

THROUGH
THE HEART
OF THE SOUTH

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations and events portrayed in this novel are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For Annie Pride

acknowledgments

THIS STORY IS mine, but it was not my idea to write it. Like many first novels, I suspect, it occasionally bubbled into my consciousness the way the cool lake-bottom spring does to Chris McAndrew.

But it went unwritten for decades because the life experiences it drew from were mine, which meant mundane from my perspective. Recounting them would be like sharing another day at the office. But in 1996, when I was a sportswriter covering the U.S. Olympic Swimming Trials in Indianapolis, my anecdotes didn't sound ordinary at all during dinner with journalist friends from newspapers around the country.

"You need to write a book," said Phil Hersh, the Olympic writer at the *Chicago Tribune*.

This is almost certainly not the book he had in mind. Nor is it the one I contemplated as a result. We were journalists, and the book would be nonfiction. It would take a lot of time and money to research how the Civil Rights Era affected my hometown in North Carolina, and I had little of either.

But some years later – my journalism career past and my job with a fledgling women's professional soccer league dying along

with our attendance – it was time for some serious reflection on the next steps in my life and career. Returning to newspaper journalism was tempting because it was familiar. But it also seemed like a backward step. Besides, it would have been more tempting if the newspaper business hadn't gone into its downward spiral shortly after I left it.

Answering the question of what I would do next seemed to demand a real understanding of whom I considered myself to be. The person I believe myself to be is a writer.

Eileen Lee, a psychologist who helped me work through the issues of what I would do when the Women's United Soccer Association folded – she's a writer herself and the first person to read a draft of what became this book – was invaluable in helping me move from journalist writer to fiction writer, to create characters' personalities, motivations and words rather than recount what I could learn about existing people and quote what they said.

It helps to have been a journalist to understand how difficult that transition can be. For the longest time I couldn't really understand why my response of “it didn't happen that way” wasn't an appropriate response to her suggestions for story improvement. I was no longer confined by journalism's rules, and if I wanted to indulge and succeed in this new form of writing, I had to exercise and explore the freedom it afforded.

I also needed her help because the choice to write a novel seemed the easy shortcut to the book Phil originally suggested. I thought imagination was the only ingredient necessary for fiction and that it would be a quick, easy substitute for research. After all, I had lived the story myself.

Six years later, you are holding the result of my shortcut.

The problem with my approach turned out to be that I hadn't really lived *the* story, just my part of it. As I got deeper into the writing, it became increasingly obvious that what I knew about the story was embarrassingly incomplete. I was writing about child-

birth knowing nothing more about it than what the other guys in the waiting room said.

The book changed significantly once I returned home to listen to people who lived their parts of story and discovered how our versions combined to create a fuller tale.

It is humbling to learn that your story is not *the* story, especially for an ex-journalist.

The people who helped me relearn that lesson were Sheila Blakely, Michael Howe, Stephanie Scarborough Ashworth, Cherry Kay Killian, John Adeimy, Dennis Quick, Leroy Quick, Billy Quick, Janet Petris, Betty Williamson, Eli Nilsen and Hanne Hovden. The time they shared with me made this a richer book, and I am thankful for their contributions as well as for relationships created and renewed. Publisher Rick Bacon kindly allowed me access to the files of the Richmond County (North Carolina) Daily Journal and the now-extinct Hamlet News-Messenger.

Sharon Davis, Beth Thompson and Nan Williamson provided love, wisdom and support in the times when a blank computer screen was the best I could turn out that day.

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I'm especially thankful for the review of the Equal Rights section of the "History in the Novel" page of the website for this book – www.JodyMeacham.com – by another colleague, Dr. Ben Field, who has taught courses in American history and the U.S.

Constitution as an adjunct professor in the Department of Political Science at San Jose State University.

The Rev. Dr. Ken Henry listened to as much about the '60s, North Carolina, trains and high school football as any young pastor from Oregon should have to. We're still on speaking terms.

There are some kinds of support only family can provide. Mine was generous. Brother and sister, Lee and Julie, shared their memories, criticism and love. My son Gordon hilariously deflated tense times with his humor. And Emily waited four days for me to cross the country by train while I was in my sleeping car roomette writing the first words of this story. Since then we have wrestled over every scene and semicolon. That's the way we collaborate.

I am grateful for these people being in my life and work. And I am thankful to the American taxpayers who subsidize business ventures like this.

—*Jody Meacham*
September 2010

“A Catechism to Be Taught Orally To Those Who Cannot Read; Designed Especially for the Instruction of the Slaves,” is quoted in this novel. It is part of *Documenting the American South*, a project to digitally publish “texts, images, and audio files related to southern history, literature, and culture,” sponsored by the University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The original is contained in its collections.

The cover photograph of the *Silver Meteor* stopping in Hamlet, North Carolina was shot December 17, 1968 and graciously provided by Martin K. O'Toole.

chapter 1

THE COOL UPWELLING of a lake-bottom spring chilled Chris, rousing him from slumber on his plastic float. The pine forest was still where it had been when his eyelids succumbed to the laziness of the afternoon, a dark wall of black trunks and deep green needles along the far shore. Dark ripple patches from faint puffs of late May breeze scattered across the blue water. Cam's freckled legs – all he could see of his best friend – hung dripping over the edge of the diving platform.

Sounds captured Chris' reviving consciousness: the rivulets from Cam's bony toes *plipping* and *plopping* into the water, the breathing of the pines. No children's squeals, no swimmers splashing, no music from the beach house.

It was way too quiet at Harvard Lake.

Cam must have thought so, too. His head bobbed up.

“Hey, QB. Everybody's leavin'.”

Chris turned his float toward the beach just in time to see Mrs. Wallace dragging her twins from the water by their wrists.

Water moccasin!

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They usually swam in quiet shoreline coves far from the hectic activity of the beach, but every now and then one of the snakes would stray, causing a panic that Grampy Harvard would quell by wading out with his shotgun. The limp remains of a cottonmouth dangling from Grampy's fist reassured people that he maintained discipline over the reptile world the way he did Shortridge, North Carolina.

"The preacher's yellin' at Wanda," Cam said.

Dr. Gordon's belly was unmistakable even from a hundred yards offshore. He pounded the ticket counter twice before stalking off toward the parking lot with his wife and children. Chris had never seen him so angry – and it was Sunday.

"Race you to the beach," Cam yelled in mid-dive.

Chris had no chance to catch up, but Cam waited for him at the water's edge. They hustled to the ticket window where Wanda Harvard was sitting inside on a stool, her blond curls in disarray, sobbing into her hands.

"Grampy'll shoot it," Chris said, trying to reassure her. "It's nothin' to cry about."

But Wanda wouldn't be consoled. She grabbed Chris' hand when he reached for the buzzer up to Grampy's house. "I yelled for you, Chris," she said between sobs. "Y'all were so far out."

"You cain't stop snakes, Wanda."

She squeezed his hand, digging her nails into his palm. She was as terrified as she'd been years before when he taught her to swim.

"It was two nigger boys, Chris."

The nerve twitched in his cheek. What was Grampy thinking, putting his thirteen-year-old granddaughter in the ticket booth to enforce his rules? Especially when civil rights marches were on TV every night.

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She was almost convulsing now, shaking with powerful spasms every few breaths. Chris opened the door to the ticket booth and held her tight. “Grampy will understand.” It bothered him to lie.

“A preacher yelled at me, Chris!”

Dr. Gordon always led the Comets in the Lord’s Prayer before Shortridge High football games. He was a quiet man; you could barely hear him over the cheerleaders even when the team was huddled around him.

Cam interrupted Chris’ thoughts. “Looky here.”

Rounding the corner from the beach house were two boys – the oldest Wanda’s age – dripping wet, wrapped in towels, their bare black feet caked with white beach sand.

“Damn!” Chris said.

“They just said they wanted to go swimmin’,” Wanda whispered.

Cam found that hard to believe. “I thought colored people sank.”

As they drew even with the ticket window, Chris knew he had to say something. “Does your mama know you’re at Harvard Lake?”

“No, sir,” the older boy said, smiling. “We’re staying at our grandmama’s.”

They continued unconcerned, the younger one sucking on a Tootsie Pop, out the gate, across Harvard Lake Road and into the kudzu on the creek path below the spillway.

“Call Grampy,” Chris said. “He’ll know what to do.”

“I’ll call Daddy. He’s not so mean.”

“NOBODY SHOOTS off skyrocketes at six o’clock in the mornin’.” The explosion had been muffled, but it was different from the background noise that steadily drifted down from the rail yard, to which Hattie Mae Johnson had long been accustomed. The

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glare of the rising sun on the window screen almost obscured the oak tree near the creek. She poked Rosey in the ribs.

“Hmmm?”

“Wake up. Somethin’s the matter.”

The bedsprings squeaked as he rolled away from the wall to face her. He always looked befuddled in the morning. It was his first night back since she had sent her grandsons home to New York on the *Silver Meteor*.

“What’s wrong, Honey?”

“A boom, like the fireworks. You didn’ hear it?” She rolled out of bed and into her worn green slippers.

“Must’ve been dreamin’ ’bout weddin’ bells.”

She usually enjoyed his sarcasm, but she had no patience for it now. “It came from the lake, Rosey. Get up! Somethin’s the matter!” She had already made it to the kitchen, dodging the scattered chairs from last night’s card game.

By the time Rosey caught up, she was on the back porch pointing at turbulent Harvard Creek. “Water’s risin’, Rosey! Somethin’s the matter!”

He joined her on the porch just as an old inner tube lifted from its place in the weeds, rose slowly as the current intensified and flattened the tomato vines, then drifted free. It bumped against the live oak that hung over what had been their tiny beach but now stood lonely in the middle of a rapidly expanding pond. Then the tube floated on, past the old swing where first her daughter Erlene and, years later, Wanda Harvard used to sit and dangle their toes in the water.

“We gotta get out’ve here, Hattie Mae. We’re goin’ to drown.”

“Can you swim?”

“Can you?”

They rushed to the front of the house, but the swirling brown water had already reached the running board on Roosevelt’s car. It was gurgling beneath the planks of the stoop.

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“What if there’s snakes, Rosey?”

She wrapped herself in his arms and stood paralyzed in fear until the rising water soaked through the flimsy soles of her slippers and sent a cold shiver up her spine.

“On top of the car,” he said. “Come on, Mae, we can wade that far.”

Rosey stepped into the current. The water was almost up to his boxers. He struggled to keep his footing in the rushing water, making Hattie Mae afraid to follow. She closed her eyes and held out her hand, but the next thing she felt were Rosey’s arms sweeping her off the porch. He carried her over to the Chevy, depositing her on the hood where the metal was already heating up in the rising sun.

“Get up on the roof,” he said. “It can’t get much higher.”

She did as she was told and watched the muddy water swirl around the cinder block footings of her shotgun house, then rise against its upstream wall. After a few minutes, the flood seemed to be cresting, but Hattie Mae’s relief was temporary. There was a sharp crack of splintering wood. The wooden structure shuddered, jerking the curtains in the front window to one side. Slowly at first, then with gathering momentum, the house slid off its perch and into the water, sinking halfway up the screen door as the water surged inside.

“God damn Grampy,” she spat.

As quickly as it had risen, the flood subsided, leaving her house in the mud, a dark wet line marking the high water halfway up its weather-beaten wooden siding.

“God damn Grampy,” she said again. In all her years of working for the Harvards, she’d never been able to overcome the sense of fear she felt whenever she was in that man’s presence.

“This cain’t be about the boys,” Rosey interrupted.

“The hell it ain’t.”

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MR. STARNES was a few minutes late for fifth period algebra – not that anyone minded. As soon as Chris let slip to Mary Nell Bostic that he'd been at Harvard Lake, her voice cut through the pre-class chatter like fingernails down a blackboard.

“They were lookin’ for white women,” she said. “Mama said they just walked in and sat down beside some senior girls on the beach.”

Chris wasn't surprised at what Mary Nell said, just a bit scared at where this kind of conversation might lead – where it always led. It led to her mother's suspicion of a knife or gun, and there was no way to reason with people when they were like that.

“I only saw a coupl've colored boys about Wanda's age,” he said at his first chance to interrupt.

Jackie Thomas didn't believe him and claimed the intruders “ran the whites out've there. Everybody heard about it.”

“Baloney,” Chris countered. “Cam and I were out there together. We'd've seen that.”

The slamming of the classroom door silenced everyone. Mr. Starnes scanned the room. “A little noisy in here, people. I know there's just a few more days of class, but we're still goin' to have order.”

“It's the niggers at Harvard Lake,” someone said.

Mr. Starnes sat at his desk, impassive, while everyone else in the room waited for him to respond. The silence gave extra weight to his words once he spoke. “It was bound to happen. Outside agitators.”

“They prob'ly were from somewhere else,” Chris offered. He should have said something less obvious. You couldn't be from Shortridge – from North Carolina – and think colored kids swam with white people.

“You saw 'em?” Mr. Starnes asked.

“I saw two colored boys leave the lake.”

“Think it'll be on the news?” It was Jackie again.

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“It’d be just like ’em to tip off one of the Charlotte stations,” the teacher said.

But there hadn’t been any cameras.

“You’re a lousy eyewitness,” Jackie complained to Chris. “This is Shortridge’s chance to make the news. All we’ve ever been is a little nothin’ town – then somethin’ happens that could make us famous and you make it seem like another day at the beach.”

Mr. Starnes silenced the snickers by raising his palm.

“What do you do in a situation like that?” Jackie asked Mr. Starnes. “They just barged in.”

“Nothin’ you can do, legally. Not’ny more. But you don’t have to stay there while the niggers take over. Nobody can make you swim in a polluted lake.”

“Polluted” was one of the words like “environment” and “ecology” people had been using since *Silent Spring* became a best-seller. But that wasn’t what bothered Chris.

Monteenia had washed his polo shirt. She washed all his clothes. She fixed his breakfast while his mother got ready for work, and she made him mayonnaise-and-tomato sandwiches on summer afternoons. She made the bed he slept in. Her frame house was run down – she had stuffed newspapers in the knot-holes in the wall to keep out the cold – but on the mornings Chris would drive up to the Yard to pick her up for work, she got in the back seat in a fastidious white uniform that smelled of Fab.

Nothing Monteenia touched was polluted.

She was different from the people they were talking about this morning. She was not another dark face among the shadows. He had learned that by hurting her, and he had promised himself he would never do it again.

“Nigger” was what bothered him. Once it took root in a conversation, it spread like kudzu, choking off any other word the same way that vine subdued a pine forest. It had been awhile since “colored” had been uttered in class this morning, and he was the

one who said it. He retreated from the discussion until it finally dissolved into math.

THE STORY Chris was waiting for in the *Shortridge Weekly* lived up to the paper's nickname. It was stripped across the width of the "Weakly's" front page:

Samuel Harvard Retires, Closes Family-Owned Lake

By William Crawford

Weekly Staff Writer

Samuel J. "Grampy" Harvard III, owner of the lake that has been the summer swimming hole for a generation of Shortridge residents, announced his retirement this week.

As a result, Harvard Lake has been permanently closed. The family's other businesses, Sandhills Furniture and Hometown Finance Co., will remain in operation under his son SJ's management.

Mr. Harvard, 64, is the grandson of Samuel Josephus Harvard of Fall River, Mass., who moved to Shortridge in 1896 and founded Harvard Spinning Mill on the creek that now bears his name. He is a descendant of John Harvard of Charlestown, Mass., the original benefactor of Harvard University.

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Although the mill's closing in 1941 ended the textile industry in Shortridge, the Harvard family constructed a beach and facilities for public swimming on the lake's south shore after World War II to provide summer recreation for the town, whose economy had become dependent on the railroad.

When the annual fireworks show was begun in 1950, Harvard Lake became the town's official Fourth of July celebration spot. It was during one of those fireworks displays that Mr. Harvard's granddaughter called out to "Grampy" over the public address system, and he has been affectionately known by that name ever since.

Mr. Harvard remains one of Shortridge's most prominent and beloved citizens, carrying on a family tradition of civic leadership that included three terms as mayor. He is chairman of the Shortridge School Board, a body on which a Harvard family member has served since public schools were established in 1907, and he will retain his seat.

The article went on at length about the various business enterprises – from a livery stable to a whiskey distillery – in which the Harvard family had been involved at one time or another. It included statements from a list of county notables about the significant contributions Harvard had made to the community.

But Grampy wasn't quoted anywhere in the story. It didn't address the reason he had decided to close the lake at all. Everybody in Sandhills County knew what had happened Sunday afternoon. The fact that the *Weekly's* story avoided any mention of it simply confirmed for Chris how big the story was.

He had no idea what a Shortridge summer without Harvard Lake would be like. He was six months old the first time his mother sat with him in the sand while he splashed at the edge of the water. He was chasing minnows through the shallows the next summer, in swimming classes by the time he was five and dancing on the beach house balcony when he was in the sixth grade. For an appetite invigorated by a morning of swimming, there was no lunch anywhere as satisfying as a Harvard dog with coleslaw and chili eaten beneath the pines and washed down with an Orange Crush.

In July, Chris would begin getting in shape for the Comets' football season with Cam and some of their teammates. For one week of the summer the McAndrews would vacation at Wrightsville Beach. But the day-to-day routine of hanging out at the lake, perfecting a splashier cannonball and falling in love had always filled out Chris' summer schedule.

There was nothing in the *Weekly* about how Grampy had ruined all that.

TOM MCANDREW wondered if he had been as naïve as Chris when he was seventeen. Tom wasn't as naïve about Grampy Harvard, at least not after Grampy saw him kissing Meredith behind the bathhouse when they were in high school.

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“This’ll just be between us,” Grampy had said, and Tom knew from the look on the older man’s face there would be a price for that silence. He recognized a lot of himself in Chris, particularly a reluctance to take an unpopular stand.

“Gone,” Tom said. “It’s not there anymore.”

He slowed the car and signaled a left turn onto Harvard Lake Road. It was time Chris understood. When they walked inside the wooden gate, a rectangular patch of white sand lay before them that extended to the diving platform. The straight edges of the sandy area looked unnatural, as if the sand had been deliberately dumped there. It had, of course, years before when the Harvards built the dam and Harvard Creek flooded the shallow basin behind it.

At first Chris seemed overwhelmed. His head turned left, then right, like he was trying to understand what he was seeing. Then he focused straight ahead across the expanse of sand.

“You can walk all the way to the divin’ board.”

Beyond the platform, a drying mat of weeds was punctuated by tree stumps that stretched to the pine forest a quarter-mile in the distance. What was left of the water that once filled the shallow basin was now a small creek that meandered through stumps and vegetation browning in the sun.

Tom walked Chris out onto the mushy lake bottom and toward the earthen dam. The creek flowed through a ragged twenty-foot break in the wall over chunks of shattered concrete where the spillway had been.

“Nobody’ll ever say it,” he told Chris, “but Grampy did this. Some colored folks called the police early in the mornin’ to say the creek was overflowin’. Tug Peterson’s investigatin’, but anybody can see it was dynamite.

“Why?”

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He and Meredith had always shielded Chris from these things. It wasn't really Chris' fault that the real world with all its villains was so foreign to him.

"People like Grampy make the rules," Tom said.

"Huh?"

"I've had a boss all my life, and I'm used to doin' what I'm told. But people like the Harvards don't put up with bein' told anything. You play the way they say, or they take their ball and go home."

"So they'll just take the lake away from everybody? Even if it means the rest of us cain't go swimmin'?"

"Punishment keeps people in their place, son. The Harvards believe their place is runnin' things, and they're born to it."

He let Chris stare at the rubble and grieve his lost summer.

It was fall that filled Tom with sadness, even dread. But there was no point in making Chris feel worse. He had urged the school board to vote against integration, to delay it just one more year until Chris had graduated. He was in the courthouse the night the man from Washington spoke and the board voted against the white parents. But he had not joined the protesters after the hands were raised.

This shouldn't be happening; it was wrong. But he was not an important man. He delivered mail. People like him, like the railroad engineers and conductors around town, didn't turn the tides of history. They endured them. Chris would have to learn that.

chapter **2**

THE HEAT AND humidity hung heavily in the opaque Shortridge sky. Nothing moved; even the crickets were silent. A few minutes before the inevitable thunderstorm, the smell of cool rain on hot asphalt drifted in on freshening air. Relief finally came in a twenty-five minute attack of pent-up atmospheric anger: Lightning bolts flashing brilliant white against a black waterfall from the sky while thunder shook the ground.

Then it was gone.

Rufus Montgomery Jr. stepped out of the Witch's Hat Café at the Seaboard depot and into the tentative coolness of deepening night. Maddy's farewell fried chicken lingered in his mouth. Twenty years of hauling luggage, wrestling with berths on speeding trains and tending bar in the Sun Lounge car were wearing him down. The run to New York, down to Miami and back up to Shortridge was twenty-six hundred miles, and it would be three

more nights before he was back home where he could have an uninterrupted night's sleep.

Down the platform to the south, heat lightning continued to flash intermittently. It wasn't long before a light beam swung across the sky. When it swung back, it illuminated the underside of thunderheads slow to scurry out of town on the breeze.

"*Meter's* on the bell," crackled the voice from a radio on a nearby car knocker's belt. "Got a hangin' shoe on the rear."

Ten thirty-five. The *Silver Meteor* was on time in its overnight race from Miami to New York. Rufus Junior tugged each sleeve of his starched white jacket like an actor getting into character.

"George?"

A harried-looking woman lugging a suitcase and overnight bag struggled toward him through the clutter of carmen and passengers on the platform. "George? Can you help me with these?"

"Yes, ma'am," he answered. He touched the bill of his cap with the silver PULLMAN badge without a hint of objection to the name. "Takin' the *Meter* tonight?" He relieved her of her burden and asked for her car number, but she couldn't remember.

"I've got a room in the Sun Lounge."

"Yes ma'am. It'll be stoppin' right along here. Just stay with me and I'll take care of everything."

The train's cosmic heritage may have been lost in his Short-ridge pronunciation, but there was no mistaking why it had been given its name. The *Silver Meteor* was still a half-mile away when the station rails began to creak and groan. The oscillating light of the first of the *Meteor's* three diesel-electric locomotives swept the path for its eighteen glistening silver cars. The nose of the lead motor carried the Seaboard's circular herald, a red heart in the center with the words "Through the Heart of the South" written across it in white lettering.

