sex oozing through her lips she spoke to Willie, while looking deep into Calvin’s eyes. “If you can’t make love to a friend, Willie, who can you make love to?”

As though suddenly aroused and aware of his uncontrollable desire for Jackie, Calvin passionately French kissed Jackie, probing deeply with his tongue into her mouth. Wetting her lips with the moisture of his, delving deeper and deeper into the crevices of her lustful desires. She moaned under his spell.

Willie’s face flushed, erupting with waves of white hot rage. His temper boiled over. With the vicious rage of a stampede of demons, Willie rushed towards the couch lunging onto it with all his might. His shoulder hit the couch first, then the rest of his body followed with so much force the interior wooden support structure cracked. The couch rocked backwards before finally settling back down.

No one was on the couch save Willie. None of it had been real. He turned to his left and to his right, groping in the darkness for his wife and her lover. He realized there was no one there. What the hell just happened? Willie thought. He was confused, flustered and bewildered. It was all too disconcerting, too strange. Willie Jr.’s eyes rolled back in his head, just before he passed out.

The clock showed the time as three a.m. when Willie staggered into the kitchen, mentally beat up. The sound of the clock ticking was prominent in the early morning silence. It pounded into the walls of his brain, like some ancient mystical mantra.

“I need aspirin for my head.”

Willie’s head was pounding. He didn’t know why, maybe it was because he was so angry. Or because he had attacked the couch so violently like some mad mongrel.

Willie Jr. had awakened from lying on the couch, perplexed as to how and why he was there, the cool night air having chilled the surface of his skin. He went to his bedroom, checking on the boys before he did. It was then he again discovered that Mane was not in his bed. He checked the rest of the house, and seeing Mane was not there, went to a window on each side of the house to see if he was outside. Willie became livid.

Willie Jr.’s silhouette projected onto the wall as light poured inside the house from an exterior street light. He stepped forward out of the shadows. He looked haggard. He brought his hand up to scratch his face; it had a gun in it, a Saturday night special. He moved through the house in a highly exaggerated fashion, as if each step ached throughout his entire body, his entire being.

The yellow-green fluorescent light above the sink flickered lazily into his glazed over eyes. He had gone there, to the dark place. He had again disconnected from reality.

This was the first time he had disconnected, had as many occurrences as he had today, and in such a short period of time. Generally, when Willie made the destructive transition, it only lasted for five minutes or

less; and it would happen once or twice a month. It depended on the stimuli in his environs, the stress he endured, and the chemicals which his brain had or hadn't produced.

He checked the clock on the stove for the time. It was three thirty a.m.

His anger mounted. He was frustrated by not having control of his son. But subconsciously, the frustration of not having control of his life, his mind, his brain, grew ever so slowly, almost imperceptively, yet steadily. He remembered nothing of the events which had occurred so ominously earlier, though he had remembered the dream with his father. It was a recurring one. It was either that dream or dreams which were remarkably similar that haunted him. He knew he would have to confront his father at some point in time, but he wanted to wait until the right moment.

The sound of the clock ticking filled the kitchen. Willie Jr. dug in his ear with a frantic, agitated, shaking motion. His heart pounded in his throat from his anger. He walked out of the kitchen, pulling the sliding wooden door which he had built into the wall halfway open, then closed again, just checking it; old habits die hard. He moved into the hallway and flipped on the light. He moved to the boys' bedroom, deftly pushing the door open with the gun. He entered the room. Light from the hallway illuminated a triangular section of the room.

August and Marcus were sleeping in their small bed at close quarters. The covers were disheveled and Marcus' leg hung out of the bed. August's mouth was wide open; he was perched on the edge of snoring.

Nicholas was sleeping alone on the top of the trunnel bed.

Willie Jr. walked in, stood at the end of Nicholas's bed with the gun by his side. Willie Jr. looked past Nicholas at the window. He reached over Nicholas and jiggled the window frame to ensure it was locked; this was how Mane usually got in. As he turned towards the bedroom door, noting that the window was locked, he noticed out of the corner of his eye a shadow moving up the street, in the general direction of the house. He turned back to the window, focusing on the figure, studying it as it unknowingly approached. There was a cheerful strength to the figure's gait. He knew this person. He silently pivoted and walked out of the room.

Nicholas' eyes opened slowly as he heard his father close the bedroom door. He had laid very still when his father's garment rested on his head, tickling his flesh to a point of irritation, as Willie looked out the window. Nicholas believed his ability to resist the urge to brush away the garment, to withstand the growing irritation coupled with his consternation made him more of a man. He always was the optimist. Now, he had to urinate. He would just have to hold it.

But at this moment, Nicholas was a petrified child, afraid for his safety, but more fearful for the safety of his older brother who knew nothing of the awaiting danger. He had laid very still, afraid to take a breath. But while his father was close, he had dared to sneak a peek at a metallic coldness which had also brushed hard against him. Nicholas thought it was a pipe. He didn't know what it was, but whatever it was it was cold and emotionless, like he imagined his father was at this hour.

Now that Wardaddy had left the room, quietly, slowly Nicholas swallowed. At the welcome sound of the door closing, he had gulped a deep breath, inhaling it in deeply, sighing faintheartedly.

The crickets were as loud as the fragrance of the evergreens in the air was strong. The noise of their tiny legs scraping, rubbing together, scratched at the deafening quiet of the early morning. Not even a faint hint of a tractor-trailer rig could be heard from the distant interstate. If not for the crickets, one could hear the sweet delicate breeze which blew through the southern pines from a country block away.

The crickets seemed to be in a symphonic competition with one another. Crickets to the left of the house would increase a few decibels over the ones to the right, to be met by the increased sounds from the right. All night long this competition streamed from their small frames. Mane would sometimes throw his empty beer bottle, which he timed to finish just before he entered the house, end over end into the bushes, temporarily disrupting the noisy little creatures. This time he had no beer bottle, so he thought it strange that they would stop their wretched screeching when he approached the house. They never had before. And the times when he had thrown his beer bottle, they would only stop for a moment.

His instincts caused him to pause before stepping onto the porch. He turned around, visiting one of his old fears. One of his childhood fears was that as he reached for the doorknob to open the door, or worse

yet, as he fumbled with the key to put it in the slot, eight feet tall demonic creatures would erupt out of the darkness from either side of the house, running full throttle towards him, knocking him over carrying him into the dark abyss with them. He quickly dispelled the eerie fear which threatened to overtake him now. He was grown- let something jump out if it wanted to. He was man enough to take care of business.

He reached under the door mat to get the house key. He kept his duplicate there. He hadn't bothered to make another copy- anyway it would have cost him money. There was no need for that, so long as no one removed the hidden key.

Slowly, with subtle fear as his undergarment, Mane turned the screen door handle. The screen door slowly creaked open. Mane winced at the noise. He looked over his shoulder, but saw nothing. The crickets became silent. Mane became unnerved for no apparent reason.

He realized he hadn't just waltzed in like he normally did- and he didn't understand why. And the crickets- in the old Frankenstein and Werewolf movies hadn't the crickets always stopped their songs when there was danger near? He had a buzz on; he had been drinking Wild Irish Rose and Thunderbird.

"I don't believe me."

He chuckled as he inserted the key into the key hole. Somehow, this time he knew it was different. Not the keyhole, nor the key, nor how it entered the doorknob- but there was something absurdly different- he sensed it. Faint of heart, Mane's greatest fear walked in unison with him.

Willie Jr. walked past the front door, the gun cradled in both hands, raised, the barrel pointing to the ceiling. He flattened his back against the wall by the door. The retarded tick of the kitchen clock, obtrusively playing in his ears, reminded him of his son's disobedience, slowly replacing the pounding of his heart.

The door knob slowly turned. Mane, his foot investigating every inch, reluctantly stepped inside. His senses spoke to his fears, alerting him to make a bee line to his room. Once inside, he reached behind his back grabbing the door knob. He didn't look at the door as he closed it, nor did he check his surroundings.

Willie Jr., face awash in an affected, evil smirk, placidly lowered the gun to just behind Mane's unsuspecting ear. He pulled the hammer back. A loud ominous click echoed off the stillness. Mane froze, his body stiffened, every alcohol-soaked muscle on alert.

Mane's eyes shifted to their corners, imagining a stranger with a gun... supposing he was about to be robbed. Then he saw his father. He felt relieved, his body relaxed. The alcohol-induced stupor made him more at ease than he would have been otherwise.

"Like the ole man said, horse sh#t don't stink until you breathe it in."

Mane realized his father was in one of those demented Wardaddy moods. He became even more tense than before. He now knew his adversary, he was in big trouble. He had to play it cool or he might wind up dog food for Jazz. Mane tried to speak but he had cotton mouth. Nervously he spoke, barely able to speak at virtually a whisper.

"Daddy, don't shoot me, don't shoot, it's me. It's Mane. Your son."

Willie created the space for excruciatingly high tension by not saying a word for about one minute. To Mane, it seemed like an hour.

“The ole man said if you let sh#t in, it just spreads all around. You a piece a sh#t, ain’t you boy?”

“No Daddy, I ain’t...”

“Then why you keep acting like sh#t then? I ought to spread the sh#t in your head all over this room!”

Anger sprayed from Willie’s voice, it spewed from his soul. Mane, permeated with dread, opted for silence. He was too afraid to move, too frightened of the rising nature of Willie’s discourse. He listened intently as his father sighed gravely.

“Don’t give me an excuse to hurt you, son.”

Willie wanted penitence, servitude from Mane. Correctness, obedience, subservience. He felt a sense of hopelessness, an inability to control him, his own flesh and blood. He fought the rising urge to pull the trigger, to smash the gun against his young face. More important to Mane’s safety was the fact that Willie Jr. had broken a subconscious psychological barrier when he called Mane “son.” If not for that, Willie would have either wounded Mane or pistol-whipped him into submission.

He loved his son deeply. After all, Mane was his first born male child, but he was burdened with great enmity for his son’s irresponsible behavior. Willie believed that ultimately, he, Willie Jr., being Mane’s father, bore the final responsibility for Mane’s actions. Willie couldn’t have Mane acting recklessly, being untrustworthy. They were a good family and his children had a good upbringing.

Willie Jr. began a story which he told succinctly.

“Let me tell you something, Mane. There once was an old religious man who trusted a young man with, prior to this time, untold secrets. The younger man had begged and pleaded with the old man to tell him the ancient secrets. The boy had finally convinced the man not to take the secrets with him to the grave, but share them with him. The old man told the young boy the secrets and also told him never to tell anyone for there would be dire consequences.”

The steel metal of the gun rested coldly against Mane’s head. Mane struggled to stay focused on the story. He wanted to be able to answer any questions relating to this tale, if asked. It was difficult, to say the least, for Mane to stay focused. Willie continued.

“Time passed and sure enough the young boy violated the older man’s trust. What the younger man didn’t know was that the old man was not only religious, but a spiritual man. The spiritual man over the course of a week, would go to the boy’s house at night while he slept, as a spirit. Each night, the man took a part of the boy’s soul with him every time he visited him. Each morning the boy knew that something was different about himself, something was missing. The last night the man visited the boy was a Saturday night.

“The boy was awakened that Sunday morning by the cries of his mother. When the boy opened his eyes, he could only see the inside of his body, as he heard his mother crying; and he could feel his mother’s tears. He felt like he was suffocating, closed in, but he wasn’t, he was trapped. It was not until they placed his casket in the earth, days later, did he realize he was dead and would remain this way for an eternity.”

Willie gave Mane a moment to let the story sink in. Mane didn't get it. And he hoped that he wouldn't get it- the violent, deadly explosion. His father had told him this story and similar ones, and though he didn't know what many of them meant, they all stayed in his mind.

“Don't give me an excuse to hurt you, son.”

Willie Jr. carefully let the cold steel hammer down with his thumb, the gun still pointed at Mane's head. Slowly, he lowered the gun. Willie's eyes, still glaring, brushed past Mane, saying not another word, nor looking his way.

“Don't sh#t where you eat, son. Don't sh#t where you eat!”

Mane stood in the doorway, his body awash in a cold sweat, his mouth open, breathing laboriously. He slumped down to his knees and began to pray to God.

CHAPTER

17

Jazz, the dog, was on a heavy chain behind the house. Had it not been for his dog house, he would have created a full circle in the dirt which surrounded his small wooden shelter. When Jazz was a small German Sheppard puppy, he ran around loose in the yard, jumping, darting, and playing with neighbor children who came over. As he grew older, he learned to stay within the boundaries of the Jones' yard. It wasn't until he grew smarter and bigger, and the children in the neighborhood were chased by him, and a few bitten by him, that he was relegated to the chain. He would remember which child had thrown rocks at him when he was smaller, and was exacting his sweet revenge.

The back screen door creaked slowly open. Willie Jr. walked out disappointedly to bring Jazz scraps from last night's meal.

It was Saturday and Willie Jr. was tired. The early morning rising buttressed with the arduous physical

labor wore on Willie's body and soul. The children hadn't taken out the leftovers which by now had started to smell. He held the leftovers at arm's length.

As Willie got closer to Jazz with the food, Jazz hungrily jumped around, pulling against the chain, barking excitedly.

"Hey, boy, hey Jazz. How you doin', boy? Look what I brought you. Yeah, well I got some good home cookin' for you. Well, it used to be. Nicholas should have gotten this to you sooner."

Willie Jr. kneeled down beside Jazz. He kept the smelly food just out of Jazz's reach, so he could pat him. Willie Jr. got another offensive whiff of the strong smelling food.

"This food really stinks, Jazz. I don't know if you want to eat it or not. I sure wouldn't."

Jazz jumped around barking, tugging at the chain. Willie Jr. set the plate down, his hand barely escaping hungry teeth. Jazz scarfed down the food.

Nicholas walked nonchalantly along the side of the house towards the back yard playing with a yo-yo. Turning the corner, he saw his father feeding Jazz.

"Oh man! I don't believe I forgot to feed Jazz."

Nicholas backed up to the security of the corner of the house and watched. He would have to strain to hear, but then again safety was his friend, plus he had an avenue of escape.

Jazz finished the food. Willie gently stroked his back with the compassion of angels. Jazz looked up at Willie Jr. as if to say, "Is there any more food?" Jazz licked water from his water bowl, and then licked Willie Jr.'s face cheerfully.

"Well, boy, wasn't that good?"

Willie Jr. continued to pat Jazz entering into a silent communion with him.

“I don’t know what I’m gonna do about that boy, Jazz. When I was his age, my Daddy would tear the skin off my back if I acted like him. Hell, he still would.”

Nicholas, with terror in his eyes, looked up to heaven and silently lippered, “Oh no!” He was afraid he had angered his father.

“He just won’t listen, staying out to all times of night.”

Nicholas sighed in relief, wiping his brow. It was difficult for Nicholas to hear. He moved closer staying protectively behind a covering tree.

“There’s just no sense in it. What am I gonna do, Jazz?”

Jazz licked Willie’s face.

“Seem like nothin’s going right any more! I think some of the guys at work are talkin’ about Jackie. Everybody’s after my woman Jazz. And I do mean everybody. I don’t know what to do.”

Jazz started barking towards the overgrown field behind the house. Willie briskly turned to the field. He saw evil aberrations which only he could see.

The dark, almost transparent figure moved in a sideways manner, never changing the gaze of his red beady eyes which were fixed on Willie, deeply penetrating into his soul. The shadow looked eight feet tall as it floated two feet of the ground and above the bushes as it passed. It smiled hideously, which looked like the crevice of a fiery chasm.

Willie Jr.’s face contorted with anger.

“You go to hell! Back where you come from! And leave my baby alone! Damn you if you ever talk about her again!”

When Nicholas looked at the overgrown field where Willie Jr. was looking he saw nothing. Willie Jr. was talking to nothing but bushes and vines. Jazz calmed his barking, tucked his tail and went into his dog house.

“I can trust her. I know I can!”

Nicholas had managed to reach a nearby tree without his father noticing. He hid behind it, in awe of his father’s insanity. Willie moved closer to the overgrown field.

“You evil demon! Don’t try to fill my head with those evil thoughts!”

Willie Jr. snapped off a stout branch, whirling it around over his head. Shouting at the bushes, screaming at the top of his lungs.

“Y’all get away from me and my family. Right now! Damn you! Or I’m gonna kill you now! I’m gonna kill all of you!”

Nicholas absorbed this scene like a sponge. His father was getting worse, and there was nothing he could do. None of the adults believed him when he told them his father was hearing voices, making false accusations, or just plain mentally ill. Willie’s flare-ups into insanity were observed mostly by the neighborhood children, and most certainly always by he and his brothers. He couldn’t remember if his sister Olivia had ever seen him ‘click’. He had mentioned it to Olivia on the telephone when she called home from college. But she gave it no weight. She just blew him off- treating him like the child she thought he was.

Nicholas and his brothers were learning how to survive in a hostile environment in the confines of their own home.

They had learned how to cover for one another. They had learned how not to be at home when their father arrived from work. They learned how to leave the same room in which their father was, if they thought for a second he was about to erupt. In an effort to receive as little collateral damage as possible they learned to have as little contact with their father as possible. They and their friends had learned that it was safe to play in their yard only until it was time for Wardaddy, the name all the children called him now, to come home. At that time, they would take their fun and games to safer ground.

His father's lapses into schizophrenia could last as little as five minutes, but that was enough time in which one could get killed or psychologically damaged for life. Given the fact there were at least four episodes per month at the start- now the episodes were more frequent and lasted longer- the children expended considerable effort trying to avoid Willie Jr. To the children, the episodes lasted forever.

From behind this tree where he threw his first GI Joe paratrooper off the lowest limb, he now witnessed his father's worse demonstration of mental illness. Aside from the physical abuse and the accusations, this was the first time his father had acted out without some stimulus. Or had he really seen something in the bushes? Had there really been some unclean spirits in the bushes? He recalled the theology taught to him in the church Sunday school by the church superintendent.

“I rebuke you satan in the name of Jesus Christ. The blood of Jesus Christ be against you, demons! The power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ be against you right now!”

“Y’all better just get outta here now, just get outta here!”

Willie threw the branch into the bushes, stood there staring at the spot and listening. After a moment, Willie, satisfied that the aberration were gone, turned and walked towards the chinchilla hutch.

The chinchillas scurried for cover as Willie opened the hutch door, entering with a triumphant gait. He opened a cage door, his hand moving over to one of the animals touching the fur of the chinchilla, cautiously petting it. Quick hand movements often lead to a bitter tooth attack by the chinchilla.

Willie Jr., the chinchilla cages in the fan-cooled foreground before him, spoke to the chinchilla in a sing song way.

“That’s right. Be nice. I’m gonna make a fur coat outta you. Eat lots of food, get fat and shiny. Then I’m gonna skin your fat little hinnies.”

He laughed as he closed the cage door, heading out.

Marcus and August sat around the television in the den. Their father slept with a beer can in his hand. Nicholas had come in with the change from the convenience store run.

“Daddy, here’s your change,” Nicholas said to his sleeping father.

“Man, you must be crazy, tryin’ to wake him up.”

Marcus had been enjoying the peace afforded to them while their father slept. Now, Nicholas was breaking the peace, and asking for trouble.

“Yeah, but you remember the last time I didn’t give Daddy his change.”

August said uneasily, “Uh, huh. And I remember the last time you did too. I’m outta here, boy!”

“Me too!” August piped in.

Marcus and August quickly left the room.

Nicholas reluctantly placed his hand on Willie Jr.’s arm. He gently shook it.

“Daddy, Daddy, are you alright? Here’s your change.”

Startled back into reality, Willie Jr. looked left and right, trying to place the noise.

“Daddy, I’m back from the store. Here’s your change.”

“Just put it on my dresser. And don’t steal any.”

Willie, puzzled, got up and followed Nicholas. As soon as Willie got past the telephone he stopped to answer it, even though it had not rang.

“It’s your dime,” Willie said, listening. “Who the hell is this?” He listened again, this time with fire in his eyes. “You chicken sh#t muthaf#@ka!”

Willie slammed the telephone down, staring angrily at it, then headed back to the den.

Nicholas, having witnessed this incident, discounted spiritual intervention by evil spirits, but thought maybe his father was mentally confused because he had just been awakened. He was still asleep. That was it. Sleep confusion. He couldn’t bear the thought of the “Exorcist” in the house. If his father was sick then he could get help. He had to convince

someone that his father needed help. His hand began to tremble as he realized the danger he and his brothers were really in. His compassion swelled for his brothers. Tears filled his eyes as he thought about his mother.

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CHAPTER

18

It was morning. The hammer of the alarm clock striking its two bells broke the painful silence in Willie's bedroom. His hand swiftly, deftly shut off the clock. Willie Jr. brought his hand back, quickly swinging out of bed. He reached down by his shoes and put on his socks. Awakened by the Saturday morning alarm, Jackie laid very still in the bed until her emotions and curiosity overcame her.

"Why you gotta get up so early?"

Willie Jr. pulled his pants up and slipped on his shirt.

"Gotta see somebody about some work."

Jackie slowly pulled herself up into a sitting position. "Why you need to see about work? You already got a job. And who you gonna see?"

Willie stuffed his shirt into his pants, slowly buckled his belt, ignoring Jackie long enough to raise her venom.

"A million questions! A million questions! What difference does it make? Just keep track of my socks!"

“What do you mean a million questions? If you’d tell me somethin’ sometimes, I wouldn’t have to ask!”

Willie never looked at her during their entire conversation. This infuriated her even more.

“You never tell me nothin’! Willie? Willie! Damn it. Keep up with your own damn socks!”

Willie stepped into his shoes with the annoyance of demons confronted with prayer, swaggering out of the room with much bravado.

The washing machine was located in the kitchen, three feet from the stove. It was just completing a noisy, unbalanced spin cycle. It squeaked to a stop.

Jackie walked in with a red bandanna tied around her head, having heard the machine stop. She raised the top to get the clothes out, putting the clothes in the wicker basket. Someone was knocking at the front door.

“Somebody get the door!”

She continued to take the wash out of the machine and into the basket.

The knocking continued unabated.

“Mane! Nicholas! Get the door.”

Jackie straightened up, listening for the movement of children going to answer the door. There was no sound but her own, no one was around. Some of the clothes fell on the floor.

“Dang it!”

The knocking at the door continued.

“Wait a minute!” she yelled in the general direction of the door.

She put the basket down, went to the door, straightening her dress, primping. Jackie looked through the window to see that it was Bubba, Willie's buddy from work.

"Oh, it's just Bubba."

She opened the door. Bubba held the screen door open with his body.

"Well hello there, Bubba, how ya' doin'?"

"Oh fine Jackie, how ya' doin'?"

"Jus' fine. Is the door bell not working?"

Bubba shrugged his shoulders. Jackie leaned forward, and pressed the doorbell. She listened as it sang its self-same song.

"Are you lookin' for Willie? He's not here."

"Where'd he go? Will he be back soon?" Bubba was a little surprised that Willie wasn't home. Suddenly, he became uneasy. "I really wanted to talk to him."

"Well I don't really know, he didn't tell me what time he'd be back. He said somethin' about a job. What'd you wanta talk to him about?"

"I guess it wouldn't hurt to mention it to you, you being his wife and all. Things have been a little strained at work. I wanted to come over to see if there was anythin' I could do to help him. At least get him to talk about it."

"C'mon in and talk to me while I hang out the clothes."

Bubba followed Jackie into the kitchen. She started to pick up the basket, but Bubba reached for it.

"Oh, that's okay, I got it." She had a thing about other people touching her clothes.

Jackie picked up the basket, heading outside to hang out the clothes. Bubba followed.

Bubba sat down at the picnic table while Jackie hung up the clothes. Bubba noticed how shapely Jackie was from the rear, especially in her tight knit dress. He slowly shook his head, “uh, uh, uh,” sighing deeply to himself.

“Well, Bubba, what’s going on at work?”

Bubba nervously moved the rim of his hat through his fingers as he spoke.

“He’s just not himself any more. He stays off to himself. He doesn’t have much to say any more.”

Bubba placed his hat on the grass beside the basket. He reached into the clothes basket, pulling up a shirt in an effort to assist Jackie. She was pinning a shirt to the line.

Jackie turned to reach for the next piece of clothing. Bubba had it in his hand.

“Bubba you don’t have to help me with the clothes, I can manage myself,” Jackie said sternly.

Jackie turned back to line to hang up Willie Jr.’s shirt.

“Now, I don’t see much harm in Willie staying off to himself. He stay outta trouble that way, don’t he?”

“Yeah, that’s true, but things just aren’t the same. Lately he’s been sayin’ things that ain’t true.”

“Like what?” Jackie slowly stopped hanging the clothes and focused on Bubba.

“He thinks we been talkin’ about you,” Bubba said with quiet determination.

Jackie swung around with the curiosity of a kitten.

“Talkin’ about me? Well, have you?” Jackie said coquettishly.

“No, we ain’t, but Willie say we do.”

“Oh, does he?”

“Jackie, Willie accused Toothless of sneakin’ - ”

“Sneakin’?”

Bubba stopped to think about what he was about to say. He wanted to make sure he phrased it correctly.

“Well, sometimes he gets this wild look in his eyes, and he says things that just don’t make sense. And then a few minutes later he don’t remember what he said.”

“I know what you mean,” Jackie said reflectively, “I’ve seen that look myself.”

Jackie’s mind wandered into the distance. She looked towards the clothesline, but past it. The clothes blew in a melancholy breeze. This moment of reckoning seemed like an eternity. She knew somehow, maybe on a spiritual level, that today was a turning point for her, for her family, for Willie.

“I’m afraid he may lose his job if things keep going the way they are. If there’s anythin’ that I can do, give me a call.”

“Okay, Bubba.” She thanked him.

Bubba departed through the carport.

It was like a dream. She heard Bubba, and then again she didn’t. She suppressed her growing fear and her the negative thoughts. She saw him leave, but it was in a fog. What is going on with Willie Jones Jr.? Jackie thought to herself. Could the children be right after all?

The wind kicked a sheet up, slapping her across the face. The reality of her waiting household chores took hold of her mind. She left Willie’s issues behind for another day.

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CHAPTER

19

The television mindlessly blared the antics of the Road Runner cartoon show. With much commotion, the children played monopoly in front of the television, which was much too loud. August and Marcus tussled over a yo-yo, rolling over one another, rough-housing. Nicholas got out of their path.

Willie Jr. walked up to the door of the chinchilla hutch in concert with the cartoon audio. An exaggerated car crash could be heard on the television at the very same moment Willie Jr. opened the hutch door.

Dead chinchillas lay before Willie, sprawled about in their small cages. Bits of detached fur floated past Willie, who stood flattened by the crush of blue emotion. A chinchilla lay in the cage nearest him, apparently a victim of heat exhaustion. He looked past the dead chinchilla bodies.

A low sound, guttural and primitive, began in the depths of Willie's torso, rising in pitch and volume as

it made its way up his body and escaped through pursed lips. His head rolled back violently as an anguished, tormented cry rose from his soul, shaking his entire body.