The woman took shelter behind Rufus Junior when the blast of track debris preceding the train forced her to grab her hat. A

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fiery trail of sparks splayed from the brake shoes that squeezed the *Meteor's* steel wheels into submission as it slid to a stop along the platform. Almost in unison the vestibule doors along the flank of the train opened, and boarding steps clanked down into position. A wave of workers and supplies surged from under the wide eaves of the Victorian station against the side of the train – carts of block ice from the Witch's Hat to the diners and lounge cars, hoses to refill drinking water tanks and a couple of car knockers to fix the brakes on the tavern-observation car on the rear.

Just as Rufus Junior had predicted, the Sun Lounge car – its name, *Hollywood Beach*, lettered in black on a silver plaque midway down its side – stopped next to them. An identically dressed black porter descended just ahead from the *Lake Wales*, a ten-six sleeper with ten single-berth compartments and six double-bedrooms, and placed a steel boarding step on the concrete platform at the foot of the car's retractable stairs. Wiping his hands with a white handkerchief, he stood at attention at his boarding position and a white conductor came down to call for passengers.

“Mister Chatham will check your tickets, ma'am,” Rufus Junior told her. “I'll see to your bags.”

While the conductor leafed through the coupons stapled inside her ticket jacket and announced her assignment in Bedroom C, Rufus Junior took his position next to the steps the same way that every Montgomery man had since his great-grandfather was hired off the plantation by George M. Pullman at the end of the Civil War. When she gave him tacit permission by looking him in the eye, he touched her gently at the elbow.

“Watch your step, ma'am.”

He followed with her bags and his own worn leather grip into the *Hollywood Beach* and a long room done in pastel greens and blues with chairs grouped around low tables and driftwood lamps. At the opposite end of the lounge, a bar stretched most of the way across the car, except for the entry into a corridor on the right side.

The windows were wide and tall, knee-level to the ceiling, with two rows of large skylights built into the roof. A couple of middle-aged men with loosened ties sat at one table drinking beer from glasses. A third in slacks and a blue golf shirt sat alone with his beer at the other end of the lounge playing solitaire. Cigarette smoke rose from heavy glass ashtrays on both tables.

“Your room’s down the hall, third door,” Rufus Junior said. “This way.”

The previous porter had already made her room down for the night, converting the couch into a lower berth running perpendicular to the length of the train, and lowering the upper berth from the ceiling. He placed her bags on the upper and showed her the various air conditioning and light switches and where the toilet was.

“Thank you, George. I can take care of it from here.”

“Yes, ma’am. Ring the bell here if you need me. G’night, ma’am.” He withdrew into the passageway, closed the entry curtain and door, and returned to the platform to chat briefly with the porter he was relieving.

“Light car tonight,” Charley Ledbetter told him. “Bedroom A is open all the way to New York. D’s a spotter. He’s the blue shirt, and he’s out at D.C. All of ’em are made down.”

Northbound, then, would be easy. He could sleep in one of the vacant rooms and not worry about getting up at three-thirty in the morning to let a passenger off in Richmond or to warm a crying baby’s bottle. The Pullman Company’s “spotter,” though no one was supposed to know who he was, would be out of his hair before breakfast.

“Night, Charley. Have a good layover.”

Mr. Chatham looked along the length of his train. The wave of activity had washed back under the station overhang, and no one was approaching.

“Booard!”

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Rufus Junior picked up the boarding step and followed the conductor into the vestibule, lowering a steel trap door in the floor, which retracted the stairs. The conductor called “highball” to the head-end crew on his radio, leaned out the top half of the Dutch door and swung his electric lantern up and down.

Air horns on the lead diesel responded with two brief blasts. The brake tension that had held the *Meteor* still for the past eight minutes relaxed along the length of the train, and the long silver snake sighed. Somewhere a brake shoe dropped away from its wheel with a muffled *clunk*, and then, almost imperceptibly at first, the *Silver Meteor* resumed its northward slide, gathering momentum with every second until it hurtled into the darkness beyond the platform.

Cleaning the tables just vacated by his retiring passengers, Rufus Junior glanced out the windows to the lights on the Yard where he and Maddy lived. If anybody went there to ask, “Where does Rufus Junior live?” he knew they’d be directed to his white cinder-block home at the end of Dellums Street. If someone asked where Charley stayed, he’d be told, “Two houses down Randolph Road on the left.” Anyone could tell you who Lomuel’s wife was or when Daniel was expected home from his run.

But the Yard was a world apart from the speeding hotel of a hundred sixty-two beds that he and seven other *Silver Meteor* porters would tend tonight. Whether on the Seaboard, the Union Pacific or the New York Central, Pullman porters answered to just one name.

Passengers called them “George,” because they were George M. Pullman’s boys.

MEREDITH MCANDREW picked up the plates from the supper table and made sure she kept her right hand beneath them as she carried them to the sink. Just thinking about Grampy Harvard made her palms sweat, and she didn’t want to drop any.

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“You think you could talk him out of playin’?” she asked Tom.

“You know I wouldn’ do that. He’s been playin’ since the seventh grade. If he’s goin’ to go to school with ’em, he might as well play football with ’em.”

She would have regretted not taking the opportunity to ask even if the answer was exactly what she expected. And she didn’t disagree.

There had been talk of starting a private school, but how many people could afford that? Grampy could send his grandkids, the Markses could, the Moncures and probably some of the mill executives from Northampton. Not enough for a whole school, although she would work a second job if it could get Chris out of Shortridge High this fall.

They were in the same boat as everybody else, which was some consolation. She hated even to think the words, but nobody in town could call the McAndrews “nigger-lovers” for letting Chris go to an integrated school. Their kids were going, too, and there was going to be a football team whether or not Chris played.

“You cain’t tell a boy not to play football,” Tom said, reading her thoughts.

“Grampy still scares me,” she said. “Always has, even though he sent a car to bring me home from school when Daddy fell off the caboose.”

“I remember his face from that day at the lake,” Tom said. “That’s when I figured out how he always got his way.”

She remembered Tom’s face after he finally kissed her, all lit up for those few moments until he saw Grampy at the corner of the bathhouse and they realized their secret was his. Thinking back, Daddy probably wouldn’t have been that upset. He knew and approved of Tom. He liked him.

But they were nineteen then. They thought they were in trouble, and Grampy’s promise not to say anything reinforced that idea rather than relieved them.

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“Grampy’s not goin’ to make trouble,” Tom said, reading her mind again. “He’s an ass, but Chris was just there. He didn’ cause anything to happen.”

“He oughta thank Chris for takin’ care of Wanda. He oughta thank you for bein’ at the school board and remember you were on his side.”

Tom sort of snickered beneath his breath, and when she turned her attention from the sink to him, he was gazing away. “You were on his side,” she repeated.

“All of us were,” he said. “But you know, I still felt kind’ve good when he lost the vote. I mean, how can you not like seein’ that man get beat by somebody even if it took a worse ass like Lyndon Johnson to do it?”

SITTING WITH Samuel Bethea at one of the lounge tables while he shined passenger’s shoes was against the rules, but Mr. Chatham wouldn’t mind as long as Samuel checked back in the *Lake Wales* every few minutes in case a passenger rang for service. One of the things Rufus Junior’s brother-in-law in New York had asked the last time they were together was to show Samuel the ropes if they ever worked together.

“Don’t let the guy in ‘A’ wake up in the mornin’ and find high heels,” he told Samuel, checking the soles to be sure he’d marked them when he retrieved the shoes from the pass-through. He had almost finished polishing his first pair, the spotter’s cordovan Flor-sheim wing-tips, when he began to ramble. “I wonder sometimes whether I’ll retire before I take the 11:59.”

“You’re not that old, Mister Montgomery.”

He wasn’t. But this business was. There were rumors that Pullman was getting out of sleeping cars altogether. Some railroads would certainly operate the sleepers themselves, but how many? The Post Office was moving its mail to the airlines, which would be another blow to the overnight trains’ revenue. And then there

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were the merger talks between the Seaboard and the Atlantic Coast Line. Would a combined railroad run the *Meteor*, the *Silver Star*, two *Champions* and the *Florida Special* from New York to Florida?

“I just want to squeeze a few more years out of this trade and then sleep in my own bed,” Rufus Junior said.

“Sounds like you’re fed up.”

“Tired. Your ten-six would kill me. Five doubles are about all I want to handle. I’m at the age you start lookin’ back at your life and wonderin’ what you did with it.”

He finished another pair of shoes. Travel was no longer the attraction it once was. He had seen enough beaches where he couldn’t swim, enough hotels where he couldn’t sleep. “Makin’ beds and shinin’ shoes,” he sighed. “If I was white, that’d be woman’s work.” He pulled a pair of women’s pumps from Samuel’s pile. “What’s goin’ on in New York?”

“Everybody talkin’ ’bout your nephews,” Samuel said. “They could’ve got killed.”

Rufus Junior chuckled uncomfortably.

Their grandmother had been terrified when she found them and learned they’d been to Harvard Lake. That was no place for a couple of colored boys from Brooklyn.

A last check around the Sun Lounge to be sure everything was picked up, and Rufus Junior was back in Bedroom A. He hung up his clothes, pulled the passenger bedding from the lower berth and replaced it with the sheets and blue blanket for porters.

A travelin’ man had to grab some sleep when he could or he didn’t last very long.

SUSAN MARKS bumped into Chris as she walked into their final French II class of the year, just as she’d planned. He was as oblivious as usual, so she smiled at him after the collision and made sure he saw it. “My daddy’s put in a pool,” she told him.

“Lucky. The year they close the lake ...”

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“Daddy said a long time ago the niggers would try to get in, but Grampy never believed him. Said ours were happy and knew better.” Chris’ face twitched like she knew it would. “I’m havin’ a party Saturday after school’s out, and I want you to come.” She had his attention now. “Daddy’s goin’ to grill some steak.”

Chris had always been polite about passing up her homework at the start of class. Most of the boys she had dated criticized her handwriting. Her jerky scrawl didn’t look feminine. Too many had been put off when she talked about going hunting with her father as if that clued her in to stuff a girl wasn’t supposed to know. But they always watched when she swished her hair.

None of that had ever bothered Chris. He was fascinated when she told him about flying her father’s Cessna down to Lake Mattamuskeet to shoot ducks. He wasn’t as handsome as some of the boys she’d dated, but who didn’t have some acne? And he was blond.

“I’d love to come,” Chris said. “Should I bring anything?”

“Just you and your bathin’ suit would be a gracious plenty.”

IT WAS a game, but Rufus Junior knew he had to play it to keep his job. He had the coin ready when the spotter stepped down from the *Hollywood Beach* into the morning sun at Washington Union Station.

It had been in one of the usual places, under the far edge of the mattress in Bedroom D. Sometimes he’d find change in a pillow slip, or a cufflink would be “lost” under the seat or in the sink drain, but spotters invariably left a trail of possessions when they got off a train.

He held the quarter in his open palm as the spotter bent over to retrieve his valise from the platform. “Have a good trip, sir,” Rufus Junior said. “It may’ve fallen out during the night.”

The Pullman inspector took it without a second look and disappeared into the crowd headed for the stairs up to the station.

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The remainder of the morning run was a piece of cake. From Washington to New York, the *Silver Meteor* ran over the tracks of the Pennsylvania Railroad and could only discharge passengers, leaving boardings for the Pennsy's own trains. After the nine o'clock stop at North Philly when the diner closed, he had some grits and toast with the galley crew. He finished making up rooms and bagging trash before the train reached Newark an hour later. At ten-fifteen the *Silver Meteor* plunged into a tunnel in the midst of a New Jersey marsh and minutes later screeched to a stop beside a fluorescent-lit platform beneath Manhattan.

It took ten minutes to completely empty the train of passengers and baggage at Penn Station. When the conductor swung his lantern, Rufus Junior pulled out a cigarette for the first time since leaving Shortridge and leaned out of the top of the Dutch door. The humidity of the coming summer bore down on him in the dark tunnel as the train's wheels echoed off the walls, squealing in protest as they shunted through a series of switches and a sharp turn.

Then the tunnel that had swallowed the train in New Jersey spit it out into the blinding Long Island sunlight at Sunnyside Yard. The *Meteor* stopped amid rows of silver and purple passenger cars from the Atlantic Coast Line, dark green Pullman sleepers awaiting their return to New England on the New Haven Railroad, and the Pennsy's own Tuscan red trains to Chicago and the Midwest.

The sun flashed off the spire of the Chrysler Building to the west. It was getting toward eleven o'clock, and there were three hours to kill before the twenty-four-hour run to Miami. He took his grip and caught a ride on one of the electric carts headed to the brick Pullman commissary. Joe was already there, a short, impatient man puffing a Camel on the loading dock. Rufus Junior shook his hand, handed over a manila envelope and received a similar one in return, which he slipped into his leather grip.

"Everything's right as rain," he said.

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Joe flicked away the remains of his cigarette and hopped to the ground beside the blue Te Amo Comestibles truck. “See you Thursday.”

When Rufus Junior turned back toward the commissary entrance, Erlene Clifton was walking toward him on the loading dock.

“It’s been so hard,” she said when she finally relaxed her embrace. “I had no idea ...”

She wasn’t crying. He had never seen a tear in his sister-in-law’s eye, neither the day she married Frank nor the day she buried him. She had always wrapped her sensitivity in resolve, and she kept a steady grip on his arm as they went inside to sit.

“Some days it’s all I can do to make sandwiches for the boys,” she said. “Some days it gets so bad that I don’t eat just to keep from being reminded how much better he was in the kitchen than me.”

He wished he could hold her for awhile and let her go on. That’s what worked with Claryce or Maddy – just make them feel secure and free to talk. But the commissary wasn’t a place for that kind of conversation.

“I know it’s hard,” he said over the background noise of men zipping by with electric carts loaded with dining car provisions. “Maddy asks ’bout y’all all the time. How’re they doin’?”

“Better than I expected.”

“You mean Frank or the lake?”

Her smile told him she understood.

“Both,” she said. “Workin’ to Chicago kept Frank away a lot, so they’re used to bein’ without him. Neither of ’em really knows what death is. They don’t need to know their daddy was murdered ’til they get older. But the lake was my fault. I should’ve told ’em Shortridge idn’ Sunset Park.”

“Sorry,” he said. “I know you wanted to be dealin’ with your loss.”

“I had some time.”

She began reminiscing about growing up on Harvard Creek, how she loved swimming in the tea-colored water on summer days when the air was heavy and still. The Harvard Creek stories were the ones her boys liked to hear – the times she and Maddy would float down to the railroad trestle and wait for a friendly conductor to toss them candy from a passing caboose, or when Mama would make peach ice cream for her and Frank when he’d come courting.

But she had never told the boys how she’d watch the Fourth of July fireworks above the tops of the pines or how much she had always wanted to swim in the lake. Then she laughed. “They got to do it,” she said. “They’ve got no idea what it means, but they swam in Harvard Lake.”

He laughed, too, now that the boys were safe and he could see that Erlene was okay. “Claryce is goin’ to the new high school this fall. Booker T’s closin’ for good.”

She patted his hand. “Frank always talked about what a mean place Shortridge was, but he was from New York and he had no right. But I can – it’s mean as a snake.”

“Meaner than here? Somebody walks right into your apartment and blows his head off?”

This time Erlene could not hold back the tears.

“I didn’ – I’m – I’m – forgive me.” He gave her a handkerchief to blot and compose herself.

“A couple of days before he died he told me he needed to talk to you,” she said finally.

“What about?”

“I don’t know. But he’d already been to the police.”

chapter **3**

THE HAMBURGER STEAK at the Witch's Hat was much better than the meat loaf at school during final exams. Any food was. But eating at the depot café meant Chris had a view through the screen door of the railroad that gave Shortridge its reason for existence.

He had loved trains from the first four-car Lionel freight he saw circling his Christmas tree. The fact that real trains like the ones his grandfathers worked on and reminisced about ran right behind his house only made him love them more.

It was frightening at first when his father would take him to the station to watch the streamliners stop through on summer nights. The massiveness of the *Silver Star's* three diesels vibrated through his eyeballs when it rumbled to a stop by the platform. The explosion of a brake hose when cars were uncoupled hinted at other startling noises that might erupt from the metal beasts that seethed and dripped while resting in the station. When they went to Morrison's crossing, the speed and power of trains rocketing out of town sucked the breath from his lungs.

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But his first train trip to Raleigh was like discovering that the hulking new kid in third grade actually wanted to be his friend. The benign smoothness, the nearly imperceptible sense of movement as the train accelerated smoothly from a stop, were equal parts comfort and disappointment.

He wanted to ride farther than Raleigh.

There was a larger world out there that he had glimpsed on television news. There were lots of obvious differences between his world and the one on TV that were attractive to a teenager who had been no farther from Shortridge than Myrtle Beach. But one difference particularly intrigued him. On TV there were places where black players were on teams with white players and nobody seemed to notice, restaurants where no one minded the color of the folks at the next table.

It would be so much simpler not to live in dread that a night at the movies would be ruined if somebody from the Yard sat down in your row.

The railroad went to those places: New York, Chicago, California. When he touched the rails behind his house, he touched those places. They were within reach.

“You with me?” he asked Cam, who was picking through his French fries.

“Hell yeah. Etheridge is rakin’ in more money for school than he’d get robbin’ the bank.”

Chris looked back out the door where Eddie Etheridge was working the downtown switcher job while home for the summer from Chapel Hill. He and Cam would join Eddie next summer, and Chris planned to have his Seaboard application in on his eighteenth birthday in November.

“Number 10’s late,” Cam said. It normally picked up its dining car here in mid-morning so the passengers could have lunch during their stop-and-go trip to Washington. Etheridge was doing most of the work of attaching the diner to the train, signaling the engi-

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neer back and forth, throwing the switch from the mainline to the house track and making the coupling.

Chris' daydream about being in Etheridge's place was interrupted by a couple of car knockers coming in for cigarettes. Carl Daugherty recognized Chris and approached the booth after he lit up.

"You and Cam goin' to play this year?" he asked.

Chris had gotten the question before. He knew Mr. Daugherty from church and knew the question wasn't to seek an honest answer. Daugherty wanted assurance that Chris was as disgusted as he was that black players would be on the team this fall.

"I'm playin'," Chris said, trying to be nonchalant. "Why not?"

"Damn." Mr. Daugherty seemed like he wanted to continue, but he stuck the cigarette in his mouth and took a long draw, his eyes narrowing a bit. Then he walked away.

"You get a lot of that?" Cam asked once they were alone again.

"Coup'l've times. Even if they're not goin' to call you a 'nigger-lover' to your face, they're figurin' out where you stand and whether they'll ever let you date their daughter."

He could be honest with Cam. They had stolen peaches together from Mr. McCaslin's orchard and lied to their parents about it. They had hopped freight trains together for a quick ride downtown. Theirs was a friendship sealed by conspiracy.

"It's happened to me, too," Cam said. "Sometimes I wish I hadn' turned out like this so I wouldn' care. Why are you like this?"

Chris had only a partial answer. "A book," he said. "A kid's biography of Paul Revere I read a long time ago. The British soldiers in Boston would make him polish the brass buttons on their coats when he was growin' up. It was like they wanted him to feel bad just 'cause he was an American."

"Quarterbacks cain't hide," Cam said.

It was the curse of the position. You got more credit than you deserved when you won, but more blame than you deserved after a loss. Cam was getting at something he'd begun thinking about after Mr. Starnes' class, and that was how to hide his feelings about integration.

He wasn't opposed, or even ambivalent. It was overdue, the fair and just thing. His plan was to somehow get through his senior year quietly and escape to UNC or someplace where being different was a distinction, not a social felony. That was Cam's plan, too, but it was easier for a halfback to lay low than the guy calling plays and dealing with Coach Wilson.

"You know anything about BTW's players?" Chris asked.

"Velma said they've got a real good one named Malachi."

"You know how pathetic it is that your maid's our scout?"

Booker T. Washington High School had won the North Carolina Negro Athletic Association football championship twice in Chris' memory. The only time the *Shorthridge Weekly* had ever run a BTW photo was a few years back when the Maroons won the '63 title. The poor reproduction on coarse newsprint had rendered the black-and-white picture a blob of darkness, four rows of blurred white numbers that stood out in the shadowy image of what the cutline alleged to be the "BTW Maroons, State Negro Champions." It perfectly summed up his and Cam's knowledge of the other team in town and the people who played and watched its games.

"Sherry told me Susan asked you to her party," Cam said, changing the subject. "Way to go, QB. I was wonderin' how long it'd be 'til you told me."

"I didn' think it was that big a deal," Chris lied.

Cam chewed and looked at him skeptically. "You know, QB, sometimes I can't tell if you're just dumb or tryin' too hard to be cool. Girls like Susan Marks don't bump into boys in French by accident."

"What else did Sherry tell you?"

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“Wadn’ anything more to tell. She’s after you, QB. You might want to start payin’ attention.”

SHORTRIDGE HAD only two mansions and Chris had never spent much time in either. Certainly Capitol Hill could not match the string of white-columned homes along the boulevard in Northampton where the textile mill owners, lawyers and doctors lived. That was as fine a collection of faux-plantation architecture as could be found in the state. But if you were going to compare individual houses, nothing in Northampton surpassed 400 Pine Cone Drive.

Wade and Mary Kathryn Marks’ white two-story with Pullman green shutters had an entire block to itself. The driveway – a white, sandy track that ran thirty yards between double rows of long-leaf pines – began at a gate in the wrought-iron fence and looped beneath a white portico held up by four Doric columns. The cupola on the roof was higher than the surrounding trees, and people who’d been up there said you could see all the way to the railroad yard.

Chris’ mother turned the Buick station wagon into the driveway just after one o’clock and pulled up beneath the portico to drop him off. If anything, she was even more excited than he was when he told her about Susan’s invitation.

“The Markses!” she’d said, like he’d been invited to the White House. “You want to be popular with the Markses. They’re good people.”

Pedigree trumped all, and Mary Kathryn Marks – she was a Randolph from Virginia – was from good people, which meant Susan was good people, too.

Chris grabbed his towel and was about to walk up the steps, but he could see through the screen door that no one was inside.

“Come on around back, Christopher.”

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Mrs. Marks had come through the gate in the pool fence from the back yard and was standing on the brick walkway between the boxwood hedges that lined its course to the driveway. Nobody else in Shortridge smoked a cigarette in a holder. She wore her orange and yellow plaid Bermuda shorts crisply pressed with a sleeveless white polo shirt and gold circle pin on the collar. Her wide-brimmed straw hat had a band that matched the fabric of her shorts, and the ends hung off the back of the brim. It seemed like more concern for appearance than most people would waste on a bunch of kids from school, but that's the kind of woman Susan's mama was.

"Let me take your towel. Some of yours and Susan's friends have already arrived."

"Thanks, Miz Marks."

He headed for the pool while she and his mother exchanged pleasantries through the car window. He felt self-conscious about his cut-off jeans – the ones he always swam in at the lake – until he saw that Cam's cut-offs were already soaked. Cam and Doug Jones were sitting on the far side of the pool where half a dozen classmates had pulled their chaise longues into a semicircle.

Susan pulled another chaise alongside hers and motioned him over.

"Daddy's goin' to grill some steaks later," she said. "Mama's got some of the Haliburton's corn, and we're makin' peach ice cream."

Her swimsuit was blue-and-white seersucker, a one-piece with a tiny skirt around the bottom like girls wore when they were they home in Shortridge, not when they went to Ocean Drive for a weekend with their girlfriends.

Chris had just finished one of Monteenia's tomato sandwiches before coming over but he was already anticipating the next meal. "What time are we havin' cow?" he asked as he sat down.

"Four o'clock or so. Want a Coke?"

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He sat up so he could reach for the bottle that Doug had already fished from an ice chest.

“Thanks,” he said to the Comets’ punter, sinking back on the chaise. “Me and Cam are goin’ to start runnin’ and throwin’ later at the saw mill. Want to come out with us?”

Doug sort of half-grimaced under the baseball cap that he had pulled down over his face. Baseball was his best sport – he was probably the best player the Comets had ever had – but he had always punted for the football team. He could get off a forty-yard spiral.

“Daddy dudn’ want me to,” he said, avoiding looking at Chris. “Said if I break a leg or somethin’, my scholarship would be gone just like that.” He snapped his fingers.

Catawba and Lenoir-Rhyne had already approached Doug. They weren’t big-time schools, but an athletic scholarship anywhere was huge. He was an error-free second baseman, and he could hit for average. Last year Chris wouldn’t have questioned Doug’s decision. But this year was integration. Doug’s father and Grampy Harvard were both on the school board, and Chris couldn’t help wondering if baseball wasn’t a convenient excuse. But he didn’t ask about it. Wrong place, wrong time.

“Sammy Stinson’s not playin’ either,” Susan said. “Daddy told me last night he was quittin’. And Gary Shelton.”

Everybody could name someone who was quitting or rumored to be.

“They’re takin’ over everything,” Sherry Watson said.

Chris was bolt upright now on his chaise.

“Takin’ over?”

Sherry was hurt by his outburst.

“You don’t need to jump all over me,” she complained. “I’m just tellin’ you what some people say.”

“Sorry.” It actually made things better that Sherry pushed back at him.

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Susan's hand on his shoulder gently pulled him back down onto the chaise lounge. "Everybody oughta remember we're doin' 'em a favor by lettin' 'em come to our school."

Exactly. They would still be the Comets, not the Maroons. Coach Wilson would be head coach. Integration would be like getting a transfer student from out of town – except there would be a lot of them. Adjusting was their responsibility. What was the problem?

"What about the Rebel flag?" Doug wanted to know. "That's a whole lot of givin' up on our part. This is *our* school."

Sherry glanced tentatively at Chris and then ventured back into the conversation. She and Cam had been going to the football dances since they were freshmen. Now the dances were gone. Susan should've been homecoming queen this fall, but the school board eliminated homecoming and the band's Confederate flag. It was un-American. It wasn't fair.

"It'd be dangerous," said Tater Peterson. "One of the BTW players knifed his brother after a game last year 'cause he was screwin' his girlfriend. The Yard's a whole 'nother world you don't want to know about."

What a lie that was, and Tater knew it. Nothing was more fascinating than what life was really like in that mysterious part of town across Raleigh Highway from the freight yard. Chris' experience on the Yard was like everyone else's around the pool. They went there to pick up the maid or take her home. One of the things on the Yard you noticed right from the start was the noise. The shriek of a cut of coal hoppers rolling through the retarders, the impact of couplings down in the classification tracks – none of that disturbed summer evening porch conversations in this part of town. But on the Yard it sounded like what he imagined Vietnam must be like.

Tater volunteered a series of stories he'd heard from his father, most of whose career as a Shortridge policeman apparently con-

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sisted of breaking up fights and sorting through the bloody disturbances that raged day and night all over the Yard.

“Most of ’em don’t think anything of cuttin’ each other up for no reason,” he said.

But when Chris asked Tater if he would play this fall, the Comets fullback said “Sure.”

The sound of the back door opening interrupted the conversation. Susan’s parents were out on the elevated deck, and Susan nudged Chris with her elbow. “You haven’t tried our pool yet,” she said with an artificial smile her parents couldn’t see.

Chris got the message. “Y’all c’mon,” he said. Sherry seemed reluctant, and so he apologized once again.

“Shithead,” she said, pulling the hairs on his forearm.

HATTIE MAE Johnson ran her fingers along the stitching at the neckline and looked at herself in the full-length mirror. The turquoise silk was so light and cool. The only other silk dress she’d ever worn was Mrs. McCaslin’s hand-me-down. This one was new, and she couldn’t suppress the sheer sensual pleasure that drew her mouth into a smile. It hung beautifully, and the pleats in the skirt were so crisp and sharp she knew she’d be afraid to sit down in it.

But could she sit in the pale green one she’d just tried? Or in either pair of slacks?

“I just don’t feel right, Miz McCaslin,” she said. “All these clothes. All this money. Me and Rosey can get married cheap in South Carolina.”

“I’m not listening to any more of this, Hattie Mae,” Frances McCaslin said from outside the dressing room in that politely stubborn way of hers. “Lemme see how that one looks on you.”

Hattie Mae cracked open the door.

“It looks gorgeous. You’ll have folks all over lookin’ at you when you walk down Fifth Avenue in that.”

“I ’preciate this. I really do.”

“You’ve ironed too many of Lee’s shirts not to have a proper wedding and a proper trousseau.”

Hattie Mae had never been inside Kathy’s Dress Shop before, although she had things that Mrs. McCaslin and others had given her with a Kathy’s label. A woman who wanted anything nicer would have to drive at least a hundred miles.

She’d left the Harvards’ house nearly ten years ago when the chance came to work for the McCaslins up on Capitol Hill. Mrs. McCaslin gave more and bigger parties than anyone in town, which was to her husband’s benefit, because he represented the Fifty-fifth House District in the North Carolina General Assembly when he wasn’t tending to his law practice.

The wedding at the McCaslin’s in two weeks would have been impossible in any other white home in town. Mrs. McCaslin was the rare woman who didn’t let other people’s expectations dictate her life. Anyone who knew her knew that. It was public knowledge that she didn’t get along with Dr. Gordon at the Presbyterian Church, and that for the duration of his pastorate she was resigned to staying home on Sunday mornings. She went by the church just long enough to toss her offering envelope through a crack in the big double doors during the service, and she made sure it included some change so everybody heard it hit the floor.

“I’m going over to sportswear to find you some things for the train,” Mrs. McCaslin said. “Would you be more comfortable in pants or a skirt?”

“Either’s fine, Miz McCaslin.”

Hattie Mae came out of the dressing room with an armload and noticed a middle-aged woman at the other end of a rack of blouses, disgust dripping from her face. Hattie Mae wanted to evaporate from sight.

“Land sakes,” the woman said to the sales clerk. “How’m I supposed to know which items are ... uh ... acceptable?”

“Ma’am?”

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“You know exactly what I mean,” the woman said, raising her voice and pointing directly at Hattie Mae. “Kathy’s got a clientele!”

“But Miz Birmin’ham ...”

Mrs. McCaslin, who had returned from the other side of the store, interrupted. “I’ll handle this. She’s here with me, Harriet.”

Harriet Birmingham paused momentarily. “I had no idea, Frances. But really ...”

“I’m trying to organize a wedding,” Mrs. McCaslin said. “Today’s the only day I could get this done.”

Harriet appeared puzzled, but she didn’t prolong the discussion.

Hattie Mae stood downcast fighting tears and wringing her hands. Mrs. McCaslin’s original offer for the wedding had been overwhelming. But when Mrs. McCaslin suggested this shopping trip, she had been reluctant precisely because she foresaw this kind of incident.

“Please let’s go. I b’lieve I’ve done enough shoppin’.”

“Nonsense, Hattie Mae. You hush up and don’t apologize when you’re with me.”

But Hattie Mae’s heart was no longer in it. Silk had turned to burlap.

chapter 4

SOCKLESS IN PENNY loafers, cotton slacks and a light blue golf shirt, Chris felt as comfortable as was possible on a sticky summer evening in which he'd have to deal with Wade Marks. He steered up the same driveway his mother had driven twenty-four hours before, eager to be alone with Susan for the first time.

Mrs. Marks answered the door and welcomed him inside. "Come on to the back, Christopher. Mr. Marks and I are having some supper. Would you like some peach pie while you wait?"

He thanked her but declined as they made their way back through dim front rooms filled with sizeable pieces of furniture. The back of the house was much brighter. The light-colored wall-paper with small scenes of moss-covered cypress trees, bird dogs and flying geese helped, but so did the large windows that faced into the sunset and looked out over the deck and pool.

The kitchen was at one end of a room that stretched across the back of the house, and the Markses were eating at a small table in the breakfast area. The other end had bookshelves and cabinets along two walls. There was a table with an unfinished jigsaw puz-

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zle, and David Brinkley was narrating a news report about the war on the corner TV. Chris sat on the couch, taking care not to block the Marks's view of the television.

"What're y'all goin' to see," Mr. Marks asked.

"Susan wants to see *Cat Ballou*," Chris said. Mr. Marks was a frightening man even when his daughter wasn't being taken out to the movie.

"That downtown? Susan cain't go to Northampton."

"Yessir."

"Lee Marvin's in that idn' he? We shot Japs together in the Pacific."

"Wade!" Mrs. Marks objected.

"Crazy sons-a-bitches," he rumbled on, unfazed. "Started a war and never had to own up to what they did."

"Sir?"

"Jap schools don't teach Pearl Harbor. They raise kids over there to think they lost a war we forced on 'em. We didn' punish 'em, and that's goin' to come back and bite us one of these days."

"Daddy, Chris is probably more interested in Jane Fonda."

Susan had come down by a back staircase. She was pink from the sun deck and she wore a pair of sharply creased Bermudas and a sleeveless blouse. Her brown penny loafers were just like Chris'.

"Actually, you look a little like Jane Fonda with dark hair," Chris said. It was a clumsy attempt at a compliment, but it was true, and Susan's smile said she approved.

"Tom goin' to let you play football with those niggers?" Mr. Marks said.

Susan intercepted his provocation. "Chris and I don't want to be late for the movie, Daddy."

Thank goodness she wanted to move things along.

Mrs. Marks looked up at the wall clock. "You come see us again, Christopher. Come swimming anytime."

"Yes, ma'am."

“Wait up and I’ll walk out with you,” Mr. Marks said. He wiped his fingers and face with a napkin and gave his wife a quick peck on the cheek. “*Meter’s* on time, Honey.”

He turned on the hallway light, and Chris could see for the first time exactly what the frames on the walls held: pictures of the Markses in fancy restaurants and theater programs from musicals they had attended on Broadway.

“Mary Kathryn and I used to take the train up every ‘Thanksgivin’,” Mr. Marks said, taking notice of Chris’ interest. “We always stayed at the City Squire, saw the Christmas show at Radio City and at least one play. Did some Christmas shoppin’, too. With Miz Randolph’s health lately we spend ‘Thanksgivin’ in Virginia, but we still get up to the city a couple of times a year.”

“I’d love to take the train up there,” Chris said.

“You wouldn’ care for it. They aren’t Christian folks like here. We look after each other. They want to look after us. Yankees know what’s best for everybody.”

Chris stifled the observation that the Markses seemed to enjoy New York and proceeded to the framed certificate of Mary Kathryn Randolph’s acceptance into the Timahoe Chapter, Virginia Division of the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

“It’s up near Roanoke,” Mr. Marks said. “I can get there in the Cessna in a couple of hours if there’s an emergency.”

Farther down was a large frame containing yellowed pages lined up horizontally. Chris could barely read the faded text:

A
CATECHISM,
To Be
Taught Orally
TO THOSE WHO CANNOT READ;
Designed Especially For The
Instruction Of
THE SLAVES,

THROUGH THE HEART OF THE SOUTH

In The PROT. EPISCOPAL CHURCH In The CONFEDERATE STATES.

It was in question-and-answer format, just like the catechism he'd learned at church, except these had a condescending tone that it took a moment for him to recognize:

LESSON I.

Quest. WHO made the world?

Ans. God.

Q. Who?

A. God.

Q. What did God make?

A. The world.

Q. Yes, God made the world. Did He make any thing else?

A. He made all things in the world

Q. What are some of the things in the world?

A. Water, trees, cattle, and men.

Q. What?

A. Water, trees, cattle, and men.

Q. Who is your neighbor?

A. Every body who lives with me, and around me, and has control over me.

Q. Can you name some persons?

A. My master and mistress.

Q. How are you to show your love to your master and mistress?

A. I am never to lie to them, to steal from them, nor speak bad words about them; but always to do as they bid me.

He had lost track of why he was visiting this family museum until he felt Susan nudge him. It was a smooth escape from a discussion he didn't want with a man he didn't like. Susan slid across the front seat of the station wagon to sit next to him and turned on the radio as they headed out the driveway gate.

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“Thanks for your help in there,” he said. “I get kind’ve nervous around your daddy.”

“All the boys do.”

“The slave thing was creepy.”

“It’s been in Mama’s family forever. The Randolphs were Tidewater people – tobacco people.” She switched the radio back off and turned in her seat to face him. “Thanks for finally askin’ me out.”

Of course she’d choreographed the whole thing, but that word “finally” – he liked what it implied.

“I almost had to leave Shortridge this year,” she continued. “They were goin’ to send me off to Raleigh. I talked ’em out of it, but they made me quit basketball.” She seemed wistful. “I thought you might help.”

“Huh?”

“You’re not that hard to figure out, Chris. Every time somebody said “nigger” in Mr. Starnes’ class, you had that weird twitch.”

He hadn’t thought it was obvious. “We say colored.”

“Lots of people say colored. You’re the only one I’ve ever seen squinch when somebody said nigger.”

She was snuggling lightly against him, her soft face partly shrouded by a cascade of dark hair. He knew why the word bothered him, about the fight he’d had with Bobby Bradshaw when they were only ten. Neither could throw a punch hard enough to really hurt the other. They ended up shoving and calling each other names. Chris could have called Bobby a moron or dumb, but that wasn’t mean enough. He wanted to say something that would do what his fists couldn’t; something that would draw such a distinction between them that Bobby would feel utterly worthless.

“Nigger” was the word, but it was Monteenia who felt the pain. As soon he turned away from Bobby, there she stood, her eyes wet with betrayal.

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“I didn’t want Monteenia to know that word was in me,” he said. “I couldn’t talk to her for two weeks.”

“That’s what I’m talkin’ about,” she said. “I say it in front of Kathleen all the time. Dudn’ bother her a bit.”

It didn’t fit, this utter coldness toward the woman who had taken care of her since she came home from the hospital and the girl who leaned against him now. But he had wanted to take Susan Marks out since his freshman year, and he wasn’t going to turn around right here in the middle of Main Street and take her home.

“Why weren’t you sayin’ it yesterday at the pool?”

“Cause of you.”

No, he absolutely was not going to turn the car around. He pulled into a parking space half a block from the theater and they got out just as Mr. Marks came by in his pickup, headed to the station.

“He meets the *Meter* a couple of times a week,” Susan said, tugging on his arm. “We’re goin’ to miss the start.”

WADE MARKS’ favorite parking spot was open. It was behind the station, away from the platform lights and always in darkness when the *Meteor* came through, even in summer. Muffin was sitting on her haunches in her usual spot beside the back door to the Witch’s Hat, where the grill cook gave her fish scraps, and she didn’t budge when the headlights set her eyes ablaze.

He didn’t have to wait long until a dark figure came around the end of the station toward his pickup.

The transaction lasted only long enough to exchange envelopes.

“Everything’s right as rain, Mr. Marks.”

SUSAN SQUEEZED Chris’ hand as they emerged from the darkness of the theater into the brilliant light of the lobby and its white

marble floor. Cam and Sherry, who had entered from the opposite aisle, were there laughing about the movie.

“I was wonderin’ how long it’d take you, Chris,” Sherry said when she spotted them. “Let’s go to the Caboose.”

A couple of miles out Harvard Lake Road, the low, white cinderblock building – originally a gas station – was where the Comets luxuriated in the customs that trapped them in the past, and it served barbecue and beer.

Chris followed Cam’s Fairlane onto the dirt and gravel lane that led around to the back and turned off his headlights, an unwritten courtesy to the couples grappling in the cars parked in a semicircle around the rear entrance. Once they were parked side-by-side, Cam flashed his headlights once to summon one of the black curb boys who sat on a bench outside the door.

Most of the dozen or so high-backed wooden rocking chairs on the opposite side of the door from the bench were occupied by Shortridge High football players sipping Blues, their feet propped on the a cinderblock wall that separated the deck from the dirt parking lot. Chris would be able to sit there with Cam in the fall when their senior year was under way. The metal Coca-Cola sign over the deck listed all ten Shortridge football scores from the six-and-four season last fall – all but the last score, anyway. The bottom line read “COMETS 21, Northampton 14,” the last Shortridge victory in the cross-county rivalry.

Maybe it was because he’d been preoccupied lately with his senior year, but the sign and its final score held Chris’ attention as the curb boy approached. He had always been proud of the way the Caboose had preserved that nineteen-year-old memory. Tonight he wasn’t, and he couldn’t immediately pinpoint why.

“Hey Chris,” he heard Sherry call across the gap between the cars, “you say you love me and are beholden to me, but the first time I ask you to do one little thing for me, like rob one little train ...”

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Her recitation of Cat Ballou's disappointment after failing to persuade anyone to avenge her father's murder by a railroad baron distracted him from the sign. "We cain't hold up the train, Cat," he replied.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Cause we're rustlers, not train robbers."

"Well if people don't try somethin' new, there wouldn't be no progress at all."

Susan was giggling and accepted Chris' arms around her. "Y'all take a break for a second," she said. "The boy's here for our order."

He was stocky, about Chris' age, wearing black slacks and a starched white cotton tunic that buttoned up to the neck. He stood there in silence.

"Barbecue sandwich, French fries and a Coke," Susan said.

"You take slaw on your barbecue, ma'am?"

"Yeah."

"Two of those," Chris told him.

The sandwiches came on an aluminum tray that the curb boy hung on the car window. Chris loved how the vinegary tang of the shredded, smoked pork combined in each bite with the sweet coolness of coleslaw.

"Lookin' forward to this season?" he asked Susan. "We're goin' to make the Caboose put up a new Northampton score."

"If y'all beat Northampton, I'll kiss you on the courthouse steps and give you thirty minutes to draw a crowd."

"I don't think I could wait 'til November for that."

"I didn' say you had to."

She turned and kissed him. She reached behind his head and her mouth warmed from its Coca-Cola chill.

"You know what you've got to do," Cam called between their cars as he flashed his lights again for the curb boy.

"I cain't go home with beer on my breath," Susan protested.

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“Three Blues,” Cam told the curb boy, showing his cousin’s ID.

When they arrived, Chris walked out into the dirt at the center of the automotive amphitheater, hoisted his can and drank the first beer of his life. It was cold, bitter and delicious.

chapter **5**

THE OLD BOOKER T. Washington gym had seen better days. Two of the lights were out at the far end, where about twenty boys in shorts and T-shirts were lined up across the end line of the basketball court, making them look even darker than they were. Larry Wilson’s eyes were still adjusting to the dimness after the bright glare of July sun off the white sand outside, but he guessed the identity of the slender silhouette walking toward him on the sideline.

“Henry,” he said, extending his hand. “Glad to finally meet you.”

“Same here, Coach,” said the figure, whose facial features were beginning to emerge from the darkness. Henry Austin had the nose of a man who played his football before widespread use of the facemask. “Mister McCaslin said you’d be by today.”

Wilson felt an invisible hand from the darkness clasp his – firm and warm, not at all greasy – and he squeezed a response. It was good to have that part out of the way so quickly.

“Tell me ’bout your boys,” he said. “All I know is what I’ve read about ’em in the *Weekly*.”

Instantly he wondered if he'd made a mistake in trying to portray himself as somebody who actually kept up with BTW football through the newspaper. He had never read the *Weekly's* coverage of BTW games, and his anxiety level rose when it occurred to him he might get a question that would expose his ignorance.

"They're good kids," Austin said, betraying nothing. "I told 'em they don't want to embarrass themselves in the big time."

Wilson chuckled at the older man's acknowledgment of the obvious. As much as he preferred segregation, the one argument about preserving it that he had never bought into was the separate-but-equal line. Nothing about BTW was the equal of Shortridge High – not the buildings, not the money, not the opportunity, not the education. But mostly it was because of what couldn't be said any more, now that segregationists were embarrassing themselves with the stupid things they said every night on the TV news: BTW wasn't equal because the people who attended and taught there weren't equal. He was just waiting for someone to come up with a way of explaining it that wouldn't sound so redneck.

"I'd like to meet 'em," he said. "We could use more speed."

Austin led him along the line of sweating boys taking a break from sprints. It reminded Wilson of the military inspections he'd endured when a VIP would show up at Fort Bragg – "yessirs" and "nosirs" if he asked questions – but eye contact that yielded no insight and handshakes that were perfunctory. That was okay as long as they were obedient this fall. He wasn't trying to make friends.

"Why don't we talk in my office?" Austin said, dismissing the players.

They went into a bright hallway along the outside of the gym illuminated by sunlight from the windows along the right-hand wall. Austin's office at the far end was a simple cubicle with a desk, a couple of wooden chairs, shelves loaded with textbooks being

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stored for the summer and piles of shoulder pads and dark red helmets in a corner.