Willie's face transformed from no expression to one of shock and disbelief; into anger, then rage. Willie Jr. grabbed a cage and hurled it to the cement floor. He kicked it across the closed shelter. Pulled another down, and slammed it into a wall.

The den was the closest room to the chinchilla hutch even though the hutch was outside and connected to the house by the carport. Nicholas and his brothers heard their father's scream. His brothers didn't know what that sound was, but Nicholas was unmistakable about to whom the scream belonged.

To Nicholas it was a matter of cause- what caused it? And which one of his brothers were going to suffer the consequences for the cause? He hoped none of his brothers caused the scream, and if anyone was the blame he wanted it to be him. Nicholas tired of seeing his younger brothers getting beat up unmercifully.

Nicholas turned off the sound to the television. The children stopped their horsing around. They listened intently to the chinchilla cages being thrown around. The children could hear the grunts their father made when he tossed the cages about. Something was terribly wrong. The disturbance in the hutch could be heard clearly now. It would surely spill over into the house. The children knew that they would bear the brunt of their father's pain.

"Listen," Nicholas said cautiously, "Shut up you guys! Listen!"

“What’s going on?” questioned Marcus. “I’m getting outta here!”

“Me, me, too!”

With that Marcus and August were gone. The screen door closed loudly as they scurried out. Nicholas reached over, and turned off the television. It was as if the light bouncing from the television to his iris somehow exacerbated the situation. He listened harder, more intently, moving down the wall, easing to the back porch window, sneaking a peak. Having seen nothing, Nicholas thought it wise to join his brothers.

Willie Jr. kicked another cage. And another. He then tried to calm himself- he sat down on a cage. Willie turned his eyes towards heaven, and spoke in a quiet voice. “Lord, why you making my life so hard? It’s two steps forward and one step back. Seem like nothin’ I do works out!”

Willie looked around at the mess he made.

“Lord, I need encouragement, not discouragement.”

Willie Jr. walked out of the hutch, slowly closing it shut as if it were a crypt... his crypt. He walked dejectedly towards the house, his spirit broken, his hope washed into a sea of failure. He was confused. He had done all the right things. He went to church every Sunday, even sang in the choir. It was all a lie- his Christianity, his apparently successful job- his life. All a lie.

Willie crushed his Marlboro underfoot. He had needed it to calm his nerves. He slowly walked into the house via the back door, entering the kitchen. He paused at the back door, leaning on it until it closed. He imagined himself to be a failed Egyptian king, a Pharaoh, prepared for the journey to the afterlife. The

burial chamber was being closed on him forever. At the very moment the last glimmer of light diminished, as the chamber door closed, he awoke from his comma, realizing he was trapped forever in his elaborate tomb.

Willie moved unconsciously over to the refrigerator, opened it, staring inside, oblivious to anything inside. He picked up a can of Budweiser and popped the top.

Willie walked over to the kitchen table, sat down looking blankly into the television in the adjacent den, but not turned on. It offered him no solace.

Jackie was in the bedroom, dusting furniture. She came into the living room, humming to a tune in her head. She saw Willie sitting in the kitchen. She hadn't heard any of the commotion because she had run to the store to buy some furniture polish. It was after her return, while Willie was still outside, that Calvin James, a high school friend, had called and invited himself over.

"Willie Jr.," Jackie said, concealing her excitement. "Guess what Willie Jr.?"

Willie didn't lift a hair on his head.

"C.J. called," Jackie said, full of anticipation.

Willie looked up puzzled. Who the hell is C.J.? And why should I care? Willie thought.

"Calvin James called a few minutes ago. Said he's in town from Washington. Says he might stop by this afternoon, in a half-hour."

Willie remotely noticed her new found effervescence and it further exasperated him.

"Call C.J. back and tell C.J. not to bother. I don't want Calvin James in my house!"

Jackie walked into the kitchen, and stood just to his right, but behind him. Both looked forward towards the television, which was off. It was habitual.

“Say what?” Jackie questioned, two octaves higher than a moment before. “I don’t understand. What do you mean?”

Willie Jr., no emotion on his face, stated matter-of-factly, “I said I don’t want him in this house. You don’t understand English?”

“What?”

“You don’t understand English now?”

Jackie was obviously disturbed. She looked down at Willie Jr., who was visibly not himself. She couldn’t focus on that; she didn’t want to because of the pressing issue at hand that had to be resolved.

“What part of that don’t you understand, missy?”

She sat down at the kitchen table. She pulled her chair closer to the corner of the table, to be closer to him.

“Willie...”

“All of a sudden you jus’ don’t understand, now that Mr. Man is coming over?”

“Willie Jr., what’re you talkin’ ‘bout?!” She remained calm. She knew instinctively how important it was not to get him upset. She spoke in a more reserved, calm voice. “What’s he ever done to you?” She again began to get more excited, not being able to control herself.

“I don’t like anybody talkin’ about my woman!”

“Talkin’ about me? I haven’t seen him for years! How - ”

“- That’s not what I hear! What?! I’m supposed to be Boo Boo the fool now!”

Most often, Willie needed a trigger to send him to the other side- to the dark side- to make him the person he was not- the person he knew not. Sometimes, the children and he would be sitting around watching television, and for some unknown reason, Willie would start talking about people in the street who meant other people, specifically the children, no good. His eyes would glaze over.

The children learned that it was at these times that they had to fear for their safety. They thought they had to fear for their lives. They didn't know how correct they were.

Jackie was either at work or too busy to watch television. She didn't like the same shows as Willie and the boys. When the boys tried to explain Willie's change to Jackie, she heard them but she always returned to a state of denial. She had more real issues pressing her for attention. Not only did she not believe them, she gave the issue no further thought.

Unknown to Jackie, she now supplied Willie with the necessary catalyst to trigger his transition. She fed his insane jealousy through no fault of her own. The apparent failure with the chinchillas and the advent of Calvin James fueled his descent into darkness.

Jackie, flabbergasted, stood, rising slowly, remembering not to get too upset so as not to further fuel Willie's emotions. She leaned on the table with both hands, staring angrily into his deranged face. She was both afraid and defiant.

"Who told you that? You know that ain't true! Who said anythin' to you? Was it that Toothless creep?"

"Never mind who told me that, or anything else! He's not comin' over here and that's that!"

Emotionally drained, Willie Jr. got up, moving as if he had one foot in the grave. He walked dispassionately into the den.

“Willie Jr., don’t you turn your back on me!” Jackie scolded. “This ain’t over yet!” she declared, having lost her composure.

He turned the television on and put the sound up loud enough to exacerbate the situation. “Gunsmoke,” a favorite television show of his, was coming on. He plopped backwards into the shelter of his favorite chair.

“Well, you ain’t telling me what to do! This is my house too, you know. I invited him and he’s comin’ over. You are not the only one living here Willie Jr.!”

Willie craned his head towards the kitchen, towards Jackie.

“Well we’ll see about that. You just bring C.J. on over here. We’ll see what happens... let him, C.J., come on by.”

Jackie nervously picked up the kitchen telephone to dial Calvin James. She wanted to tell him not to come. Jackie was aggravated. She listened as the telephone rang on the other end. She fidgeted, knowing she wasn’t going to catch him in time. She now began to worry.

To the telephone, Jackie shrieked, “Come on, damnit.” She was practically yelling as the phone continued to ring in Calvin James’ hotel room.

“Come on, pick it up. Hot damnit! Pick it up!”

Jackie slammed the handset down. She walked into the den, positioning herself by Willie Jr. She stood there with her hands on her hips, moving between Willie Jr. and the television.

“Willie, we need to talk!”

Willie just stared a hole in her where the television picture tube would have been.

“Listen, Buster Brown, don’t act like you don’t see me! Nigger, don’t you ignore me! Why don’t you answer me? If you are really a man, you’d stand here and talk to me!”

Willie Jr. considered standing, but did not. He decided to stay put. He shifted his weight in the chair as if to stand, gauging her response, concluding not to play by her rules. He remained seated, chuckling nervously.

Jackie’s ears alerted her to a peculiar strangeness in his laughter. By now his chuckle had become laughter. She wanted to attack him verbally, but she put her emotions on reserve.

“It’s not funny, Willie Jr.”

Willie’s laughter wasn’t directed towards Jackie, but to his apparent failure with the chinchillas. How could he have possibly thought he could make money off of them? And Jackie, if she hadn’t had the last three children, we wouldn’t be in this situation, Willie thought angrily, misplacing the blame.

The doorbell rang, interrupting the strained atmosphere in the house. They stared spitefully at one another. The doorbell rang again.

Jackie was hesitant and acutely aware of Willie’s threats. But she was going to answer the door. Regardless of Willie’s attitude or temperament, she would greet Calvin James like everything was okay and see what Willie would do. Hell, what could Willie do? What would he do - beat him up? Her thoughts brought a smile to her beleaguered face.

Calvin James searched for his reflection in the glass on the front door. He smoothed his hair back, wetting his index finger with saliva to smooth his eyebrows into place on his handsome face. Dressed in the newest fashion, he eagerly awaited showing them off.

Jackie opened the door less reluctantly than either she or Calvin James had anticipated.

“Well, don’t you look too fit to be tied,” Calvin James exclaimed. “Girl, it’s so good to see you. You look better than ever.”

Calvin gave her a big hug. Willie could hear it all from the other room. He could feel it too. Jackie stood in the doorway for a moment, bewitched by his good looks. Calvin walked past her, deeper into the living room, deeper into Willie’s world.

“And where’s Willie Jr.? I can’t wait to see how he looks. You know, how good father time has been to him.”

Willie Jr.’s eyes flared upon hearing Calvin James’ voice.

Willie stood up briskly, walking out of the den into the living room. His intentions were not to greet Calvin James.

“Hi you, Willie Jr.! How you been doin’?”

Calvin extended his hand.

Willie Jr. did not shake Calvin’s hand, but stopped for a moment.

“Get the f#@k outta my house!”

“Willie?” Calvin James said, flabbergasted, “uh, is somethin’ wrong?”

Willie continued to the bedroom where he planned to get his gun.

Calvin looked at Jackie who only shook her head in disbelief.

“Did I do something to offend Willie?”

“Oh no, no. It’s just that... uh...”

“Is Willie all right? Is something wrong with him?”

“Uh... this really isn’t a good time. I tried callin’ you.”

“I was just passing through... that’s all... thought I’d just stop by, you know.”

“I know. I’m sorry, but this just really isn’t a good time.”

Jackie turned away from Calvin James to look down the hallway. Willie broke the plane of their bedroom entrance. Jackie saw Willie Jr. coming down the hallway with the gun, each footstep poignantly emphasizing his anger, contorting his face further.

“I tried to call and tell you not to come over here.”

“What’s going on? Do you need me to stay?”

“No, no, I need you to leave. I need you to leave now. Now!”

Willie Jr. came into the living room with the gun lowered.

“Didn’t I tell you to get the f#@k out of my house?!”

Calvin James looked down and saw the gun. His body tensed in fear.

“No, Willie, you didn’t,” Calvin said with quiet agitation.

“Well, C.J.,” Willie said softly. Then yelling at the top of his lungs, “Get the f#@k out of my house!”

Calvin turning to Jackie, “Jackie... you know... I think you’re right. It is time for me to go.”

Jackie nodded politely, motioning for him to leave.

“I said for those hard of hearing,” Willie said in normal tones. “Get the f#@k outta my house!!” Willie yelled at the top of his lungs again.

Calvin backed out on his heels, looking at his watch in a nervous comic effort to relieve the tension. He backed towards the door, looking into Willie's crazed eyes and then at the gun, which was now aimed at his crotch.

"Would you look at the time, I really have to be going! Well nice seeing you Jackie... and you too Willie... bye."

Calvin exited hurriedly, stumbling over his feet, but being careful not to fall. Jackie did an immediate about-face, turning towards Willie Jr. Her face was set in ardent anger.

"Willie, are you crazy?!" Her denial up until this point would not allow her to accept the answer.

Willie Jr., eyes were emotionless, set in the clam glaze of detached dementia. The unmitigating nerve of Calvin James coming into his house, his castle- his domain- after his woman, his prize. His insides were about to explode with anger. On the outside, he was as peaceful as an early morning snowfall. The nerve of Jackie, welcoming Calvin James in his space with open arms.

Willie's mind swirled in a sea of uncertainty and fear, languishing back and forth- from reality to the contrived. The fear of losing control- slipping over the edge. The uncertainty of his jealousy. The uncertainty of his life, his future.

Jackie's reaction to Willie Jr.'s expression caused her face to change from anger to fear. In silence she steeled herself. The tension between she and Willie became electric as he locked his stare upon her. A lightning bolt could have passed between the two.

At panic's door, Jackie's burning fear gripped her. She was unable to get her feet to receive the message

to run. A fearful tear washed across her eyes. She gently shook her head. She knew she was in trouble.

With his eyes fixed on Jackie's soul, Willie Jr. gradually raised the threatening gun to just above his shoulder.

With the speed of a bolt of lightning, Willie unexpectedly hit Jackie with a crushing smack across the face with the cold hardness of his gun. She crumpled backwards falling against the wall with a thud, landing hard in the corner. His eyes fixed strongly on her position. Turning maliciously, he slowly walked away from her. He moved his eyes from her at the last possible second, when it was physically impossible to do otherwise. Heavy of hand and heart, displaying no emotion, Willie absently walked away with zombie-like footfalls, without a trace of remorse.

CHAPTER

20

The flat-top house that Willie built was quiet but for the sound of field rats gnawing, filling their small bellies until the furry animals could eat no more.

Ten inch long field rats sat atop a nearly empty bag of chinchilla food pellets in the old chinchilla hutch. With no chinchillas to eat the feed, and no foot traffic in and out of the hutch, the over-sized rats were having fat-belly, hard-pellet feed-filled days. A rat ran out of the hutch, along the foundation on the outside of the house, every now and then, stopping to sniff the air and dig into the ground.

Mane left the house, slipping out for the night on his now twice a week night foray with his partners in crime. Willie knew he was leaving at night. Willie continued to punish him for going out, but this didn't stop Mane. Willie was getting tired of beating the boy. He beat the boy too much. But this is not what weighed on Willie's mind.

Willie was concerned about the reality of his own situation. He questioned his mental well being. Additionally, his financial woes were deepening. He was also troubled with his increasingly distant relationship with Jackie. He didn't remember hitting her. He only knew that she said he had.

Once during their numerous discussions, she mentioned the children's accusations of his mental instability. He could only remember the beginning of the events espoused in the accusations, questioning his overly-abusive disciplinary nature. He tried but he could never remember the conclusion of the events mentioned by either Jackie or the children.

It was dark. In the still of night, rats could be heard gnawing. A rat moved along the water pipes which led up to the washing machine. The washing machine was in the kitchen next to the stove. One rat made it to the top of the pipes. It inched around the back of the washing machine, following its olfactory senses, squeezing by the stove to find itself on a glorious wide span of tiled kitchen floor overflowing with food fragments.

Another rat, followed by two cohorts, made it to the end of the metal pipes. They followed the rubber pipes up the washing machine, finally squeezing up and over the top of the washing machine, landing on the lid. They peered around at the radiant expanse of blue kitchen, awash in moonlight. Slowly, they moved from the washing machine to the stove top where the fried chicken and cold biscuits from dinner lay waiting.

The four dark figures appeared larger than a kitten, and just a bit smaller than an adult cat. Sniffing the food with their long mature snouts, they studied the

chicken slowly. Their whiskers swept across the surface of the food. The rats ignored their instincts to leave, sniffing the presence of humans. They followed their appetites onto the plate of left-over chicken.

With his belly full, one adventurous animal climbed down to the floor. Looking around the kitchen, this curious intruder meandered over to the hallway entrance. The smells from the hallway wafted into his nostrils, and piqued its interest. It hesitated for a moment, then headed down the hallway towards the children's room, stopping at the door which lay ajar. After a brief hesitation, considering the danger which may lay within, it continued into the room.

The shadowy shape of a child lying under the covers could be seen. He laid very still. The covers rustled, then a large, powerful fart was emitted from the child's rear.

"You stinky dog!" August said.

Marcus laughed. August laughed too.

"Y'all shut up over there and go to sleep!" Nicholas said.

There was a brief silence, then Marcus farted again. Now they all laughed.

"Y'all ain't nothin' but a bunch of fartheads!" Nicholas continued.

"You're the biggest farthead!" said Marcus.

Marcus faked a fart and laughed.

"Yeah, you're the biggest farthead!" August said as he giggled, "Farthead, farthead."

August faked a couple of farts with his mouth. August and Marcus laughed.

"You better be quiet before you wake up Wardaddy!" Nicholas said.

The children kept laughing. August fell out of the bed laughing, hitting the floor with a loud thud. The laughter stopped as the room filled with the children's fear. They awaited the dreaded response from Willie Jr.'s adjacent room. Tension gripped their bodies. Nicholas swallowed hard.

Willie Jr.'s booming voice echoed through the walls from the room next door. "Y'all be quiet in there. Don't make me have to come in there!"

August had a minor asthma attack. He quickly got his aspirator, and crawled back into the bed. The family doctor had attributed his asthma to his nerves. The children were silent, but for accusatory looks at one another. Small fingers pointed in the darkness accusing each other of the blame.

The moon was skirted with clouds. In the window sill, a lone rat moved towards Nicholas's arm, which rested on the sill as he slept. The rat crawled down Nicholas's arm into the bed- under the covers, causing him to stir. It then resurfaced by his face. The rat's whiskers brushed his face- waking him.

Rubbing his eyes into focus, Nicholas saw what he thought was a rat. His eyes widened as he realized it was indeed a rat. Screaming wildly he jumped out of bed and into Marcus and August's bed- waking them up, creating pandemonium. August and Marcus didn't know why Nicholas was in their bed- but they started screaming too.

"There's a rat in here! There's a rat in here!" Nicholas screamed.

The door burst open with a bang. The door crashed upon the unsuspecting doorstep, framing Willie Jr.'s silhouette in the doorway. The children's screaming came to an abrupt halt as they gulped their last breath of excitement. The fear of the rat, replaced by that of their father.

Nicholas said, "There's a rat in here, Daddy! There's a rat in here!"

"I don't give a rat's ass about what's in here. Keep the freakin' noise down! Be quiet in here."

"But Daddy, there's a rat in my-"

"Didn't you hear me, boy? If I hear another peep outta either one of you, all of you gonna get a killing, you got that?"

"Yes, sir!"

"I gotta get up in the morning!"

Willie slowly closed the door, his eyes connected to theirs until only a slither of light cut into the darkness, then he slammed the door with a bang!

"There's still a rat in here," Nicholas said quietly. "If Mama was here she'd do somethin'."

Scared and remaining motionless, Nicholas cut his eyes left and right trying to locate the rat. He reluctantly and quietly tip-toed over to the dresser, reached in and retrieved a flashlight.

He turned, promptly tip-toed back to the bed, picking up a shoe on the way back. While sitting up in bed Indian style, he panned the room with the light. He saw neither hide nor hair of the rat. He flashed the light directly into his eyes in disgust. Eventually, he laid back and fell asleep.

The field rats became brazen in their visits and their approach to the house. They had taken ownership of the house as their territory. One day while hitting softball pop-ups in the back yard, an emboldened rat scurried in the path of the bat-yielding Nicholas. Nicholas shrieked and started to run.

“Hit it with the bat!” yelled Marcus. “Use the baseball bat!”

It took only a brief moment for the sound advice to register. Gathering courage from his soul, Nicholas swung at the rat as it rapidly changed directions. He closed in on its ever changing position while Marcus jumped around barking yelps to direct the furry over-zealous beast towards Nicholas. He closed his eyes at the second of impact. Whump! The ground thudded with the impact of bat and beast.

When Nicholas opened his eyes he found himself a good distance from the creature. He was surprised to see his younger brother standing beside him laughing and pointing a bemused finger at the dead rat. Jittery but victorious, Nicholas joined Marcus in the nervous laughter of which memories are made. They guffawed as they moved unconsciously further away from the perpetrator.

“Man did you see that?” Nicholas said nearly screaming.

“That rat was over here,” Marcus said electrified, “then over there!”

“It was all over the place,” Nicholas roared, “then boom! I knock the hell out of it!” He bent over laughing.

“You did man, you did!” Marcus bellowed. “Look at how scared you are!” Marcus laughed. “You shakin’

man! You shakin’.” Marcus grabbed his sides because he was laughing so hard.

“At least I ain’t peeing in my pants!” Nicholas laughed slapping his pants. “That rat scared the pee outta me,” he roared. “It scared me to death!”

“Me too!”

They fell to the ground laughing at themselves. It took them minutes to compose themselves.

“Throw that rat in the trash Nick,” said Marcus.

“You do it. I’m the one who killed it.”

“No way. Go get a shovel or something to pick it up. It might have rabies or something.”

“Get outta here, Marc!” Nicholas said, “It ain’t got rabies. And I don’t need no shovel. I jus’ hope it don’t have no fleas.”

“On second thought, I don’t know ‘bout this,” Marcus said cautiously.

Nicholas reached down and picked the rat up by its tail, pinching it tightly between his fingers. “I’m gonna let the other rats see that if they come this way like this one did, that this is what they gonna get.” In a manly gait, Nicholas headed towards the back bushes.

He was going to throw the small predator in the general direction from which he thought it had come. Nicholas would soon realize that the small animal had only been glazed by the bat, subdued only into unconsciousness. The rat opened its small dark eyes. It began wiggling to get free.

Nicholas screamed, almost having a seizure trying to let the rat go and distance himself from it. Both he and Marcus sought the shelter of their house. The riotous laughter they shared this time was adrenaline-filled and coated with a thick layer of reality. The rat had made a mockery of them. Marcus vowed never to

let Nicholas forget this day. Nicholas vowed to end the siege the rodents had on their house and on them.

It was that very heart-rending afternoon Nicholas robbed his savings he had stashed in the dresser drawer to buy rat poison from the grocery store. He filled the rat holes around the foundation of the house, rat trails and any locations which signaled their presence with poison. In a couple of days he could smell the success of his efforts.

CHAPTER

21

Pouring from a giant vat, the molten glass dropped down in short fat cylinders to the awaiting mold makers. The glass was deposited onto a slow-moving conveyor belt as white hot bottles, slowly cooling to red hot bottles before entering the large wide-mouthed oven. On the other side of the heavy industrial oven where they were tempered, the meticulously lined bottles were cooled by short blasts of room temperature silicon sprays. Hundreds of Coca-Cola bottles, Pepsi bottles, vinegar bottles, and you name it, marched down the line.

The bottles were winding their way down the line towards the bottle inspector. At this station, the inspector was Jackie. She looked over at a new hire and remembered. She thought of the time when she first started to work at Morris Glass Works. They had asked her to go get a bottle stretcher. It had been a joke. There was no such a thing as a bottle stretcher. They had all laughed, watching her go from one inspector to another asking for a bottle stretcher.

Finally, an enamored box staker had clued her in on the joke.

They once sent a hot bottle up the line from the hot end. It had burned her hand. It wasn't at all funny, and she let them know it. She had since seen new hires twisting around, trying to shake off a hot bottle, that was stuck to their hands. Hot damn! Sticky hot glass was not fun.

Jackie now worked at the Morris Glass Works factory, located four miles west of town. It was a much better job than the hosiery factory job, which she had when she first started working. The glass factory employed many of the town's high school graduates at a premium dollar. The high wages were due largely to the fact, that there was a union. Like Jackie, many of the workers at the glass plant were instrumental in helping the union take root in this southern factory.

The factory was a large industrial complex. The warehouse section of the huge building was about two enormous city blocks wide and four blocks long. It was a new annex to the rest of the building, which was about eight blocks square. Jackie worked in the products division. The bottles streamed out of the hot end section of the facility which was connected to the raw materials section of the plant, mostly located outside. There the raw materials were combined, or prepared for delivery into the hot end.

The hot end was named that for one, and only one, reason: it was searing, blistering heat in the extreme! Workers in the hot end wore T-shirts under long sleeve shirts year round. It was so hot, that wearing extra clothing didn't make any difference. After you had

been in the hot end for about a minute, your clothes were soaked in your sweat. The clothes kept one from getting burned by the baffles and heat.

The hot end workers handled the baffles, molds, and an assortment of bottle-making interests which go into making a glass bottle. And in handling these items, the heat from the hearth, where the bottles were actually molded together, would cause the hair on their eyebrows to curl up. And the hair on their arms, if unprotected by long sleeves, would either curl up, or be scorched off.

These men, as there were no women working in the hot end, literally, risked life and limb in the production of glassware, primarily soda bottles, vinegar bottles, and other food product glassware.

The conveyor belt, filled with hundreds of red hot bottles, in rows of thirty, just out of the oven, marched the bottles towards the waiting inspector. The bottles wound their way down the line, into a single file, where under the glare of a bright tungsten lamp, an inspector stared with mindless numbness at each product.

Jackie picked a defective bottle off of the line, and threw it down a re-cycling chute. She was wearing glasses to keep flying shards of glass out of her eyes, and a bandanna around her head, which made her look like a gypsy.

Out of the background, another worker approached Jackie and tapped her on the shoulder. It was break time.

“Break time!” The relief worker said. The woman gestured with her hands, simulating breaking a stick. The noise from the forklifts and heavy machinery in

the factory was often deafening, so ear plugs were a must.

“Thank you!” Jackie said, “I need a break.

Jackie headed to the break room, her shapely figure beckoning the lustful looks of old and young men alike. The jealousy of the women spewed out in the form of gossip.

The break room was fashioned in a modern country decorum. Red and white checkerboard vinyl tablecloths adorned the eight plastic tables, which had backless, and equally hard plastic chairs. It was clear, despite the room’s flaws, that a woman helped design the room. The pleasant changes in the break room would not have occurred, if not for the union.

The walls were lined with snack machines, a couple of refrigerators, and soda machines. On the opposite wall were the cubby holes for individual lunches, and a large, distant ice machine sat in a lonely corner of the room. Jackie entered the break room with her lunch bag. She never left her lunch in the refrigerators or in the cubby.

Bessie, 37, an attractive divorcee, sat among the red and white checkerboard tables. She sat alone at the table, her food untouched. There was one other person sitting in the break room. Only moments earlier, she had entered the break room. She knew that Jackie would not be far behind. Her break came at the same time as Jackie’s and she couldn’t wait to talk to Jackie. She hadn’t seen Jackie since the mishap, the accident. That’s what Jackie called it, but everyone knew different.

When she saw Jackie, she waved excitedly. She motioned Jackie over to sit with her. She knew she

would be reluctant to talk about it. Bessie stared curiously at Jackie's face as she approached and started to talk before Jackie could sit down.

"Girl, your face is lookin' better," Bessie said, having imagined it to be much worse, based on the gossip she had heard. As always, the girls had been talking.

Jackie immediately veered off to the snack machines, touching her face lightly. Her face showed the pain which she had been trying to forget, and no amount of makeup could hide. Bessie studied her carefully. Jackie got a snack and went over to the table where Bessie was sitting, feigning sitting at another table. She sat down hard, and opened her bag slowly. She breathed a sigh of shameful embarrassment.