“Been meanin’ to throw ’em away,” Austin said, motioning him to sit. “You can only repair stuff so many times before it’s worn slap out.”

Wilson understood and tried to empathize. “Fatback lost the cheek pad from one side of his helmet last year and kept meanin’ to ask me for some new ones to snap in. I finally asked him one day how he got those bloody holes in the side of his head and he showed me the snaps stickin’ out.”

Austin gave him a blank look, and he silently cursed himself. Lee McCaslin had told him last spring that he’d have to take Austin as his assistant and that there was no way around it. He had dreaded meeting Austin one-on-one because there would be no one there to smooth over the inevitable awkward moments like this. Every time he spoke, he was afraid he would stick his foot in his mouth, and now, in Austin’s silence and indefinite expression, he thought he had.

“Look,” the older man said finally, running his hand beneath his maroon baseball cap through his salt-and-pepper hair, “I didn’t want to talk about this in front of the boys, but I thought you’d ’preciate a scoutin’ report.”

Wilson was relieved. “Why don’t we just go down the list? I’ve got my roster with me.”

Football was what they both had in common, after all, and he could talk it about with confidence. Wilson could feel his apprehensions slipping away as they began to talk about systems and coaching philosophies. Austin liked the power-I at the high school level as much as he did, and when the black coach showed him the faded mimeographed pages from his loose-leaf playbook, Wilson liked the innovations he saw.

“Played offense, didn’ you?” he asked.

“Quarterback at Livingstone,” Austin answered. “Loved havin’ the ball in my hands.”

“Linebacker,” Wilson said. “Appalachian. Look, it seems obvious. I’ll take the defense. You handle the offense.”

“Sure.”

Their progress down the two rosters was detailed and professional. By the time they had worked through the defensive positions and then most of the offense with some back-in-my-college-days tales thrown in, more than ninety minutes had passed and Wilson had forgotten that he was talking to a black man.

He remembered when Austin got to the final issue.

“Quarterback.”

“Mine,” Wilson responded perfunctorily. Quarterback was non-negotiable, and he was entitled to assert privilege. Quarterback was a white position, and Austin’s weak protest confirmed it.

“EVER SEEN the Marks’ gate closed before?” Cam asked as he drove down Pine Cone Drive.

Chris had never paid any attention to the white brick pillars at the entrance to the Marks’ driveway, and he was frankly surprised that Cam was thinking about anything but how uncomfortable a tuxedo was on a summer day. But there it was, a wrought-iron gate blocking the entrance.

“They’re not out of town ’cause me and Susan are datin’ tonight.”

“In a couple of hours this’ll all be over,” Cam said. “And in a couple of minutes, we’re goin’ to find out what the deal is with this weddin’. You even know who’s gettin’ married?”

“All Mama said was that helpin’ the McCaslin’s was an honor I should ’preciate ’cause they’re good people.”

They had just about reached the front steps, which were decorated with arrangements of pine boughs and magnolia blossoms, when the front door swung open.

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“Dahlins, why don’t you look handsome?”

Mr. Cooper was in his usual show business form. Instead of a starched white shirt with bow tie and studs like he and Cam wore, his high school glee club director had on a white silk turtleneck. A band of black velvet with gold braid along each edge ran around the neck and also down the front of the shirt into his cummerbund. A diamond glistened on the gold ring on his left pinky.

“Who dressed you this mornin’?” Chris asked sarcastically of the only teacher at school he could address like that.

Mr. Cooper laughed and welcomed them into the house as if it were his own. He said he’d been there two days working on the wedding decorations. “Lord, you should have been here last night when we were working on this staircase. The white runner was George’s idea. George? George, where are you? I want to introduce you to a couple of my tenors.”

Wherever George was, it wasn’t within earshot. “Wait right here while I go find him. The food’s off-limits until after the ceremony.”

Mr. Cooper disappeared down the central hallway toward the back of the house leaving him and Cam to survey the preparations.

The banister was covered with small pine boughs and cones with magnolia blossoms spaced every couple of feet down the railing. In the library, through the glass doors on the right, were about thirty wooden folding chairs from the funeral home in white slipcovers arranged with a central aisle. A huge Bible rested on a wooden podium surrounded by sprays of flowers and pine greenery.

In the dining room to the left of the foyer, a huge antique mahogany table held a three-level wedding cake at one end. On the other side of the pine cone and magnolia blossom centerpiece was a large silver platter of fish with pink, translucent flesh surrounded by small wedges of toast. Silver bowls with more finger food went down either side of the table, and there were stacks of china dishes

and silver forks everywhere. There was a silver-painted railroad spike by one of the punchbowls.

“I told you to stay out of the food!”

This time George was with Mr. Cooper. George was taller but thinner, and there was a shock of dark hair across his forehead that he occasionally brushed out of his eyes with his hand. He wore a velvet bow tie around his winged collar.

“This is George Bergman from New York. He’s in theater. I asked him to come down for a couple of days to do the McCaslin’s house.”

“Christmas in July,” Chris said.

“Why thank you,” George responded. “Jon-Franklin has always talked about Shortridge, but I didn’t realize how your pines just dominate the landscape until I got down here. The needles – they’re a foot long! As soon as I saw them I knew I had to incorporate them in the theme. It’s *sooo* Shortridge.”

The fact that someone from New York was impressed enough with something “*sooo* Shortridge” as plain old pine straw made Chris like George immediately.

Mr. Cooper quickly ran down Chris and Cam’s pre-ceremony responsibilities of greeting guests under the portico and parking their cars. Then he led them into the library and showed them the organ he had rented and hidden behind one of the flower arrangements.

“*Trés gauche*,” he said. “I’d have a small pipe organ in this room, but you’ve got to work with what you’ve got. Chris, you’ll sit with me and turn the music pages.”

“Who’s gettin’ married, Mr. Cooper?” Cam asked.

“You don’t know?” Mr. Cooper was still trying to stifle his laughter when a rustle at the back of the room made everyone turn around. The custodian at Shortridge High was standing in the door dressed in a tuxedo.

“Hello, Samson,” Mr. Cooper said. “Big day today.”

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“Shore is, Mr. Cooper. It looks mighty nice.”

“You can thank George here for that. Came all the way down from New York.”

“It looks just beautiful, Mr. George. It really does.”

“Samson?” Chris asked. “You helpin’ us today?”

Samson glanced down at his shoes as if he were embarrassed. “No, sir. I’m givin’ away the bride.”

Chris found his shoes momentarily fascinating as well. “Who’s the bride, Samson?”

“Hattie Mae Johnson. Rosey’s marryin’ my only girl.”

“The Hattie Mae who took care of Wanda Harvard?”

“That’s her,” Samson said. “She quit ’em a while back to come here.”

Mr. Cooper interrupted. “Chris, why don’t you get Samson’s keys and go park his car.”

Chris took the keys and hesitated for a moment. “Congratulations, sir,” he said. “This is a special day.”

A car was pulling into the driveway when Chris and Cam got outside, a black Cadillac with fins as long as a Myrtle Beach shark. Cam positioned himself at the driver’s side so he could get the door. From the passenger’s side, Chris helped a large black woman in a long purple dress with lots of ruffles and a lavender straw hat covered with flowers.

“Good afternoon, ma’am.”

“Afternoon, sir,” she answered back with a broad smile.

The distinguished looking driver with graying hair retrieved a black robe from the back seat before he gave Cam the keys. When Cam returned from parking the car, he showed Chris the card the man had given him. It had a gold cross embossed on the left side and a name: Rev. Anson James Varick, Pineview Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church. Across the bottom edge of the card in smaller italic print it said *"God hath made of one blood all nations of men to dwell upon the face of the earth. Acts 17:26."*

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"Any idea what's goin' on?" Cam asked.

"Not a damn clue."

"You goin' to tell Susan about this?"

"Looks like the Markses already know."

When Mr. Cooper finally came out to retrieve them, Chris took his seat at the organ. "I'm going to improvise a little," Mr. Cooper whispered.

The sheet music carried only a melody line, but Mr. Cooper could play "Mary Had a Little Lamb" on an organ and make it sound like Handel's *Messiah*. The way he played "The World Turned Upside Down" was less grand and more like a typical prelude people snoozed to in church, but Chris was more interested in the words on the sheet that the congregation could not see:

*If buttercups buzz'd after the bee,
If boats were on land, churches on sea,
If ponies rode men and if grass ate the cows,
And cats should be chased into holes by the mouse,
If the mamas sold their babies
To the gypsies for half a crown;
If summer were spring and the other way round,
Then all the world would be upside down.*

Chris had to fight off laughter, but the musical selection was typical Mr. Cooper. When he finished, Reverend Varick and another black man in a tuxedo entered the room from a door behind the organ and took their places in front of the guests. Mr. Cooper pulled out some more sheet music and looked to Mrs. McCaslin, who was standing in the foyer, quietly laughing and checking the top of the staircase. There was only a brief pause before she looked to Mr. Cooper and nodded.

The processional was grand, even regal. As soon as he struck the opening chord to "Rigaudon," Chris felt the hairs rise on his neck. It may have been only an electric organ, but Mr. Cooper was playing it.

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With each descending note of the opening theme, the figure in the silken gown took another step down the stairs until Hattie Mae and Samson had reached the bottom and entered the library. She carried a single magnolia blossom the size of a grapefruit surrounded by its shiny Pullman green leaves.

Mr. Cooper wrapped up the brief processional in a glorious *ritardando* and everyone sat. Cam, George and the McCaslins slipped into the back of the room along with Monteenia and two other black women who, from their starched white uniforms, obviously had been hired to help with the reception. When Monteenia recognized Chris, she smiled at him the way his mother had when he received his first Bible in Sunday School.

The service took only a few minutes, ending when Mr. Cooper launched into Henry Purcell. Chris tried to ask him more about the wedding, but his questions were politely declined.

“Why don’t you and Cam come over later and we can talk all you want,” he said. “Monteenia’s giving us some of the leftovers from the reception.”

Monteenia had hung back from the crowd and complimented Chris on his tuxedo.

“Thanks. I didn’ know Hattie Mae was gettin’ married.”

“I didn’ know you knew Hattie Mae,” Monteenia said. “We’ve been on the lay committee for I don’t know how long. Sometimes she takes care of my boy. And how are you doin’, Mr. Cooper? I do enjoy hearin’ you play.”

“Where do y’all know each other from?” Chris asked.

“He’s been teachin’ up at Booker T,” she said.

“When did that happen, Mr. Cooper?”

“I been over there the past year, teaching them in the morning and y’all in the afternoons,” he said. “The school board thought it would be a good idea. Monteenia, how is it you know Chris?”

“I’ve been workin’ for his mama since he was two years old. Me and Chris go way back.” Monteenia noticed the library was

empty now. “Y’all are goin’ to have to ’scuse me, but I’ve got a reception to take care of.”

It lasted a couple of hours, during which Chris tried to stay out of the way in the kitchen as new food was carried out and picked-over platters were brought in to be washed. He was about to pull off his snap-on tie, but Mrs. McCaslin shot him a look that said she didn’t approve of such informality, even behind closed doors. When the party finally broke up, it didn’t take long to match people with their cars. Then he unhooked his cummerbund and popped open his starched collar.

“I hope Mr. Cooper got some of that salmon,” Cam said as they pulled away from the curb. “You’d like it.”

“Looked kind’ve odd to me,” Chris said. “This whole day was odd.”

When they pulled up in Mr. Cooper’s driveway, he and George were carrying wax paper-covered plates from the carport into the kitchen.

“If you’d just carry those sandwiches I’d appreciate it,” Mr. Cooper said. “I’ve got to change out of these clothes before I melt.”

It had been Mr. Cooper’s kind of occasion. He was a one-man show on stage, playing piano for the glee club and simultaneously directing the singers with his eyebrows, a nod of his head or a shrug of a shoulder. He could somehow squinch his face into a tiny shape for the *pianissimos* and expand it with a wide-open mouth for the *fortissimos*. In places where sections sang independently, Mr. Cooper’s face went into exhausting contortions that made him look like a caffeinated spastic.

That was part of what made Mr. Cooper different, but nobody really wanted to explain him. He preemptively overwhelmed people with the force of his personality and abundance of his musical talent. He could sound more like Patricia out at the Pit Stop than she did.

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“Honey, you’re just the sweetest thang that ever came in this hash house,” he’d say to an imaginary someone at a pretend table, fanning himself with his hand. Listening to him talk about the years he worked on Broadway as a musician and composer, his celebrity gossip – who wanted to spoil the show?

The Coopers were a railroad family, and their son had made Shortridge proud. Jon-Franklin’s father died a railroad death in the locomotive of the *Silver Meteor* when it plowed into the caboose of a freight train hanging out of a siding. They said his hand was still on the air brake handle when they cut his body from the twisted metal of the locomotive cab. Jon-Franklin went to Julliard and had a successful theater career, but when his mother suffered a stroke, he came back home to nurse her. When she died in his arms a few months later, he offered his services to the school board.

Mr. Cooper had been to the places the trains went when they left Shortridge. He had dared to stay there, succeed, and then return to teach another Shortridge generation. Chris admired him.

Within a few minutes Mr. Cooper had changed into a Hawaiian shirt, a pair of white linen trousers and leather sandals. “How do you like my huaraches? Got ’em down in Mexico on a movie shoot.”

“They look a lot more comfortable than these things Mama rented,” Cam said, kicking off his patent leather dress shoes. “So what do you know about the weddin’?”

“Miz McCaslin called me about a month ago,” Mr. Cooper said, lighting a Salem. “She said Hattie Mae asked for a few days off to get married, and you know how Miz McCaslin is. One thing led to another and all of a sudden we had a production.”

“It didn’ turn into a production all by itself,” Chris said. “If that’s what she was after, she came to you to get it done up right.”

“Well it *was* what she was after. She made that perfectly clear, and that’s when I called George – here, try some of this food – she

said do it like it was for her own daughter. Mrs. McCaslin can bruise people, but her heart's in the right place."

"She's got guts for sure. You know people'll call her a nigger-lover," Chris said. "When Susan gives me grief about it, I'll be able to say I didn' know it was a colored weddin' 'til I got there."

"Would you've come if you'd known?" Cam asked.

"Hell no," Chris said. "You wouldn' either. The McCaslins can get away with stuff like this."

"But we didn' do anything wrong," Cam said.

"Doin' what's right idn' what matters in Shortridge," Chris said. "It's doin' what's expected."

He tried to slide a piece of salmon off the serving tray, but he was obviously struggling, so Mr. Cooper pricked the edge of a layer of the pink flesh with a fork, peeled it off and laid it on a piece of toast.

"See if that isn't the most delicious fish you've ever tasted," he said. "I'll tell you something about other people's approval. If you have to work for it, you'll hate yourself when you get it."

Mr. Cooper was right. It was the best fish Chris had ever tasted.

chapter 6

MALACHI STEVENS GAVE the screwdriver a sharp twist, and the screw bit deeply into the soft pine door frame, tightening against the hinge. This old wood was disintegrating and probably would last just one more summer. If he'd been more careful moving the stove in ...

“Bet Chris never fixed a screen door at his house,” he said.

“That’s mean,” Mama answered gently, her words and the aroma of pork chops drifting out of the kitchen. “You won’t feel that way when you eat this supper.”

He knew she was happy to have a stove that worked, even if it was a hand-me-down, even if she had cooked more meals on it than their old one now sitting in the back yard. If she were more like Mrs. Bethea, or even more like Claryce, she could allow herself some occasional anger. But he had never seen it.

There were times he’d been thankful for that. She’d defended him more than once when he slipped out of Sunday School to go fishing under the trestle. He’d needed all the defending he could

get, because Mrs. Bethea was the teacher. He knew she'd defended Chris, too.

Chris was like all the white kids in town, putting on clothes that women like his mother had washed, eating a breakfast that Yard women had cooked and getting into a bed at night that they had made. So much time spent with those other families while he got passed around to Mrs. Bethea or Mrs. Varick. Yet as much as he wanted to tell Mama he wanted more of her attention, it made him feel weak and needy just to think about it.

"How can you take it?" he asked.

"What?"

"Not even bein' a person. How can you stand bein' around 'em every day?"

"We all have to earn our keep."

"That's not what I mean. How can you let 'em be the way they are?"

"They're not tryin' to be mean," she said. "It just comes out like that 'cause of their raisin'. They try. They're good people."

It made him angry when Mama talked like that. The McAndrews had given her their stove and she'd gotten some nice second-hand dresses for church. But it wasn't the same as making enough money to buy something yourself so you weren't beholden. He found another screw in the coffee can and aligned the hinge flap by eye.

"What makes 'em good people, Mama? If they're so good, why does Coach tell us we're goin' to have to be careful this fall, we're goin' to have to work hard to show we belong?"

"Cause ..."

"Cause he knows they hate us and they're just lookin' for some way to keep us down."

Except for the supper sounds, there was only silence from the kitchen. Finally, Mama spoke. "It's hard when people have been wrong about somethin' for so long to see it," she said. "If you

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grow up in everyday meanness, it dudn' seem mean anymore. Wrong has a way of lookin' after itself so it can fester. It twists your conscience 'round so you start thinkin' wrong is right."

"But we're the ones who suffer for it," he said.

"I've been wronged by lots of people, Malachi. Not all of 'em were white. Sooner or later everybody you know will let you down some way. Think about your daddy. He'd done run off before your mama passed."

"He got what he deserved."

"I don't think God tells a man to go cut somebody's throat," she said. "Your daddy didn' do nothin' to deserve that. Bad as any of us are, don't none of us deserve that."

He wasn't convinced. "You were raised a certain way, too. You were raised to keep your mouth shut and stay safe and be satisfied. Understandin' and forgiveness was s'posed to make you a better person. But if Claryce's daddy hadn' spoken up, nothin' would've ever changed around here."

"Rufus Junior's a wonderful man," Mama responded, "but he was lucky. A lot of men like him wind up in the grave for less than he done."

"That's exactly what I'm talkin' about. You cain't say they're good people if ..."

"Here's my point," she said, surprising him both with her interruption and the firmness that accompanied it. "You can ask for too much and end up with nothin'. Or worse."

Coach Austin had said the same thing, but he was easier to argue with.

"You oughta be more thankful for her," Mrs. Bethea had told him once. "Monteenia took you in and raised you up when nobody else was there to do it, so you best watch how you behave."

CAM LOVED the leather smell of a new pair of football shoes. It was one of a collection of aromas – the not unpleasant odor of

year-old sweat inside the plastic shell of a football helmet, the smell of newly mown grass at the bottom of a pile of tacklers in Railroad Park – that reset his mental calendar to the start of a new season.

The smell that overwhelmed him this afternoon was another that reminded him of football: pine. He was immersed in it at the saw mill. The nearly empty parking lot where he lay was deep with wood chips. They were piled like snow across every expanse of bare ground, between the machines in the corrugated metal shed and around the railroad spur where hopper cars waited for loading, bound for the Santee paper mill.

The soft, forgiving cushion of pine chips in the parking lot was why he was willing to dive for Chris' errant passes. It was a place where he could prepare for the opening of summer practice and dream of super-human heroics at the same time. If he couldn't be a professional golfer, then spectacular diving catches in the National Football League were what Cam dreamed of.

Ever since he had moved to Shortridge and met Chris, they had spent fall weekends running pass patterns and throwing to each other at the mill. He always sat with Chris on the bus to games. Now Cam stood, brushed the wood chips – sticky with resin – from his T-shirt and arms and considered Chris' question.

What if they wouldn't be starters this fall? They knew nothing about the new players from BTW except that they won lots of games. Cam had been worrying about it for awhile now, although he hadn't brought it up to Chris because he saw no reason for Chris to be concerned. Even at integrated colleges and on NFL teams, black players didn't play QB. He didn't wonder why. It just didn't happen.

But halfbacks – there were plenty of colored halfbacks – and that was his position. Velma didn't know much about the game, but Cam had asked her about BTW one afternoon while she was fixing supper and Malachi was the player she talked about most. She couldn't tell a fullback from a quarterback, but she knew Mala-

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chi scored a lot of touchdowns and that was enough to make Cam feel vulnerable.

“One runner better than me would be OK,” Cam reasoned out loud. “You need two halfbacks.”

Chris was reassuring, pointing out that Coach Wilson would be head coach and he’d look out for his own players. “He knows you and how you play,” Chris said. “Know anything about their quarterback? You can’t play but one QB at a time.”

Chris was not the best passer around, but Cam had been in the huddle with Chris plenty of tense times and that part of the game never seemed to bother him. Their last jayvee season they’d been down by six points at Lumbee River and Chris had completed six passes in a row to drive for the winning touchdown.

“Coach Wilson’s not goin’ to play a colored quarterback, and you know it,” Cam said. “You’ve got the safest position on the team. But you still have to want it bad.”

“Why’s that so important?” Chris asked.

It was obvious to Cam. “Cause it’s goin’ to be the first integrated team and everything you do’s goin’ to be the example. That’s what you need to be thinkin’ about.”

The smile seemed to fall off Chris’ face, but he needed to be told.

“Look,” Cam continued, “I know you’d rather just slide through and get to Chapel Hill. But Shortridge will never change, and we just got caught before we could escape. People are goin’ to be lookin’ at our whole team to see how we handle it. That’s what Daddy says. But on the team, they’re mostly goin’ to be lookin’ at you.”

He had pushed Chris hard enough on the point. Chris had the grades for Chapel Hill, but he could be oblivious to things outside books that were just as important. Sometimes, like at Harvard Lake, he was the last person to realize what was really going on.

JODY MEACHAM

“THERE’S NO excuse for summer football!”

Chris felt better getting that out of the way first. It was already seventy-seven degrees at seven-thirty in the morning and the air was as still as a corpse. The needles on the long-leaf pine outside his window had long ago drooped in surrender to summer’s siege, and a layer of humid haze bleached the sky white.

“Sure you’re up for this?” Mama said, brushing the hair out of his face as if he were a baby.

She had been dropping hints all summer that her enthusiasm for football wasn’t what it had been in previous years. She would ask a question about how much football meant to him that led to other things, or she might say she was worried about him getting hurt. The first time, which was right after Harvard Lake, Chris had barely paid attention. But after a couple more comments, the pattern emerged. Last week she had finally asked flat out if he was sure he wanted to play football with colored boys.

He gave her the same answer then that he gave her now as he headed for the shower: “I’m goin’ to play.”