"Come on, girl," Bessie asked passionately, "tell me what's going on. Anythin' new from the Twilight Zone? Huh? Tell me how you got smashed like that in the face."

"It's a long story."

"I bet it is. That's okay, I'm not going nowhere."

Jackie stared into Bessie's big brown eyes. She then looked at the tablecloth.

"What do you do when...", Jackie started, as she tried to control her emotions, "when a man's insanely jealous? He's not the same- not the same man I married." She stopped to composed herself. "I don't know what to do... with him... myself... the chil'ren. God, it's such a mess."

The only other person in the break room left, leaving them to talk with more privacy.

"You know everybody's talkin'- talkin' about Willie Jr.- say he's flipped out. This is a small town you know. And people are talkin'."

“I know, I know, let them talk,” Jackie said tearfully, pathetically.

Jackie looked away from Bessie. She searched the room for unseen comfort, having received none from Bessie, only cat-like curiosity. She reflected deeply, impassioned thoughts...

“Willie Jr. ain’t crazy,” Jackie said in Willie’s defense, “he’s just mean like his Daddy. I guess fruit don’t fall too far from the tree.”

Bessie was all ears.

“The chil’ren all say that he’s been acting crazy.” Jackie paused to think. “He ain’t crazy, he’s just mean- I ain’t seen nothin’ but mean outta him for months.”

Jackie listened to herself tell Bessie this, and heard herself for the first time. Was she trying to convince herself that he wasn’t crazy? Was she being true to the situation? Was she being honest with herself, her children? Were her children telling the truth about Willie? From this moment on, she began to doubt the direction in which her life was going. And she now questioned the nature of the abuse her children had received and would receive from her husband.

“Come on, honey, you look a mess. Talk to me, girl.”

“I’m just... I’m just so tired. So, so tired,” Jackie whispered reluctantly, “I don’t feel like I can make it anymore, sometimes. I’m about to give up on life.”

“No, girl, don’t do that!”

They both sat quietly for a moment, which seemed like an eternity- absorbed in the painful gravity of the moment.

After a moment, Jackie said, “Do you remember Calvin James?”

“From high school?” Bessie piped in more lively! “C.J., Calvin, suave, James, the lady killer from Manilla? Heart throb with the big knob?”

“Yeah, yeah. Well, he came over a couple of days ago.”

“Did he? And?”

Handling her curiosity wasn't one of Bessie's stronger attributes.

“He called outta the blue, right-”

“Right, right!”

“Said he was comin' over, right,” Jackie said both more agitated and more excited, “and Willie acted like we'd been carryin' on.”

“Well, he is fine if I 'member right,” Bessie said anxiously, “and I do remember! I can see how Willie Jr. might wonder, any man might.”

They both stared at one another.

“You did get his phone number, right?”

They laughed at one another like giddy school girls, breaking Jackie's tension. They now sounded more like two friends chatting about old times than true confessions of the black and blue.

“Well he ain't got nothin' to wonder about,” Jackie steaming ahead, her voice and temper rising.

“Sure, you know that, but maybe Willie Jr. don't.”

Jackie couldn't believe her ears, Bessie was coming to a man's defense. Unbelievable. Jackie shifted towards Bessie. She sat on the edge of her chair, leaned forward, her face set in anger, her eyes, cold as a dead nail.

“That don't give him the right to hit me, does it?”

Jackie said sternly, starting to cry. Her hands trembled.

“Why do men think they can do this to women?”

Jackie continued, as she stifled her tears.

“Girl, what you doing?” Bessie said, very animated, “Why don’t you leave?”

“C’mon, I can’t do that.”

“What’re you talkin’ about? You can’t. Why not?”

“It’s just too hard.”

“What do you mean? Ain’t nothin’ hard about it. Just get yo’self together and go. Better yet, kick his butt out. He can’t treat you like that.”

“Oh, Bessie, you don’t understand.”

“Jackie- there ain’t nothin’ to understand. The man beat you up! He hurt your children. You gotta protect them. How can you let him hurt the children?”

Tears swelled up in Jackie’s eyes. “What am I gonna do? What can I do? I can’t just leave, oh sweet Jesus, what am I to do?” Tears rolled down her face. “I love him, Bessie. He loves me too. You can’t just walk out on someone who loves you!”

“Love? Love?” Bessie said incredulously.

Bessie shook her head, rubbed Jackie’s shoulder, in an effort to calm her down.

“Listen, Tina, what’s love got to do with it? Girl, you don’t beat someone you love,” Bessie said gravely.

“I know he loves me. He’s been good to us- built that house- brings in good money. He never goes whoring around and don’t drink much at all. And he’s takes good care of the kids while I’m at work...”

“Good care of the kids? Hittin’ them? Scaring them? Who you think you talkin’ to? This is Bessie!”

“All kids scared of their daddies,” Jackie said in Willie’s defense. She tried to no avail to convince herself that what she was saying was true. “He’s got to discipline them, you know, keep them in line.”

“C’mon, Jackie, the man beat ‘em.”

Jackie sat pensively, reviewing all of the facts in her mind.

“You know it.” Bessie paused for a moment. She watched Jackie, muddled down in thought and pain. Then sharply, “You know it, Jackie, you know it as a mother!”

“Well, I...” Jackie whined sheepishly.

“You know, girl! You know.”

They sat there for a few seconds, no one saying a word.

“But how they gonna grow up without a Daddy?” Jackie questioned, full of distress. “Who’s gonna take me in with five children? Who’s gonna show ‘em how to be a man? How they gonna eat?”

“They’ll be fine. Better off, yeah, they’ll be better off. Bessie nodded.

“But how am I gonna pay the bills? It’s his house. I don’t have any place to live.”

“You’ll make it. You always do. People always do. You aren’t the first, you know?”

“Always do,” Jackie said angrily, “because there’s been two of us!” Jackie hit the table hard with her fist. “A man and a woman, a husband and a wife. It just ain’t right to take a man away from his family, ain’t right to break up a family.”

Bessie nodded like, right, right... she wiggled in her seat.

“We married for life, Bessie- for better or worse. How can I say that don’t matter? It does matter. It matters to me!” Jackie said, tapping her finger to her chest.

“You didn’t marry to be abused. You didn’t have children to get beaten. Nobody deserves to be beaten up.”

“But Reverend Moyd. says its a sin to leave... to, ah... divorce.”

“Now listen here girl,” Bessie said sharply. “Ain’t no God in heaven gonna think you a bad woman for leavin’. You gotta take care of yourself.” She stopped momentarily to calm herself. “What about your babies?”

“But I love Willie Jr.,” Jackie said tenderly. “He’s just tired and overworked, is all. If I can just love him a little more it’ll be okay. Just get the children to be quiet around him- not make him mad- then it’ll be okay. I just gotta try harder, is all.”

Jackie heard herself again. Was she denying Willie’s insanity? Is divorce immoral under every circumstance? Was she hurting the children by staying in this relationship? Would Willie kill her one of these days?

“It ain’t gonna be okay. Once a man strikes- it’s like a dog’s first bite.” She smacked her lips comically. “Tastes that blood, and he’s gotta have more.”

“My man ain’t no dog.”

“He’s a man, ain’t he?”

Bessie asked fiendishly, “What about your babies?” She arched her eyebrows.

Jackie gazed into the distance. “Ain’t a dog at all, but a man. I can’t go running off wit’ them kids. Nobody’d take care of me.”

“Take care of yourself then. God’ll watch over you.”

“A bad man in the house is better than none!” Jackie, a thoughtful pause. “What’d people say? What’d they think?”

“Let me tell you what they’d say- ”

“I’ll tell you. They’d say, ‘She can’t keep her man. She don’t know how to treat him right. She must be some kinda loose woman.’”

“You know Jackie, I really thought you were a lot smarter,” Bessie said angrily. “You let that man hurt you and the kids- that’s what’s goin’ on.”

Bessie slammed her hand on the table really hard. It rocked the table fiercely. Silence, a long pause for both of them to calm down passed slowly. Bessie’s fingernails strummed the table.

“You don’t understand, Bessie,” Jackie said upset, emotions rising. “I love him. He loves me. Maybe he is a little rough sometimes, but what man ain’t?”

Bessie shook her head in angry disbelief.

“I’m not gonna do any better than this and I sure as hell ain’t gonna be alone!”

“You made your bed Jackie, you sleep in it,” Bessie blasted, anger still escalating. She slammed the table again hard. A whistle blew, signaling the end of their break time.

“If you can’t see that, then only God can help you.”

She looked at Jackie for a moment. She stood, grabbing her Tupperware. She pointed a stiff finger in Jackie’s direction.

“You a fool girl! A real fool! Look at you- I ain’t had nothin’ to eat!” Bessie stormed out, leaving with her uneaten lunch.

Jackie sighed deeply, her forefingers rubbing her forehead. She then looked down at her partially-opened lunch bag.

Do Not Copy

CHAPTER

22

Jackie had been there a while—at Mabel’s house. She and Mabel were alone. The pressure cooker released its steam from the top in a rocking sing-song way. Like the steam being released from the top of the pressure cooker, Jackie’s visit was quite similar. She had to release some steam. She needed relief. Mabel turned off the cold water she had been running in the kitchen sink.

Mabel walked over to the stove and turned off the gas. She picked up the pressure cooker, setting it in the sink which was full of water. The water in the sink sizzled, sending steam, rushing to the ceiling. Mabel then turned to Jackie, wiped her hands dry on her apron, sat down then rested her hands on her hips.

“What you think you gonna gain from comin’ over here and telling me lies?”

Jackie pointed to her face. “Is this a lie?! He hit me with a pistol! Are my babies lying too?! Somethin’s wrong with him!”

“Oh, come on Jackie... I just can't believe my boy would do somethin' like that.”

“Do you think the gun just jumped out of his hand and hit me?”

Mabel started doing busy work, cutting potatoes for potato salad. “Anyway, you probably brought it on yourself. What'd you do to make him so mad?”

“What makes you think I did anythin'? And who does your precious boy think he is, that he can go around beating up on people? It ain't right, Mama.”

“Why should I blame Willie?”

“What makes you think I'm to blame? Mabel, you know that I love Willie.”

“Then why you always do things that aggravate him? Why do you nag him so much?”

“Nag!?! What are you talkin' about?!” Jackie said hysterically.

Jackie slammed her fist down on the table- a fork went flying into the air. Jackie followed the fork with her eyes as it flew through the air, dancing on the floor before it came to rest.

“Sorry, Mama,” she said, laughing nervously.

The truth was that Jackie didn't nag him all the time. It was after the third child that Jackie had become particularly negative. She had become negative about the little things that didn't really matter. The ice in the freezer, cobwebs in the corners, dust above the door frames, not enough clean towels, anything and everything sometimes. Nicholas tried to appease his mother by doing what he thought were peculiarities to house care. It only appeased her temporarily. There was just too much male energy in the small house for Jackie.

“Listen, Mabel, I’m tryin’ to tell you something here. Something’s wrong with your son and my husband. Even Bubba thinks something is wrong with him.”

“Bubba Johnson?”

“Yes, Bubba. The chil’reen been tryin’ to tell me for months that there’s somethin’ wrong with Willie. But I didn’t believe them.”

Mabel paused to give what Jackie was saying time to sink in. This was the first sign that Mabel was receiving what she was saying.

“Now, I know there’s somethin’ wrong... There-is-something-wrong! You gotta believe me Mama. We gotta do somethin’! Willie needs our help! Your grandchildren need your help.”

Not wanting to believe the bitter truth, she turned to Jackie.

“Hmmm...,” Mabel said sedately. “Well, I don’t know. I just don’t know. I gotta talk to his Daddy ‘bout this.”

“Better you than me. I don’t think he would understand.”

She was right he wouldn’t understand nor want to hear about it. He would declare that he wasn’t going to accept the possibility of insanity in his family, in his genes. No way! What would people think?

“My babies cryin’ to me with bruises on their arms... and welts on their backs...” Tears rose in her eyes. Her voice cracked. “And I didn’t believe them! Just like you don’t believe me! I turned them away... didn’t believe them! My babies!”

Mabel went over to Jackie- put her arm around her and patted her on the back. She wasn’t about to mention to Willie Sr. this episode with Jackie. It was a

good thing he wasn't at home, otherwise she would have ushered Jackie outside and on home, where she belonged. Mabel wasn't going to believe a spirit of insanity had taken control of her baby, much less believe that he had some type of chemical imbalance in his brain.

"Mabel, hear me, please... please hear me... Willie is sick. Your boy, my husband needs help. He ain't right."

"Growing pains," Mabel empathized patronizingly, "that's all... just growing pains..."

Jackie languidly, silently shook her head side to side, signaling 'no'. Mabel gathered Jackie into her arms as tears trickled down her face. They both cried.

CHAPTER

23

The foreman put his fingers in his mouth and whistled. The bricklayers quit working. They got off the different walls to get their lunch pails and bags. The African-American bricklayers moved to the spot where they always ate. Most of the time, the African-American and Caucasian workers ate in separate places, with a few stragglers from either group eating with the other.

“What did you bring for lunch today?” Bubba asked Willie.

“I hadn’t looked yet,” Willie Jr. replied energetically, “but I’m gonna eat all of it, even if it’s still alive.”

Toothless looked into his lunch bag.

“Damn! Another apple!” Toothless said frustrated. “I’m gonna have to talk to that woman about her cookin’.”

“I got tuna! My baby’s tryin’ to tell me somethin’!” Sugar Williams said.

“I don’t never eat no tuna!” Toothless said as he spit, “Tuna! You boys crazy!”

Sugar grinned at Bubba, and they started to laugh. They knew how Toothless felt about oral sex.

Jimmy Bugg and his cohorts ventured over. And in the process of sitting down, Bugg provoked Willie Jr. by kicking dirt near his lunch.

“Hey! Hey!” Willie Jr. said in a deep, monotone voice, almost yelling.

“Speaking of tuna!” Toothless said, “The Buggman can tell us all about eating tuna!”

“That sandwich is about as close as you’re gonna get to it,” Bugg said. “The only chance you gonna have to get to it is if your woman is passed out cold and tied down.”

Bugg’s bunch laughed at Toothless, just like most of the people at the job site.

Derek, a friend of Bugg’s, said, “Bubba’s tuna’s so old it squeaks! You need a can of three-in-one oil to get near it!” Bugg and his friends laughed again.

Jackson, another friend of Bugg, said, “You couldn’t pay me to go near Bubba’s tuna! Ain’t that right, Bubba!? So Bubba tell us, where’s the best fishing?”

“Well, the finest tuna around comes from your neighborhood Willie Jr.,” Bugg said, trying to stir up trouble.

Willie just sat there and steamed.

“Don’t get started,” Bubba said, in an attempt to intervene. Bubba knew Willie hadn’t been himself for some time now, so he had to make Willie’s days at work as stress free as possible. These boys were asking for trouble.

“We ain’t getting started,” Jackson said. “We just having fun. Anyway, we ain’t talkin’ about yo’ mama.”

“Yo’ mama!” Toothless said, “Yo’ mama’s been whoring around for years.”

The guys said, “Ooooooohh!”

“You can’t talk,” Derek said, “you don’t even know who your Daddy is, and neither does yo’ mama!”

“Shoot!” Bugg said excitedly, “one of Willie Jr.’s boys looks like me for the world! How bout that Willie? That’s why he doesn’t have his boys out here working with us.”

“Cool out, man,” Bubba said quietly to Bugg.

“I’m gonna fix your ass, buddy!” Willie Jr. said under his breath.

Willie Jr. raised up with angry determination and walked down the hill to his truck.

“You done it now,” Toothless said defensively, “you done pissed Willie off.”

The taunting or harassing, better known as the “dozens,” especially when speaking about someone’s mother, happened on occasion, but no one was ever hurt, at least not physically.

The work crew continued taunting one another. Willie Jr. walked to his truck, and reached for somethin’ under the front seat. Willie Jr. quickly rotated as he shoved it deeply into his pants. He closed the driver side door, and started back to the work area.

“Look like you too much for him to handle,” Jackson said.

“He ain’t nothin’ but a big pu\$\$y,” Bugg said.

“Yeah, yeah,” Derek and Jackson said in agreement. They agreed with whatever Bugg said or did. If Jimmy Bugg said that his feces didn’t stink—they would agree.

“You boys are just as soft as my boy Willie,” Bugg said.

“Right,” Derek said, “a bunch of sissies.” He turned to Jackson. “Listen, Jackson, let me hold a ten ‘til Friday.”

“Man, what you mean asking me for money? I gotta hold on to everythin’ I got! My babies eat tens and twenties left and right. I don’t believe babies eat up so much money! And you want a ten? A ten? What’s that?”

“Well if you didn’t have so many babies, you’d have more money,” Bubba said.

Willie Jr., his face tortured by a deranged look, walked briskly in the direction of the work crew. The sound of rocks and dirt crunching under his footsteps played under his heartbeat which pounded in his ears. Willie could hear every move his body made. The work crew’s conversation was subdued, and sounded as though it were coming out of a tunnel. All the sound he heard echoed, reverberated in his ears. Nothing seemed real.

Willie Jr. emerged in the center of the group with his shirt tail out, covering the bulge in his pants.

Bugg was paying no attention to Willie Jr., intentionally ignoring him. Willie eased the gun into his hand and with lightning speed struck Bugg on the side of his head.

“Shhh...,” Bugg said painfully, “what the hell?”

As he fell, Willie hit him again. The crew members grabbed Willie.

“That will keep you from talkin’ like that,” Willie Jr. said triumphantly.

“What the hell’s wrong with you? What the...?” Bugg said, realizing his blood was running down his face.

“You talkin’ like that about my woman,” Willie Jr. said angrily, “ain’t gonna allow it!”

“Hey, man, cool out. Take it easy now,” Toothless, the peace maker said.

“Yeah, man, relax!” Bugg gasped, “I didn’t mean nothin’! It’s okay. I was just jokin’ is all.”

“Can’t have you talkin’ about my woman, nigga. Think you can talk like that around here? You gonna show me some respect.”

“Respect? Respect?” Bugg said impassioned, “Man, we just talkin’. Ain’t nobody mean nothin’ by it. Come on, now.”

“Yeah, we just talkin’,” Toothless said. “Nobody disrespecting you! Take it easy.”

Willie Jr. glanced at Toothless recklessly, then twisted free. He struck Bugg across the head again. Bugg cried out as the butt of the gun struck him hard across his head.

Willie straddled him, and tried to hit him again.

“Jesus, Willie”, Bubba yelled, “get off him! You tryin’ to kill him?”

“C’mon, Willie man,” Toothless said, “dis gotta stop. You disrespectin’ yo’self.”

The crew moved towards Willie, who was now swinging wildly. They all grabbed at him to pull him away from Bugg.

“Gonna teach you not to run your mouth, boy. Y’all been talkin’ about me... talkin’ about my family... gonna show you, all of y’all-”

“Nobody talkin’ about you,” Bugg said, through bloodied teeth. “We just playin’. You gone crazy, man. You done lost your mind.”

“Sure look like he done lost it,” Toothless said comically, but not trying to be funny. Toothless looked

at Bugg's bloody face. "Shoot, man, he done messed you up."

"Oh man, look at that," Bubba said focusing on Bugg's bloody face. "Get him outta here."

Toothless and Derek tended to Bugg's face. Bubba and the rest of the crew restrained Willie, who was still in a rage trying to get Bugg.

"Get off me, get off me! You think you can just talk about me in my face. Y'all tryin' to disrespect me in my face. Y'all gonna pay. All of y'all gonna pay."

"Come on now Willie, come on now," Toothless said. "Cool off man before somethin' really happens. Nobody's disrespecting you here."

"Take it easy, Willie, it's alright," Bubba said.

The masons let go of Willie Jr.'s arms. Willie Jr.'s face contorted. He again lunged violently at Bugg.

"You son of a b#@*h. I'll kill you," Willie Jr. said furiously.

"Oh sh#!!" Bugg said, with fear in his heart, "get him out of here! Get him out of here! You need to be locked up, you crazy!"

"I'm gonna kill you, man. I'm not gonna forget what you did. I'm gonna show you somethin' now...."

The masons forcefully pulled Willie Jr. away from Bugg. They wrestled him to the ground. Bugg scrambled to his feet, backing away, keeping his eyes fixed on Willie.

"Get him the hell outta here. He's crazy, man," Bugg said to Bubba. "He's just out there man. You're gonna go to jail for this!"

"Yeah, get him outta here," Toothless said, taken aback by Willie's strange behavior. "Get the hell outta here, Willie."

“Willie, go! Get outta here quick,” Bubba said. “Get outta here. Sh#! Willie, you done really screwed things up this time.”

“Ya’ll tryin’ to play me the fool. I’m not gonna let any of you fools play with me.” Willie turned, walking to his truck in a huff. “Y’all talkin’ about me, I know you want my woman. You’re not gonna get away with it. I’m not gonna forget.”

Crickets performed macabre warnings of ensuing danger on thin prickly legs, breaking an eerie quiet. June bugs rested on southern pines, weary of the burning heat. Lady bugs lay idle among the crimson blooms in the flower bed.

Willie’s house was dark inside and wore a foreboding spirit. The twisted darkness inside Willie continued its toxic spill, filling the house with a disagreeable spirit. All the lights were off. The curtains were drawn. Shafts of exterior ambient sunlight penetrated the inauspicious spell.

From his favorite chair, Willie Jr. re-visited the troubled events of the day. He stared malignantly into empty space with an unbalanced disposition, fondling a dark object in his hand.

Jackie and the children pulled into the driveway.

Willie sat motionless when he heard the car. His stomach was twisted into agonizing knots. His mind filled with contempt; abhorrence for the world in which he existed, his present reality. In his lap lay a gun. He absentmindedly spun the gun’s cylinder.

Jackie, Nicholas, Marcus, and August got out of the car. Jackie handed them each a bag of groceries and took two herself. They held their bags tightly in their arms, waiting patiently for her to gather her bags securely into her arms. Then they followed her. They all were in a particularly pleasant mood.

Willie Jr. continued to absentmindedly spin the cylinder on the gun. The cylinder halted with the stillness of death. Jackie and the children walked into the house carrying brown paper grocery bags from the nearby Safeway.

Willie stopped spinning the cylinder when they entered. He had no interest in hearing their mindless chatter. He sat in the quiet of his house, in the house he had planned. Willie Jr. tried to sort business out in his mind, in the house that he built, in the life he had planned. He sat quietly as he listened to them. He didn't want them to know he was there. He was home early from work. He knew Jackie would think there was a problem if he was home early- then again, in the strength of his anger, he didn't care.

Jackie led the children into the kitchen. They set the bags down, unloading them tenaciously, looking for surprise sweets within. They were oblivious to Willie Jr.'s presence, his dangerous state of mind.

"Get me those peas there Marcus, Mane, uh, Nicholas," Jackie said, "Lord, y'all sure eat up some food. Y'all gonna have to get jobs," she said half seriously and half joking.

"Here, Mama," Nicholas said, handing her a bag of pinto beans. "You want me to put these to soak?"

"And soak your head, too?" Marcus teased.

Marcus and August laughed.

Willie Jr. played with the gun, staring into his contrary nature. He appeared inattentive to Jackie and the children and showed no reaction to their conversation, lost in himself.

“Come on now, boys,” Jackie prodded. “Give me a hand here. Marcus put those cans up over there.”

“What about the peas Mama?” Nicholas asked. “We having these tomorrow?”

“Yeah, baby. That’s right. You sure do help me out here. You two could learn somethin’ from him.”

Willie Jr. stood up methodically. Premeditation tempered each footstep in his long, lonely walk to the kitchen. He deviously staged himself in the doorway, speechless, leaning against the doorjamb which framed his family insidiously in his view. An unsympathetic gun languished perniciously behind Willie’s back. He imagined where their bodies would fall.

Jackie and the children put the remaining groceries away unknowingly.

“Yeah, that’s right August,” Marcus taunted. “You gotta be like Nicholas.

“Right,” August replied sullenly.

“Soak those beans, soak those beans, soak those beans till they’re fat and clean,” Marcus humored. Marcus and August laughed.

Jackie jumped as she put a can of beans in the cabinet near the doorway. She saw an eye-gray shadow of Willie in the doorway, observing them. He startled her further by the peculiar manner in which he observed them. She didn’t think he looked crazy, not as if he would or could hurt them. But he looked like a terminally wounded animal- one needing help if it were to see tomorrow.

“Well, hey, Willie,” Jackie breathed nervously. “I didn’t know you were home!”

Nicholas took a half step backwards. August moved behind Marcus. All three children became impulsively quiet, averting their eyes from Willie’s scrutiny.

“Willie, would you put this on the top shelf for me, please?”

Willie Jr. hesitated- resisting the urge to lunge out, giving each of them a lick on the head with the gun barrel or sharing a metallic jacket with them.

Jackie was the main perpetrator- the children were the product of her judgement. She was the cause of his increasingly disastrous life. He gazed oppressively at each child, then at Jackie. He slowly raised his hands from behind the door frame, they were both empty. He reached for the can, putting it on the shelf.

The doorbell rang. August took off for the front door with Marcus on his heels. They raced to the door.

“Stop running in the house!” Jackie shouted.

“It’s the police! It’s the police!” they yelled.

A sheriff’s car was in front of the house.

“It ain’t the police,” Nicholas said, bringing up the rear. “It’s the sheriff!”

CHAPTER

24

The county jail was a nondescript brick facility with green and white shutters and a quaint gold fish pond out front. It could have been mistaken for a residence but for the official green and white “Correctional Facility” sign on the freshly trimmed lawn. The jail was adjacent to the fire station which sported a similar home façade.

The sheriff’s deputy walked Willie down a short institutional grey corridor which led to the prisoner incarceration area.

“Hey, I’m about to go crazy up in here!” One prisoner yelled as they moved past his cell.

The deputy put Willie into a cool, damp cell. Willie walked around the cell, surveying his stark surroundings. He never thought about the possibility of landing in jail. He hadn’t anticipated the comforts it offered or its discomforts. Willie grimaced at the paltry soiled rust-stained toilet. He reached down for rough prison grade toilet tissue to blow his nose. He took tissue off the latent paper roll but it was the last of the tissue squares.

A correctional officer walked by an adjacent cell.

“When y’all gonna get some hot water in here?” a prisoner yelled.

“Get a hold yourself in there!” the correctional officer responded. “Don’t you know we got company!”

Willie wanted more toilet tissue. He walked over to the front bars. The correctional officer walked by Willie’s cell. Willie tried to get his attention, but he didn’t see Willie. Willie didn’t say anything and didn’t want to either.

Willie’s spirit disintegrated further into depression. He began to sing an old Negro spiritual, “Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world.”

He sang for two verses but stopped because of the discourteous harassment and threatening interruptions. Willie sat on the bed contemplating the heaviness of his situation. The bars imprinting into his psyche. Pressing on his mind. He was captive like a slave.

Willie stood in a distant corner on his cell thinking about his family and how his incarceration would affect their relationship.

Willie squatted, picking up garbage off the floor. He slowly walked across the cell, heavy bar shadows groping upon his back. He found himself in a corner exasperated, sitting in his tribulation.

The incarcerated life style, Willie concluded, was more difficult than he imagined or desired to deal with, no matter how short-lived. Lying on the thin institutional mattress looking at the ceiling, Willie withdrew deeper into the complexity of his state. Willie closed his eyes, disheartened. He hoped to lose himself in sleep, which lately had become labored.

Willie Jr. looked forward to the security of his own home. Willie's incarceration was finally over.

His key still fit into the front door. He had called in advance of his arrival. As he closed the front door, three vengeful children willfully converged on him mercilessly with three critical aluminum baseball bats.

"Cut him low! "Cut him low! Get him!"

That's all Willie could hear from the youthful voices which surrounded him. To his dismay, he heard and felt the thud, thud, thud of the bats hitting his flesh. An occasional punitive crunch would mark the challenge of strength between bat and bone. Retribution...

With unforgiving metal bats, the relentless children savagely pounded Willie into submission. They stepped away from him momentarily. He managed to roll over on his back. His face was bloody, his clothes splotted with blood. The pain was excruciating. He thought he would die right there on the floor.

"Wardaddy! Over here!" Willie faintly heard.

Through one swollen eye, he made out the blurry image of Mane standing over him. He held a wooden Louisville slugger. Mane lifted the bat high over his shoulders.

He heard Mane say, "This one is for Mama!" just before he heard his cranial cavity cave in.

Sweating profusely, head throbbing, Willie woke up, physically shaken, his horrible nightmare finally over.

At an after church function, August's smiling face was being lowered from Reverend Moyd's tired, outstretched arms onto the floor amid a group of happy screaming children. Each yelled to be the next one lifted.

Table-clothed tables were laden with a wide assortment of food, mostly desserts. There were many older women and children, but few men in attendance.

"Me next! Me! Me! Me!" said an overweight kid.

"No," Reverend Moyd said. "You're too big now. That's enough. That's enough! Lord! Y'all got me tired out now."

Three grey haired, silver tongued old women were gossiping nearby.

"Reverend Moyd sure is a politician," Mrs. Hayes said.

"And he's a fine catch, too," Mrs. Johnson said adoringly.

"Reverend Moyd know he don't need to be pickin' them kids up like that," Mrs. Hayes asserted. "That's how his back went out last time."

"That's not what I heard!" Mrs. Johnson sensually suggested.

"What? Don't pay her no mind," Mrs. Hayes inserted.

"He don't care," Mrs. Johnson insinuated, "'cause Reverend Moyd only doing that to impress them boys' Mamas!"

"But he's a married man," Mrs. Smith exclaimed.

"That ain't never stopped him before," Mrs. Johnson said. "You heard about them two kids he done had since he been married?"

“Y’all ought to stop that. Y’all still in church! Stop that now, I say,” Mrs. Smith said, abhorring their disrespect.

Marcus didn’t let up as he chased August past Jackie and Mabel.

“Y’all stop running in church now!” Jackie admonished loudly.

“You boys mind your Mama,” Mabel reinforced. “I remember when Willie Jr. used to run through here like that.” An amorous matriarchal warmth graced Mabel’s countenance. “You know, I sure do miss my boy.”

“I know what you’re sayin’ Mama. But we’ve known nothin’ but peace since they locked him up.”

Mabel’s radiance changed bitterly, 180 degrees.

“Seems like things are getting better now that he’s gone.” Jackie remarked, not thinking about Mabel’s reaction. “I hate to say it, Mama, but it’s just so much quieter. And the children aren’t as nervous. Even Mane stays home more.”

Mabel grew vexed, but Jackie didn’t notice.

“The chil’ren are happier. August’s asthma’s cleared up. Nicholas ain’t as nervous anymore. You know his hands would be shaking like he had ten cups of coffee. And I can sleep... thank God I can finally sleep... in peace.”

“You can sleep?!” Mabel came back, gravely shocked. “What about Willie Jr. in prison? What you talkin’ ‘bout, things are bedda’? Bedda’ for who? How can things be bedda’ with your man away?”

“Mama, you just don’t know. The chil’ren are scared of him. He just... he just acts like... well, sometimes he walks around with his gun... like somebody else. I told you he was acting crazy!”

Jackie studied Mabel. Jackie's comments were met by Mabel's cold resistance.

Rooted in her position, Mabel remained closed to Jackie's comments. She disbelieved her daughter-in-law's words. She condemned Jackie's attitude. Mabel was in denial. She hadn't heard anything Jackie said after the "sleep" comment. Mabel had no appreciation for how times had changed for Willie and Jackie.

"It's like he didn't even know we were there sometimes. Or cared! You know, Mama, they didn't put him in there for nothin'."

"Oh, you're unbelievable. There ain't nothin' wrong with Willie. He's just tired sometimes...that's all."

"Tired? You're not there, Mama. You don't know what its like. I get scared when he's around. I'm scared now. He's gonna be home soon and I don't know how he's gonna be." On a more solemn note she added, "But Mama, I do miss Willie... I really do."

"I miss my baby, too. Six months is a long time."

"Not long enough," Jackie replied in a whisper.

"What'd you say?"

"Uh... it's long enough."

CHAPTER

25

Jackie laid on her back playing with August. Marcus was sitting admiring his mother's stunning looks. She was so beautiful. He couldn't remember the last time he saw her so happy.

There was a knock on the front door. August rolled off of his mother and got up to answer the door.

"Oh my God!" August exclaimed. "It's Wardaddy! What is he doing here?"

Willie Jr. wore a beanie cap with big yellow moveable ear flaps attached to a string. Willie pulled the string methodically causing the ear flaps to move up and down comically.

A smile crept past August's nervousness. Willie smiled at Marcus, pulled the string again, hoping to ease everyone's apprehension.

"Hello there, young fellow," Willie Jr. said humorously. "I just flew in from Washington, D.C., the Capitol, and my ears sure are tired."

Jackie sat up and listened. August sought the closeness of his mother.

"I'm about outta gas too," Willie said flapping the funny looking ears. "Can I come inside and gas up?"

"Yeah..." August said haltingly. "Daddy, come on in."

August stepped back to allow his father entrance. Willie Jr. walked into the living room. August followed. Jackie got up off the floor.

Willie started flapping his ears again while looking at August who was standing in front of Jackie. Nicholas came into the room and posted behind Jackie.

"Look what they done to my ears! Boy, have you ever seen anythin' like this before?"

Marcus shook his head.

"You have to nail down my feet 'cause when the wind comes up I lift right off the ground!"

A quiet paralysis descended upon Willie's family. No one could say anything. Inwardly pleasantly humored, their countenances remained emotionless.

"Willie, why didn't you call?" Jackie asked.

Her tone of voice surprised Willie, as did the question. With rough playfulness he pulled August into his arms.

"Come here, little man." This alarmed Jackie.

Willie sat with August on his lap.

"I was just in such a hurry to get home and see my family, that I didn't want to waste no time dialing numbers."

"Come on and have a cup of coffee with me in the kitchen." Jackie said flatly.

Jackie ambled huffily to the kitchen. Willie placed August down and followed. Jackie parked against the kitchen sink. Cagey, she kept her distance.

"Listen, Willie, I'm glad to see you're back and okay."

“Yeah me too! How’s papa doin’? Any better?”

Shortly after Willie Sr. heard about Willie’s incarceration he had become ill. Willie Sr. was a proud man. It was bad enough when Willie and Jackie came over to discuss the abortion issue. But to have his son in jail would kill him.

“No, he’s taken a turn for the worse.”

“Oh. Jackie. I’m sorry to put you through all this, but some things just have to be.”

“You know it’s been rough here while you’ve been gone, but we’re hanging in there.”

“I couldn’t help things going like they did. It’s like somethin’ I can’t control. Baby, I love you and sometimes people just get on my nerves. They get on my nerves real bad, I feel like I’m gonna explode.”

Willie Jr. sighed deeply shaking his head. He dragged his hand across his face, sighing remorsefully.

“I just couldn’t control it. That time it did explode and I paid for it!”

“Yeah, but you made us pay for it too!”

“Baby, I’m sorry. I just want to make it up to you.”

“Make it up to me?” Jackie said indignantly. “How you think you gonna make it up to me? How you gonna make up six months time, all the bills, taking care of these kids?”

Willie nodded in agreement. He was a man, he didn’t actually understand her position though he tried. He listened with feigned sensitivity.

“But, Willie it is good to see you. We just don’t want any of that old Willie Jr. here. You gonna have to learn to control your temper.”

“Oh baby, oh I don’t know. I don’t know how you put up with me. It’s just that... well, I don’t really know, but sometimes things just don’t go right.”

“You should try dealing with these kids, feeding them, picking up behind them, ironing their clothes-”

“I mean, it’s not like I don’t try to make everythin’ work out right, but sometimes things just happen... seem like I can’t do anythin’ about it. People want to make it hard for me, like those guys at work.” It was like a stake through her heart. She heard and saw the scene with Bubba, the clothes blowing in the wind. Surprisingly, for the first time in a long time, she felt badly for Willie. She didn’t know how much Willie’s actions and conversations were a pretense. She still loved him and incarceration had done him good. He looked well rested and was more handsome than she had remembered.

“I know they talk about me and about you, too. I just can’t let it get to me, but I don’t know how to make it stop. It just rolls by itself, Jackie. I know that I have had a problem with my temper, baby, and I’m tryin’ to make it right.”

“You really gotta try. No, you have got to make it happen. In fact I bet you there’s some medicine that can help you control all that.”

“I’m sure you’re right. I’m gonna make it all right for you, for the chil’ren. It’s just gonna take some time, take a little time. That’s all. You gotta understand me. You just gotta know what I mean.”

Willie Jr. walked closer to Jackie embracing her compassionately. She squeezed him hard and lovingly.

“I can’t go through it again,” Willie whispered. “Man, can I tell you some stories.”

“Please, no stories, Willie. No more stories.”

Willie Jr. backed away as Jackie pulled back.

“Willie, you just gotta pull yourself together. Anyway, what are you doin’ with that silly hat on your head?”

“I knew it would make you smile. Your smile brings sunshine to my life.”

With that comment Jackie’s heart melted. She pulled Willie closer, hugging him tightly, squeezing his buns. She raised her head to him so he could kiss her.

“Oh, Willie, I missed you.”

They kissed passionately and lustfully. Nicholas, Marcus and August stood there watching in disbelief. Wasn’t this Wardaddy?

“Let’s go in the back,” Willie Jr. suggested, imagining how good it would feel to be inside of her.

“What about the chil’ren?”

“Send them outside.”

“Nicholas, Marcus, you boys go outside and play,” Jackie called out.

“But I don’t want to go outside,” August complained.

“Just do what I tell you,” Jackie strongly suggested.

“Yes, ma’am.”

The children went outside reluctantly, exchanging knowing looks.

Jackie held Willie’s hand like she was on her first date. Bouncing with excitement, she led him into their bedroom. Their mutual desire reignited the heated passion of their love.

The soulful music of singing robins and blue jays saturated the warming morning air. Jackie hummed contently as she cooked Willie Jr.'s breakfast. Willie came into the room pulling his suspenders up. He walked up behind Jackie. He slowly slid his hands around her waist, embracing her. Willie nibbled on her ear, one of her several hot spots. She turned around.

"You're still cookin' baby!" Willie whispered.

Willie chuckled at his own humor.

"I figured you'd need somethin' to restore your energy."

"Don't you be worryin' 'bout that," Willie said all smiles, "I haven't even switched over to my reserves."

The children peered into the kitchen from the doorway. They whispered their displeasure concerning recent events. They entered the kitchen reluctantly.

"Good morning, chil'ren," Willie Jr. said. "How y'all doin'?"

Willie's voice transformed their thoughts instantly into submission. Their young memories were solidly intact.

"Hey Daddy, hey Mama," Nicholas said, signaling his brothers to respond in like manner.

"Good morning," said Marcus and Nicholas.

"Y'all just sit on down," Jackie said energetically.

"Are your hands clean? Wash them real good, now."

"Mine already clean," Marcus said.

"Are not!" August said.

"Are too! They're cleaner than your old dog paws are."

"You just lick them off like Jazz does," Nicholas insinuated. "You just an old dog."

"Yeah," Marcus added, "an old dog that's gonna take a bite out of your-".

“Boys!” Jackie said. “It’s time to eat. Knock it off.”

Willie sat stoically, watching this familiar scene. He believed he hadn’t been here long enough to take the reigns without upsetting Jackie.

“Yes, Mama,” Nicholas replied. “Come on, Marcus, knock it off. I want to eat.”

“Well, sit down, cause I’m fixing some eggs, bacon, and grits.” Turning to Willie, Jackie said seductively “and I got some fatback here too.”

“Alright!” they all said.

“You kids act like you never had good eatin’ before,” Willie noted. “You know your Mama takes good care of you... and of me too!”

Willie laughed and rolled his eyes like Bill Cosby.

“Oh hush, Willie.” Jackie snapped the dishtowel at Willie.

“Come on now, Jackie. You come set yourself down here. I’ll get those dishes to the table.”

Willie stood, holding his chair out for Jackie. She settled herself into it, watching the children watching her. They watched them both in bashful bewilderment.

“Oh, Willie, that’s alright. You can have this chair. I’m fine. Well, thank you!” Jackie was all smiles. “You should go away and come home more often,” Jackie said under her breath.

The boys were thinking that he should go away more often and stay away. Take a road trip and forget the way back.

“No, I’m happy here. Let me bless the table,” Willie Jr. said.

They all bowed their heads. Willie stood as they held hands. Everyone else remained seated.

“Dear Lord, thank You for letting me be back home with my wife and family. That’s where a man is

supposed to be. Thank You for keeping them free from harm while I was gone. Let everythin' we do from here on out give glory to Your Name. Bless this food, amen! Over the lips, pass the tongue, look out tummy, here it comes! Let's eat."

They all laughed and began to eat. Willie left the room and returned with a chair.

"Slide on over, Jackie. I know you got plenty of room for me!"

"I sure do!"

Willie laughed.

The telephone rang, Willie answered it.

"Hello."

"Willie?" Mabel questioned. "Is that you? How ya' doin' honey?"

"Yeah, Mama, it's me. I'm just fine."

"When did you get in?"

"Just got in last night. I was meaning to call you today."

"Well I'm glad you're home, Willie, but I got some bad news. I wish you'd had come over to see your Daddy last night."

"I just got here, Mama. What's wrong?"

"Your daddy is dead, Willie. He passed sometime between last night and this morning."

A sober uneasiness saddened Willie's face. The children and Jackie saw this and fell silent.

"Papa is gone."

"What? Papa is gone?" Jackie said, emotionally shaken.

Willie nodded to Jackie. The children pushed their plates away, except August.

"Papa is gone?" Nicholas inquired. "He's gone?"

“He’s gone?” Marcus queried, tears swelling in his eyes. He knew what that meant.

“Where did he go?” August asked, not knowing.

“Papa is dead,” Nicholas said. “He’s gone to heaven.”

“Why’d he do that?”

“Hush, August,” Nicholas softly scolded. “Be quiet.”

“Seem like he just run outta steam,” Mabel added. “The life just left him Willie. He’ll be happier now.”

“Ask her what we can do for her,” Jackie suggested.

“What can we do, Mama?” Willie Jr. asked, “for you, I mean?” Maintaining a check on his emotions, he restrained his tears. “Do you need anythin’?” The words almost constricting in his throat.

“I just need my family near me,” Mabel said tearfully, “that’s all. I just need y’all with me.”

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CHAPTER

26

The small brick church with its high steeple was quiet now. The janitor ushered his red bandanna to his forehead to soak up the sweat. A member of the deacon board, he cleaned up the fresh assortment of fragrant petals left by the roses, chrysanthemums, but mostly glades with their fleshy bulbs. The highly polished wooden floor and the semi-circular altar were purged of the floral debris. A number of hardy but distinguished floral arrangements remained for church use, courtesy of the Jones family; Willie Jones Sr. to be specific.

The funeral procession had long since left. Occasional drafts of air rushing through the open stained glass windows would awaken the delightful floral bouquet left in the rafters. The janitor inhaled the wonderful fragrances with delight, noting the mixture of sweat and musk from the parishioners. He thought it had been a very nice funeral, as funerals go. For a brief moment he revisited the gathering of souls.

Willie Jr., Jackie, Mabel and the children, all dressed in black, sat in the front row.

The choir mournfully droned through, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot".

Never in a million years had Willie Jr. thought Willie Sr. would die before things between the two of them was resolved. Now what was he to do? Willie's Sr.'s untimely death made Willie as angry as when Bugg would make despairing remarks which worked on his last nerve. He almost erupted in church. He wanted to stand up and scream. He knew he couldn't, though he could clearly see himself doing it to vent his frustration.

But who would receive the brunt of his contempt? Where would he vent his anger? The man laying in the casket surrounded by all the lovely gladiolus and irises?

The Right Reverend Moyd was in the pulpit now. Willie Sr.'s coffin lay before him in front of the kneeling rails. The song ended and Rev Moyd stepped forward boldly to the podium. The fans, many donated for the funeral, were moving asynchronously. The church was much too hot.

"Man that is born of a woman has but a short time to live and is full of misery," Reverend Moyd said. "O' Lord deliver us not into the bitter pains of eternal death. Deliver us from those evil thoughts and spirits that enter our minds and soul and seek to turn us from you, o' Lord."

Jackie, Willie, Mabel and the children sat, all puffy eyed.

"Amen," said the parishioners.

“Brother Willie was a hard working man, a family man. In this life, we are surrounded by sin and the temptation of sin. Lord, forgive us the times we let the evil have the best of us. Forgive us the times when we do not recognize the evil when it comes over us. Brother Willie was a hard man, but he overcame the evil in his life.”

The old women whispered to one another, the children twisted in their seats, but dared not to disturb this solemn moment. The children showed their respect to the Jones children by not getting loud or restless. The men, mostly brick masons who worked with Willie Sr. at one time or another, showed their strength by nodding their heads and displaying no emotion.

“Amen.”

Mabel wept.

“Let’s not allow evil intentions to bring us to a personal hell here on earth, even I say, even before you go before Him on Judgement Day.”

Mabel couldn’t imagine her life without Willie Sr. She always believed that she would be the one to die first. She didn’t want to endure the tragedy of the loss, the mourning, the neighbors and countless friends who would offer their condolences. She had been to many funerals in her life. She preferred not to be a spectator.

“I am the Resurrection and the Life, he that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.”

Willie Jr. cried uncontrollably.

“And whosoever believeth in Me shall never die. I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth.”

“Amen!”

Jackie dotted her face with her handkerchief. She would miss the obstinate old buzzard.

“And though after my skin worms destroy this body yet in my flesh shall I see God. Whom I shall see for myself and mine eyes shall behold, and not another.”

The solemn mourners said, “Amen.”

Willie Jr., Jackie, and the children were poised in a state of shock.

This was the first funeral for the children. It was the first time they saw a real dead person. Sure, they had seen dozens, hundreds of dead people on television. But this was real. This was their grandfather. They were sad, but more scared than anything, scared.

They had met more relatives than they knew existed. And they seemed to come from everywhere. Every time they turned around, there was a new uncle or aunt. They didn't mind meeting their first or second cousins on their father's side; they had proven to be fun. It was also fun to be in the lead car of a funeral procession. There were so many cars behind them. It was fun and exciting both. But all the children had to do was look ahead at the hearse carrying their grandpapa. Or look around at all the sad faces and their bubbles of pleasure and fun were burst.

But what was most unbelievable was that when they had gotten to the church the family had to line up to go in. This took forever because family members seemed to have forgotten their places or wanted to change them. If that wasn't bad enough when they walked into the church they all paraded to the front of the church right past the open casket of their dead papa.

The children not knowing how to respond to all of this, watched the adults to see what they were supposed to be doing and how they were supposed to be responding. Some grownups had joyous praise on their lips. Others adorned sad auras. Tears abounded from the colorful mourners. Mabel reached over the casket and kissed Willie Sr.'s corpse. Willie Jr. looked at his father and cried. Jackie held his hand; blotting her own tears with her handkerchief. Olivia had been in tears off and on since she came back from college. It only continued here. August thought she was going to break his hand.

As the children neared the casket, they didn't know if they were supposed to shake his hand, kiss his forehead like Italians in movies, or what. What Nicholas, Marcus, and August did know was they had to resist the temptation to run. Run fast and hard, until they were out of breath. Each of them reached for the nearest hand. They didn't know if their grandfather would lash out at one of them for some unknown reason, striking one of them dead. Then there would be two funerals or three.

August had a fleeting moment of boldness. Actually, it was curiosity. He wondered if he could shake his grandpapa awake. When he reached over into the casket touching Willie Sr.'s face, the cold stark reality of death ran up August's arm. He had a knee jerk reaction. Fear filled his heart, then sadness. Tears filled his eyes and poured down his cheeks. When grownups around him saw this, they too were overcome with emotion and tears.

The children would miss their grandfather. They would miss the candy he would sneak under the table

to them to entice them to finish their meals, during their visits. They had even tried his pipe once. It was sickening. They imagined their grandfather to be adventurous and strong willed. You couldn't fool him no matter how hard you tried. But he was a character, a card.

They were as afraid of him as they were of their father, maybe even a little more. He could get angry for the most innocent, about the most infinitely uninteresting incident and bare down most horribly as the bearer of bad tidings. His anger was not the desire of any adult individual, much less the children. But they had learned to love him as they had their father.

“We brought nothin into this world, and it was certain, we can carry nothin out. The Lord hath taken away, blessed by the name of the Lord.”

Willie Sr.'s wreath shrouded coffin. There were wreaths on the coffin, on the floor in front of the coffin, in front of and behind the coffin. Floral arraignments surrounded the coffin and spread out from it like ivy.

And the onlookers said “Amen.”

“Lord, we commend this body to you at this time. May his soul be preserved in your Holy Presence. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, bless O'Lord this precious child into Your care as we commend his body to the ground.”

It was a time of reckoning for Willie.

CHAPTER

27

Jackie drove into the driveway honking the horn of her new maroon Buick LaSabre. She was as giddy as a Jay bird. She had waited long enough, waiting for Willie to be done with his bereavement. How long could it last?

The children ceased their playing in the yard to gather around the car with a million questions.

“Mama, what are you doing driving that car for?” Marcus wondered.

“Whose car is that?” August asked.

“Man, look at this big car. It sure put Daddy’s car to shame,” Nicholas commented, and, just as quickly, thought about what his father’s reaction to the car would be.

“I told you I was gonna buy a car. You like it?”

“Yeah!”

“Can we go for a spin?”

“Does Daddy know?” Nicholas questioned. “Did you buy that? Did he know you were going to buy that car? And such a nice car?”

Jackie looked defiantly at Nicholas.

Willie was curious about the commotion outside, but more interested in who was coming to visit but hadn't come into the house. He walked to the front screen door peering outside. He came reluctantly him out of the house. His curiosity changed to controlled anger as he assessed the situation. He approached the car.

Jackie saw Willie come out of the house. She walked along the length of the car caressing it as she walked.

She had purchased the car without his consent. She knew it would put pressure on their already tenuous financial situation, but that car was what she wanted. After all, she was going to pay for it. Anyway, they were Christians; God was on their side, and He would help take care of any real trouble.

"Hey, Willie, how you like my new car? Don't you think this will get me around town? you know, with all the Avon and all?"

Willie Jr., a pensive melancholy look on his face. He just stood there without replying, despondent, studying her, the situation, vacillating between controlled rage and an inevitable explosive resentment. His resentment of his father's untimely demise had created a greater chasm between he and Jackie. He resented her poor decisions which impacted his plans adversely. His ultimate plan of a small family with a high quality of life had flown out the window. He saw Jackie as the individual who opened the cage and then the window. He resented her in an uncompromising steadfastness.

Marcus came over to Willie and tugged at his sleeve. "This car'll turn a lot of heads, won't it Daddy?"

With the quickness of a dozen demons, Willie Jr. arced around- backhanding Marcus, sending him sprawling. He turned on his heel and walked away. The children looked at Jackie as if to say, "we told you so." Jackie's flustering regret turned to steaming anger.

Jackie stared at him as he went into the house. Puzzled, she mumbled, "What's got into him? It's my money anyway. I'll spend it like I want to."

She ran over to comfort Marcus.

"Mama, Daddy's crazy," Marcus said matter-of-factly. "What you gonna do 'bout it?"

She stroked his head maternally, placing his head on her bosom after his comment.

The Saturday matinee on television was just going off. An old western movie starring John Wayne had been on. Willie as usual was parked in front of the tube. Jackie, almost dressed for work, poked her head in the doorway.

"I start second shift tonight, Willie," Jackie said. "It'll be a big help if you'd feed the chil'ren; help them get to bed on time."

"Uh huh," Willie Jr. responded without looking up.

Jackie looked at him somewhat disgusted, then left to go to work.

The children were horsing around at the street corner light throwing rocks at bats which were darting

to and fro. The bats were feeding on insects which were flying near the street light next to the house. The bats attacked the rocks just as if they were bugs. The more rocks the children threw the closer the bats came to the children. The bats followed the rocks as they left the children's hands and soon homed in on the children as the source. A few bats came really close to the children. The children ran for the shelter of the house whooping and hollering afraid the bats were going to bite them.

Willie Jr.'s brain waves were parked in neutral watching television. His body was parked on the Laz-Boy recliner in the den. He wasn't really watching it, he only looked in the direction of the obtuse box. His mind negatively loaded with his weighted cryptic thoughts which bore down into his consciousness. He peered through the television in some mysterious mantra. He nursed his accusing, hostile pain which was directed towards his family.

His bitter discomfort manifested physically, moving through his body in threads of depression shrouding his heart. He hadn't asked for all of this, all the children, all the noise- all the confusion- all the bills. It was driving him crazy- insane. After his father's death, his demeanor diminished into steel- cold hard lifelessness. He continued, though, to be a pillar of strength, glue to hold the family together because of the economy of his income.

In addition to all the other things he felt, Willie Jr. believed within his soul that Willie Sr., not Mabel, was the glue which held the extended family together. He was afraid that he wouldn't be able to step into those shoes. Was his father right about all those negative things he had said about him?

The children came into the house rambunctiously. They made enough noise to drown out Grandpa on the Hee Haw television show.

Willie Jr. became very upset. Here come those damn children! I can't get any time to myself. Damn it! Willie Jr. thought. This is where his favorite chair was. His television was here too. And this is where he relaxed. He wanted it to be his space but he knew it couldn't be so. He was frustrated.

The children barreled through the living room, heading for the den. They knew their mother wasn't home, otherwise they would have made a back door entrance.

"There's a bat in your hair," Marcus said excitedly, "a bat in your hair...it's gonna bite you."

August picked at Nicholas's back. His fingers crawling as high up as he could reach.

"It's a vampire bat," Marcus said. "A vampire bat. It's gonna suck your blood."

Marcus stuck his fingers down Nicholas' collar. August jumped, poking at Nicholas's neck. Nicholas laughed at his two younger brothers teasing.

"I eat vampire bats for breakfast," Nicholas said acting like the Incredible Hulk. "They can't hurt me."