He didn’t have to feign enthusiasm. Even the craziest players – and the best players were a little crazy – didn’t pretend to like two-a-days that marked the end of summer’s laziness and the beginning of another season. They were a form of torture that coaches used to drive off players who weren’t dedicated to the cause of the glory on the gridiron and to establish their dominance over the team.

That wasn’t going to change because BTW players were joining the team. But he did expect – because of what Cam had said at the saw mill – that he was going to have to do something to set an example, and he wasn’t sure what that would be except he didn’t want to make a speech.

The thermometer had climbed to eighty by the time Mama dropped him off at the old brick gym to join the stream of players headed to the basement for equipment and to dress. Within a half

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hour he and Cam were crossing Richmond Avenue, their cleats clattering on the pavement, and up the dirt path to the silver and blue-painted wooden door into Railroad Park.

When the full team had gathered on the freshly chalked field, Coach Wilson counted forty-four players standing ready to go in the lazy, heavy air. Sweat had already soaked through the fronts of their heavy cotton jerseys, and dark stains had formed around the edges of the pads in their pants.

“Good mornin’, men,” Coach told them, lighting a cigarette. His gray Comets T-shirt was already darkening, and there were white salt rings around the band of the blue baseball cap he wore every season. “Everybody take a knee.”

The white players all pulled off their helmets. The only time a Comet was allowed to be on Coach Wilson’s field without wearing his helmet was when a coach told him to take a knee. Coach was about to begin his speech, but then he stopped and folded his arms across his chest.

“Some of you boys are new to Shortridge High and aren’t familiar with the way we do things here,” he said. “So we all get off on the same foot, I’m going to go over what I expect of each of you.

“Forget this place is called Railroad Park. This is my field. While you’re on this grass, you’ll do what I say. From the time I blow my whistle to start practice until the time I say ‘That’s it for today,’ there’s no walkin’ on this grass. You will run to your next drill. When you’re on this grass, you will wear your helmet unless I tell you to take a knee. That means you should all have your helmets off now.”

Coach paused for a moment so that the newcomers could get their helmets off. “If you break any of these rules, there’ll be some runnin’ to do. Any questions?”

No one spoke.

“Okay then. Coach Austin here has been head coach at BTW for twenty-two years,” Coach continued, motioning toward the slender black man in the maroon polo shirt who had been with him in the equipment room. “He never had a losing season at BTW, and he won two colored championships. He knows a lot of football, and he’s goin’ to be my assistant. He’ll be workin’ with the offense. Coach?”

Austin stepped gingerly into the circle as the players parted to give him passage. He was maybe fifteen years older than Coach’s thirty-four and wore a maroon baseball cap with a white “W” monogram that covered most of gray in his hair.

“Thanks, Coach,” he said, touching his clipboard to the bill of his cap in acknowledgment. “Boys, I just want to say how much I’m looking forward to working with y’all this season. I know my boys from Booker T, but I’ve seen all of y’all play, either in person or on film, and I like what I’ve seen. This is a special group, and we’re goin’ to have some fun.”

Fun. When had a football coach ever used that word?

Austin smiled and excused himself from the center of the circle. Then Coach blew the whistle that hung around his neck. “No walkin’! Linemen with me, backs and ends with Coach Austin!”

Chris and Cam set out together following Austin in a jog.

“That was different,” Cam said. “Coaches are ’sposed to prove how big an ass they can be.”

At the opposite end of the field from the defensive players, Austin went down a checklist of the names he and Wilson had compiled, and Chris was intent on matching the new faces and names when they were called.

The short, powerfully built player with a smile that seemed permanently drawn across his dark face was Malachi Stevens. Chris reached over and shook his hand after Malachi had identified himself by answering “here.”

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Austin divided them into two groups of six, what Chris assumed was a tentative first and second string, with the other three players assigned as fill-ins during the drills. For an hour Chris worked together in the same group with Cam and Malachi at the halfbacks, Tater Peterson and Darnell Wilson and Goose Griffin at ends. Austin would gather one group at a time, hold up his clipboard with a play diagrammed on it, and then that group would run the play.

It was slow going, and after each play there would be a quick critique or suggestion. Sometimes the group would repeat the play if they botched it the first time. But other than the fact that nearly half his teammates were strangers and Coach Austin was an altogether less-volatile personality than Coach, the first practice of the new season didn't seem much different from the ones Chris had experienced before.

The needle on the big Royal Crown Cola thermometer on the front of the press box was pointing at ninety-two when Coach Wilson's whistle blew, calling the full team back into a circle. Chris's shirt was laden with sweat, and it dripped from his eyebrows like the overflowing rain gutter across the front of his house during a thunderstorm. Harold Yates' pants were already soaked through except for dry white areas over his pads. Harold pulled out his shirttail and began to wring sweat out of it.

"Take a knee," Coach commanded, and then he ordered the manager to bring out a water bucket.

Several players gasped. Except on game nights, Coach had never allowed a water bucket on his field.

"The latest thing," Coach said, not bothering to hide his displeasure. "The state says we have to give you boys a drink every now and then. It was a lawsuit or somethin'. One dipper apiece or y'all will get sick."

The manager put the bucket down in front of Malachi, who looked like he'd fallen in love. He took the dipper with the strip of

black tape around the long handle, put it to his lips and slurped it down so eagerly that it overflowed, washing down his neck into his shoulder pads. He was as reluctant to part with the dipper as he would have been giving up his right hand, but he dropped it back into the bucket.

“Thank you, Jesus,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” Coach said.

The bucket came to Chris next. He knew why one dipper was marked with black tape – the same reason one of the water fountains at the depot was brown and the one beside it white – and he knew instantly what he was going to do. Taking the dipper with black tape, he closed his eyes and drank. The last few teaspoons he poured over his head.

The circle of players was silent as a snowfall.

Fatback was next. His freckled face was beet red from the workout, and from his expression it looked like he was about to faint from the heat. He reached for a dipper, hesitated, then dropped it back in the bucket.

“I cain’t,” Fatback huffed. “God almighty, I cain’t do this.”

He rolled over onto his knees and began to convulse and vomit onto the grass. The players around him backed away as if he had a disease.

“Somebody get Fatback over to the bleachers,” Coach said.

Cam shot Chris a worried look, and Chris understood his concern.

FATBACK HALIBURTON didn’t hang around his girlfriend’s pool during the summer watching the tan on his legs deepen while he ate steaks. He didn’t play golf.

The Haliburtons lived out in the country, renting a house in the McCaslins’ peach orchard alongside the Seaboard tracks south of town. Fatback picked peaches in the spring and helped in the family’s garden during the summer. They had a stand alongside the

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highway where they sold cantaloupes, tomatoes and corn, and where Chris' mother shopped a couple of times a week.

Fatback had been his football teammate since seventh grade, yet Chris didn't know him very well. Nobody did.

But Fatback had proven himself as a football player. Last season he was the last to get up from a pile in the Aycock game. The fingers on his left were splayed like a mangled whisk broom, but his face betrayed no pain. Instead, he calmly asked Chris to call a timeout and then jogged over to the sideline. After only a few seconds of chit-chat, Fatback extended his hand to Coach and turned his head away. Coach grasped the dislocated fingers, put his right foot up in Fatback's armpit, and gave them a sharp yank. Then he pulled a roll of athletic tape from the clip on his belt, wrapped the fingers together to keep them straight, and whacked his center on the butt. Back in the huddle, Fatback never said word about his hand.

Chris had seen him react emotionally only twice, when he puked at practice and once when Chris said something complimentary about Richard Petty winning a race at Daytona. The Haliburtons went to Daytona Beach every Fourth of July because they were David Pearson fans.

"Petty couldn't change the tires on Pearson's car," Fatback had said, angrily poking his finger in Chris' face. Chris had never discussed stock car racing with Fatback since.

After a week of two-a-days without Fatback, Chris hesitated when Cam said they needed to try to get Fatback on the team.

"He's always looked up to you," Cam told him. "If you tell him we need him, I think he'll come back."

Chris had finally relented and set up a meeting for the three of them out at the Pit Stop. Susan's father had built it next to the last exit on I-95 before crossing into South Carolina. It was a convenient place to pick up milk and bread if you lived on that side of town, but for most customers – Yankees traveling to Florida and

back – it was a burger and sandwich stop with pecan pie for desert.

Mostly what the Pit Stop was about, as billboards up and down the interstate advertised prominently, was cigarettes. “CHEAP!” the signs said, and to eliminate any question why, they showed a chart that ranked places up and down the Atlantic seaboard by the amount of their cigarette taxes. New York City was at the top with fourteen cents a pack – two dollars per carton – and North Carolina was at the bottom with none.

Chris was surprised at how empty the parking lot was on a summer Saturday. When he pulled in just before noon, a tractor-trailer rig was pulling out leaving Mrs. Marks’ beige Chrysler as the only car in the lot.

“You need some customers,” he told Susan, who was working the cash register just inside the door when he entered.

“We’ll be okay,” she said. “Just sold a couple hundred cases of cigarettes.”

“Make it two-oh-one. Mama wants a carton of Salems.”

“Cases,” Susan repeated. “That’s 200 cartons. When Daddy wants to get under Mama’s skin, he tells her he’s just as big in tobacco as her family ever was.”

Chris slid into the booth nearest the cash register and Susan put the Salems in a bag for him. “I’m s’posed to meet Cam and Fatback for lunch,” he told her.

They arrived almost simultaneously a few minutes later. Susan brought over some menus and asked Fatback how the first week of football practice had been.

“Chris must not’ve told you,” he answered. “I quit.”

She shot a look at Chris that said she should have been informed.

“That’s why we asked him here,” Cam said. “We need him back.”

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“Like I told Chris when he called,” Fatback continued, “I ’preciate the fact y’all want me. I went back and forth all summer about whether to play with the niggers. From the minute I smelled ’em in the gym, I didn’ know if I’d make it through practice. Then you went and drank after one.”

Susan looked at Chris again. “God a’mighty, Chris. I kiss you.”

“Why’d you use the nigger dipper?” Fatback interrupted.

“They’re in the same bucket.”

Chris watched Fatback roll that thought around in his head for a moment and then continued. “I’m not criticizin’ you for pukin’ in the grass ...”

“Oh my God,” Susan interrupted, sitting down beside Fatback with her arm around his shoulders. “Fatback, you poor ...”

Cam clamped down on Chris’ thigh before he could stand. “This is about whether you’re goin’ to finish as a quitter,” Cam said sternly, looking straight at Fatback. “We’ve got a football team that needs you. It’s our last season.” Then he tacked on an afterthought: “How you solve your drinkin’ problem is your own business.”

Fatback lunged across the table. Cam was too quick, ducking the right fist. But in swinging at Cam’s nose, Fatback’s body rammed the table into Cam’s side. Cam gave out a weak yelp and clutched his chest in pain.

“Oh Jesus!” Fatback screamed, instantly changing from belligerent to regretful the way he did when he hurt someone on the football field.

Cam at first knelt on the floor, then lay down on his good side as Chris and Susan hovered over him. “It’s pokin’ like a stick,” he said, his voice raspy and barely above a whisper.

“Shit,” Chris said. “We’ve got to take him to Dr. Moncure.”

He couldn’t tell if Susan or Fatback was closer to tears.

chapter 7

HE WONDERED WHAT she was thinking as she brushed her hair in the oak-framed mirror. The antique dresser had come from Virginia where it had been in her favorite aunt's family for years. He had taken it apart, crated it, and shipped it home in the baggage car a couple of weeks after the funeral. But she had always associated it with high school, because he reassembled it the day before she began her freshman year.

Along the edge of the dark wooden mirror, she had wedged tickets from all the Friday night football dances in the gym. The chin strap Edward had pulled off his helmet and given her after his last senior game was looped over the pivot on the left side. On the right hung the burgundy bow tie Danny wore the night he took her to her first prom.

But this evening, as she sat in her pajamas looking into a mirror framed by good memories, Claryce Montgomery was crying.

Rufus Junior held his silence as she spoke about her reluctance to go to Shortridge High the next morning. He knew she was upset about changing schools. Just last week, he hadn't even gotten

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his cap and jacket off when she began to unload her disappointment over the elimination of football dances because of integration.

He hadn't taken those comments as seriously as he should have. They were tiny leaks in a dam that held back much deeper resentment. Tonight, the flood gate shielding him from Claryce's reservoir of fears and reservations was finally yielding to the pressure. Talking about the loss of the Booker T senior trip to Atlantic Beach – she and Alma had been planning that weekend since they were freshmen – opened a fissure just wide enough for a torrent of other concerns to rush through: picnics, the Christmas formal and a long list of Booker T senior traditions.

"I'm so sorry, Daddy," she told him when he sat next to her on the dresser bench and folded her into his arms. "I'm disappointin' you. I know it's what you wanted ..."

What *he* wanted.

That was when he began to understand. What he wanted most at this instant was to tell her he would feel the same way in her situation, that she had no reason to feel sorry. But instead he held her in silence as her body heaved and more complaints poured out.

And he wanted her reservoir of regret drained to the bottom. As wave after wave of her concerns washed over him, what became clear was that Claryce's grievances weren't so much with the school board, which had stripped her final year of fun and senior privileges, or against white students and families who had demanded "protections" as their price for acquiescing to integration.

Her complaints were with him.

He had championed access to Shortridge High before the school board. He'd been backed strongly by other parents on the Yard and the Shortridge chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. But in Claryce's lament he heard echoes of what so many white parents had said who had successfully opposed him over the course of a decade.

JODY MEACHAM

“I know how important integration is to you, Daddy, but cain’t it wait another year?” she was saying. “Cain’t it wait ’til I’m out of here?”

As desperate and pathetic as those parents had been, Rufus Junior had had no sympathy for them. He, Maddy and everyone on the Yard had waited patiently since the Supreme Court outlawed segregated schools to learn when the justice of doing something for their children would finally outweigh the claimed injustice threatening yet another class of white students. No argument that he could muster, no pressure the NAACP could mount, no legal avenue within the state had ever so much as nudged the school board’s deference to white Shortridge. It postponed compliance with the court’s ruling one year at a time until the letter from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare in Washington, D.C., threatened a cutoff of federal funds. The students who entered separate first grades the year of the Supreme Court decision had never eaten together in a Shortridge restaurant, never sat in the same waiting room at Dr. Moncure’s office or prayed together in the same church. But in less than twelve hours, all two hundred seniors in town were going to enter classrooms together for the first time.

Now his daughter wanted to back out.

“I never thought you’d be hurt by this,” he started. “I never imagined ...” He couldn’t finish his thought.

He could have been angry if he were dealing with one of Clarryce’s friends. But this was the delicate little girl with the gumption to challenge Reverend Varick on his sermons after church, the girl he and Maddy had cloistered on the Yard for seventeen years. His girl.

He and Maddy had not taken her on a train until she was a teenager, after the Seaboard had gotten rid of the Jim Crow cars and taken down the portiere between black and white passengers in the dining car. When he was in town, she was never allowed to

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accompany him to the Coop in Northampton for take-out barbecue. He and Maddy didn't want her to see him wait on the back stoop rather than in the dining room. They could not prevent her exposure to that kind of humiliation, but they would not subject her to it.

Instead, Maddy had taken her to NAACP meetings when he was going to make a speech or to the depot where he stood with the rest of the crew, dignified and in uniform, alongside the gleaming *Silver Meteor*.

He had talked with Claryce many times about the white world he worked in and the pride he took in his ability to get along in it, learn from it and exploit it. That was why their house at the head of Dellums Street was cinder block and the Johnson's' next door was sagging wood frame. That explained why he had been able to capitalize on the opportunity represented by Wade Marks' business proposal that night in the Sun Lounge car.

He wanted Claryce to begin her life where things stood now, not where they were when he was her age. School integration was the key. That was the door through which Claryce and her generation would finally enter the world that had always been off-limits. Under no circumstances would they have placed her in an uncomfortable situation they knew they could avoid.

No, Rufus Junior could not be angry with his daughter now. He remembered his own angry prayers when his father had died, wasted by cancer. How he'd complained through his tears about the injustice and cruelty of a God who allowed a simple, innocent man to suffer the way Rufus Senior had those last months. It wasn't until years later that Rufus Junior could begin to look at his father's death as the awful consequence of too many cigarettes smoked over too many years.

No, he could not be angry with Claryce. How could she understand in one evening what it had taken him most of a lifetime to learn? How could he explain it? There was more at stake here

than his daughter's senior year; it was the rest of her life and the lives of kids now going to bed all over the Yard. If only God had spoken to him as directly as he was about to speak to Claryce.

"I'm the one who's sorry, Precious. I know it's not fair, but one day this'll all be right as rain. I promise you that."

He pulled the string to the ceiling light and held Claryce in the darkness until her sniffing ceased and her breathing settled into the steady, relaxed cadence of slumber.

ALMA HODGES was clearly more eager for the first day of school than Claryce. It was evident from the way Alma was honking her car horn. But that was typical of her. She was five-feet-eleven, and the eleven inches she had on Claryce was all confidence.

Not that it wasn't earned. She was one of those people to whom things just seemed to come easily, like basketball or French. She was reading Molière by the end of their first year in the class. Maybe riding to school with Alma would help her own attitude about things.

"I know I hurt Daddy's feelin's," Claryce said as she climbed into the beat-up Chevrolet.

Alma had been forewarned the conversation was coming. Claryce had practiced versions of it on her all summer, and Alma's expression now was a mixture of fatigue and knowledge of what was involved when she was called on for this kind of morale boost. "Your Daddy understands," she said. "You weren't sayin' integration was wrong."

"I really don't know what I was sayin'. I know what I wanted to say, but I don't know how it came out. You know how when it's time to say something important, but you can't think of the right words until you're through talkin'?"

"*Do* you think it's wrong?" Alma pressed. "You've been complainin' for awhile, but maybe that's why. You really want to be

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left at Booker T with hand-me-down books and knowin' when you got out, nobody but another black school is goin' to pay attention to your diploma 'cause it's a black diploma?"

"No," Claryce blurted, and then she immediately reconsidered. She did want to stay at Booker T, but it wasn't like Alma was describing. Going to Booker T shouldn't mean accepting the worn and out of date. That was unfair. But going to Shortridge shouldn't mean giving up what made her like Booker T, either. And as she thought about what Alma was asking her, what she liked about Booker T wasn't really the beach trips and picnics.

"I b'lieve the only white person I've ever talked to is the lady at the Grab," Claryce continued, "but I don't think I'd have a problem sittin' next to one at Booker T. And that's all this integration argument has really been about, sittin' next to each other. Like that's goin' to solve the problems of the world. We both know that's bullshit.

"I like Booker T 'cause it's home, 'cause it's ours. Shortridge id'n. It's theirs, and our bein' there id'n goin' to make any difference. They're goin' to be in charge. We're not goin' to be any more equal at Shortridge than we are at Booker T, so why not stay where do stuff our way?"

"Some of their stuff sounds okay to me," Alma answered. "They charter a train to a football game every year. Don't you think it'll be fun to go up to Aycock to see Malachi play?"

It did. She and Alma had driven to Aycock last year for the game against Burbank Avenue High, and Malachi scored the winning touchdown for the Maroons. They followed the Booker T bus home that night and had barbecue with the players when they stopped in Lee County for a break on the long ride back home.

"We oughta be doin' a lot of that kind of stuff instead of bein' locked down this year," Claryce said. "Daddy says they're worried about fights and stuff."

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“Really?” Alma had a grin on her face. “He give you the same warnin’ my daddy did about not bein’ alone on campus and not goin’ to the bathroom by yourself?”

“Yeah. Why’s that funny?”

“Look in my pocket book.”

Alma’s purse was ridiculously heavy. Then Claryce flipped open the metal clasp and looked inside. It was evil ugly, dull steel.

“Damn, Alma! You cain’t take a gun to school.”

“Well Daddy said I better have it.”

Claryce’s dread level was spiking again. She placed the purse back on the floorboard ever so gently, afraid the slightest impact might set it off. She had never seen a gun in person, and she wasn’t about to touch this one.

“Just be cool,” Alma said. “It ain’t loaded. She turned into the dirt parking lot behind the school that was beginning to fill with cars.

The three-story brick building was covered in ivy and nearly fifty years old, a downtown landmark with a distinguished aura matched only by the railroad station two blocks farther down Main Street. Claryce and Alma had walked by it many times on Saturday afternoons on the way to matinees at the Town Theatre where they’d sit on the front row of the balcony and flick popcorn kernels through the darkness onto the white kids below. She’d never paid that much attention to the school before. It was the biggest building in a town where most buildings were off limits.

“Just stay cool, Claryce. Don’t piss off anybody and it’ll be fine.”

THERE WAS a kitchen area at the front of the classroom with cook tops and ovens, and the rest of the room was filled with high tables, each of which had two stools for students to sit. The teacher, a tall woman in a black-and-white houndstooth dress with her blonde hair up in a French twist, passed out an information form

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first thing. But when Claryce reached into her purse for a pencil, she found the point snapped off. It had probably happened when she put Alma's heavy purse in her lap in the car.

There wasn't a pencil sharpener in sight, and she had promised herself that she wasn't going to give any white student reason to call her a dumb nigger from Booker T. But there was a quiet noise from the table top, and when she looked down there was a freshly sharpened yellow number two pencil being pushed toward her by a dainty white hand. The arm was in a light blue oxford-cloth blouse, and the girl with the soft brown hair who was pushing it toward her was keeping her eyes on Mrs. Thompson, as if the pencil were some kind of contraband.

The fifty-minute class seemed to drag on forever as Mrs. Thompson went over the syllabus for the year, listing the materials the girls would be responsible for providing at various points during the course, passing out another form from the Future Homemakers of America and attending to the minutiae that always occupied the first day of classes. But what made it seem longest was not being able to say anything to the girl who gave her the pencil. When the period came to its merciful conclusion, Claryce handed it back.

"Thanks," she said tentatively. "It's pretty embarrassin' not to have a pencil for your first class."

"Keep it." The white girl paused for a moment, leaving the pencil untouched. "Susan Marks."

"Claryce Montgomery. I'm a senior."

"Me too. First day at Shortridge High?"

"Yeah. I was at Booker T." Claryce was so nervous that Susan's question and her answer had, for an instant, seemed perfectly sensible. It felt uncomfortable looking this girl in the eye the way she did Reverend Varick. She didn't want to be seen as challenging anyone today, stirring up trouble.