"Yeah, well, go back outside then."

He laughed. August joined in the laughter.

The laughter set Willie off.

"I'll hurt you boys if you don't shut that noise up!" Willie Jr. shouted with exaggerated loudness. He set his beer bottle down hard, splashing beer on his hand - which angered him further.

The children who were standing in the room adjacent to the den instantly exchanged glances and shut up. No one moved. They hardly breathed. August

was the first to move nervously. They nudged one another with “I told you so” looks.

“Ask him,” August pulled on Nicholas. “You the brave one.”

“No, that’s Mane.”

“C’mon...ask him,” August prodded. “You promised.”

Nicholas acquiesced without argument, walking up to the doorway to the den- respectfully waiting for a commercial to come on.

“Daddy.”

“Yeah. What do you want?”

“Uh, can we watch TV? Please?”

Willie Jr., without looking away from the television asked “Did you do your homework?”

“Yes sir!” They all said, nodding their heads vigorously. The other two boys had followed closely on their brother’s heels.

“Come on in if you can be quiet.”

The children filed in and sit down on the floor. The children sat silently.

The commercial break was still in progress. Willie heard the telephone ring. It rang twice and no one made a move to answer it. “Hell, I got to pee,” Willie mumbled barely audibly, “I’ll get it.” He got up to answer the telephone that no one else heard ring. It had not rang.

“I bet you,” Nicholas said after Willie had left the room, “he’s going to do that telephone thing again.” Nicholas just happened to hear Willie over the noise of the television saying, “I’ll get it. I got to go pee.”

“Naw! No he ain’t!” Marcus said disputing Nicholas.

Willie picked up the telephone.

The children peered at him from around the corner. A stack of three heads.

“You better stop calling here you piece of pickle sh**!! Leave my family alone. We not gonna take this! I know who you are!”

Willie Jr. slammed the telephone down angrily. The children ducked back behind the security of the wall when he slammed the telephone down. The children snickered nervously- their fear couldn't suppress the humour of it all.

Willie stood silently, fuming. He heard mature, masculine voices from the den. It couldn't have been anyone but the children. But it sounded like adults. He hadn't seen anyone come in. Willie thought he knew it was the children talking. He stopped to listen.

Willie's mental illness had escalated. It stepped up a couple of rungs on the ladder.

“Daddy's such a wimp!”

“If Mama was here she'd let us cut up as much as we wanted.”

“Yeah, if she wasn't hanging out so much.”

“I know what you mean.”

“Let's hope Daddy never finds out.”

Willie's rage was anything but under control. He was very angry. There was hell to pay.

“I don't believe these kids are talking like this.”

And they weren't. It was all in his mind.

“Did you see how dressed up Mama was when she went to work?” asked a voice which sounded like August.

“She said she was going somewhere after work,” said a voice that sounded like Marcus.

Willie became the more enraged.

“Where is she going?” a voice like Nicholas asked.

“She is going for a drive,” a voice like Marcus snickered.

“That b#@*h is whoring around again,” a voice like August said.

The children, who had been watching television all this time, laughed at a punch line.

The voices he heard fueled his emotions, but the laughter pierced his soul- it took him over the brink. Willie stormed down the hallway, tangling his foot in the telephone cord, pulling the telephone from the stand. He whisked around the corner into the den.

When Willie entered the room the children knew that there was something askew. His face was constricted, his forehead was furrowed, and he had the look of a devil in his eyes. Fear overcame the children instantly. They were paralyzed with trepidation.

Willie shouted at August, “What the hell did you say, boy?”

August could hardly breathe, much less speak. It took prodding from the other children to ease him into words.

“Wh- wh- what? M- m- me? I didn’t s- s- say nothin’.”

“You heard me, boy! I heard all of you!”

August, Marcus, and Nicholas resembled lambs at the slaughter house door. They became the epitome of terror, incredulity, and compassion, respectively. Nicholas understood there was a medical problem which needed to be addressed, remedied. Now safety was the issue.

“How dare you talk about your Mama like that!”

Willie's conversation, his vehemence, was directed towards August. He reached out, backhanding August, knocking his face hard to the floor.

"You two are just as guilty as he is!"

"But - we didn't say anythin'!" Nicholas said. "August didn't do nothin'. None of us did anything Daddy! Don't you believe us?"

"But, we didn't say nothin'! Honest! Daddy, please!" Marcus pleaded. "We wouldn't do anything to hurt you or Mama or anybody! Please don't hurt us anymore!"

"We just laughing at the TV!"

That statement only confirmed the thoughts in Willie's unbalanced mind. Willie violently pulled off his belt, never taking his eyes off August. Nicholas and Marcus scrambled to their feet. Willie swung at them, but missed. They ran through the doorway to the kitchen stretching and twisting to avoid being hit. The shot out the back door. They would return when they thought he had calmed down. August wasn't so lucky. It wasn't until well after they stopped running did they realize that the younger brother August wasn't with them.

Willie Jr. hovered over August. His arm cocked as he swung the belt towards August, buckle first.

August shrank into a ball of flesh, shielding his head with his hands. Willie Jr. mumbled and cursed at August as he beat him.

August managed to scramble around and get on his feet. Once he found them, he ran down the hallway with droplets of tears and blood marking his path.

Willie Jr. chased him, striking him with the buckle of the belt. He ran into the bathroom cowering under

the sink. Willie Jr. struck him twice more and turned away.

“That’ll teach you. Maybe you’ll think about that the next time you talk about your Mama.”

The boys were sleeping soundly as the sun broke over the horizon. Daybreak rays of morning sun filtered in their window.

August was lying on his stomach sleeping peacefully, his favorite swishy soft pillow tucked under his arms. He stirred agitatedly. The covers of his bed slipped off the bed revealing the sheets and the scourge of his beating. Blood was the adhesive which held the sheet to young August’s back. His back was a patchwork of black, dried, caked on blood.

Anxiously Jackie came into the boys room to get them up. They weren’t late, but they should have been up well before now.

“C’mon, boys, it’s time to get ready for school! Let’s go! Come on, get up!”

She spotted the blood on the sheets. The children started to stir.

“What’s that on your bed?” She asked as she walked over to the bed.

Up close she got a very good look at the sheet. She picked up the bloody sheet.

“Is this blood?” Her imagination began to run wild. “What happened to you?” She managed to say calmly despite her excited nature.

August started to raise his head to look at his mother.

“Don’t move. Stay there.”

She slowly pulled at the sheets. The dried blood and dead flesh pulled up first, then the sheet tugged at the attached flesh, opening up small wounds where ever the sheet was connected.

August wheezed in pain. The children traded glances and wheezed in empathy. She slowly peeled back the sheet.

“Mama we been...,” Marcus tried to speak but emotion filled his throat making him speechless.

“How’d this happen? Who did this?”

“When you were at work.” Marcus tried to continue.

August now sat on the edge of the bed. Jackie still motivated to remove the sheet continues to pull it off. She looked over to Nicholas. August moaned louder.

“Have you been fighting again? Who’s been fighting this child?”

Solemnly, with defeated feet, the children gathered around Jackie. The children looked at one another- emotionally distraught, drained.

Nicholas looked painfully into his mother’s eyes, “Mama-”

“Who he been fighting with? Them boys down the street.”

August started to cry.

“We ain’t been fighting!”

“Well what happened then?”

“It was Daddy...Daddy beat him up,” Marcus said then he added shamefully, “Nick and I ran outside.”

Jackie- stunned into disbelief.

“We been tryin’ to tell you! Daddy said we were talkin’ bad about you- but nobody had said nothin’!”

“Yeah and he said Rusty said somethin’ bad too,” Marcus began to snuffle, “the other day.”

August piped in, “But he didn’t!”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute. Slow down! What’d you sayin’?”

In an unusually calm manner Nicholas said, “We were watching TV and Daddy started talkin’ to us like we said somethin’ bad.” He wanted his mom to feel his sincerity and earnestness so she would get a grasp of the severity of their situation.

“But we didn’t say nothin’,” August declared.

“You mean he beat you for nothin’?”

“Then Daddy came after us with the belt,” then Marcus dropped his head, “that’s when we ran, Nick and me.”

“Boy, don’t worry about that. These cuts came from the belt too?”

“The belt buckle, Mama, the belt buckle,” Nicholas emphasized.

“What? The belt buckle?”

The children looked at one another as if she didn’t understand how afraid they were. How tenuous their lives were on the balance of Wardaddy’s scales. They thought their lives were in danger when she was not at home.

“Uh-huh,” they said.

Suppressing her true emotions, calmly and quietly Jackie asked, “Why would he do that?”

“Mama,” Nicholas said maturely, being convincingly serious, “he’s been acting weird for a long time.”

“Yeah,” Marcus said placing his arm around his mother’s waist, “like that time he cursed out Mrs. Hargrove for talkin’ to the chinchillas!”

“Mama you should have seen the time I saw him talkin’ to the bushes!” Nicholas said trying to play the big brother. Mane was around as little as he managed possible. “And just yesterday, he picked up the telephone when it didn’t even ring.”

“And he started talking! It was funny in a way.”

“And it didn’t even ring! I didn’t think it was funny. I was scared.” He hit me one time ‘cause he said I was hiding his socks!” August sobbed as he remembered the living nightmare.

“Are you boys making this up? I can’t believe it!”

“Mama you weren’t here, you were at work!”

“I haven’t seen any of this stuff.”

August between sobs, “Mama, it’s true, we’re not lying.”

He nestled in her arms. She was careful not to touch his back.

“Mama you gotta believe us,” Marcus hoped.

The tears welled up in his eyes. He could see her disbelief. He fought the tears.

“Help us Mama!” August begged, rubbing his prayerful hands into her stomach.

Marcus added, “Please help us Mama. We’re really scared. Really scared.”

Standing a couple of steps away Nicholas said, We got to do something Mama- before someone gets hurt really bad. Worse than this. We don’t want it to be us.”

“Mama, I’m not ready to die,” August started to cry. Tears running down his cheeks. Jackie started crying too. Marcus started to cry. He hugged her tighter. Nicholas started to cry as well.

Jackie came out of the room weary-eyed, drying her tears on her sleeves. Emotionally drained she rested on

the door. She walked a few steps and stopped, leaning on the doorway, physically weak.

Willie Jr. came out of the bedroom and walked down the hall towards Jackie.

“What happened to the children, Willie?”

Giving her a blunt, vacant look, he walked on by.

“What happened to my babies?”

She started to cry.

CHAPTER

28

It was Saturday afternoon. Mane and a few of his friends Bobby, Mickey, and Mane's cousin, Rusty, were playing cards at the kitchen table. The last cards were being dealt in a game of 500.

"Come on, man," Rusty said, "don't you have some coffee for your running buddies?"

"Coffee will do, but don't you have somethin' stronger?" Bobby said, looking as though he had drank too much when he was younger.

"Yeah, I bet there's liquor in here," Mickey said.

He stood up to go into the cabinet.

"Cool out man!" Mane said, "My old man's in the other room. Let's play cards!"

"I sure wish I was with you guys last night," Rusty said jealously. "What time did y'all get in?"

"Four o'clock," Mane said proudly, as if staying up late made him more of a man.

"Boy, Grandma would kill me if I stayed out that late," Rusty said.

“Yeah, Daddy almost killed me once.” Mane said, reflecting. “Come on, Mickey, let’s play.”

“I’m gonna pluck me a good one!” Mickey said.

He drew from the deck, and studied it. He placed the plucked card in his hand, then discarded a card.

“You mean like the dog you were talkin’ to last night,” Bobby said, teasing Mickey. “She don’t need no gold, all she need is a collar.”

They all laughed. Bobby picked a card. He had a three card spread, and now was the time to throw it down. He did.

“Take that, dirty dogs,” Bobby said.

“Man, you always so lucky,” Mane said.

They shuffled the cards, and dealt another hand. Mane picked a card. He looked at the card he had just picked and discarded it.

“Here comes the lucky pluck!” Rusty said.

Rusty said it loud enough for Willie Jr. to hear in the den. The noise level with the boys increased in intensity as each minute passed. They thought they were keeping it down- and they were. It was just not enough. Had it not been for their efforts to keep it down, their noise level would have been out of control. But, for Willie, it was out of control.

The play moved to the next person.

“Man, you don’t know what luck is,” Mickey said, “And you sure can’t pluck!”

“I could pluck something, if someone would deal me a hand.”

“You don’t need a good pluck, you need some luck.”

“I got so much luck, you ain’t left with squat,” Bobby said.

“No, man, you got plenty of squat,” Rusty said.

“Nah, man, he got plenty of squat,” Mane said.

“I’m gonna squat you in between your eyes,” Bobby said.

“You better look twice before you sit in your car,” Mickey said, “or other wise you gonna be sitting in squat.”

Willie Jr. walked into the room, over to the stove.

The boys became much quieter than they had been since they had arrived. The children’s friends had found it difficult to come to the Jones’s house when Mr. Jones was at home. They avoided him like a plague. But Mane was determined that the fear of Willie’s madness wasn’t going to keep him from inviting his friends over for a simple game of cards.

Willie retrieved a metal pot from under the sink. He poured water into it from the tap. He put the pot of water on the burner to heat. He turned, and walked out, not having said a word to anyone.

“Hey, Mr. Jones,” Bobby said, “I hope you got some money for your son, cause I’m gonna take all of his.”

Willie Jr. did not respond. Mane shot Bobby the look of death.

“What’s wrong with him?” Bobby said.

“Who knows?” Mane said, “He’s just a big pu\$\$y.” Mane expressed himself low enough for Willie not to hear.

“He’s crazy, man, that’s all,” Rusty said, nonchalantly. “Let’s play.”

“Right,” Bobby said, “Man, I hear he been acting all crazy.”

“Not as crazy as you,” Mane said, “Bobby, man, you could of got us all locked up last night.”

“Play cards,” Rusty said.

“Yeah, but I didn’t... you just a pu\$\$y,” Mickey said, “Like father, like son.”

“Pu\$\$y hell, I don’t like the thought of getting my butt greased,” Mane said.

“If you a man you ain’t gonna worry ‘bout butt greasing,” Bobby said, “I ain’t never gonna get caught, no how.”

“Hey, will somebody play cards?” Rusy said with increased impatience.

Willie sat in the den with the television on. He listened to them through the sound of the television. It sounded like noise. Every now and then, he could hear a word or two ring out clearly, above the rest.

From what Willie could piece together in his sick mind, they were saying something about Jackie. He couldn’t believe it- he couldn’t believe his sack of sh#t for a son, had the audacity to let his so-called friends talk about his Jackie so badly- in his house. He had a mind to go in there and pistol-whip each one of them. Instead, he sat there, his eyes fixed on the television, and listened.

“What you do last night anyhow?” Rusty said.

They looked around at each other.

“None of your business!” Mickey said.

The two-quart saucepan of water was boiling. Rusty noticed the water.

“Uncle Willie, your water is ready!” Rusty said.

Willie Jr. walked into the kitchen stealthily. He went over to the stove. Calmly, he turned the burner off. With complete nonchalance, he picked up the saucepan- and in what seem like slow motion- moved towards Mane, and slowly poured the boiling water down Mane's back.

Mane's face, displayed wide-eyed, open-mouthed terror. Mane screamed in pain. He bolted up, tore at his shirt. He turned in circles as he tried to reach his back.

"Excuse me," Willie Jr. uttered without any sign of emotion. "I didn't mean to do it. I'm sorry."

Bobby and Mickey ran out the back door as Nicholas, Marcus and August ran in. Willie Jr. left the room.

"That'll teach you to let these boys talk about your Mama like that," Willie Jr. said, matter of factly, as he went into the den to watch more television.

Rusty tried to get Mane's shirt off.

"Stand still," Rusty said in frustration, "stand still so I can help you."

"Get it off, get it off!" Mane shrieked as the excruciating pain exploded on his back.

Willie Jr. trimmed the hedges with large dark hedge clippers as Jackie pulled into the driveway in her car. Willie was trimming the hedges back too far. Jackie got out of the car and walked towards the house.

"How you doin', Willie Jr.?"

Willie Jr. did not respond. He struggled with the hedge's rigid undergrowth limbs. She walked into the house thinking, "He's in a funk again." His behavior was not so unusual now. She was accustomed to it. He would be out of it in a short time.

Jackie walked into the kitchen stopping abruptly. Her senses automatically on alert. Jackie stared in disbelief.

There were dirty dishes piled up in the sink and food which had not been put away on the stove. Glasses and cards were strewn about the table with playing cards sprinkled about the floor.

There was a hint of foulness in the air. Never in a hundred years would she have imagined that it was the smell of her oldest son's burned, partially cooked skin.

The house was unusually quiet. Sensing that something was wrong- Jackie wheeled around. She walked briskly from the kitchen filled with concern. Her gait increased with every step. She rounded the corner to the living room. The sound of the hedge clippers magnified in her ears. She slowly raised her head, to peer out the window at Willie Jr.

Willie Jr. continued methodically clipping the hedges.

Jackie stared incredulously at Willie. She was in the house pressed against the large three foot by four foot glass pane, six of which lined the front wall of the living room. As though by some miraculous afterthought, she saw Willie Jr. for the first time, outside clipping the hedges like a maniac. She imagined the worse.

“Oh my God... the chil'ren!”

Jackie rushed towards the children's bedrooms besieged by fright and horror.

“August... Marcus... Nicholas... where are you?!” Jackie yelled.

Jackie burst through the bedroom door.

August would often sit at the window and await his mother's return. He was too shocked to notice her drive up. He was relieved almost to fainting to see her walk through the door. The children were sitting on the bed. Mane was sitting between Nicholas and Marcus.

August jumped up, running to Jackie for shelter and comfort. He burst into tears.

“It's alright baby, Mama's here. It's alright. Just calm down now. Shhh, It's alright...”

“Mama, “Nicholas said, “come look at Mane's back!”

“Mane's back,” Marcus said, “Mama, come look at Mane's back!”

She walked over to Mane. All the children, but August responded as if they were on sedatives. They were in a mild shock.

“Mane, oh sweet Jesus, what happened?”

She held Mane by the arm to assist him off of the bed. She was surprised by how rigid he was. She then turned him around by the elbow to see his back. As she peeled his once white T-shirt up, he moaned in pain as his nerved-exposed skin stuck to the surface of the T-shirt. Mane's back was a wreck of skin, blood, and hot water.

Jackie wheezed in horror. She felt nauseous. Mane felt more like screaming than moaning, but he was going deeper into shock.

“Daddy did it!” August wined. “Wardaddy did it!”
“I gotta get this boy to the hospital!”
“Don’t leave us!”
“Y’all come on!”

Willie Jr. still out front cutting the hedges maniacally. Jackie ushered the children out of the house. She kept herself between the children and Willie.

Jackie, a nervous wreck, the children in a state of nervous confusion and mild shock, except Mane, scrambled into her car. Not a word was spoken to Willie Jr. Nor did either of them look in his direction.

Mane sat cock-eyed in the back seat, being careful not to brush the seat with his back. August got into the front seat. Marcus charged into the back seat with Mane wincing when Mane did.

Jackie turned the key in the ignition, changed gears, and depressed the accelerator pedal all in one motion. Jackie with her little lambs tucked safely into the car, peeked a glance at Willie who stood motionless staring blankly into the hedges. She backed out of the driveway hurriedly.

Brooding over thoughts in his head, Willie turned around flatly when he heard the grit under the car’s tires being crushed.

The car pulled out of the driveway with heated caution. Jackie jerked the car into forward gear-chirping the tires as she sped off.

Mane shot Willie Jr. the bird through the back window.

Willie Jr. saw Mane and stared hard at him, at them.

Mane observed Willie Jr. looking at him and ducked down out of sight. He hoped for refuge in the back seat. He imagined that he saw sorrow and a plea for help in his father's eyes. No way.

The car sped off.

Sitting on the couch in the living room, Mabel worked mindlessly on a crossword puzzle. The television provided background noise which she would miss as soon as it was off.

Jackie and the children burst through the front door with much rigor. They head to Mabel with everyone trying to talk at once. The emotion of the moment overwhelmed August. He breaks down into tears.

Mabel directed her attention towards the clamor.

"Grandma, Grandma," Marcus said excitedly, "he's been hurt!"

"And he didn't do nothin'!" Nicholas said.

"It wasn't his fault either!" Marcus said.

Mabel stood perplexed, "What in the world... Jackie... Who's been hurt?"

"Y'all be quiet! Mama, we got a problem."

"What you mean? What's wrong with y'all?"

"It's Willie Jr."

"Oh my God!" Mabel espoused nervously. "He's been hurt!"

She plowed through the children, unaware of the moans from Mane. She embraced the screen door looking out towards Jackie's car.

“Where is he? Where’s Willie?” Turning to question Jackie’s motivations, Mabel was only to be blasted by children’s pleas for an understanding, loving, and maternal ear.

“No Mama, Jackie responded disheartened, “Willie Jones Jr. is not hurt. He’s not alright either!”

“Slow down girl, you confusing me. Lord give me strength.” Mabel calmed herself as she moved past the clinging children to the couch. “Sit down here... tell me what you tryin’ to say!”

Jackie still standing. “There’s somethin’ wrong... there’s somethin’ wrong with Willie Jr. The man has gone crazy.”

“What you mean crazy?”

“Crazy! Crazy! Insane!” Came the chorus from the children.

Mabel listened intently.

“I’m on the way to the hospital right now. And I just had to come by here and show you what he’s done. Mane, show your Grandma your back.”

Jackie turned Mane around so Mabel could see the blood on his shirt.

“Look at your baby!”

“You sayin’ my child did this?! What have you done, child, to deserve this? Was it an accident?”

“No, Grandma, he poured hot water on me,” Mane quipped.

“You sure you didn’t bump him while he had it?”

“No ma’am.” Mane squeezed through heated teeth. “I was just sitting there playin’ cards,” Mane unable to maintain against the full court press of emotions and pain. “and he poured it on me.”

Tears flowed from Mane. His grandmother's disbelief became the straw that broke his camel's back. Her disbelief cut him to the quick.

"I'll tell you what else, Mama. My little angels say he beats them for no reason too. And I believe them."

Nicholas showed Mabel an old wound on his arm. "Look what he did?"

"Member that time my mouth was puffed out... and my cheek was bruised." She paused for effect. Mabel was beginning to understand. "He had pistol whipped me."

"You must have done somethin'. He wouldn't just—what did you do?"

"I didn't do nothin'," said an angry composed Mane. "There's somethin' wrong with him."

"He said I said somethin' about Mama too!" August said.

"But he didn't!" Marcus said.

"You must have done somethin'!"

"Mama, nothin' this boy has ever done can deserve this! The man done lost his mind!"

Mabel stared, perplexed.

Jackie spun Mane around... gingerly pulling up his shirt. "Look at this!"

Mane's back, a gagle of shirt, blood, flesh as it was uncovered. Mane moaned.

Mabel gasped-- horrified. Apprehensively, she touched the air near his wounds. Holding back her gag response, a lone tear rolls down her cheek.

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CHAPTER

29

Tears washed over Mabel's high cheek bones. The saline drops trickled into Mabel's lap. She touched the air near a sheet on her bed as if it were Mane's back.

"I didn't want to believe that my Willie did that."

"I never knew that!" Olivia was shocked. "Isn't it strange that no one ever told me about that?"

Mabel had tuned past Olivia. She motioned to Francesca to come to her. Francesca did, but reluctantly.

"Come to your Grandmama."

"All I knew was that Daddy did something to Mane- something real bad." Olivia pined on. "Even Mane wouldn't talk about it... strange."

"Men can be that way. I guess we all can..." Mabel paused for a moment, "but men 'specially."

Francesca sat quietly but stately on the bed. Mabel stroked her back lovingly.

"What did they do," Olivia asked, "to make him do that?"

“Men are just temperamental. Willie ‘specially so. He was worse than a woman.”

“How so?”

“Be easy with yo’ man girl.” She rubbed her cheek. “I suppose his emotions ‘fected him in a bad way- real bad.” Her eyes begin to wander. “But Grandma... I don’t understand why you refuse to believe something was wrong with Daddy prior to that point.”

Mabel stared distantly into the afternoon sun whose rays were bursting through the daintily draped window. A minute passed in silence.

She gazed beyond the fabric of the drapes, through the sun’s filtered rays, she could see the outside of the tool shed which was in their backyard. Loud whipping sounds. The sounds of extension cords cutting through the humid southern air, contacting flesh. Youthful screams for help from a terrorized child punctuated an endless moment.

Mabel continued to stare absently out the window... into her past.

Young Willie Jr., pleaded, kneeling towards his father. His back was crisscrossed with blood tracks left by the extension cords.

“Oh God no!” Cried young Willie. “I didn’t say nothin’ ‘bout Mama!”

Just then the cords laid their nasty hands on the child’s back. “God! Jesus please help me!”

Screaming at the top of his lungs, young Willie’s predicament was beyond belief. His mind flooded with contempt and confusion and pain. The cords connected

again with his tender back. Tears and mucus dripped off his small sculptured chin.

“Boy! Don’t you ever let me hear you talk ‘bout your mamma like that again!” Willie Sr. yelled vehemently. “You hear me! You idiot! Do you hear me!”

Mabel stared endlessly out the window, past her grand-daughter and great-grand-daughter. Her body was steeled by what she saw.

Olivia concerned about disturbing her focus, her concentration whispered, “You alright Mama?”

A younger tear-faced Mabel was frozen in place by her fear- fear of her husband’s retaliation - fear of the physical harm he would cause to her son if she intervened.

Willie Jr.’s cries for help moved Mabel to make a frantic run for the tool shed.

“Junior! Junior!” Mabel cried hysterically.

Mabel opened the tool shed door.

Daylight poured in. Cement dust floated in the air. A bare bulb swung mindlessly, casting a discord of long, wiry shadows about the interior of the shed.

She saw Willie Sr. swinging his arm ever so violently towards a cloud of dust.

Willie Jr. had the where with all, the presence of mind to make grunting sounds as his father hit the top bag of a stack of cement bags with great force.

Mabel cried out, “Don’t kill him Willie! Don’t kill him! He is your son! Please, don’t hurt him anymore.”

Her tears clouded her vision, but she focused on the small figure crouched behind stacked cement sacks. She watched Willie Sr. violently beat the bag of cement. She discovered Willie Jr. kneeling, hiding, in a prayerful position.

Young Willie Jr., the back of his shirt ripped in several places, stifled sniffles between teary downpours. His back was fresh with bare extension cord tracks from the whipping he had just received.

Willie Sr. continued to whip a bag of dry cement. He scolded it as if it were Willie Jr.

“You understand me boy? Damnit! Do you hear me!”

On the cushioned rest home bed, Mabel gazed aimlessly and for what seemed an eternity. But Olivia could see the tension leaving her eyes and face. She just waited.

“That boy never said anything bad about me in his life.” Mabel confided to the shadows which stood just outside the open window.

Dr. Singleton was the family physician. He had treated the Jones family and a large number of Black families in this small, idyllic country town. He knew all the Jones children by their childhood illnesses. He had delivered or help bring to term all the Jones children. He stood by the Venetian blinds in the now darkened room.