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But the white girl wasn't looking directly at her, either. There they were, facing each other while pretending to pick specks of lint from their own blouses.

"Well," Claryce said, breaking the silence, "Thanks for the pencil."

Susan was already on her way out the door.

Claryce ran into her again fifth period when Susan came into French trailed by a skinny blond boy wearing a white polo shirt and navy slacks that revealed too much of his light blue socks. From the point where Claryce picked up their conversation, it seemed like he was asking Susan to go with him to the "booster special," wherever that was.

"I think I can get Daddy to go along with it," Susan was saying when she recognized Claryce and turned her attention toward her new acquaintance. "Survivin' okay?"

"So far so good." Claryce said nervously. She and Alma had swapped stories at lunch about how funny these white kids could be. Alma had turned away in embarrassment while waiting in line for fish sticks and mashed potatoes because of the tall white boy and his girlfriend making out in the line ahead of them.

"Snakes in heat," she whispered.

"Can you imagine anybody gettin' away with that at Booker T?" Claryce had said. "Ol' Miz Rutherford would've slapped 'em silly."

But she couldn't get into that with a white girl.

Susan turned to the boy she'd been talking with and introduced him to Claryce. "Chris and I are datin'," she said. "Claryce and I are in home ec."

Chris put out his hand, and she shook it. "Nice to meet you."

Claryce introduced Alma, and then Susan and Chris took seats a couple of rows over from her and resumed their conversation. Either Chris really wasn't interested in meeting anybody new, or he

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and Susan were emotionally wrapped up in each other like the couple in the cafeteria line.

“Daddy’s not crazy about me goin’ up to Aycock on the train,” Susan was saying to him. “But I’ve got some ideas.”

“Just don’t make your daddy mad,” Chris told her. “Once the season gets goin’, he’ll be okay.”

Then the teacher arrived.

“*Bonjour, classe,*” she said.

“*Bonjour, Madame Birmingham,*” Claryce heard the students around her answer. “*Bonjour, Madame Birmingham,*” she said softly, a beat behind the chorus. How was she supposed to know her name?

Mme. Birmingham focused her icy blue eyes on Claryce: “*Bonjour, mademoiselle. Quelle est votre nom?*”

“*Je m’appelle Claryce.*”

“*Bien.* We can fix your accent.”

Claryce could feel her neck getting hot the way it did when her mother scolded her for not cleaning up in the kitchen. She had hocked out the “r” in Claryce every bit as well Mme. Birmingham had in asking her name. *Damn you, White Woman!*

Mme. Birmingham was busy with her back to the room, speaking first in French, then in English as she added to the list of reading selections for the coming year. It seemed that her purpose had less to do with information than intimidation, not directed to the class generally so much as at her and Alma, the only Booker T students in the class. *Just in case you were under the impression that you belong here, nigger, listen up. You’ll never keep up in French lit.*

But Claryce, at heart, was her daddy’s girl. If Mme. Birmingham’s intention was to catch her in some kind of embarrassing mistake, well, Daddy had told her all about the Pullman inspectors’ tricks. For the rest of the period, any time Mme. Birmingham had a question – and sometimes when the teacher was merely looking

around the classroom – an eager, smiling Claryce had her hand up to be called on.

She never was.

Amid the noise of shuffling feet and books being stacked at the bell, she turned to Alma. “*L’enseignant est une chienne.*”

Alma giggled. “Mind your manners, young lady.”

Malachi was waiting in the hallway at the bell. Mr. Cooper’s sixth period mixed chorus was the only class he and Claryce had together all day. Malachi relieved her of her books for the stairwell descent to the basement rehearsal room – one final class – with a teacher they both knew from Booker T.

She had really gotten to know Malachi for the first time the previous spring when Booker T’s new choral director had what he called “one of my housecleanin’ moods” and rearranged the singers, putting the basses stage left, the altos next to them, then the sopranos and the tenors stage right.

Mr. Cooper’s motive hadn’t been strictly choral. Malachi and some of his teammates in the bass section couldn’t seem to get along with the basketball players among the tenors. This new layout put both girls’ sections between the boys, effectively moving the basses and tenors out of spitball range of each other. But it also put Claryce – on the rebound after her breakup with Edward Ratliff – next to a football player who not only was cute, but was fun to lean against when Mr. Cooper was working with the sopranos.

Malachi had the lowest range of anyone in the Booker T choir. He had done the solo in the spring concert, and after she told him how much she liked his singing, Malachi had gotten out of his job one night to take her out. He had always seemed shyer than the other football players she’d dated, and that was attractive at the start. But the first time she leaned against him during rehearsal, she had felt his hand brush lightly across her buttocks and she blushed

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in excitement. Claryce was all for mischief as long as it wasn't in the cafeteria line where everybody could see it.

"Get out the Rogers piece," Mr. Cooper said. "Malachi, you take the solo like last year."

Like a kitten, Claryce gently rubbed against Malachi as he began:

"When Israel was in Egypt's land, let my people go ..."

COACH'S OFFICE was a litter box of old playbooks and worn American history texts, jetsam of a career dedicated to the twin goals of perfecting a blocking scheme for the power sweep and explaining how slavery wasn't the real issue of the Civil War. Chris had listened to his repeated lectures on both topics and believed he made a better case for the power sweep.

But Coach had lost Cam McCauley, the best runner in Shortridge High history, for the season opener this week, and Chris could tell he was having difficulty balancing that against the return of his most devastating blocker of the past two seasons, Fatback Haliburton.

"Fatback," he said to the trembling man-child sitting across the desk, "why should I let you come back to the team? You bailed on us, son."

"Coach, Fatback didn' ..., " but Wilson cut Chris off.

"Fatback's got to deal with this," he said. "Speak up, Fatback."

A sweat had broken out across Fatback's upper lip, and he was looking down at his hands as he tied the front laces of his shoulder pads in a series of half-hitches. "Coach, all I know to say is I'm sorry. I let the team down, and I'm sorry."

"Sorry dudn' cut it, Fatback," Coach said, his voice rising. "Is that what you're goin' to say in Vietnam? When your patrol gets shot up 'cause you ran and hid, is that what you're goin' to say? Sorry? That's a worthless piece-a-shit answer, Fatback."

This was another speech Chris had heard before. Last year, after the Comets had lost at Little Washington, they sat on the chartered bus in complete silence for the four-hour trip back home. Coach hadn't even let the bus driver stop at Hardee's for hamburgers. But when they finally arrived at the gym after three o'clock in the morning, Coach had stood in the darkness of the bus and railed at the team, the glowing tip of a succession of cigarettes marking the cadence of his tirade like the bouncing ball on a Mitch Miller sing-along. For more than an hour he hammered home the point that players who gave the kind of effort the Comets had in their 35-7 defeat would go on to fail their country in the war.

Chris – all the players – knew no one would stop Coach. The Trailways driver was getting paid by the hour, and the parents in the two dozen cars parked in the darkness around the bus figured the team was getting what it deserved.

“Got chewed on pretty good I see,” Daddy had said when Wilson finally wound down and freed the players, but Chris had been too exhausted to respond.

Now Fatback began to sob into his hands as Coach continued to impugn his worth as a human. Chris couldn't bear to watch, but he had persuaded Fatback to rejoin the team, and he felt obligated to be with his teammate and share in Coach's condemnation.

The theme – although Chris was certain Coach hadn't consciously put together a speech but was just spewing thoughts – was Coach's concern that life was too easy these days.

“Boys like you,” he said, pointing his finger in Fatback's face, “don't have any idea what it's like to do without. Everything's just handed to you. So pretty soon you start thinkin' that you deserve it instead of thinkin' you've got to earn it. Know what I'm talkin' 'bout?”

“Sir?” Fatback responded. He'd played long enough for Coach to know that any answer to this question would just incite more ridicule.

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“Too many people are catchin’ a break these days,” Coach continued, oblivious. “That’s why things are so bad. We ought to be worryin’ about all the people gettin’ off the hook. Softness is draggin’ us down.”

Softness was trying to see the other person’s point of view or giving someone the benefit of the doubt – virtues to Chris but unforgivable sins in Coach’s mind. Chris had always excused Coach’s perverted take on values as the result of what happened to all coaches given a team. They turned into tyrants.

But today’s harangue was the first time he’d ever found himself wondering about the source of Coach’s philosophy, and the only basis he could come up with was fear. God forbid that any of the world’s limited supply of compassion should spill upon the undeserving. Chris was getting angrier at himself by the minute for ever being so naïve when all of a sudden, he realized that Coach was going to let Fatback off the hook.

“I’m a Christian man,” Coach said, concluding his recitation of Fatback’s mistakes. “There’s nothin’ I cain’t forgive if you come to me and confess it. You’ll dress in your old spot, Fatback.”

That was it. Coach had built himself into a great man on the ruins of Fatback’s failure, only Fatback didn’t realize it. Chris looked over at his teammate, who seemed to be in shock, his mouth slack.

“Yessir,” Fatback said. “Thanks, Coach.”

Chris trailed him toward the door when Coach reached between them, blocking Chris and letting Fatback leave.

“Standin’ up for a teammate important to you?” Coach asked.

“Yessir.”

“Just be sure you weren’t standin’ against me.” Coach dropped his arm, and Chris moved as quickly as he could down the hall without appearing to run.

chapter 8

THREE O’CLOCK IN the afternoon was not an ordinary time to sit down to a steak, but football Fridays were not ordinary days in Shortridge or at the McAndrews’ house. In an hour Chris and the rest of the Comets would be boarding the team bus to Aycock for the season’s first game. Daddy always left explicit instructions with Monteenia that Chris’ sirloin needed to be ready by three-fifteen, and that he’d be home from the post office at three-forty-five to take Chris back to the gym.

“You need meat before a game,” he said.

Chris loved steak and everything else about football Fridays because of the way the focus of the town turned to him and his team. As he sat down at the table, the mixed feelings about the season that had troubled him at Harvard Lake and the pressure that went along with being quarterback melted away faster than the butter he put into the steaming potato Monteenia had baked.

“Here you go, Chris,” she said as she forked the steak onto his plate. “You enjoy that meat.”

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She turned to retreat to his bedroom in the back of the house where she usually went while the McAndrews ate. She liked to sit in the sunlight that streamed through his window and read from her Bible, making notes on the back of the previous week's church bulletin, which she used as a bookmark. But it didn't feel right that she should excuse herself. Chris had been playing football with black teammates for three weeks, dressing with them in the basement of the gym, tackling them on the field, drinking water from the same bucket and collapsing into the same mud wallow around the spigot at the end of the day.

"Stay here," he said. "Have some of these biscuits."

Monteenia seemed happy to be asked, putting a napkin down where his mother usually sat and pouring herself a glass of sweet ice tea.

"Thanks for the steak," he said. "Just the way I like it."

"You're welcome. Today's goin' to be my first trip on the Booster Special."

"You're goin'? I mean ..."

"Oh yeah. My boy's playin'."

Her boy? He blushed. In the twelve years she had worked for his family, Chris had never asked Monteenia her son's name.

"Who's your boy?"

"Malachi Stevens."

Chris sat, stunned. He was sure his face was beet red.

"How could you keep that a secret?"

When she reminded him that he had never asked, she delivered the point with such a lack of judgment or condemnation that he could feel his body shrinking in his chair. Yet he could not stop himself from suddenly launching into all the routine personal questions that he realized they could have discussed long before.

"Damn – 'scuse me, Monteenia, I didn' mean to cuss – but me and Malachi have been playin' together and you didn't even let on."

“You know better than that,” she said. “It’s not my place to be talkin’ about my boy.”

“But I should’ve been callin’ you Miz Stevens.”

“Oh no,” she said. “That’s not right ...”

“But you’re somebody’s mama.”

“I’m a Harrison,” Monteenia corrected. “Malachi’s mama died when he was born. I just took him in.”

“Well then, you’re Miz Harrison. It’s almost like I don’t know you.” It was embarrassing the way the obvious kept tumbling from his lips.

“You can call me Monteenia, Chris,” she said. “That’s what I’m used to.”

He paused a moment to look at her as she broke open a biscuit and buttered it. She was such a placid woman, never getting upset at his crises or reacting when he’d talk about Friday games. Mostly she just stayed in the background, the way she retreated from the kitchen at meal times. She was there in her unobtrusive way when she was needed, gone when she wasn’t. She was, as his mother had remarked more than once, “a good colored woman, ’umble.”

“Did you pick the name Malachi?”

“Yeah, to remind me why I’m here on this earth,” she said. “Malachi was the last prophet. He warned the people of Israel they’d suffer unless they honored the Lord. It reminds me I’m the Lord’s servant.”

WADE MARKS got Susan to the depot twenty minutes before the Booster Special’s departure. He wanted his usual parking spot, but all the places around the station were full, and he had to leave his pickup back toward the Town Theater. Several hundred people were milling around on the platform alongside the train, which consisted of a single locomotive and four Pullman green passenger coaches.

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The crowd disappointed him. Niggers mixed in among the football fans were bad enough, but what really gnawed at him was the way so many white people – people like the Jernigans he went to church with or people he'd run into at the Coop – were standing there talking, milling around like it was no big deal.

It was a big deal. It needed to be. This casualness was a problem because people could get the idea that integration might not be what they feared. He hadn't dropped his opposition to Susan going to the game because she ought to enjoy her senior season, which was what she and Mary Kathryn had argued. He'd done it because she needed to see for herself just how awful integration was, and he had to guide her to that conclusion.

The people inside the rotunda chatting at the ticket window or in the line forking over a dollar seventy-five for boxed suppers of barbecue or fried chicken weren't going to teach Susan that lesson. He knew there was tension here – he felt it – but people were trying to make it seem as if there was nothing wrong with it, that they were going to make the best of it and move on.

That was the danger he hadn't anticipated – the seductiveness of normalcy – that Susan might be fooled by and succumb to.

Matt Townsend of the *Weekly* was posing Nub Johnson, president of the Booster Club, Mayor Roberdel and Grampy Harvard for a picture presenting a check to the Seaboard conductor. Fuzz Crawford and his family were lined up for fried chicken. People were loitering on the platform and standing alongside the train waiting for permission to board.

The tops of his ears felt hot, like they were aflame. But a friendly arm fell over his shoulders.

“God damn,” he said to Charlie Watson, who handed him a supper box. “They goin’ to let ’em sit anywhere they want?”

He saw Sherry Watson's eyes close when he said it, but Charlie tried to change the topic.

“You got anything ridin’ on the game tonight, Wade? It’s goin’ to be tough for the Comets to move on the ground without Cam.”

“I’m not riskin’ anything on these boys ’til I see ’em play,” Wade said. “Too many unanswered questions.”

Susan and Sherry had wiggled through the crowd to get to the boarding steps. By the time he and Charlie caught up to them inside the car, they had already found a set of facing seats with a black girl across from them. It was just the kind of thing he’d feared, and his ears were heating up again. Charlie steered him into the row just behind their daughters.

“We can keep an eye out from here,” he said.

It was easy to hear the conversation a row forward. Susan knew the black girl from one of her classes and introduced her to Sherry as Claryce. When Sherry smiled back, Wade gritted his teeth and nudged Charlie, who should have been paying more attention to them than his supper box.

“This is the way it starts.”

“Take it easy, Wade,” Charlie said, patiently mixing the slaw and barbecue together with his fork. “They’re classmates. They’re havin’ a good time.”

Exactly, Wade thought. His supper box still unopened in his lap, he rubbed his forehead and then watched the station begin to slowly slide away. He wondered if that might be happening between him and Susan as well. She was going to be spending a lot more time at school now, and the kind of fake casualness he was seeing here had to be even more widespread at her school.

When he turned his attention back inside the coach, a familiar broad-shouldered black man with neatly trimmed graying hair was sitting down in the vacant seat of Susan’s foursome.

“Rufus Junior!” Wade blurted.

As soon as he spoke he regretted it. He hadn’t spoken the porter’s name in five years.

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From the surprise on his face, Rufus Junior obviously shared his discomfort.

“Mister Marks,” he said as he stood and extended his hand.

Wade stood reflexively. It was embarrassing, but in a coach full of people, he figured he had no choice. He shook Rufus Junior’s hand. The last time he’d touched Rufus Junior was several years before on the *Silver Meteor*, and the only reason he’d done it then was to seal their agreement. Mary Kathryn had wanted to read for awhile before turning in, and he said he thought he’d go back into the Sun Lounge for a nightcap.

Anthony Balducci, who had suggested employing a porter, had told him never to discuss things over the phone or through the mail. “Don’t know the phone company,” Balducci insisted. “Don’t know the mailman.”

But he and the New York grocer had gotten to know and trust each other through their business connection. Wade remembered their first conversation, when he bragged about his retail gross on cigarettes – “Location, location, location,” he had laughed – but he couldn’t remember who first floated the idea of a business partnership. Their mutual loathing of the government, taxes and the way it restricted their business just seemed to bubble up spontaneously from their discussions at the annual grocers’ convention at the Greenbrier, the Chesapeake & Ohio resort in West Virginia.

Whoever mentioned it first, cigarettes were the perfect fit for both of them. New York’s tobacco taxes meant a truckload of sticks that he could sell for sixteen thousand five hundred dollars at full North Carolina retail would appreciate by another twenty thousand dollars as soon as Anthony’s truck reached Staten Island.

As far as Balducci had been concerned, no one but a Pullman porter was as suited for the confidential courier work that would be necessary in their enterprise. On his trips to the grocers’ conventions at the Greenbrier he said he had always found porters to be

discreet, especially late at night when he left his wife in their drawing room for his mistress's compartment in the other sleeper.

Wade figured fifty dollars a month would do. The night he and Mary Kathryn were headed up to see the Rockettes' show, all Rufus Junior had asked was that Wade not call him George, and Wade knew he could accommodate that. He had made a game out of coming up with new ways of talking to Rufus Junior without using his name at all. Lots of times he just smiled and said "How ya doin'?"

"HOW LONG was I goin' to have to wait before you told me?" Chris asked when Malachi approached the door of the team bus.

Malachi grunted as if he didn't much care. "So you finally talked to Mama."

Chris knew from the moment Monteenia had told him that his next conversation with Malachi might go like this. She may have raised him, but she hadn't passed on her personality.

"Look," Chris said, figuring he'd just confess his stupidity to get past this embarrassment as quickly as he could. But Malachi stopped him by raising his hand.

"Bein' ignored's not right," Malachi said. "We've been teammates for three weeks."

"Meanin' what?" Chris shot back. It was so much easier talking to Malachi than it was talking to Monteenia, knowing he was willing to bite back. "Was I s'posed to pick up a hint somewhere that Monteenia might be your mama? Is it my fault?"

"Cam," Malachi said. "If he hadn' got hurt, how long would it have been 'til we talked? We're playin' a game in a coupl've hours."

Aycock. Chris hadn't thought about the game since his first bite of steak.

"I've known you for years," Malachi continued. "I see you when you pick up Mama in the mornin'. Mama talks about you all the time – what you like to eat, what you argue with your daddy

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about. But mostly it's about how Chris does this, or Chris does that, and why cain't I be more like Chris."

"I get it. You're sick of me."

"I gag sometimes." Malachi was holding back a grin. "But I agree with Mama that everybody gets a chance. The water bucket was a good move."

Chris motioned Malachi into the bus. "I had heard about you," he said. "Cam said you were BTW's best player. But you know plenty about us."

"Course. The *Weekly* covers all your games. Our mamas work for your mamas. And you know what else? We know about all the Burbank Avenue players on Aycock's team this year."

The business of discussing the game and their strategy was an obvious way out of the confrontation. By the time the bus turned off the interstate at the Aycock exit, they had spent three hours dissecting the strengths and weaknesses of every Comets player and rehashing their previous games against players they could expect to face.

Aycock was the only town of any size in Richardson County, and it had half again as many people as Shortridge and Northampton combined. The forest here was hardwood mixed with pine, and it was interrupted by flat expanses of bottom land covered in tobacco, not the sandy hills around Shortridge that were ill-suited to most agriculture. In the northeastern corner of town stood Aycock High, a gothic pile modeled on the famous chapel at Duke University fifty miles west. It was a fitting structure for an old-money town, and every time Chris had been to a game there as a spectator or player, he had always admired it.

A boy wearing a purple Aycock Football T-shirt spotted with sweat from a fast-disappearing afternoon met the bus when it parked next to the gym. "All y'all come right in here," he said.

Chris and the forty-two other Comets filed down the steps of their bus and into the foyer of a gray stone building that reeked of

athletic success. The bright lights inside reflected off what seemed to be acres of polished hardwood floor. Purple banners hung from the rafters with yellow inscriptions marking state championships in sports Shortridge High didn't even play: swimming, tennis and field hockey. But the largest banners recorded Aycock's history of conference, regional and state football titles – two 3A state championships in the previous six seasons.

“This ain't Burbank Avenue,” Malachi said as they were led downstairs into a cream-colored tile locker room and shower area.

In its spotless brightness and perfect order, the locker room was everything that the gym basement in Shortridge was not. Worked into the floor tile design was a yellow and purple Aycock Knight mounted on horseback. There were individual stalls against the tiled walls, each with a wooden bench, a pair of metal shelves and an assortment of hooks. A carefully folded white towel with the purple-and-yellow Aycock Knight had been placed on the purple pad in the center of each bench, as if whoever put it there expected the Shortridge players to actually use the school showers.

“They put their pants on one leg at a time, men,” Coach said, an echo of the comment he made every time he brought a team to Aycock.

“Yeah,” whispered Malachi, “but when they take 'em off, the cockroaches don't steal 'em.”

Chris' mind was shifting into its game mode, a discipline he had taught himself early on that blocked distractions or any other form of reality from intruding into his mental preparation. What did it matter, really, whether Aycock would dress eighty Knights for the game, which it would? What difference did it make that they practiced every day on a secondary field with better turf than Railroad Park? That there were six coaches on the Aycock sidelines, each working with a specialized group of players?

It did matter, but it didn't do Chris any good to think about it. His mental approach boiled down to self-deception, and he was

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willing to accept that for a few hours every Friday. It was one of the few areas of agreement he had with Coach.

“Don’t be judgin’ by the looks of things around here,” Coach said as Chris methodically stuffed knee and thigh pads into his stretchy silver game pants. The new uniforms this year were modeled on those of the Dallas Cowboys, with electric blue stripes down the outside of the legs. “Don’t take that first hard hit on the kickoff and start thinking those boys are mean and strong,” Coach said. “If you start thinkin’ like that, you’re beat before the game starts.”

Coach sucked hard on the last bit of Chesterfield before it burned back to his fingers and he dropped the butt on the floor, right on the purple knight, where he ground it into a black smudge with his shoe. “You scratch the surface of this place – you lay somebody out with a hard hit – and you’ll find out how soft that bunch is on the inside. Lot of tobaccuh money in this place,” he said, looking around the room. “Lot of stuff just given to somebody. The railroad didn’ give you boys nothin’, and you’re better people ’cause you earned what you got. You don’t collapse first time something goes wrong.”

BY THE time Matt Townsend wrote up this game for next Wednesday’s *Weekly*, Chris knew the 28-7 loss in the Booster Special game would read like a small misstep at the start of a glorious season. The paper never piled on too hard after a Comets’ loss. But when Coach had finished watching the film over the weekend and came to Monday practice, the team prognosis was going to be much worse, and Chris couldn’t disagree.

He was going to have to work harder than ever on self-deception to survive this fall.

“Tough game,” Malachi said as the last of the game-ending series of desperation passes fell incomplete. “Not quite like that night at the Caboose, but you’ll recover.”

“The Caboose?”

“When you kissed your girlfriend.”

“*You* were the curb boy,” Chris said, half chuckling. “Why’m I not surprised?”

Whoomp!

The arms clasped around him weren’t squeezing the breath out of him the way arms had the previous two and a half hours; they were just squeezing. The head pressed against his chest wasn’t encased in plastic but shrouded by a cascade of brown hair. He pushed the face mask of his helmet up to his forehead and kissed Susan on top of her head. When she looked up at him, her eyes glistened the way his mother’s had at Grandpa’s funeral.

“It’s okay,” he said, stroking her hair. “We’ll get over it. Have you met Malachi Stevens?”

Malachi smiled. “Saw you in chorus,” he said, extending his hand.

But Susan demurred, holding even more tightly to Chris as if she were trying to melt into his side. Malachi quickly dropped his own hand.

“Daddy’s on the warpath, Chris” she said, her eyes fixed firmly on the ground. “Please walk me back to the booster bus.”

BUS RIDES home after losses were the longest. They focused Chris’ attention inward in self-destructive ways that Coach Wilson’s silence during the trip and his long speech at the end usually exacerbated.

It wasn’t that victories were painless. The calf muscle that spasmed in the fourth quarter while he was lying contorted and immobile at the bottom of a pile of players would ache in either case. So would the hand that was swollen and stiff after being stepped on by steel-tipped cleats and the place in his back, underneath the shoulder blade, that seemed to catch when he reached up to turn off the reading light. But victories somehow postponed

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suffering until Saturday mornings when there wasn't a teammate in the next seat to laugh and gloat with, or a Hardee's down the road where Coach would spring for hamburgers and fries.

After losing, Chris wanted to be alone and so, apparently, did Malachi, who had moved across the aisle so he could stretch out across the empty seat and keep his throbbing ankle elevated. That's what Dr. Moncure had recommended when he cut off the tape in the locker room and a hematoma the size of a tennis ball puffed up.

Once the bus had maneuvered back through town – past the train station where the silver and blue bunting to welcome the Booster Special was obscured by moth swarms beneath the dim lights of the deserted platform – the hum of the bus engine settled into a steady drone on the interstate. The lights of farm houses and filling stations, churches and chicken houses slid past the window. Chris retreated into the darkness and solitude of his own mind, away from Cam, Fatback, Malachi, Tater and that small cluster of players who always gathered around Matt Townsend in the back, laughing quietly and whispering things that might or might not make Wednesday's edition.

"No more games," Susan had told him as they walked together in the crowd that had slowly drained through the brick gate of Aycock Memorial Stadium. "I've never seen Daddy as mad as he was tonight. When we got off the train, he came up behind me and grabbed the top of my arm like I was a little girl crossin' the street and just shook me. I've still got a mark."

Even in the poor light, Chris had seen the bruise. "The look in his eyes – God, Chris, I couldn't even look at him. He walked me away from the crowd and started preachin' at me."

"Why?"

"Niggers, Chris. It was all about the niggers. I told him about home ec a couple of days ago, and he didn' say a word. All of a

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sudden tonight he was on my case about it, about how I better not ever help a nigger again.”

“Out of the blue?”

“Cause I sat with a nigger on the train. That set him off.”

“It’ll pass after a few days” he’d said, trying to talk himself into hopefulness.

“This was different, Chris. He was madder than when he kicked Blackie.”

Mr. Marks loved his hunting dogs. Susan might be right. Probably was right. Of course she was right. His three hours of self-deception had expired. Reality reoccupied his brain the way pain was taking over his body, and he was too tired to fight it. Chris looked across the aisle at Malachi, a silhouette against the headlights streaking past the left side of the bus, and wanted to blame him and everyone else from BTW for taking his girlfriend out of football.

All that stopped him was reality. Mr. Marks had done it.

chapter 9

MALACHI LOOKED LIKE a dining car waiter in his starched white cotton jacket, balancing a tray on his fingertips, but he was limping across the dusty parking lot at the Caboose with two barbecue and cole slaw platters in the fading light of Saturday evening. Chris felt odd about having a conversation with him. Relaxing in his car while Malachi was hobbling around in his curb boy get up, they didn't feel like teammates any more.

"Thanks," Chris said, passing a barbecue plate to Susan across the front seat. "Looks like you're hurtin'."

"A little." Malachi didn't seem interested in talking, either.

Maybe he was still down from last night's game, or maybe he didn't want to be seen spending too much time at a car. He left the check in the tray and headed across the circle to where another car had flashed its headlights.

Yesterday he and Malachi had started with iciness at the door of the bus and after a few hours of common cause had moved all the way to – well, maybe he couldn't call it friendship yet – but something beyond "Looks like you're hurtin'." But the Caboose,

with its old traditions and freshly painted score, allowed the past to reclaim him as if nothing had happened last night. They weren't openly hostile, just withdrawn, but Chris still compared himself and Malachi to those kids from Northern Ireland who'd visit the United States to play together and then go back home to war.

He didn't want to be at war, but it was becoming obvious how difficult it was to stay out of it.

"Somebody you know?" Susan asked, picking at her barbecue.

"You know Malachi. Last night after the game. Number twenty-two."

But Susan said she hadn't paid attention to the other players other than to notice the one Chris had been commiserating with was a nigger. She'd been bitching about niggers doing this and that ever since Chris had picked her up.

"Mama's talkin' to the other mothers about doin' somethin'," Susan said. "I don't know what they'll figure out, but they're not goin' to let a bunch of blue-gum niggers take our lives away from us."

She was on a hot-and-bothered roll, trashing everybody from General Sherman to Lyndon Johnson. Chris just wanted to let her erupt for awhile without getting in the way of anything. Gently he pulled her backward toward him so he could lean against the driver's door and she could lean against him and complain toward the darkness. Occasionally he forked up some barbecue and slaw for her from the plate in her lap.

But rather than exhaust her, firing invective into thin air seemed to invigorate her. On the third forkful, Susan grabbed his hand.

"Quit feedin' me like a baby. Daddy said I might have to make some choices about you, and I'm beginnin' to think he's right."

"What've I done?"

"Exactly," she said, putting her plate on the dashboard and turning to face him. "You've just gone along with stuff. You don't

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stand up for your own kind. You play football with these niggers every day. You get down and wallow around in the mud with 'em; you drink out of their water bucket. God, it makes me sick sometimes.”

“Are you breakin’ up with me?”

“No,” she said, her voice suddenly softer. “I want you to ...”

“Quit football?”

“No. I just want you to make it so I’m not between you and Daddy.”

She put both hands behind his head, pulled him to her and kissed him hard. It was part attack, part vinegar-flavored seduction, all Susan. He had no solution for her, or for himself, but he had her in his arms.

CHRIS HAD never lost a game to Waccamaw County High School before. The Comets had beaten the conference’s smallest, poorest, weakest team five years in a row. But two weeks into the season, Shortridge was 0-2 after a 7-0 loss down east.

Even with Cam back in the lineup, Shortridge hadn’t managed a single touchdown against the Buccaneers. Coach’s speech in the darkness of the bus after the hour-long ride back home had been mercifully brief and to the point, so much so that Chris was awake before noon on Saturday. But they would all be in trouble a few years from now in Vietnam.

The veteran Shortridge players knew today’s practice would be like last Monday’s, a humiliating film session called the Monday Matinee in which everyone’s mistakes would be replayed over and over, occasionally in slow motion, and always accompanied by Coach’s stinging play-by-play. Then a no-water, damn-the-lawsuits practice ending in wind sprints until somebody, usually Fatback, threw up.

During the Aycock films, Chris had silently sympathized with Ronnie Tucker, whom Coach lit into several times for failing to cut back to the inside on runs.

“I don’t believe you got tackled all night long,” Coach said more than a few times. “Speak up if we run across a play where you got tackled ’stead of runnin’ out-of-bounds. Call it to my attention, ’cause I think we’d all like to see it.”

This week Chris was his favorite example of failure, which Chris had expected. No touchdowns against Waccamaw? Anybody who’d ever played for Coach Wilson knew the quarterback would catch it during the Monday Matinee.

“Why’d you throw to Goose on that play?” Coach demanded, as the players flickering across the white cinder block wall reversed direction and returned, backward, to their positions before the snap, ready to embarrass him again. “Did you just make up your mind in the huddle that you were goin’ to throw to him? Because he was sure as hell covered like a blanket. If you’d been lookin’ for the open man like you’re s’posed to – Darnell over there, just to pick one example – you’d’ve seen that.”

And on and on. There was no point in disagreeing. Any explanation was an excuse, and that meant Chris would run wind sprints after practice until he collapsed and puked. When the Comets were finally let out of the dark gym basement to walk across the street to Railroad Park, their heads hung like a line of mourners.

“Notice anything?” Cam said to him quietly, as they walked up the dirt path to the silver and blue door to Railroad Park.

“What?”

“We’re missin’ some people.”

Chris had tried not to notice, but the film room had seemed less crowded than the week before.

“I think some of the BTW players aren’t here. You seen either of those linebackers?”

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Chris stopped at the entrance to the door, not stepping over the threshold. Something had been missing, he had noticed, but as soon as he realized it, he had perfunctorily set it aside. Now that Cam had reminded him, he realized what was missing was a voice. A week earlier, after Coach Wilson had trashed Ronnie Tucker during the Monday Matinee for an out-of-bounds run, that missing voice had said: “Six yards is a good gain, son, you just left a few more out there on the field.” And, when Ronnie had run laterally the width of the gridiron on a sweep without once even feinting toward the wall of defenders up-field, that voice had asked where was the fullback who was supposed to block the linebacker and give Ronnie a hole to turn into. It was the voice that had made the drills for backs and ends so much more fun this season when they practiced apart from the line.

“Where’s Coach Austin?” Chris asked.

Cam stopped, too. “Wadn’ he ... come to think of it, he wadn’ on the bus back from Waccamaw, either.”

Coach Wilson’s whistle meant no more time to talk. There was only time to look around and imagine the faces that had gone to Waccamaw on Friday and now were elsewhere. Everybody – linemen and backs – would be practicing together today because there was only one coach. Even though Chris knew, with time, he could run down a mental roster and figure out who was missing, years of conditioning himself not to do that were difficult to overcome.

Two hours later as he and Cam trudged exhausted back across the street, water sloshing audibly in their just-filled bellies, Chris returned to the topic against his better judgment.

“Malachi didn’ have it in him today,” he said. “I’ve never seen him fumble like that before.”

Cam couldn’t remember it happening either. “It’s Coach Austin.”

“I thought it was just the Monday Matinee,” Chris responded.

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But Cam wasn't ready to let go of his theory so quickly. "You cain't tell me you didn' miss Coach Austin, not after the way Wilson chewed on your ass today. Get real, man. Sometimes you live on a different planet than the rest of us."

It was a pretty scathing indictment for Cam. Usually he had a gentler way of disagreeing on the rare occasions they actually found themselves on opposite sides of an issue.

"I had a crappy game, Cam. You know that as well as I do."

"You didn' lose it by yourself, Chris."

If only Cam had said something like that during the matinee the way Coach Austin used to. But "if onlys" were excuses. Yeah, Coach Austin had taken up for players like Chris, but maybe the Comets needed more confrontation and less consolation. They were 0-2, after all, and it was time to get meaner.

"It's the quarterback's responsibility when you don't score. We both know that."

chapter **10**

CLARYCE SAID SOMETHING didn't feel right, and Alma was inclined to agree. The heat may have been part of it. September afternoons on the Yard were always hot, and the wind that whipped through her car on the way home from school was thick and heavy – far from refreshing but better than suffocating in the greenhouse the Chevrolet would have become had they rolled up the windows.

That's why the closed door at Claryce's house didn't make sense. Claryce said the *Silver Meteor* had been late last night, and her father had gotten home just in time for breakfast. He wouldn't be inside asleep with the door closed.

But what bothered her most, Claryce said as she collected her books, was simply the lack of commotion – no dog running through the yard, the porch swing where her father liked to read still and silent.

“Come in with me for a minute?” Claryce asked.

Alma was happy to indulge her.

The house was dark when Claryce pushed the front door part-way open. The shaft of sunlight that came through the narrow

opening fell across the rug and far end of the sofa, illuminating only a Kleenex box resting on its side on the floor. The tissue protruding from the box hung motionless in the stagnant air.

“Daddy, I’m home,” Claryce called into the stillness to no response.

“Anything wrong?” Alma asked her.

Claryce pushed the door further and the leading edge of sunlight swept across the room. Alma screamed. It took a moment longer for the scene to register with Claryce. She dropped her books with a *splat* into the sheet of gummy, drying blood.

The body was sitting on the floor, back against the sofa, hands thrown back to either side and legs splayed apart. Pieces of bloody, gelatinous tissue covered the sofa, hung in bits on the wall and obliterated the sunbeams that shown down on Jesus in the framed print behind the couch. The Savior’s uplifted eyes shed sanguine tears.

It was all Alma could do to prevent Claryce from crawling across the floor to her father’s faceless corpse. She was stronger than Alma imagined such a small girl could be, but her will to fight finally dissipated, and Alma was able to drag her inert body to the porch swing.

By the time Mrs. Bethea arrived, Claryce’s face had gone blank, and she was shivering.

“Don’t go in, Miz Bethea,” Alma said. “Mister Montgomery’s in there dead.”

“Lawsy mercy, child. Lawsy mercy, Rufus Junior. Johnnie, run down the street and get Miz Pearson. Let’s get y’all over to my house.”

Claryce moaned.

“Come on, child,” Mrs. Bethea insisted, but Claryce wouldn’t move from the swing.

“She’s not ready,” Alma said.

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They were still hovering over Claryce, when the police arrived and the crowd began to gather in the front yard. Alma pulled a porch chair over for Claryce's mother after somebody retrieved her from across town.

Over the remainder of the afternoon and into the evening, the crowd in the yard steadily grew. Tables sprang up amid the dusty patches of grass in the front yard to hold fried chicken and casseroles that were arriving from all over the Yard. While the multitude in starched domestic uniforms and greasy railroad overalls fed, the coroner and police worked quietly under the pall of death and gore inside, collecting bits of evidence, digging shotgun pellets out of the wall with pocket knives and preparing the body for transport.

The procession of people who ascended to the porch to speak with Claryce and Mrs. Montgomery was steady until the covey of women sharing fan waving duty around the swing parted to allow a white policeman through.

"Y'all the family?"

"My husband," Mrs. Montgomery said quietly, never looking up.

The policeman fished a pack of Chesterfields from the pocket of his navy uniform shirt and pulled a cigarette from it with his teeth. Without pausing to light, he pulled out his notepad and began asking about Rufus Junior's recent activities, anybody who might have had a reason to harm him and especially his drinking habits. Alma thought they must have been the same questions he'd asked witnesses on the Yard many times before. He was as concerned as if he were taking down the serial number of a missing bicycle.

As Mrs. Montgomery's strained answers grew ever briefer, Alma finally interrupted. "Please, Mister, her husband ain't even cold."

The policeman's neck muscles tensed, and it frightened her for a moment. But after a pause he folded his notepad and struck a match to his cigarette. The first drag seemed to relax him, and he allowed that the interrogation could wait until morning. "Evenin', y'all," he said. He took one more drag and then turned toward the street. The crowd parted for him to leave.

"Lawsy mercy," Mrs. Bethea said after he was beyond earshot, "you'd a thought you was the criminal."

"Now Sister Cordelia," said a deep, resonant voice. "He's just trying to do his job."

Reverend Varick had come onto the porch from the living room. His house backed up to the Montgomery's, and he had been inside talking with the coroner. He accepted the offer of a folding chair near the swing, and took Maddy Montgomery's tiny hands in his.

"Let's pray for a minute, Sister," he said. They bowed their heads and a hush fell, first over the cluster on the porch and then across the crowd in the yard as hands went up for silence. Reverend Varick tacitly acknowledged the widening audience for his invocation by raising his volume.

"Merciful Father," he began, "Sister Maddy and Sister Claryce are suffering a hurt the rest of us cannot begin to imagine. But we're hurting, too. Rufus Junior was husband and father to them, but he was a brother and friend to all the rest of us gathered here. Lord we know, even at this moment of our grief, that Brother Rufus Junior is safe in your embrace, attended by all the heavenly hosts. But it's hard for us down here to feel your love and comfort in the horror of what's happened. It's hard for us to see the grandeur and perfection of your plan from the low point where we kneel. So bear with us, Lord, while we struggle with our humanity. Our wounds won't heal overnight. Pills can't take away this pain. What's happened has left us wandering in the wilderness. Be here with us to help us find our way out. Amen."

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“Amen,” Alma sobbed.

Reverend Varick stood up and looked out over the gathering. “If y’all would kindly give these fellas some room, the coroner needs to bring out the body.”

Caps – striped ones with the Seaboard’s herald and maroon caps with a script “W” monogram – came off as Mrs. Montgomery stood, propped up by the reverend’s arm. Alma held Claryce. The screened door opened, and two black men in blood-stained white cotton pants and jackets gently pulled the gurney over the threshold and carried it down the steps. The coroner, an elderly undertaker from Northampton, escorted it to the hearse through a fan-waving congregation that parted to allow passage.

It was nearly midnight when the crowd finally thinned to the point that Mrs. Bethea invited Mrs. Montgomery and Claryce to her house for the night. Alma and Reverend Varick accompanied them down the street, and they sat around Mrs. Bethea’s kitchen table drinking sweet iced tea. Claryce seemed aware of what was going on, and occasionally she sipped tea with help, but she wasn’t part of the conversation.

“Tell me about the policeman, Sister Cordelia,” Reverend Varick wanted to know after awhile. “What did he do to get you so riled up?”

“He didn’ give a damn. They never do. It didn’ bother him any more than the white man who killed Rufus Junior?”

“You saw who did it?”

“Naw, Reverend, but you know good as me that’s what happened. Far as we know, it could’ve been the policeman hisself.”

“Why would you say such a thing?”

“He stood up to ’em, Reverend. He stood up to ’em at the School Board and backed ’em down. You know good as me ...”

“I know, Sister,” he said. “I guess I was just hoping you had some other kind of theory.” He paused a minute and then he

touched Mrs. Montgomery's hand. "I'm sorry. All this talk can wait until later."

"No, sir," she answered, dabbing at her eyes. "Rufus Junior had said somethin' like this might happen."

The remark pulled Claryce from her silence. "When?" she asked weakly. "When did Daddy say that?"

"Oh, Precious," Mrs. Montgomery said, pulling Claryce's head to her shoulder. "It wadn' the kind of thing we talked about. We didn' want you worryin'."

LEE MCCASLIN didn't immediately recognize the voice on the phone. It had to be after midnight, but he kept the alarm clock facing away from the bed because the dial was too bright for Frances.

"That you, Lamar?" he asked quietly into the darkness, figuring it was his friend from the 11th District who sometimes called at odd hours if something was on his mind.

"Anson Varick, Mister McCaslin. Pineview A.M.E. Church. Sorry to call so late, but there's something you need to know."

It had to be the high school. McCaslin had feared a riot or some kind of disturbance might erupt eventually. In fact, he figured it was inevitable that something would happen. There were more than a few nutcases in Shortridge.

"What is it, Reverend?"

"Rufus Junior's been murdered."

"God Almighty." McCaslin spit the words, and he could feel Frances stir. It wasn't an expletive he used often, because as a politician he was used to watching his tongue. But it was also because he had no use for religion other than that the public assume he was a faithful Christian. On their last trip to Washington together, Rufus Junior had called him the most Christian white man in Shortridge, a comment that now came back to him with the impact of

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being hit in the chest with a baseball bat. His mouth went dry as he gasped for air.

“How? Where? What happened?” Rufus Junior must have been killed during one of his layovers, either in New York or Miami.

“Right in his living room, Mr. McCaslin.” He detected a sense of offense in Varick’s voice, as if being killed at home was somehow worse than being gunned down on the road. This was not the usual Yard crime – an alcohol-fueled fight over a woman or money that produced a steady flow of blood and back-page stories for the *Weekly*. McCaslin had been with Rufus Junior in too many situations where the NAACP’s most effective orator before the school board was relaxed and booze readily available, but he had never seen Rufus Junior so much as take a sip. But all those appearances before the school board certainly had to have created a long list of people who’d like to see him done away with, and they were all white.

“I’ll call the Chief,” McCaslin said. “They can’t leave this investigation to just anybody.”

“Thanks, Mr. McCaslin. The young fellow they sent up here today – he rubbed folks the wrong way. This isn’t the kind of situation we want to get out of hand.”

“Not at all. Let me see if I can get Tug Peterson on this case.”

“He a good man?”

“Good as they’ve got,” McCaslin said. “He’s got a kid in the high school, so he’s got as much interest in keeping things under control as we do. Tug’s an evidence man. That’s what we need. He doesn’t get caught up in the excitement of things.”

“Thanks, Mr. McCaslin. I appreciate it.”

When he hung up the phone, McCaslin rolled over to see his wife, silhouetted against the window, propped up on her elbow.

“It’s bad, isn’t it?” she asked.