He snapped the blinds open by the time Jackie pushed the heavy office door closed. Light rushed in from outside, silhouetting Dr. Singleton's sagging physical appearance. He walked over to his desk. He had ascertained through various family contacts that there was a high possibility that Willie was paranoid schizophrenic. But he didn't know for sure.

Jackie sat in a comfortable high-backed chair in front of the desk. Her thoughts drifted to the comfort of the chair then back to the moment. Her movements reflecting her nervousness.

"For treating major depression," Dr. Singleton said in a voice which demanded respect, but had a soothing southern manner, "the current constraints make the treatment of depression, much less schizophrenia, even more challenging. There are a number of options available." He stroked his chin confidently.

"Like what?"

"Some treatments have proven more successful than others. Of course that depends on the patient. A major depressive episode may last up to a year. In most cases it doesn't last that long. With medical assistance it's duration is curtailed sharply. Has it been that long?" He stroked his chin.

"At least three years. My options?"

"You know men lose brain cells one-third faster than women as they get older. Generally in the front lobe. It can make them cranky. Did you know that?"

"My options? What are my options?" Jackie asked impatiently, not caring how many brain cells men lost.

"And some patients are more responsive to specific treatments than others. He could have bi-polar depression, psychotic depression. He could be paranoid or have some type of dementia, like schizophrenia."

“Doctor Singleton, will you please answer my questions, what are my choices? What can I do?”

“Well, Jackie, that’s hard to say,” as he stroked his chin. “Lithium could work, maybe a tricyclic antidepressant.”

“Just tell me what to do. I need to do somethin’!”

“Okay, Jackie. First I suggest we try intensive vitamin therapy. Vitamins will help.”

“No.” Jackie was tired of his abuse – his abuse of her and her children.

“You did say that he was not the same? That he showed a deterioration in his social relations, work and self-care?”

“Yes, everything but the self-care.”

“Well there are drugs which may help. New psycho-active drugs which might help.”

“No, that won’t do either,” Jackie exclaimed. “I have had enough. I can’t take it any more and don’t want to take it any more.”

“Schizophrenics, if he is, are badly affected by criticism and a negative environment. Anythin’ you can do to make his home life happier will help.”

“You don’t seem to understand. It’s beyond that. You’re the one who treated my face. And you saw what Willie Jr. did to Mane’s back.”

He remembered those events well.

“Maybe family counseling- ”

He knew there wasn’t a chance in hell he was going to get this small town girl and her husband into a counseling session. She would think that it would be the talk of the town. And for a while he knew she and Willie would be the talk of the town, had it not been for the fact that they already were.

He knew a great deal more than he let on to her. His receptionist talked about the Joneses. And so did the nurses. He kept quiet about what he knew. He would have to see how much of what he heard was real.

Dr. Singleton understood that Willie's mental challenge probably derived from some cataclysmic event, usually of family origins, which destroyed his super-ego. It may have gone all at once or slowly over time. But whatever it was, it had started Willie's mental meltdown.

"No, I'm afraid. I'm afraid of him. And I'm afraid for the children. We've to get him outta the house."

"Have you considered leaving? Or moving in with one of your relatives?"

"You know I can't do that." Jackie's nerves were on end. "Where am I gonna go with four chil'ren? Willie Jr.'s gotta go."

"Well Jackie--"

"Don't 'well Jackie' me! How can we get him out? His Black ass gotta hit the road!"

Dr. Singleton sat silently for a moment studying Jackie. "There is one thing to do."

"What?" Jackie demanded. "Tell me."

He chose his words carefully. He moved his hands pensively.

"He can be committed for psychiatric evaluation and treatment."

He knew that if he couldn't get Jackie and Willie into marriage counseling, there was no way in hell that he was going to get Willie to see a psychiatrist. No way in hell! But he had to try.

"Good. How? When? How much is it gonna cost?"

“It requires a bit of paper work and a preliminary evaluation by me and then by an Institution staff member.”

He would talk to him and try. He would give it the old professional heave ho. More like heave. If pushed came to shove, he would prescribe what he thought would help Willie, perhaps the latest, greatest prescription psychoactive drug, with advice from a colleague of course. Then on to the next patient. They were like family, but he was a busy person.

“It would require you and another member of your family, like his mother, to certify that he was unstable and dangerous.”

“Dangerous?”

“That you fear for your safety.” He noted her response. “We can schedule a commitment hearing. If the hearing is favorable to you he can then be sent to the institution for treatment.”

“How long does it take?”

Compassion flowed from his eyes. Sympathy for both she and Willie. “It’s somethin’ you need to really think about Jackie.”

He gave her a minute to think. Her anger began to build deep within her. *He couldn’t be for real? Jackie thought. Hasn’t he been the one treating our wounds?* He could see her emotions rising. And surely from his perspective he could see there was no joy in her life. But he was a man too busy to see. He had a schedule to keep; the next patient was waiting.

“Committing him is a serious step.”

“I’ve gotta do it. I can’t have them chil’ren getting beat up by him. I gotta have some peace.”

“I don’t know if this will bring the type of peace that you are looking for.”

“Why don’t you think about it? Give it some thought?”

“I have thought about it! All I think about now is our safety!”

“If you’re sure.”

“I am sure. You know he ain’t himself.”

“Well, alright,” Dr. Singleton said. “How about his mother?”

“That’s not a problem. When can you do it?”

“We can start the paperwork now.”

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CHAPTER

30

Willie Jr. was one of only four men in the adult choir. He was by far the most handsome. And he was the youngest at forty-two. The other eight female members of the adult choir were elderly women.

The choir was at the end of a song. During each announcement or song Jackie tried to explain to Mabel the eventuality of having Willie Jr. committed. She had talked to her in person at her house. She had talked to her on the telephone. They had even gone for a walk, just the two of them. Nothing could convince her that her beloved son was in trouble.

“Jackie,” Mabel whispered, “I told you I’d think about it.”

“I’m not doin’ it just for myself,” Jackie said in hushed tones, “I’m thinking about your grandchildren too.”

“Well I just don’t know if that’s the best thing.”

“I’m telling you Mama, it’s the only thing to do.”

Jackie cranks her neck to read Mabel's face. After a moment she said. "He just ain't right. He just ain't himself no more."

"Well there must be somethin' else we can do."

The choir completed the song. The choir director motioned for the adult choir to be seated. The preacher approached the podium. The organist played a slow melody under the reading of the final announcements before the offering, a pre-sermon hymn.

"Mrs. Wimbush," said Reverend Moyd, "was in the hospital with kidney problems. Let's all keep her in our prayers. The sisters of Zion will be meeting at 4:00 this afternoon in the church hall. Don't forget the Deaconess Board is having a gleaners campaign for the new addition to the church. Bible study meets every Thursday at 7:00 p.m. Everyone's invited to Sunday school every Sunday at 9:00 before the service."

The minister sat down.

Immediately, in a rushed fervor, Willie Jr. stood. He lambasted Reverend Moyd.

"To hell with you, Reverend Moyd! You ain't making' no sense no how. My Mama ain't been late a day in her life. You ain't got no right to talk about her anyhow, and my wife either. Who you think you are talkin' about her like that? You just a lying devil!"

As quickly as he stood up he sat down. His face was absent of any emotion. He wasn't moved by the gawking, the awkward looks driven his way. He didn't even see them.

The congregation looked straight ahead- awestruck, followed by their dead silence- then the slow rising murmur of people talking.

Jackie needled Mabel in the arm with her index finger, but said nothing because there was no need for that. Willie had said it all.

Mabel's mouth hung open, wide open. A fly could have landed on her tongue and she would never have known. Finally Mabel's ears turned back on to her dread. She could hear the children in the pews behind her giggling, the old ladies, her peers whispering the shame of it all. It all added to her anguish, to the weariness of the moment. A couple of people left the choir stand.

The minister twisted his head to look back at Willie Jr. Standing quickly, the minister motioned to the choir director for another song. The minister waved his hands in the air.

“Lord, bind all the spirits in your house. We rebuke you satan in this place in the name of Jesus Christ. We bind you in hell forever.”

A tear trickled down Mabel's face as she realized that Jackie and the children had been telling her the truth about Willie, her junior, her precious son. *My Baby!* Mabel thought extending her hand to Jackie. Mabel needed the comfort of her family, of someone close, someone who understood. She realized that Jackie knew more about her own son than she did. This saddened her greatly.

Jackie and Mabel exchanged loving, knowing glances. Jackie's shoulders and entire being breathed a sigh of relief. Mabel's eyes betrayed her sorrow. She was heartbroken.

Supreme satisfaction beamed from the children's faces. Finally, someone, an adult believed them.

In fact, the entire church did now. The congregation saw in the flesh that which they have gossiped about and believed all along. Willie Jones Jr. was crazy.

The Jones children gave each other low, secretive high fives. Grown-ups finally believed.

After church service, the Jones extended family often met at Mabel's home for dinner. The family was just finishing another lavish feast. Mabel and Jackie cleared the dishes, carrying them into the kitchen.

Willie Jr. stepped outside for a smoke.

"Mama," Jackie said in quieted tones, "we need to talk."

"Yeah, baby."

"What we gonna do?"

Jackie knew full well what she wanted to do, what she must do. But she had to corral Mabel in. Let it be Mabel's idea.

"We gotta do somethin', you know." Jackie said in a more than suggesting tone. "He's just getting worse every day. Seems like he just don't have sense any more."

"Don't you think he's just tired, Jackie, is all? He just needs some rest."

"No, Mama. That ain't it. Somethin's wrong with him. Just ain't safe to have him 'round the house no more. The chil'ren are scared because he ain't right."

Jackie couched her next remark, but first she watched Mabel closely, giving her time to think.

Mabel tried to convince herself that the event at church hadn't really happened. It couldn't have. But everybody saw it happen and few close friends had dared to call her to talk about it. But she put them off until later.

"And I tell you, I never know what he's gonna do next. It's no way to live. He ain't even like a husband anymore... and I ain't feeling too good with him nearby."

"What you sayin', girl? What you tryin' to say?"

"Mama, I went to see Dr. Singleton. He said Willie Jr. need some help. There ain't nothin' we can do for him at home. We gotta get him some help..."

"Some help? Did Dr. Singleton say that? Well, when did he ever see Willie Jr.? He ain't seen my baby for years."

"He don't need to see him. He knows him." Then more solemnly she said. "He's seen what he's done to me and the kids. He said there's somethin' wrong. He say we gotta get him outta the house."

"Outta the house? What you mean? Where he gonna go?"

"What I'm sayin' is that he gotta go to the Institution for a while."

"The what? He don't need to go to no mental hospital!"

"He want to send him to the Institution, Mama. They can help him. He can get professional help at the mental institution."

"God...ain't there somethin' else..."

"I'm sorry Mama. That's what he said."

“Oh, my baby. What’s gonna happen to him? Can’t you work it out with him? Can’t Dr. Singleton give him some pills or somethin’?”

“No. He gotta go to the Institution first. Maybe they can give him somethin’. Maybe it’ll make him better.”

“I suppose you’re right, Mabel said contemptuously, “if that’s what Dr. Singleton said.”

Mabel had finally agreed.

Willie Jr. flicked the brown cigarette butt into the yard as he opened the screen which led to the kitchen. He entered the kitchen bathed in the stifling smell of tobacco smoke.

“Baby,” Mabel questioned, “why you act like that at church? Why’d you shout at Reverend Moyd?”

“Huh? Shout at Reverend Moyd? What you talkin’ about?”

“You know, Willie Jr. What you did at church today.”

“Say what?” He glances sharply from Mabel to Jackie, then back to Mabel. “What’s this about? Why are you attacking me Mama?” He looks hard at Jackie. “What to you have to do with this?”

Jackie lowered her head in silence.

“Junior, why did you shout like that? What were you thinking?”

Willie felt as if he were being attacked for no apparent reason. It confused and angered him. Instantly his eyes became glazed. He became a different Willie Jr.

“I couldn’t let him talk about you like that! Who does he think he is, talkin’ like that?”

“Talkin’? Talkin’ like what?” Mabel inquired.

“Come on Mama,” Willie said gruffly, “you heard him talkin’ about you!”

“He wasn’t talkin’ about me. What are you sayin’?” It was then that Mabel could see the strangeness in his eyes.

“I get tired of people talkin’ about you and my family. These people on the street don’t think nothin’ about you. They up to no good. They just want to hurt you.”

Willie stated this flatly in an ambushed angry way, pacing like a waiting groom upon hearing the wedding march being played.

“Junior, Willie Sr. used to say that if you think people are out to get you, you just gotta know that they are out for themselves. Not after you or your family. They just out to help themselves.”

Willie didn’t hear a word of what she had said. Not in his conscious mind. He waited until there was a pause in the air. He was on a roll and Mabel wasn’t about to disrupt his discourse.

“You just don’t know who to trust anymore. You just can’t trust anybody. They all want to hurt you.” He paced more agitatedly. “Why that Reverend Moyd, he be talkin’ about you all the time. Who knows what’s on that nigger’s mind. Jimmy Bugg’s always tryin’ to get on Jackie. Just don’t respect her at all. I should have killed him while I had a chance.”

Jackie gave a meaningful glance to Mabel.

“Oh, God, this ain’t happening... no, please, no... what’s happening to my baby?”

“Calm down, Willie Jr., just calm down. Mama come over here and help finish these dishes. Come on.”

Jackie handed Mabel a dish towel. They dried the dishes hurriedly.

Willie Jr. lit a cigarette in the house which was against house rules. He spotted a knife that was stuck in the ham sitting on a glass platter on the table.

Jackie caught him looking at the knife. Willie turned from it quickly. When she wasn't looking, he slowly pulled the knife from the ham—holding it at his side.

Jackie elbowed Mabel so she would notice him.

“Have y'all been talkin' about me behind my back?”

“Come on, honey bear,” Mabel said softly. “Let me have that, now.”

Willie Jr. wanted to let her have it too. Suddenly, Willie had a moment of clarity. He realized for the first time that he was thinking thoughts of insanity. He thought that it was strange of him to want to knife his mother. That's was the beginning of the mental battle for Willie. He didn't know that he was in a battle for his sanity, but he was in a place that he did not understand. It was only akin to an urge. Nothing he would know how to act upon now. Perhaps eventually. But in this flash, his brain had broken through his queer, irate state of mind, if only momentarily. With his eyes tearing from burning tobacco, he looked down at the knife in his hand, then slipped silently away back into Wardaddy.

He tapped the blade against his thigh- he considered the irony of her request. Mabel reached retardedly for the knife with one hand while caressing his non-

threatening arm with the other. Mabel couldn't believe that she had fear in her heart.

"Give it to Mama. We don't want anybody to get hurt."

"Mama, what were you two talkin' about then?"

"It's alright, now baby." Mabel said in an effort to calm herself as well as her son. "Everything's alright."

"What were you sayin'?"

"Listen honey, Jackie told me that Dr. Singleton said that things have been hard on you lately. He said you need some help son."

"Dr. Singleton?" Willie asked. "When has she been sneaking off to see him? I knew she'd been sneaking off. I don't need any help- especially not from him." Willie glared at Jackie, cutting his eyes away from her before she could.

"He said there's nothin' he can do."

"Nothin' he can do? About what? He thinks I need some help? What are y'all talkin' about?"

"Jackie and the chil'ren are scared, Junior." Mabel pleaded. "They're scared of you. You're not acting like yourself. Look at you! You're smoking in my kitchen!"

Willie dragged hard on the cigarette, inhaling deeply, holding in the smoke as long as his lungs could bare. He exhaled in Jackie's general direction. He dipped the burning tip of the cigarette into the dishwater, then thumped it into the trash.

"Dr. Singleton thinks you need to go to the Institution. And I'm beginning to believe he's right," quipped Mabel.

"Jackie?" Willie Jr. inquired.

Suddenly, a certain calm nature, possessed Willie. It was if he were now standing before Saint Peter and the pearly gates, waiting to be judged.

"She's right," Jackie said.

"Mama, there ain't nothin' wrong with me," Willie Jr. implored. "I'm not sick. I don't need to go to no mental hospital. That Dr. Singleton don't know what he's talkin' about. Hell, he's not even seen me. What does he know?"

"Willie Jr.," Mabel said, "he thinks you need to go to Institution for psychiatric evaluation."

"It's the best thing," Jackie added, "think of the chil'ren."

"The Institution?"

Jackie reiterated, "Think of the chil'ren."

"The Institution?!" Willie Jr. said, excitedly. "That's where them crazies go. I ain't crazy! What's wrong with you?" His more violent nature was back in control. "Why you ganging up on me? There's nothin' wrong with me... and I damn sure ain't gonna go to no Institution, that's for sure."

"It's for the best--," Mabel cried.

"No, sir. They'd have to take me over my dead body. I went to prison for you, but I ain't going there. No, no. Y'all can't really think I'm gonna go there." He pulled another cigarette out of the pack. He stuck it in his mouth, and was about to light up when he looked into his mother's tear-filled eyes. He put the cigarette away.

"What you thinking about? You'll have to fight me every step of the way, I can promise you that. You gonna have a fight with me. And that's the God-awful truth."

Nicholas, Marcus, and August sat outside on Mabel's front steps with sad countenances. They listened to the conversation with sullen ears. They just wanted everything to be okay. They didn't know what it would take, and didn't care. They didn't want the fear, the beatings, and not knowing what would happen from one day to the next. They wanted their friends not to be afraid to come over to play. They wanted a return to normalcy.

"I told you it was crazy around here!" Marcus said. "Well, not here but at our house."

"Yeah," Nicholas said, "Tell us something we don't know. I always joked with Rusty and the guys about his craziness, but deep down inside, I thought he was just real strict."

"I think we all knew," August said, sounding unusually mature. "It's just too bad the grown ups didn't believe us, until now. It's almost as if we didn't matter."

"Yeah. Well, they believe us now," Marcus stated. "Maybe something will get done now."

"Sometimes I don't wanna go home from school, cause of the craziness...", Nicholas said, his nerves frayed, "look at my hand, it's shakin'."

"Don't worry man", Marcus said, "Mama will do something. Somebody's gonna do something."

"Listen guys, when we get home we gotta take care of Mama. We can't let Daddy beat on Mama any more. We gotta take care of Mama. Wardaddy is crazy."

They spoke as if they didn't really believe it themselves. The severity of their situation had come home to roost as an early Saturday morning horror

movie in which they were the major stars; the victims being chased by Frankenstein and Dracula.

Willie Jr. paced back and forth like a caged animal a manifestation of apprehension in the extreme. Jackie laid on the bed, watching his every painful movement.

“So you in on it, too, huh, Jackie? You joined up with Mabel on this? You plotting together now?”

“No, baby, its not like that at all...”

“You turn your back on your own husband? Don’t you think I do enough for you? I work hard to keep food on that table for you and those chil’ren. What’s got into you, woman? How long you been sneaking off like that?”

“Oh, Willie Jr., I’m so sorry,” Jackie said sadly, “I’m sorry you feel and think this way.”

“You’re sorry? You don’t know what sorry is. You and Mama think you got this all worked out, you think its just that clean and easy, don’t you? Ease me outta the picture. I’m telling you baby, it ain’t like that. I ain’t gonna go.”

“Don’t you see, Willie Jr.? They gonna make you get better. Gonna make you feel right. Everything’s gonna be fine... it’s gonna be alright.”

In his heart of hearts, Willie Jr. knew that his mother and Jackie would not be going through all this trouble if it were not necessary. There must have been a thread of truth to what they had been saying, but he couldn’t see it. He could see the pain in his mother’s eyes when he left her house that Sunday afternoon.

Each time he spoke with her thereafter, the anguish in her voice, in the way she carried herself, the manner in which she treated him, was painfully obvious.

Even though they had numerous conversations before he was committed for psychiatric evaluation, he could not be convinced that he had a problem.

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CHAPTER

31

Six months later. There was little movement in the sterile, medicinally cleansed lounge area in the severely mentally challenged (SMC) unit of The Franklin Institute, the state mental hospital.

The Franklin Institute was once an Army recruitment center and basic training camp during World War II. The brick buildings which once housed new inductees into the armed service now held the mentally challenged.

The state mental facility was divided into what amounted to mini-camps for the mentally challenged. The less challenged were placed in units close to the entrance. The more challenged individuals were placed in the most remote area of the facility, no man's land. The other units fell somewhere in between.

The Franklin Institute was located on sixty-five acres of prime real estate. All ponds on the facility had to be drained when the Institute was sued after one of its patients was found drowned in an algae-filled pond.

This was the unit which housed the severely depressed, the paranoid, the schizophrenic, individuals with psychosexual and affective disorders. A few patients walked around aimlessly. Since the cutbacks, there weren't enough orderlies or nurses on the facility.

"Come on, Mr. Jones," said Mrs. Crenshaw, "time for your pills." She was the nurse responsible for making sure patients were taking their medication.

"Don't need them," Willie Jr. said.

"Come on now, Mr. Jones," said Mrs. Kelly an accompanying nurse, "you know you gotta take them. The doctor said so."

"Don't need them and you know it." Willie said confidently. "Ain't nothin' wrong with me. That doctor who put me in here don't know what he's doin'."

His emotions rose. His body ached with consternation. Willie stretched his arm towards the more permanent residents of SMC.

"Hell, there a whole lot of crazies in here, and here I am where I don't need to be. No sense in it, it just ain't right. I'm gonna get that son of a b#@*h who put me in here," Willie said in an even-tempered disposition.

Willie Jr. walked off down the hall nonchalantly after taking his pills. He felt better concerning the entire ordeal. He knew he didn't belong here. His outburst in church and violent behavior at work didn't warrant being caged like a wild animal.

He felt like a victim of the system. He felt that the system was against him, his family had betrayed him and he felt like his world had crumbled from under his feet. But he had vowed not to let it show. It could lead

to even worse circumstances than this. He couldn't imagine what they could be.

He was separated from his family, from his work. He told himself he wouldn't allow what had happened to him to bother him, to let sleeping dogs lie. That he was over it. Only he believed the dogs weren't sleeping but biting and lying.

"You know somethin', he's got a point," Nurse Crenshaw said. "But I think this is the most emotion I've seen him display since his arrival."

"Yeah," Nurse Kelly replied, "I think you're right on both counts. He don't seem so bad. Wonder what they put him in here for anyhow?"

"They say schizophrenia of the paranoid type, but he sure don't act like it to me. I never seen him act out or have any episodes. Never seen him talkin' to voices like they say he does."

"Me neither."

"His chart says his family said he exhibited violent behavior."

"What? Mr. Jones? I don't know about that!"

"Yeah. Said he hit his wife or somethin'. I tell you what...I bet she just got tired of having him around."

"Oh come on," Nurse Kelly responded not believing Crenshaw had said what she did. "She not gonna have him put in here for that. Besides, she couldn't do it without the doctor's approval and the family's consent. But still, doesn't seem like he's schizo to me...."

"Oh, I don't know. It doesn't take much to get them all to sign. You ever seen him do anythin' strange?"

"No."

“Me neither,” said Nurse Kelly, who is visibly concerned. “And I’ve been here the whole time he’s been here. I’m telling you, nothin’s wrong with him.”

“Well, he gets out in a week.”

“Just in time for Halloween.”

“What if he gets out and turns into Jason,” she chuckled.

“Yeah and knifes his family to death,” she laughed too. “Ah, that’s too much!”

They both laughed loudly, hardly able to contain themselves.

The children were in the living room watching television. Willie knocked on the back door of his house, holding a huge surprise. He opened the door, coming into the kitchen unannounced.

It just so happened that August and Jackie were making their way to the kitchen, just as Willie turned around after having closed the kitchen door.

Startled to say the least, Willie Jr. said with nervous humor, “Anybody here hungry for pumpkin pie? Look at this baby I brought you.”

Willie was holding the largest pumpkin Jackie had ever seen. And Willie had the biggest smile across his face that Jackie hadn’t seen for the longest time.

She missed the joy they once shared, the happiness, the family once shared and the oneness of heart which tied their souls in an undying love. She missed Willie Jr. but her being signaled despair and terror, extreme fear when her thoughts turned to Willie Jr. She was confused, her emotions were betraying her.

“Daddy!” August said. “Daddy, it’s Daddy, Mama.” August ran over to Willie, hugging his leg because Willie was still holding the pumpkin.

“Hello, to the house!” Willie said trying to dispel any ill will. “May I come in?”

“It depends,” Jackie said with indecisive reluctance. “You know how to behave?” Jackie said with authority.

“Know all about it. Wrote a book.”

Marcus and Nicholas continued to watch television. Though they had heard their father come in, they didn’t bother to go to greet him. They did not speak or acknowledge his presence in any way. They ignored him and hoped for the best.

They didn’t desire to speak to him. They didn’t want to be in the same room with him. They were afraid of him-terrified. For a moment, when they had heard his voice, they thought he had escaped. They could tell by their mother’s tone of voice that she wasn’t too happy to see him.

Somehow, he had managed to get an early release. That was what had happened when he had gone to prison. He had gotten out on the early release program. Now, he was out again. The predator of all predators, Wardaddy, their mentally-challenged father.

Thoughts raced through their young minds. What did he tell them that allowed him to get out so early? Did they see him go crazy while he was there? Did he act out? Maybe not? What was he gonna do to them for putting him in there? What was he gonna do to Mama? Where could they hide? Where could they go? Maybe we could stay with Grandma Mabel? These and many more terrifying thoughts plagued them.

Maybe Daddy will be okay they hoped in unison. They thought perhaps the doctor or doctors gave him medicine which may have cured him. They didn't know but they did care.

The nature of their entire beings twisted and churned inside. If one were a spiritual person, one could hear the sound of their souls. The fearful souls of the two boys sitting by the ever present television wrenched in the mire of their fathers madness.

The boys always wanted to see themselves grow bigger, larger. They could feel themselves changing. Each one subtly in his own way. They knew it and could taste their desire to be away from this place. Their souls were frozen. Frozen into their positions, stuck to the floor, to his house. Cemented to their Wardaddy. Stuck with him forever. Their bodies trembled with nervous trepidation.

“And what are you up to, young man?” Willie Jr. said to August.

“I'm stirring this stuff,” he said with quiet reluctance. He understood from his mother chilly demeanor that things were uneasy. “We're all helping, Daddy.”

Jackie pointed to the other children who she could see from where she was standing but Willie could not.

“They're helping by staying outta the way.”

It was only then that he realized that the boys were there at all. And they were being quite disrespectful not to have greeted him. “Well, help me with this pumpkin. Give me a knife, August.”

“You sure move yourself in here real easy, don't you?” Jackie glared, anger stirring in her voice.

August moved ever so slowly over to the silverware drawer with his eyes on his mother. He opened the drawer retrieving a knife. August gave him a big butcher knife.

“Here use some paper,” she strongly suggested, “if you gonna cut that thing. Put it on the paper.” Even though the table had a perfectly blue vinyl tablecloth on it with the prettiest floral pattern.

“You act like you just came home from a day at work. Like nothin’ has happened.”

Willie thrust the knife into the jack-o-lantern.

“Well, that sure ain’t the truth. A lot’s happened. That Dr. Singleton, he’s somethin’. He put the cure on me good and fast. Gave me some pills and some good talkin’ too.” He monitored her reaction.

“Lord that man can talk! I didn’t want to hear nothin’ he had to say... but I had to listen... and... he was right.” Willie jabbed the pumpkin with the knife.

“Lord, I sure done you wrong. Done you all wrong. And I’m sorry. Gotta apologize now... right here and right now.”

“You sound like you running for office, Willie Jr.”

Their inquisitive natures drove them into the kitchen. Marcus and Nicholas entered the kitchen. All they had to do was take one look at the grotesque image, the face drawn into the side of the jack-o-lantern. That face was enough. It told the boys all they needed to know about the state of their father’s health, his mental health.

“I am. The best most important office in the whole, damn land. Marcus and Nicholas! How you guys doin’?”

Nicholas and Marcus said, "Hi, Daddy." But they were thinking *Wardaddy*.

"We're okay," Marcus commented matter-of-factly.

"How you doin'?" Nicholas asked sincerely, believing whole-heartedly that deep within his father's eyes lay that strange gaze that said Willie was crazy.

"Oh, I'm fine as wine in the summer time."

The children giggled half-heartedly.

"You boys want to go outside with me and throw the ball around?" Willie asked apprehensively. Turning to Jackie he winked.

The boys didn't want to go outside. The fear they housed inside them which was growing by leaps and bounds would not allow them to say "no".

Nicholas, Marcus, and August paraded outside with Willie in tow. With aloof acquiescence, Jackie kept a mindful eye on Willie through the kitchen curtains.

Willie Jr. played with the children acting silly and laughing hard as he tumbled after the football, wrestling playfully with his boys.

Jackie went to lie down, satisfied that Willie would not harm the children. She had to think for a minute. Willie's early unexpected arrival had given rise to one of the most debilitating headaches she could remember.

He played with them for a very short time—tossing the ball deeply into the bushes intentionally.

Willie knew just where to lose the football. Behind his house ran a small drainage ditch. No matter how hot the summers, the ditch, seldom if ever dried up. Due to this fact, the two feet wide drainage ditch which ran the length of their block had all sorts of shrubs,

thick weeds, pussy willow and briars- black berry briars.

These black berry bushes produced the largest, juiciest berries that any one in the county had seen. Further beyond the briar bushes was a stand of about fifty plum trees. The black berry bushes stood nearly eight feet tall with thick ill-tempered thorns. They were like the ones, one would see in a Brotha Rabbit story, or any rabbit story which involved rabbits escaping predators through a thorny tunnel.

And yes indeed there were rabbits using the Jones' briar bush tunnels. Rabbit droppings could be spotted periodically once inside the tunnels. Willie Jr. had gotten Bubba to make him a rabbit box. The few times, twice when rabbits were captured, killing them, the warm fuzzy friendly animals with their cute little noses was too much for the children to bear. They had refused to eat the rabbits. It had been a big strike against their father for him to have killed the rabbits.

The children had to get down on all fours, crawling through the rabbit trails looking for their ball.

While they searched for the ball, Willie Jr. went back inside the house. He wanted to surprise Jackie.

"Hey kids," Willie said, "I'll go inside and make some lemonade while y'all look for the ball."

"Okay dad," their young voices echoed from the bushes, "okay."

Her headache had driven her to lie down. Her thoughts concerning Willie had created this massive headache. She was frightened by his return- frightened for the children, scared of Willie. Who he had become. Who he wasn't. She had suspicious apprehension towards Willie's future actions.

What could she expect? What would he do next? Could she trust him alone with the children? He seemed okay. What was she to do? She had really enjoyed the time while Willie was away. Away in the Institute. She enjoyed the peace. She loved the quiet times. Olivia was away in college. Mane had been out of control, but she would handle that.

She had noticed how calm the other boys had become in Willie's absence. Nicholas' nerves had calmed. His hands no longer quivered. August's asthma had subsided. Dr. Singleton had said it was only their nerves. She did believe him until she saw her sons calm down into normalcy.

All three of the younger boys were always happy to come home from school now. Jackie had also noticed some of the neighborhood children had returned to play with her boys in their own yard, in Jackie's yard, in Jackie's home.

No more tobacco smoke and smell in her house. No more lingering smoke in the small bathroom. No more smoke early in the mornings or late at night, staining everything from Willie's teeth to the walls. Bringing death to her sons through his second-hand smoke exhaust. She didn't know how or why she had put up with his smoking.

Willie crept into the kitchen with the stealth of a New York second story burglar. He tip-toed ever so slowly through the kitchen, listening for the place where Jackie might be. He wanted to surprise her. He was horny. He hadn't had any sex in months.

He was a man's man. He would never think about taking matters into his own hands. If he didn't get sex

from Jackie, he would just wait. And wait he did. Now he was about to explode. He was hungry for sex.

He had imagined for months what having sex with here would be like. He could feel her moist softness surround his manhood. He had imagined to the point of an unexpected midnight wet dream.

There she was, lying beautiful upon the bed. She was stretched out on the bed, her shapely body beckoning him to take her. He would have gotten closer to the bed, to her had it not been for the bedroom door. It had opened with the ease of cutting room-temperature butter. The door however caught a back draft and closed with a “slam”.

“Eeeek!” Jackie screamed when she turned to see Willie Jr. standing there.

The children heard the door slam. It could have been a gun shot. They thought the worst. Then they heard their mother’s scream. They looked through the briars, through their fears, to one another. They began to inch their way backwards out of the briars getting pricked in their hurry.

“No! Damn you! Don’t think you can charm your way back into my house and into my bed with that slick apology! Smooth talk don’t make no never mind.”

Jackie hadn’t thought about sex, only work and her boys, her Olivia, her family. The thought of having sex with Willie Jones Jr. made her ill. She didn’t want to taste his tobacco covered tongue inside her mouth. She didn’t want his heavy body laying on hers. She wasn’t horny. Her hands worked just fine when she needed them.

Maybe she had thought about sex once. The time Calvin James had called to check on her welfare.

The children came running up to the house. On the way inside, at the back porch, Nicholas and Marcus picked up their new metal bats which their mother had bought just for an occasion like this one. They stormed Jackie's bedroom. They stood by the door witnessing the completion of their mother's declaration. She didn't need their help. Wardaddy looked like he could use it though.

"You ain't welcome here, Willie Jr.!" Jackie said angrily. "You can sleep on the couch tonight; but tomorrow you'll be gone. Don't think you gonna eat here tomorrow, either. You can't stay here no more! I'm calling the Sheriff in the morning if you ain't out of here."

In their hearts the children went "yeah!", but their faces were sad. Why did all this have to happen to them?

Willie Jr. was visibly crushed. He brushed past the children dejectedly walking down the hallway. He wasn't going to stay where he wasn't wanted. Not one week or one night. He had had it with this bull. He was through. He had had enough.

"Halloween, damn it," Willie said to himself, "they got me this time... dawn Halloween..."

Willie spoke about the demons which he had been taught about in church. He had seen them in the bushes behind the house. He knew they somehow were responsible for his calamity. He couldn't and wouldn't pray to God because his belief had been aborted during the troubled times in his life.

Mabel was in the living room watching television. She heard someone outside and went to the door. The shadowy figure, this shadow of a man did not cause Mabel to flee. Instinctively she knew him, how he moved.

“Willie? Is that you, son?”

Her Willie sat in the glider on the porch, oblivious to Mabel, his face full of anguish.

“Demons. Must be demons on me. It’s killing me. Feel like my chest is breaking open. Ain’t no demon gonna get the best of me. Bring them on! Come on you little bastards! I’ll show you a fight. You’re nothin’ to me.”

“Willie Jr., why ain’t you home with your family?”

Mabel startled Willie Jr.

“I guess I should have listened to you in the first place. There ain’t no place for me.”

“What you doin’ out here, son?”

“It ain’t home no more.” Willie laughed half-heartedly. His rejection filled his soul. “Knew all along and let me fall on my face. I should have seen that you knew what you was talkin’ about. I should have accepted it then.”

Mabel didn’t know what he was talking about. All she knew was that her son was hurting and home. She picked up his bag and lead him inside.

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CHAPTER

32

There were two chilly days before Thanksgiving. Olivia hadn't arrived home because Mane was going to pick her up. Pumpkin and apple pies cooled on a vinyl-topped table near one of the kitchen windows. Willie sat morose at the table reading the newspaper with Mabel's shuffling around doing kitchen things playing in his ears. Mabel stood busily in front of the stove pouring peppermint tea from her grandmother's hand-me-down silver tea pot. She poured the seeping tea into china tea cups. Part of her believed Willie would appreciate the china and the complimentary silver- perhaps help her efforts to cheer him up. She was prayerful in the hope the peppermint tea would help calm his nervous stomach.

"Here you are, baby," she said with an ingrained weariness.

Willie resented being called baby. He couldn't keep count the number of times he had told her not to call him, 'baby', 'pookie' or 'nutchie booboo'. He didn't know what he disliked the most, the names she called

him or sitting there having a tea party with his mother. But he understood he was in no position to comment on issues which upset him and which were of such little priority. At this stage in the game, and as his maligned life was concerned, it was an inconsequential matter.

She set his saucered cup down beside his breakfast plate. As usual, he had not eaten much. Mabel knew he was losing weight but it was not completely obvious.

Methodically, inattentively, Willie Jr. continued to skim through the newspaper, ignoring Mabel and most of the news.

Mabel curiously picked up Willie's bottle of medicine which had been prescribed for his schizophrenia. She moved her bifocals down so she could read the label.

"Three pills per day," Mabel spoke softly to herself. She had read the label before but her memory often failed her. "One with each meal. This medication may cause nausea if not taken with food."

There were 250 caplets in this prescription. Willie had had the bottle for six weeks. She noticed how dangerously full the bottle was.

"Willie Jr.!" Mabel shrieked with exasperation.

Startled, Willie jumped in his chair, skirting it backwards with a screech. His nerves were already shot and this only rattled them further.

"Baby, I know this ain't a new bottle! Honey, you know better."

"I know Mama. I sometimes cheat."

"Cheat! You robbin' the bank, boy!"

"I know, Mama," he said calmly, then shouting, "but I'm not crazy!"

Since Willie had been staying with Mabel she was emphatic about Willie taking his medicine. She had only Willie's church experience to go by. She had seen him act out insanely only that once. And that once was enough, she didn't want anything harmful to come of Willie or herself.

"Boy, you know you gotta keep taking your medicine!" Mabel said as she unscrewed the bottle and retrieved a pill. "Here drink your tea and take your medicine."

She heard Willie Sr. in how she said what she had just told Willie. "Let me give the tea a minute to cool."

A frustrated Mabel picked up Willie's plate. She briskly walked over to the sink in cold silence. She scraped what was left of brunch into a small garbage container.

She had watched his appetite steadily grow from when he first had moved in with her. Willie wouldn't eat much of anything when he first moved in with her. Now his attitude, appearance and appetite had improved, but not by much. Intuitively, she knew his weight had fallen off. She didn't know how to deal with his unresponsiveness. She decided to call Dr. Singleton after her nap.

"Is the light strong enough for you to read in?"

"Uh-huh."

Willie Jr. blew off the steam which circled on the surface of the tea. He delicately sipped the tepid tea. He slipped his medication into his pocket and threw his head back when he thought Mabel would see him in an attempt to make Mabel believe he was taking his

medication. He again sipped his tea, only this time loudly.

Willie would summarily flush the pills down the toilet like he had been doing after first receiving his medication. This practice was initiated after the fourth week of Willie having taken his medication, shortly after he first moved in with Mabel. From that time forward Willie expressed his wounds through rebellion. He was hurt, in pain, losing hope each day like blood flowing out of an open sucking wound. He didn't believe he would ever move back in with his family again—his Jackie, his sons. He contemplated the possibility- the reality of not being with her again. It was killing him; any sickness mattered not.

He wasn't going to take his medicine and he didn't care if Mabel knew he wasn't taking the medicine. Today he was just too tired to hear anymore noise from her; so he faked taking his medicine. Willie never believed that he was sick. Had he taken his medication, with proper diet, exercise and stress reduction his health would have improved dramatically.

“Would you like some strawberry jam on your muffin?” Mabel asked. Lordy, I'm sure lookin' forward to having the whole family over for Thanksgiving.” Mabel was thinking of ways to ease Willie and Jackie back into their marriage. She felt guilty for thinking she wanted to get Willie out of her house.

Willie dismissed Mabel completely. But as always, Willie thought, she doesn't notice me ignoring her or let on that she noticed me ignoring her. Sitting in bitterness, he ignored her the more. Willie was angry with her and he didn't know why or care to understand

why. He was feeling sorry for himself. It was his illness.

“It seems like ages since I’ve seen the grandchil’reen. Two more days to Thanksgiving. I gotta start cooking. The turkey is almost thawed.”

Thumbing through the Daily Dispatch, the local newspaper, the obituaries caught Willie’s attention. Willie Jr. read about a man named Willie Jones who had died unexpectedly from a heart attack two days prior. Startled by seeing his name in the obituaries, he choked on his tea, spewing it across the table. He coughed as he attempted to redirect the remnants of what was left of the mouthful of tea. Mabel rushed over patting him on the back.

The obituary announcement had been a cruel and evil trick played on Willie by Jimmy “the Buggman” Bugg. Willie couldn’t conceive that someone would do such a thing now that he was sick, nor would he have, had he been well. But it had a twisted effect on Willie. He had pictured his own demise—seen it in writing. It produced a significant and virulent irony in Willie’s life. He stared blindly past the ink on the paper and saw with new eyes his life before him.

“You okay, sugar?”

“Uh-huh. Excuse me please.”

Willie Jr. strode nervously into the living room and dialed his house to talk with Nicholas. He believed Nicholas and Olivia to be the only children who still really loved him.

“Hello,” Willie Jr. said, “let me speak to Nicholas.”

“It’s me, Daddy. How you doin’?”

“What you doin’ this afternoon? I thought you might come over and spend some time with me. Talk man to man. You know.”

“I’d love to, Daddy but I’ve got a hot date with my girlfriend this evening. We’re going down to the lake. You know, to the lake. You know, right.”

“Okay, okay, right. When you get some time, drop over and see me.”

“Okay, Daddy, I’ll do that... bye now.”

“Goodbye.”

Nicholas notes the finality in Willie Jr.’s voice as he hung up the telephone, but gave it no thought. Willie didn’t have the courage to be rejected by Jackie so he didn’t attempt to speak with her. Nor did he want to be rejected by any of the other children who may have been there. He quietly placed the receiver on the switch hook.

The multi-colored maple leaves danced across the lawn. He had twice raked the yard’s abundance of leaves into heavy-duty trash bags. He knew soon it would be time to do it again. The three-story elder maple in the back yard with its cock-cu-berry balls would surely dump at least forty more trash bags of leaves before the season was over.

He remembered back to the times when his family would come over with an army of rakes. They would make large piles of luscious fall leaves, free of sticks, rocks and other hard objects. The children would dive in, sometimes being as elaborate as tying a rope to the

black walnut tree and swinging in- Geronimo! Willie could hear their voices.

He could smell the over-ripened peach trees which lined the make-shift rock fence which separated the backyard from the garden. He could taste the hard-earned meat of a black walnut stuck deeply in the crevices of his teeth. He thought of the single pear tree from which he would try as a youth and as an adult to make pear wine like his father; but he never could, though Willie Sr. had taught him how. He could smell the cinnamon topped homemade apple pies cooling on the kitchen counter top, made from fresh apples picked from Mabel's apple trees.

A smile crossed Willie's life-hardened face. His face returned to its melancholy state. He sat on the glider on the front porch, smoking and brooding after Nicholas's rejection. He pulled out a pack of unfiltered Camel cigarettes. He had stopped smoking the Marlboro reds in the crush-proof box. He didn't care anymore. What did it matter if he smoked unfiltered cigarettes? He had lost his family!

A little red sports car pulled up to the curb in front of Mabel's house. Mane was sporting a smart new burgundy leather sports cap. Mane's girlfriend, Tamela, and August get out.

A new spark of life entered Willie. He rose to greet them.

"Hey Daddy," Mane said nonchalantly.

"How you doin'?" said August.

"Who's this?" Willie asked, looking at Tamela.

"This is my girlfriend."

"Does she have a name?"

“Tamela,” she said bashfully.

“Where you going?” Willie asked. “You look like you going somewhere.”

“They gonna go to D.C.,” August said dejectedly because he wanted to go. “Going to go see Olivia in the Chocolate City.”

“Chocolate City?” Willie Jr. asked. He didn’t know they were referring to Washington, D.C. as Chocolate City and he didn’t care. He just wanted to spend time with his children. He wanted to feel like family again.

“When you plan on leaving?”

“Soon,” said Mane. “I told Grandma Mabel we would come over to say bye before we left.”

Mane gave Tamela a look which meant “get in there and speak to Grandma so we can get out of here, ‘cause you know I don’t want to deal with this man.”

“Yeah,” Tamela stumbled, “We came to say bye to Grandma Mabel. Excuse me.”

She walked towards the front door. Mane admired her as she went inside.

“But not to me,” Willie Jr. said, “‘cause I’m gonna come too.

“What?”

“I want to come too. You got enough room, don’t you?”

“Well, I don’t think so, Daddy. Just gonna be me and Tamela.” Mane gave Willie an insincere fake jab on the arm. Willie appreciated the touch from his son.

“You know what I mean.”

“I don’t want to go to no D.C.,” August said facetiously, attempting to use reverse psychology. “It’s too long a ride. Let’s go play ball, Daddy.”

“Come on, Mane. Does your Daddy need to beg? Come on now, it’ll be fun. Besides, I ain’t seen Olivia

for a while. Be good to go back to D.C. We need to spend some time together. Y'all are the most important thing to me. I might not get the chance to see you all together again."

"Naw, Dad, I don't think so."

Mane still couldn't get over the negative feelings he had for his father. He had scars which he would wear for the rest of his life to prove it too. He didn't appreciate the beatings they received when they were younger. He was always on them like ugly.

Mane didn't care if Willie was sick, mentally challenged or not. And now his father, Willie tough "Wardaddy" Junior has been kicked out of his own house that he built with his sweat and blood by a woman. Go figure. Mane didn't want any part of this man.

This was one issue, like many others which Mane's girlfriend Tamela had made him face. Mane would have been satisfied to call his grandmother on the telephone to say goodbye. But Tamela knew that if Mane were to come over to Mabel's house, he would have to face Willie Jr. Tamela knew that Mane had unresolved issues with his father.

Jackie wondered what was taking Willie so long to call her. She sat all alone in the big quiet of the small house. She didn't want the sound of the television on to disturb the moment when Willie called. She wanted to hear every whisper of his voice. He knew that he must have been as anxious as she was for them to get back together or at least to try. Why was he being difficult?

She was nursing her third cup of coffee. She had the telephone next to her. She toyed with calling him,

making the first advance. No, she couldn't do that. She wanted him to call her and ask if it was okay for him to come over. She wanted him to make a date with her. She wanted the romance.

She stroked the telephone, even dialing the number without lifting the handset. She thought she would have a stroke when earlier the telephone had rang and it was one of her Avon customers.

She wanted Willie more now than she could remember in a long time. She wanted her man, her Willie. She wanted her Willie deep inside of her touching her soul. Something inside of her told her to call. Call Willie, the voice whispered in the silence of the house, call now. Call your Willie, he loves you. Call him now!

August tossed a football to Willie Jr.

"Come on Daddy, catch!"

"Mane?" Willie nearly pleading.

The buzzing started in Willie's head. It began stronger this time than it had ever started before. Usually it would begin quietly, then get louder and stronger. But not this time. It was penetrating in its intensity.

"No Dad," Mane insisted, taking off his cap brushing it against his pants leg. "I gotta go say bye to Grandma Mabel. We got a long drive."

Mane went into the house. Willie had the consolation of hearing his eldest son call him dad. Willie's heart had skipped a beat when he heard it.

He knew that he and Mane's relationship was the most strained of all the children. He had really hoped to get to Washington, D.C. to see Olivia. Willie could have driven to Washington himself, but he knew Mane

would be trapped in the car with him and would be forced to hear, if not deal with difficult questions. Mane knew it too and was to have no part in it.

“C’mon, Dad,” August eagerly suggested, “let’s go around back and play catch with my new football. Don’t worry ‘bout Mane! C’mon!”

August was tugging at his hand. Willie the automaton moved with him.

Mabel was washing dishes and talking to Tamela. Tamela didn’t mind. After all, Mabel had asked her if it was okay with her. Tamela respected her elders and to have Mabel even ask, commanded her respect. “Hello Grandmama!”

Mabel turned as she heard Mane. “Hi honey,” she said with joy. She gave him a big old bear hug. “You know better,” she said taking his cap off his head.

She knew him as the wayward grandson. She thought she had better hug him big while she had him.

“How’s my darling? You look wonderful, you know.”

“You ain’t got to tell him that,” Tamela said smiling quaintly. She appreciated this family scene. That was one of the reasons she liked Mane- because of his family.

“Y’all ready to go, huh?”

“We just dropped by to say goodbye. We got a long drive ahead.”

“Mane, honey, let me make you a plate. You want somethin’ to eat Tamela?”

“No, thank you, Mrs. Jones.”

“Just call me Grandma, honey.”

"I'm not hungry right now," Mane said looking out the window at his father and August. He shook his head in disgust. Tamela noted it.

"Let me fix y'all something to take with you. It's a long way to Washington."

"Naw, we gotta go Grandma. We got lunch packed. I'll come by when I get back in town."

"Well, y'all be safe now."

Mane hugged Mabel's neck and kissed her on the cheeks, squeezing her flabby underarms as they separated.

August and Willie Jr. tossed the football back and forth in the back yard. Willie Jr. moved sluggishly. He showed no enthusiasm or amusement. After they tossed the ball several times, Willie Jr. missed the ball. With melancholy he walked after it. August ran up behind him, playfully jumping on his back, hugging him from behind. He missed his father.

Willie did not react at all. If August could have seen his eyes he would have known that there was something deadly wrong. August slid off, very gently, patting Willie Jr. on the back. August didn't have to see Willie's face to sense there was something wrong.

"Daddy, what's wrong? What's the matter?"

The car horn blew, Mane was signaling August to come on. Mane was more than ready to go. He had been there long enough. He and Tamela sat in the car, engine running.

"We can't go yet," Tamela suggested.

"Why not?"

"A couple of reasons," Tamela said obstinately. "One of which is that you haven't said goodbye to your father."

"I don't have time for this Tamela," Mane replied abrasively.

"Well you should tell you father goodbye. You don't know if we gonna have an accident or something. You really should tell him goodbye." Tamela was trying to look out for Mane's best interest, his best psychological interest. She was a sweetheart and this was one of the qualities in her that Mane respected and admired. She would tell you how she felt about anything if it would help you be a better person.

"Forget it," Mane retorted.

"You really shouldn't leave yet."

"Come on August," Mane yelled.

Mane blew the horn again. Mabel looked out the window.

"Gotta go dad. Mane's gonna drop me off at a friend's house," August said scurrying away. "See you later! Stop worryin' dad!"

August rounded the corner of the house, running to the car in a full gait. He didn't want to make his older brother angry.

"You really shouldn't leave yet," Tamela pressed.

"Sorry," August said as he climbed into the car.

"But-"

"- Tamela, I don't want to hear another word out of you! We're out of here," Mane exclaimed.

Tamela cut her eyes from Mane without protest. She knew what was up.

As they sped off August remembered that he had forgot to tell his father that his mother had said hello and to call her.

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CHAPTER

33

Mabel finished the dishes and hung the dishtowel up to dry. She could see Willie standing in the yard just where August had left him. She opened the window to tell Willie that she was going to lie down for a nap. He just nodded his head, continuing to look towards the old tool shed.

Mabel walked down the hallway to her bedroom. The hallway had a long maroon runner on the highly polished wooden floor. Her bedroom was on the right at the end of the hallway. The bedroom Willie was using was on the left. The bathroom was straight ahead at the end of the hallway.

Mabel had a medium-sized bedroom with a built-in closet and an armoire. She sat down listlessly on the edge of her bed. She picked up Willie Jr.'s picture from the bedside table looking hard and long at it. "Oh Junior," she whispered softly, "my baby. What am I to do with you?"

She kissed his picture, then laid down for her nap.

Lethargically Willie made his way around to the front porch, digging in his right ear the entire time. He ended up pouring himself onto the glider. He sat in quiet desperation, reminiscing the good times he once shared with his family.

He dug deeply into his ear. He couldn't quite reach whatever irritated him. He rubbed his temple. He couldn't sit still. He got up and walked into the house. He headed down the hallway to his bedroom.

Today the hallway was a long desolate one. It as dark and foreboding like a tunnel. There however was no light at the end of this tunnel that he could see.

He walked into his bedroom and went over to the dresser mirror. There were family pictures stuck on the dresser mirror between the mirror and the frame. He looked at them. One by one, he studied each one, each smile, each crease. Willie sighed heavily. The baptism of Mane, Olivia's graduation, Nicholas with his track trophy, Marcus in his football uniform, and August caught in a beam of surprise. He had seen his family frozen in a brief moment of time and hoped this was not all that was left of the sharing.

He looked at his reflection. The light had gone out of his eyes. He gazed into the mirror, studying his face. He fixed his gaze again upon his family's photographs. He shuddered... his eyes glazed over. The buzzing in his ears grew stronger. It permeated his being.

He walked over to the closet looking in with a vacant stare. He reached down and got a double-barreled shotgun, which rested against the closet wall undisturbed until now. Willie turned, went over to the chest of drawers where he pulled out a box of shells.

He placed the shotgun shells on the top on the chest of drawers next to additional family photos. He

released the loading mechanism on the shotgun. He pointed the shotgun towards the window so he could see light through the barrel.

Jackie thought she would hang out the clothes that were in the washer while she waited. In great spirits, she walked with a peppy bounce in her steps on the way to the clothesline which stretched between the pecan and pine trees. She was as perky as ever in her white jumpsuit; it had been a favorite of Willie. She had a red sweater draped over her shoulders as she hummed, "Let's Get It On", a Marvin Gaye tune which echoed passionately in her head. She had been thinking about her Willie all night and most of the morning. She longed for him.

She waited in heated anticipation for Willie's telephone call. She knew he would be more than eager to talk to her, to come over and share some sweets with her. She giggled out loud at the thought, then looked about to see who was looking. This morning she had baked his favorite dessert, banana pudding.

Jackie had watched Willie from afar, gathering reports on his progress or lack of it. She spoke with Mabel everyday, most often in clandestinely. Jackie had asked Mabel to report any strange behavior Willie exhibited to her. Jackie would check both on Mabel to ensure no harm had come to her and to monitor Willie's progress. Mabel had given Jackie a few negative reports when he first moved in with her. But after a few weeks, Mabel's reports became sparkling accolades to Willie's apparent recovery. Her false

reports were squeaky clean; music to Jackie's unsuspecting ears.

Mabel was no dummy. She understood that Jackie was monitoring Willie's behavior and would not let him back into the house, into his family if his behavior showed no progress. So she began to give Jackie only positive reports. No matter how badly Willie acted out, talked to himself, enraged himself or became insanely jealous over not being able to live in the house he had built with his own hands or sleep with his wife. Mabel had to think about those boys, her grandchildren who needed a father's influence. She thought about her son; she could see how tormented he was by the separation from his family, his boys, his man-children. Undoubtedly she had thoughts concerning herself and the potential danger she was in as long as he was living with her; separated from his family.

Jackie had thought long and hard concerning all aspects of her life with Willie, and her life without him. She thought she would try to see if they could at least try to patch things up. She would start with pleasant telephone conversations. She would move up to dating and just see where it all lead. She was giddy as a school girl, just thinking about his touch. She was exhilarated, knowing she would soon hear his sweet sexy baritone voice. The tranquil autumn wind blew delicately through her fresh hairdo, causing Jackie to smile blissfully. An instant later she shivered but for only a fleeting moment.

She thought momentarily about Mrs. Robinson. Jackie remembered standing next to her as a teenager, hanging out clothes on a day much like today. Mrs.

Robinson had shivered in much the same way Jackie had just been shivered by an autumn breeze.

“Did you feel that?” Mrs. Robinson questioned anxiously.

“Feel what,” Jackie replied, “the breeze?”

“You can call it a breeze, darling. But it felt like the shiver caused by some evil spirit, one with power and authority.”

“I didn’t feel anything,” young Jackie exclaimed.

“Like the Spirit of Death coming to pay a visit to some soul close to my heart, someone I know.”

Later that night Mr. Robinson passed away. That experience stuck in Jackie’s innocent spirit. She became alarmed for her children. She knew the children should have made it to Mabel’s house by now. She was that much more eager to receive a telephone call from Mabel’s house. She calmed herself down, knowing that the reports from Mabel concerning Willie had all been positive.

Tamela sat quietly as Mane dropped August off at a friend’s home. She sat passively waiting as Mane turned onto Interstate 85 and sped onward to Washington, D.C.

“What’s wrong with you?” Mane asked.

“Nothin’.” Tamela just sat complacently in the passenger seat enjoying the ride.

It wasn’t until his body shuddered that he realized his head was beginning to cool off. Tamela watched silently from the corner of her eye, restraining her giggles. She knew the folly was almost up.

“I told you to say goodbye to your father didn’t I,” Tamela quipped through school girl giggles.

His head was chilly. He looked into the rear view mirror.

“You’re gonna learn not to be so bullheaded,” Tamela ribbed, “and listen to me.”

Mane half-way listened to her as he realized his hat was not on his head.

“Where’s my cap?” Mane asked smiling.

Mane wasn’t watching the road ahead. He was approaching a tractor-trailer rig. As always, he was driving too fast and following too closely.

“I’ll tell you if you slow down and keep your eyes on the road. And say goodbye to your father.”

Mane fell silent. He slumped down lower into his seat angrily. He sped up and fell in extremely close behind the big rig. He was silent.

Tamela was frightened. She had seen this behavior from him before so she knew what to expect. She wasn’t going to budge. She had the upper hand and she knew it. She checked her seat belt, braced her feet and held on tightly.

“Tamela, damn you,” Mane shouted boisterously, moving his eyes off the tractor trailer rig to her, “you really know how to piss me off!”

Tamela’s eyes were fixed on the back of the tractor-trailer rig.

“Where’s my f#@*in’ cap?”

“Where did you leave-- where did you f#@*in’ leave it?” She shrieked back at him. She was angry because he knew she didn’t like him using profane language; especially not the “f” word. “Use you brain for a change! Think!” She had hoped she would

capitulate to her desires because he truly loved his new burgundy leather cap. To her surprise, he finally did.

Mane whipped around the big rig. "Okay, okay, I'll do what you command sahib, oh, great master." Mane was thinking he wanted to get laid while he was in D.C. "But I'll have to say goodbye to Wardaddy when we get back."

"Not if you want your stupid cap."

Mane looked stupefied and confused. A light went on inside his head. "You mean you didn't get my cap from Grandmama?"

"Not me."

"You mean we gotta go back? Aw man!"

"I tried to tell you not to go, but you wouldn't listen." Then in a mocking masculine voice she cracked, "Tamela, I don't want to hear another word out of you."

Mane turned off at the next off ramp so he could head back.

Willie could see the back yard through the barrels of the shotgun. He lowered the gun with exaggerated slowness. He slid two shells into the barrels, quickly snapping the gun closed. Everything was amplified in his ears. The shells going into the gun sounded like clothes on hangers being pulled across their support. And the gun closing sounded like a car door slamming.

Willie paused for a moment and listened to hear if he had awakened Mabel. He could hear the wind rustling in the trees. The robins outside whistling. A lone cat bird and cat fighting. Someone unloading a

truck a block away. Children playing down the street. But mostly he could hear the leaves signaling a time of death and demise. Of times once shared, of hope no more.

In the stillness of the moment, Willie walked painstakingly out of his room. He walked over to Mabel's room which was across the hall. The door to Mabel's room was ajar. Willie leaned on it ever so softly. He knew it would squeak, but maybe he could control its intensity. The first creak was the loudest. Softer subsequent ones followed until there was enough space for Willie and the shotgun to squeeze through. He stopped at the foot of her bed.

Mabel laid in a peaceful slumber. The white linen delicately caressing her body. He imagined she would look this peaceful in her coffin. He looked down at the double-barreled shotgun in his hands. He cocked the hammers one at a time- click, click. He winced both times.

He didn't want to awake her. He could just see it. She awakes like a young doe stuck between on-coming headlights. She looks into the barrels and flash, flash-out would go the lights, her lights.

Mabel rolled over in her bed towards Willie. He took a step back, a breath and held it. He shuddered. His face contorted in a tormented struggle. His eyes, cold, callus, mindless stayed fixed on Mabel.

A twinkle, a spark of light moved across Willie Jr.'s eyes. Tears formed in the corners of his eyes. Two enormous tears rolled down his cheeks. Willie Jr. gasped. He took a deep breath and walked out of the

room. He closed Mabel's door with loving tenderness. He stood outside of it and patted the door resolutely.

Willie went back into his bedroom, the room his mother let him use during his separation. He placed the gun in the middle of the bed. He sat on the edge of the firm mattress, swinging his legs up with his back pressed against the head board.

Mabel tossed and turned, irritated in her sleep.

Willie Jr. held the shotgun with both hands. The gun lay across his lap. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead. He dug in his ear violently. The buzzing in his ear became intermittent. He stares crazily at the shotgun. A solemn euphoria overpowered him.

"I can't do this... I can't do this."

Slowly pitifully he placed the shotgun in his lap. His mind seemed to clear up. He looked strangely at the shotgun. He didn't know how it had gotten there.

Could it be true? Could it really be true, what Nicholas has been telling me?

Nicholas had been the only child courageous enough to try to talk to Willie about his behavior. Though he had tried only on a few occasions, he had tried. Willie hadn't accepted what his child had been suggesting. It couldn't have true. Now he looked at what he was now doing and realized that what Nicholas said, or at least a small portion of what he had said may have carried some validity. Willie was scared. He was scared for himself as well as for his family. He was terrified of what he could do without even knowing.

"No... no... no. What am I doing?"

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CHAPTER

34

Jackie's love for Willie had miraculously re-kindled. Deep in her heart she longed for his touch. She prayed to God for his return; that they could be an ideal family. The children were growing up, growing older, leaving the house or making plans to do so.

She had imagined herself alone in the flat-topped house that Willie had envisioned and then built. In fact she was lonely now. She had been for some time now. Sure she had her boys but she had no man with whom to share her life, to share her bed, her love. As she lay in the bed alone at night, her body often ached for Willie's knowing, firm and gentle caress. He knew just where to touch her.

Her intuition more than strongly suggested for her to call him, to contact him, to go to him.

Sweat trickled from Willie's forehead. He nervously moved the shotgun from his lap, not thinking to release the hammers. He meant to place it on the

floor beside the bed, but instead the butt of the shotgun rested precariously on the edge of the bottom shelf of the reading table.

He violently rubbed his temples, pressing his palms to his forehead, grimacing.

Mabel tossed and turned restlessly- moaning. "No, no, no..."

"Go away," Willie shouted, "go away.... I'm tired of this!"

He briskly reached under his pillow... pulled out a handgun... he placed it in his mouth.

Willie Thomas Jones Jr., No! is what Willie heard as clear as the ring of a telephone. It was the voice of his father, Willie Sr. Startled to the point of a heart attack, he removed the handgun from his mouth. Afraid to look, he turned towards the door, in the direction of the voice.

In turning, his elbow brushed against the shotgun. The shotgun moved off its unstable perch hitting the floor with a thud!

Before Willie could catch it, react to its falling, one of the hammers released itself when the shoulder rest hit the floor. The shotgun discharged one its two shells. Willie ducked out of the way of the pellets which sprayed past him. The roar of the shotgun at this range was deafening.

Over the white noise in his ear, Willie could hear an anguished scream come from Mabel's room.

Mabel bolted up to a sitting position screaming all the while. All she could do was think the worst. She didn't know if she were dreaming or not.

Immediately Willie's world slowed down to a snail's pace. Willie had managed to grab the shotgun

by its barrels. The heat from the one barrel, the white noise in his ears, and his inordinate concern for Mabel intensified his senses, his awareness. His brain awakened to keen sense of awareness, his soul sparked alive. His comprehension of who he was and from whence he had come was trenchant.

Jackie knew she had to go to the grocery store and pick up some items for tomorrow's breakfast but she wanted to wait for Willie's call. She could go by the store on the way over to Mabel's; or she could go by the store on the way back from seeing Willie, she thought. If she was lucky she could have company for breakfast and not just the kids- hell, she could have company- namely Willie Jr. stay the night. She wouldn't wait- she could wait no longer for Willie's call. Her mind raced with wild pleasantries. She grabbed her jacket and headed out the door.

Upon the realization that the second shell had not exploded, Willie focused his rapt attention on the shotgun which was held with uncompromising firmness in his grasp. A drop of sweat spattered on the floor beside the butt of the shotgun.

Willie was delivered from the desire to commit suicide. He smiled broadly. He just wanted the responsibility of being back with his family and taking care of them. He would take his medicine. The blast had missed him. *I was lucky*, he thought—*no—blessed*.

His smile dropped as he focused with precise awareness on the second trigger which was still cocked. The trigger—it was slipping. He saw it. In minute movements it was moving. Slowly it released

itself from its catch. There was nothing he could do. He was off balance.

And if he could change this, should he, he thought? Would this be in the best interest of his family? What if he couldn't be cured? What if the medicine wouldn't work?

He looked directly down the darkened barrel in full anticipation of what was to follow.

The last thing Willie Thomas Jones Jr. remembered after the loud discharge of the shotgun as he drifted away was hearing faint demonic laughter. Willie had lost.

The discharge sat Willie upright on the bed. Willie's blood and bits of flesh splattered across the headboard, across the wall.

Willie's bedroom door pushed wildly open. Mabel's slipped feet entered. She screamed as she rushed to the aid of her son.

Half of Willie Jr.'s head was attached to the neck. The other half of his head dangled freely with blood squirting from his neck.

"Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God! No! No! No!"

Mabel rushed over to the bed. Her hands trying to put his head back together, back on his neck. Blood dripped from the sheets onto the wooden floor.

She used nearby facial tissues in a futile attempt to soak up blood as it poured from the flesh of the partially disintegrated head. Willie's body slumped helplessly over to one side, sliding along side the bed's headboard.

One of the neighbors was astute enough to have called the police and an ambulance upon hearing the first shotgun blast.

Jackie pulled over to allow the ambulance to pass. She thought it off that the ambulance wasn't speeding dangerously ahead to reach its destination. When ambulances had moved around her car in the past she had always wondered why they drove so precariously fast weaving in and out of traffic. She assumed the ambulance was driving more slowly because it was going to service an African-American household.

The ambulance provided only a momentary diversion from thinking about Willie- to hell with the grocery store. Her mind quickly returned to Willie as she pulled back onto the raised black asphalt roadway. The axle creaked as the car lumbered over the hump and Jackie depressed the accelerator anxiously.

The community surrounding Mabel's home had grown considerably as had the adjacent communities. Northerners, particularly those from New York and New Jersey had moved down south for the leisure lifestyle which this small southern town offered; little crime, low prices.

Jackie's eyes curiously followed the ambulance as it turned out of sight. The sound of barking and howling dogs rose as the sirens diminished. Jackie knew she would turn down the same road on which the ambulance was heading. Its direction would be her own.

Alarm buffeted her mind. Panic saturated her soul. Her heart pulsed in her throat. Her foot lay heavily on the accelerator. The car lurched forward. She almost spun out of control when making the turn. She fought

to maintain control of the vehicle and herself. She imagined the worse.

Mabel ran out of the room screaming wildly, momentarily losing her balance on the hallway throw rug. Blood dripped from her blood-soaked dress. She ran into the kitchen sliding at the paper towel dispenser. She pulled paper towels from the roll in handfuls before pulling the roll off its dispenser. Back in the bedroom she ran. Willie's body twitched. Blood ushered forth. Mabel senselessly tried to stem the blood flow with the paper towels. It was a futile effort.

She stormed from the room, down the hallway crashing into the front door. If not for a neighbor, Mrs. Karen Thompson who was about to knock on the door, she would have torn the screen door from its hinges. She ran out of the house past Mrs. Thompson with blood on her dress screaming at the top of her lungs for assistance. Mabel hadn't seen her neighbor.

"Mabel, Mabel," Mrs. Thompson called grabbing Mabel by the arm, pulling her close, "come here, Mabel. What done happened?"

"Help me Lord! Help me somebody! Please!"

About this time Mane wheeled up to the curb in front of Mabel's house. Something was absolutely wrong. He saw his grandmother in hysterics when only a short time before everything was perfect. From that moment on through the next few hours time became unreal for him.

Mane leaped from the car. Tamela rushed over to Mane's grandmother.

“Check inside,” Mrs. Thompson said to Mane, “your grandmother’s gonna be alright, but there was a gunshot. Go check inside.”

Mane was on automatic pilot. He didn’t think that he was going to check on his father or he would have had second thoughts. But he rushed headlong into the house.

“Go call the ambulance,” Mrs. Thompson said to Tamela rocking back and forth with Mabel.

Mabel quivered, cried and mumbled deliriously, “Willie, my angel. Jesus please forgive him. Let him in Lord, let him in.”

Mrs. Thompson’s arms cushioned Mabel from her present reality, from the tragedy which befell her. She coddled Mabel on the front lawn. Other neighbors streamed into the yard surrounding this pitiful scene.

Mabel couldn’t be moved. She only cried like an infant, “Why? Why? Why?”

Mane’s hurriedly searched for evidence of life gone askew when he rushed into the house. He immediately spotted the trail of blood marked with random wads of tissues which ran the length of the hallway. The blood trailed into the kitchen. Mane poked his head into the kitchen not expecting to find whatever he was looking for because the path of blood down the hallway was most heavy.

Mane stepped into a puddle of blood as he broke the plane of the bedroom doorway. He slid halfway through the puddle before regaining his balance. It was a morbid setting.

He first noticed nearly perfectly spherical droplets of blood at the foot of the bed and on the floor nearby.

The droplets had fallen from the ceiling as blood pooled there and reached forward like grim fingers of death. He noticed streams of blood made macabre lines many of which ran to the baseboard.

And there were fragments stuck on the walls mingled in with the blood, bits of something akin to saw dust; which at this moment Mane didn't realize were remnants of his father's disintegrated head, his skull, face and brain. Half the walls in the room were covered with Willie's blood. That's when Mane noticed his father covered in red. Willie's body had fallen on its side.

"Oh no!" Mane screamed, as tears overcame him. Willie's body became a blur as Mane rushed over to him pulling Willie upright. The grotesque nature of what had occurred dug deeply into Mane's psyche. Mane clutched his father's body in a heartbreaking embrace.

"No, Daddy, no! You didn't have to do this! Oh God no!"

Tears and thick viscous blood mixed in an obscenely hideous concert. Willie's blood permeated Mane's soul, into his heart; Mane's face was awash in it. Willie's body quivered in a nervous muscular reflex. Willie's heart had not yet stopped beating and Mane somehow knew it.

"Daddy, we loved you, didn't you know that?!" Mane despaired hopelessly. "I didn't mean to be so mean to you. You can come with me to D.C. or anywhere, just don't die." Mane looked up past the blood-soaked ceiling to heaven, "God please don't let my Wardaddy die. Please God! Help him! Help my Daddy!" Mane wept.

When Mane knew that Willie was gone and he had calmed enough for the grossness of the scene to make him nauseous, he dejectedly pulled himself from the bed. Barely able to look in his father's direction he pulled the sheets over his father's corpse. Mane was a hurt young man.

Several blocks back, Jackie's intuition suggested for her to go back home, that it was too late. But she was too wired to respond, too stubborn to listen. She didn't understand it anyway. Now this ambulance.

As she slowed to make the final turn to Mabel's street her pasty hands gripped the steering wheel with nervous caution. Her heart raced, her eyes searching. She could hear nothing. She was highly focused on where the ambulance would be stopping. She hoped for it to be at someone else's curbside. She knew that was an ugly thing to think. She prayed that God would send an angel to help whomever the emergency medical technicians were there to serve.

Then terror struck. She struggled to focus as tears blurred her vision. She could see the ambulance, lights flashing, doors open. She blindly saw the police arriving from the opposite direction.

The emergency medical technicians stormed across Mabel's front lawn through the small crowd of neighbors. One EMT stopped long enough to ensure Mabel was okay because both women sitting on the lawn were a bloody mess.

She recognized Mane's red sports car. She thought he was well on his way to Washington by now. She thought the worse.

"Oh God! Willie done killed Mabel and Mane and August," she cried. "Calm down, calm down... maybe

Mabel had a stroke. Maybe nobody's dead. Look at the people. Somebody's dead! Oh God!" Jackie was making herself delirious with worry. Her mind ran wild.

Mabel was the closest person to a mother that Jackie had had in her life, in spite of their ill feelings. "Lord let my Mabel be okay!"

Jackie pulled over to the curb behind the ambulance leaving her car door open, keys in the car and the car running. At least she was mindful to put the car in park.

The emergency medical technicians charged into the bloody room as Mane pulled the covers over his father.

Blurred melancholy faces covered the lawn.

"Where's Mabel? Where's Willie? Where's Mane?"

The neighbors made a path for her to get to Mabel.

"Mama? Willie?" Tears poured from her tear-drained eyes.

She knelt down beside Mabel. Jackie embraced Mabel and Mrs. Thompson.

"Mama, you alright?"

"Yes, darling," Mabel moaned, barely able to reply. "It's Willie," she murmured.

"What? Where's Willie?" Jackie said standing. "Mama, where's Willie?"

Mrs. Thompson nodded her head. "It's Willie," was all she said.

"Inside." Jackie heard someone call out, "Willie's inside."

"It's Willie," someone shouted, "he done gone and..." Someone stopped him.

The crowd parted. That was when Jackie saw Mane covered with blood, the emergency medical technicians and the body bag.

“Mama,” Mane cried, “Daddy done killed himself!” Mane’s tears flowed as Tamela rushed to embrace him.

Jackie keeled over and fainted as if someone had punched her hard on her glass chin. She lay sprawled out on the front lawn overcome by grief.

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CHAPTER

35

Olivia held Mabel in her embrace as Mabel cried tearfully. Olivia cried also. Francesca stood by her mother's side whimpering; she understood a lot of what was said. There were a few solitary minutes when the crying stopped before anyone spoke. It was a time of composure, reconciliation.

Mabel wetted her lips, her tongue moved around in her mouth to rid her of the bad taste which reminded her of that dreadful day. The taste again was deposited on the taste buds on the back of her tongue. She wanted it out of her mouth. She wanted it out as much as she yearned for the odorous smell of blood expelled from her nostrils.

"When I remember that day in that room," Mabel moaned, "I always get a bad taste in my mouth. I can smell it too, you know. It was just awful. Just awful. It was a humbling thing."

The room was quiet. They shared an awkward silence, a family communion of pain shared but not understood.

“When he moved in with me,” Mabel said soaking up what tears she had left with a facial tissue, “that was the first time I was really scared... scared in my own house... scared of my own child. And then that ugly day came.”

“You know it’s difficult to believe it all happened at all,” Olivia said soberly.

“Did you know it took an awful long time for your mother to recover?”

“No, I didn’t know that,” Olivia said blankly.

“She put on a good show for you chil’ren- she had a tough time. You went back to college. Mane went away to school too.”

“She sounded fine when I called her from school,” Olivia said obliquely.

“And I’m sure she did ta you. But honey, make no mistake about it, when she woke up from that faint on the lawn--and I remember that. I don’t remember everythin’ with that day but I could see it in that girl’s eyes. She looked like Willie Jr. for a spell I that she done gone crazy too. She was hurt is all.

“When you left she went into the big depression. She was pitiful. Them boys didn’t really know what was up. They just complained about the food. Your mama could’ve got an Academy Award. She really played it. But at church we all noticed she was different. And when her cosmetics customers started to calling me. I had to have a hard talk with her.”

“Grandma, what was the matter? I mean, what caused the depression? I thought she and Daddy was gonna get divorced.”

“And so did everyone else. ‘Cept she was on her way over to make up to Willie and get him back home and snap,” Mabel weakly snapped his fingers, “he was gone.”

“Jackie’s weight fell off and I finally got her to go to Dr. Singleton. It didn’t help. She wouldn’t take her medication.”

“She finally got better,” Olivia said, “I do know that.”

“Yes, darling, that was because in my desperation I thought a male replacement might work, at least temporarily. To get her mind offa’ things. Her old high school sweetheart, Calvin James. He was a playboy. I didn’t think he would be married- and he wasn’t. He was a flirt, a woman’s man-if you know what I mean, with style, but deep in his heart he loved some Jackie-- he loved other women too--but he really loved Jackie. He would do anythin’ for her.

“He happily came in from D.C. and swooped her off her feet. Those boys didn’t like the invasion of another man, but that’s another story. Jackie finally got the wedding she wanted out of that Calvin James and she recovered remarkably. She had suffered long enough. And so have I. The end. And they lived happily ever after.”

Mabel’s soul was free at last. She was absolved of her guilt and emotional misgivings. Her eyes thanked Olivia. Her conscience was at ease. She had played her role as griot and now she could rest. She needed it.

“Thank you for sharing such a viscerally painful experience,” Olivia finally spoke, not quite finding the right words.

“I heard that word but it ain’t speaking to me,” Mabel beamed.

They both erupted in laughter. Olivia was happy to get to the truth and Mabel was happy to get a load off her chest. Her son's demise had always troubled her but miraculously her talking about had lifted an invisible burden.

"It's been difficult for you I know. It's been difficult for me not knowing. Now I know."

"Know that if you shoot yourself in the head there's gotta be something really bothering you," Mabel reasoned. "Somethin' in there that needs to get out. He should've talked to somebody. Got some professional help. Should've taken his medicine." Mabel just shook her head.

"So that's the story huh?"

"Your Daddy was a dreamer, when his life changed he just couldn't handle it."

"That coupled with his mental illness. You know he should've stayed on his medication."

"Some people say it was demons. I don't know. Alls I know is you have to make a space at home where people can ask dumb questions and not feel like they will be persecuted for it. A place where they can be vulnerable, and not fear being called stupid."

"That's a bad word Grandma," piped Francesca restlessly.

"You're right darling. I do know life is one challenge after another. It's like climbing a ladder. You deal with one rung at a time. If you try more than that, you might slip and fall off."

"Grandmama you look tired."

"I am darling. I think it's time for a nap. Come kiss great-Grandmama goodbye."

Both she and Olivia loved her with big hugs and kisses. They said their goodbyes.

“Take care,” Olivia said, “we’ll see you next time.”

“Bye, Grandmama.”

Mabel wore a pitiful shallow smile, a distance stare. She was really tired.

“Remember,” Mabel chimed, “it is better to walk with wisdom than to speak with wisdom. And one last thing. If life hands you lemons, you just got to make lemonade.”

They all smiled.

“We love you, Grandma,” Francesca said.

“We sure do.”

“I love you too,” Mabel said, “you my family.”

Olivia and Francesca got into their car. Francesca was in the back seat. They drive off.

“Is Grandmama gonna be alright?”

“Yeah baby. She’s alright, as long as she takes her medicine. God’s looking out for her.”

“Okay, Mama. How do you like those apples?”

Olivia smiled pleasantly. She was satisfied. “I like those apples just fine.”

Olivia put the car into gear. It staggered forward moving with heavy emancipation down the grove of southern pecan trees. Soon the retirement home disappeared beyond the horizon, fading like Olivia’s old memories of her father. She now carried with her the vigor of new realities from resolved mysteries.

“Faith To-day”

My loss is gain, my weakness is strength, my sorrow is joy, my footsteps are faith to-day.

His Love is promise, His mercy is peace, His comfort is hope, His tests are faith to-day.

My tears are evidence, my pain is freedom, my struggle is expression, my prayers are faith to-day.

His power is assurance, His Glory is bright, His Wisdom is forever, His discretions are faith to-day.

My emptiness is filled, my low is high, my closed is open, my rejection is faith to-day.

His Endurance is Light, His name is Christ, His Meekness is Might, His Revelation is faith to-day.

Marcus Anthony Allen

Spiritual Fortitude

seems that we
are hidden for ourselves;
objectively,
purposely to prove mirrors and challenge
shortcomings
of our forefathers. barriers are more
than salt, dirt and technique.

evil thirsts without regard for your ambition,
now that's a "race". your energies are understood
by your enemy even if you
don't understand

yourself or your enemy.
(The Good Shepherd will enlighten any questions.)

Infants are murdered, mothers are raped, and
damnation is worshipped everyday. This

Is enough to inspire.

Outsmart your appetite,
accept the possibility of hidden lust, deny temptation...
endure your heart.

Marcus Anthony Allen

Each One! Bless One!



You Make A Difference!

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Anthony has a Bachelor of Science from the University of Maryland, European Division in Business Management and has been writing creatively for more than twelve years. He was a member of the United States Army, Europe, and is involved in the Overcomers Support Group Ministry, a recovery program which assists individuals and groups with recovery, deliverance, and intervention issues. Anthony will address any of your individual or group ministerial or spiritual needs upon request.

ABOUT THE BOOK:

A man at war with himself and his family. Wardaddy is a sensitive expression from the son of a paranoid schizophrenic father.

Wardaddy follows a thirteen year ordeal of love, pain, triumph, and loss from the perspective of the family members most closely involved. It is a harrowing yet uplifting exploration of the human emotions.

Wardaddy is based on a true story about a man who became paranoid schizophrenic from the stresses of life, family, and society. Wardaddy is a truly inspiring look at a family's trying relationship with a father who was at war with himself and his family. War within one's mind is a struggle against oneself and one's society. A highly recommended investment of your time!

A Must Read Book.



John M. Allen Jr.

Each One! Bless One!



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