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He filled her in on the details, then turned on the light to look up the police chief's number. Sammy Preslar had enough sense to get Tug on the case, he said, but it couldn't hurt to let him know that the local state legislator was keeping close tabs on what was happening. And he would call the *Weekly* in the morning to take Pegram's temperature about the story. He wanted to be able to count on the editor playing it cool.

chapter **11**

JON-FRANKLIN'S PEOPLE are good people," Hattie Mae said. "His choir would be the perfect memorial." And, she said, it was the wish of Rufus Junior's widow and his daughter, who sang in the Shortridge High School Mixed Chorus.

As a matter of procedure, Anson Varick knew this meeting of the Lay Committee of Pineview Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church was necessary because the Montgomery family was requesting non-members to participate in a Pineview service rather than the church's own choir. These kinds of requests weren't unusual for funerals and weddings, which were personal as well as congregational events. A similar meeting would have been necessary if, say, a couple planned their wedding at Pineview but wanted to invite clergy other than Reverend Varick to officiate. But he knew no one sitting around the Formica-topped table in the church's meeting room was under the impression she was there to rubber stamp the invitation to a group of high school kids to sing.

Cordelia Bethea wouldn't have been dressed in her starched white cotton church dress with gloves and a corsage for a five-minute vote on a Tuesday, nor would any of the rest of the dozen

committee members in the room. They were prepared for a convocation of the utmost gravity. Cordelia wasn't objecting to the invitation because Jon-Franklin was the director. She wanted to make that clear from the start, she said, as she fanned herself and her carnation against the early evening heat. And it had nothing to do with the fact that half the singers might be white, which would make them the first white voices to be heard in Pineview Memorial.

"I've never been one for holdin' grudges," Cordelia protested. "Mama always used to say forgive and forget."

But her mother had worked as a wet nurse for the Coopers, and Varick could see that just hearing Jon-Franklin's family name caused her to squeeze the flimsy wooden lath in her white-gloved hand and fan even faster. He managed to mask his skepticism as successfully as he held his tongue. It was still early in what surely would be a protracted meeting. "Get it out, Sister," he said. "Get it all out on the table. It's time we were being honest with ourselves before the Lord."

Cordelia's mother had stayed at the Coopers' for almost six months after Jon-Franklin was born, she said. For twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, Verona Watson was never more than whimpering distance from Jon-Franklin because Miz Cooper said babies don't understand hunger. They want to suckle, and Miz Cooper was not going to deprive her son.

"She said there's plenty of time for a child to learn patience and doin' without when he's older," Cordelia said. "It wadn' right, Pastor Varick. Wadn' right at all. I mama'd two little brothers and a sister when I was just fourteen. My daddy handed me my first Kotex."

"What was your mama supposed to do?" Hattie Mae said. "Your daddy couldn't support all y'all workin' on a track gang,"

"It wadn' what my mama did," Cordelia said. "It was that white ... it was Miz Cooper. If she couldn't squeeze any juice out

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of those little tits of hers, she could've warmed a bottle. But she took my mama away. My family didn' count spit."

"Ain't it the truth," a voice growled from the far end of the table. Ruby McDonald's husband had been stabbed outside the Grab one Friday night a few years back. The policeman said he wouldn't call for an ambulance until somebody in the crowd came forward to identify who rammed the butcher knife into her husband's shoulder. By the time a suspect had been fingered, McDonald's life had flooded away onto the dirt and gravel beside the gas pumps.

"Herman's life just wadn' important," Ruby said.

On this point Ruby was preaching to the choir, Varick knew. No one there believed the Shortridge police had any interest in protecting black lives or property up on the Yard. But let some black person set fire to the Grab – the only place within walking distance of the Yard where a person could get either a carton of milk or a six-pack of Blues – and the State Bureau of Investigation would be all over the Yard within hours. Before the Disturbances fizzled for lack of sufficient white-owned property within walking distance to burn and a shortage of people to torch it, more than fifty men had been held without charges in the Booker T gym by the SBI. The entire Yard had been cordoned off and placed under dusk-to-dawn curfew.

"We'd all still be locked up if Miz Harvard hadn't needed her dishes washed," Ruby said.

"Let's not pick at scabs," Monteenia pleaded to the committee as the laughter subsided.

But Ruby, who had lived next door to Monteenia for eighteen years, apparently had become intoxicated by the fount of anger she had tapped. "You cried all night after the McAndrew boy called you a nigger."

"Chris didn' ..."

“You know what I mean, and don’t be pretendin’ he didn’t make you mad.”

“But he was just a little boy,” Monteenia protested.

“He was a little white boy, and one of these days he’ll grow up to be another damn white bigot.”

Varick sensed he needed to turn the heat down. “Sisters,” he admonished. “This is about Brother Rufus Junior’s funeral and how to honor him. If it wasn’t for him, Claryce wouldn’t be singing in Jon-Franklin’s choir.”

Diplomacy was part of his job description. He had always been attentive to the ladies of the Lay Committee and their standing in the congregation. Even though Bernice, his wife and church secretary, perked the coffee and baked the cookies for their regular monthly meetings, he served the members himself on the church’s china with the yellow and white flowers around the rim of the delicate cups, and it was a sincere gesture. The Lay Committee was the backbone of Pineview Memorial. Every woman on it currently worked for a white family in Shortridge or had in the past. It had raised the money for the steeple and the bell, the hymn books and the china service. Its members were in the pews every Sunday.

Without them the church would still be the old wood-frame building down by Harvard Creek instead of the brick sanctuary with the Sunday School annex that fronted the Raleigh Highway. Without their acquiescence, Claryce’s request to have the Shortridge chorus sing at her daddy’s funeral could not be honored. But with their endorsement, others in the congregation who might object – and he was certain they were out there – would remain silent.

Moreover, he knew it would take patience to get an affirmative vote. It was important that dark experiences such as Cordelia’s, Ruby’s and others yet to be discussed were hung out in the sunshine of open discussion and bleached clean of the bitterness that could trap his congregation in the past. But he also knew that if he couldn’t provide a counterpoint and make it safe for others to do

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the same, the grudges in this meeting would pile up so fast that they would smother any chance of inviting the choir.

It wasn't that he had no stories to add about being treated as if he didn't exist or didn't matter. God Almighty knew that he was asked to leave the Interdenominational Clergy Fellowship's meeting his first week after moving down from Baltimore to take the pastorate at Pineview Memorial.

"One day we hope and pray to welcome you into our fellowship," Dr. Gordon had told him while escorting him out of the Coop's dining room, the association's regular Tuesday lunch spot. "But we can't make our hosts here or their customers uncomfortable. I'm sure you can understand we're in a delicate position."

Varick had understood their position perfectly. It was the same position the school board explained every year when he'd accompanied Rufus Junior to their meetings. "We're sympathetic to your concerns about the Negro children," they would be told. "We're ordering new elementary reading books next fall, the same ones we're buying for the white schools. But it's going to take a little more time before we can fully integrate without destroying the progress we've already made."

Varick allowed the discussion to continue, delicately injecting himself only when it seemed tempers might flare, while humiliations and injustices suffered by committee members, their friends and most everyone they knew were recounted and discussed at length. They all could have stayed until well into the evening fanning themselves, sipping Bernice's coffee and compiling a list of perfectly valid reasons why the Shortridge singers didn't deserve the honor of an invitation to Pineview Memorial. But when the outpouring of emotion seemed to crest, he decided it was time to make his case.

"I've changed my mind, Sisters," he told them, setting his cup back in its saucer. "I was going to tell you this is all about the proper tribute to Brother Rufus. But I was wrong. This isn't about

Rufus Junior and what he stood for. It's not about what Sister Maddy wants for her murdered husband or the way Sister Claryce wants to remember her daddy. It's not about all these white people either. This funeral is about us."

TATER PETERSON smashed off tackle and into a pile of defenders who, for reasons Coach could not understand – in the most sarcastic terms – were standing in the mud exactly where Ronnie Tucker was supposed to have cleared out the hole.

"No more tip-toein' through the tulips, Tucker!" he screamed as Ronnie trotted back, head down, to the huddle. "Damn, son. We don't send the halfback into that hole to negotiate safe passage. We expect him to knock heads."

When Ronnie lifted his head again, Chris saw the kind of blank expression he assumed he had when he was Coach's target, like the previous Monday Matinee when the criticisms rained down like a summer thunderboomer, and there was nothing to do but wait for the cloud to pass. Malachi would have made a dent in that defensive wall, but he hadn't been in the bass section sixth period, nor had he been on the practice field the past two hours, so Ronnie had been moved into his halfback spot.

"Keep things movin'. Call another play, son," Coach Austin said quietly.

Whatever the reasons for Coach Austin's absence from the team, his return seemed to have calmed Wilson down until now. If Chris could do anything to return Coach to his pacified state, he would. A well-run play might do it, but the play ought to be something that would give Ronnie a chance to redeem himself as well as regain a bit of self-confidence. "Power I-right, twenty-eight sweep on two," Chris said. If Ronnie could find a little open field, he might break off a run and part the storm clouds.

Coach had the defense lined up in a five-three, a formation that would leave it undermanned around end, where the play was

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designed to go. But Chris decided to increase his advantage. As he walked up behind Fatback Haliburton, he called out a change in offensive formation. “Wing I-right!” he shouted once before putting in his mouthpiece.

Cam shifted from his spot beside Tater in the backfield to just outside right end, two yards behind the line of scrimmage. Split out on the wing, Cam was in better position to block for the sweep coming his way than having to run from the backfield to get to this point. When Fatback snapped the ball, Chris spun counterclockwise and pitched the ball to Ronnie sprinting toward right end. Ordinarily he spun in the opposite direction, taking himself out of the play once the ball exchange was made. This spin meant he was headed toward right end, too, an additional blocker to spring Ronnie free.

Cam stood up the left linebacker with a block to the chest, giving Ronnie room to turn up field, and Tater, leading the play, blocked the cornerback to the outside. Chris was taking aim on the safety, but Coach whistled the play over before that collision ever took place. Chris considered it Coach’s acknowledgment that used the right way, Ronnie Tucker could make a contribution to the Comets.

“That’s enough,” Coach shouted. “Everybody on the goal line.”

Half a dozen forty-yard sprints and practice was over. Twenty more yards and they were in the hog wallow around the spigot, Cam straddling the pool drinking his fill with Ronnie next in line.

“Where’s Malachi?” Chris asked Ronnie, who was still winded from running.

“Probably out ’cause of Claryce,” Ronnie wheezed.

It took Chris a moment to place the name. “The girl in glee club?”

“Malachi’s girlfriend. Her daddy got killed.”

“Murdered,” Tater Peterson interjected. “Somebody blew him away with a shotgun.”

“Jesus Christ,” Ronnie said. “I heard it was a stabbin’. Where’d you hear that?”

Tater looked down at the mud for a moment as if he were uncomfortable talking. “Daddy’s a policeman,” he continued. “The other night, he just couldn’t quit talkin’ about this one. Said it was different.”

“People get killed on the Yard all the time,” Chris said. “What’s different this time?” He could feel Ronnie’s eyes glaring at him – it was amazing how careful you had to be in a conversation these days – but he maintained his focus on Tater.

Nevertheless, it was Ronnie who answered.

“People get in fights at the Grab ’cause they’re drunk, or ’cause somebody’s been screwin’ their girlfriend,” he said. “They don’t get killed in their own house in their pajamas in the middle of the day.”

“Exactly,” Tater said. “Daddy says he usually cleans up after temper tantrums. But this wadn’ a tantrum.”

“Why?” Chris asked Tater, only to have Ronnie answer again.

“He was a civil rights worker.”

The way Ronnie said it sounded like an honorific title, and Chris had always heard it used as an epithet. “Was he a marcher or somethin’?”

“He was in the N double-A CP,” Ronnie replied. “It got him killed.”

The NAACP, Chris thought. It existed in the newspaper, in Alabama, at the Supreme Court and now in Shortridge, North Carolina.

The next morning’s *Weekly* was unhelpful, as usual. The story with the small, two-line headline “Shotgun Blast / Kills Yard Man” was only two paragraphs long and buried on the back page in the Police Blotter roundup. “A 57-year-old Shortridge man was found

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dead in his home Monday, according to police. Rufus Montgomery Jr. was the victim of an apparent shotgun blast to the head. Police are investigating and ask for anyone with information to please call.”

At their lockers before the home room bell, Susan might have been more interested in discussing the murder if she didn't have big news of her own to share. Yes, she had noticed Claryce's absence from home ec yesterday. She remembered Claryce's father from the Booster Special. He seemed a nice enough man – he knew her father – but mostly what she recounted about the ride up to Aycock was talking with Sherry and Claryce and, of course, Daddy taking her aside to say she couldn't go to any more games because of the niggers.

“But, Chris!” she said as excitedly as she could without calling attention to herself in the crowd milling in the hallway. “All that's over now. We're goin' to have a prom!” As soon as she said it, she jerked her head around to be sure no one had overheard. She maneuvered Chris behind the open door of her locker for more privacy and pinched his cheeks. “We're goin' to have a winter formal.”

“I knew the school board would back down.”

Susan put her hand over his mouth. “No, Chris,” she whispered. “This idn' going to be a school prom. They're puttin' it together just for us.”

Chris was clearly slow to comprehend. “They who?”

“No niggers,” she said. “A private prom.”

She snuggled against him as closely as hallway etiquette allowed and spoke into his chest. “It's goin' to be wonderful, Chris. We're goin' to have dresses and corsages and decorations and a band and everything. I don't know how I'm goin' to last 'til Christmas.” She wrapped her arms around him and squeezed as tightly as she could. “See you at lunch. Gotta go, Sweetie.”

Chris paused a moment to try to clear his head. Susan's scent, intoxicating even at the most minute concentrations, still hung

faintly in the air and clung to his shirt. Until he changed into his football pads this afternoon, he knew it would linger, diverting his attention from the Mayflower Compact and quadratic equations just as easily as it had made him forget – good God – somebody had murdered a guy up on the Yard because he integrated the schools.

“Whatcha day-dreamin’ ’bout, Quarterback?”

It was Malachi.

“Damn. We missed you yesterday,” Chris said. “Ronnie told us about Claryce’s daddy. I’m sorry.”

Malachi thanked Chris for his concern, and then Chris asked if he had any more information.

“It dudn’ look good, me and you talkin’ in the hall like this,” Malachi answered, keeping his voice low. “The police have been actin’ funny about it.”

Chris didn’t understand.

“The cop was mean to Miz Montgomery,” Malachi said. “He didn’ give a shit. Then yesterday it was like she was Jackie Kennedy, the grievin’ widow. He pulled out her chair and asked if there was anything he could get her. I was there. It was amazin’.”

“You prob’ly ought to know the policeman is Tater’s daddy,” Chris said. “Did he say anything about who did it?”

“Nope. He just said it wadn’ ordinary. ‘Ordinary’ was the word he used.”

“What about Claryce?”

“She saw her daddy sittin’ in a puddle of blood with his face blown off.”

“God a’mighty,” Chris said. “She okay?”

Malachi was about to answer, then changed his mind. “It’s not good for me to be talkin’ ’bout this,” he said.

By the time sixth period rolled around and the glee club was gathering in the basement rehearsal room, Chris had almost forgotten it was a school day. Discussion about the prom was spreading

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covertly through a whites-only grapevine and he was overhearing snippets of conversations about the N double-A CP murder when he'd pass groups of black students clustered in the hallways.

After first period, Mr. Starnes had walked up to Chris and a couple of other white students who were late leaving class to confirm the rumor he'd heard about a prom. Mme. Birmingham had asked Susan privately after fifth period if there was anything she could do to help.

Susan and Sherry had talked about nothing else at lunch but the Christmas prom. They perched on their elbows across the table from each other so they could whisper about the details. Chris and Cam sat alongside watching their lockets drag back and forth through their mashed potatoes.

"Any dance that takes all day to get dressed up for is a dance worth takin' your shoes off for," Cam finally said when his meatloaf was gone.

Sherry gave him a sideways glance and then pretended to backhand him across his face. "This stuff's important, Mr. Smartass. You got dressed up for that weddin' at the McCaslin's last summer; now you can get dressed up for me. And you don't take your shoes off when you're dancin' in a tux."

"That's after the dance, Cam," Chris said.

Susan's timid slap caught him on the shoulder. "Sssh! Not everybody needs to hear this."

Neither Susan nor Sherry had much interest in talking about the murder, so he and Cam finished lunch by having their own crime confab while the girls talked quietly between themselves.

In chorus, Chris had little time to reconnect with Malachi about the murder because Mr. Cooper was more insistent than usual on getting the rehearsal started on schedule. There were some Christmas pieces he said they needed to get moving on because the annual concert in early December was the choir's biggest money-maker of the year. They worked for awhile on the melis-

mas in the Christmas portions of Handel's *Messiah*, but with twenty minutes left in the period, he had the singers put their music folders away and passed out some new sheet music.

"You've probably heard that Claryce's daddy died the other day," Mr. Cooper said. "She asked if we'd sing at the funeral tomorrow afternoon. I told her we'd be honored, so we'll take the activity bus over to the church at the start of sixth period. We'll be back in time for you football players to get to practice. Coach and I've already talked about it. If you can't sing tomorrow, Coach will have a study hall in here. Malachi, would you like to try the bass solo on this one?"

Susan squeezed Chris' hand, and he knew she'd be in study hall.

chapter **12**

IT COULD NOT be a coincidence. Erlene Johnson Clifton and Maddy Johnson Montgomery were both widows now, sisters with children still in school whose husbands were murdered four months apart.

Frank's service was on Erlene's mind as she was getting ready for the funeral trip to Shortridge when the pan spit at her. It stung like a tiny dart – not enough pain to make her cry out and wake the boys but enough that she pulled her hand to her mouth where she could cool the burn with the wetness of her tongue. Too peppery, but the fried chicken tasted like home.

Skillets never spit at Mama like that. Her memories of growing up in Shortridge were tinted with nostalgia. Mama had always been so serene in the kitchen. She could leave the eggs in a hot pan and check on the biscuits, get some butter from the ice box, move the salt and pepper to the table, find a new box of napkins in the cupboard and then return to the stove where the eggs would be obediently waiting, still fluffy, moist and unburned.

Erlene's eggs didn't obey. Nothing in her kitchen obeyed – not the okra that boiled over, not the brown sugar pie she burned

last Thanksgiving when Mama came up to visit her in Brooklyn. But since Frank's murder, every return to his kitchen reminded her of his absence and intensified her uneasiness being there.

Frank had brought the same serenity to the kitchen, and to her life, that Mama had. He was a lizard scorcher who made two or three runs a week to Chicago and back on the *Broadway Limited*, the flagship of the Pennsylvania Railroad's passenger service. He spent most of the westbound overnight trip with four other cooks crammed into a dining car galley not much wider than her bedroom closet. Together they turned out a couple hundred dinners or so, another couple hundred breakfasts, and then repeated the process on the trip back. Home again, Frank would fix pork chops and mashed potatoes for her and their boys.

Her dream was to do for her family what Frank did for his passengers. But as long as it had been since his death, she wondered if that goal might always remain a dream.

"How do you do it?" she had asked him once when they rode the *Silver Star* back from a visit to Shortridge. They were in the dining car, and the chaos she glimpsed every time a waiter emerged from the galley with another tray of lamb chops, steaks and shrimp magnified the feelings of inadequacy she had in her own simple kitchen. A hurried group of men carved meat, chopped vegetables, stirred sauce pans and washed nearly two thousand pieces of crystal, china and silver while squeezing past each other in the four-foot space between the wall and gas-fired ovens as the train swayed over rough track at eighty miles per hour.

"Good money," he told her. "If a colored man wants to travel and make some money, he has to work for Pullman."

It wasn't the answer she was after. She had asked him how, not why. How did Frank develop the confidence to cook and serve food, the skill that was so much of the lady Mama was, and which she so envied in her new husband? She knew she didn't

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have it. Nothing she ever tried in the kitchen was the equal of Mama's or Frank's cooking.

But she hadn't pressed him on the question because Frank had never been a man to reveal much in conversation. She learned about the pride he took in everything he did from the way he laid the table just so, even when the meal was only for the two of them, and about the way he cared for others in the way he helped Mama in her kitchen. Erlene knew Frank was in love with her long before he ever said it. She knew when he first served her chicken. He peppered it just like Mama's. His love was in his food, just like Mama's.

They'd had leg of lamb that night on the *Silver Star*. Screened from the white passengers by the *portière*, they dined alone by candlelight in a style she'd seen only in movies. When the train crossed from North Carolina into Virginia and the attendant could reopen the bar, Frank ordered wine served in a heavy crystal glass she was almost afraid to touch.

That was thirteen years ago this month. She was pregnant with Roy ...

The boys! What time is it?

Frank hadn't left any room for a wall clock in all the cabinetry he'd built. But through the window she could see the sidewalk clock at Marx's Jewelry, even at night, from their apartment four floors up in the Van Rindt Building. It said seven-fifteen.

"Boys!" she called out as she turned toward the hallway back to their room. "Boys! Wake-up time! We're goin' to Other-Mimi's!"

"Other-Mimi!" The high-pitched excited voice belonged to Harold, her nine-year-old. "Roy, wake up. We're going back to Other-Mimi's house!"

"Her new house," she corrected. "And your new grandpa will be there."

JODY MEACHAM

Erlene had arrived in their cluttered room just as their feet thudded to the floor. She began stripping their beds as they washed and dressed.

“I smell chicken,” Roy called out from the bathroom.

“Chi ... Oh Lord, don’t let it burn!”

She made it to the kitchen just in time. The pieces were perfectly browned, and she used a fork to pluck them from the pan and spread them on a paper towel. What an unexpected bit of luck. Maybe her track record in the kitchen was changing.

The boys knew why they were returning to Shortridge, but she hadn’t emphasized the funeral. They’d already been to their father’s service this year, which they had not handled well. Besides, they hardly knew their Uncle Rufus Junior.

If she could just get them to the train to Shortridge in time, then she could exhale.

“How ’bout French toast?” she called to the boys. She was confident of her French toast.

As she began collecting the ingredients, she started down a checklist in her mind.

“Harold, remember your pilla!”

“Yes, Mimi.”

The nearness of Harold’s voice snapped her thoughts back from travel preparations. He and Roy had come into the kitchen while she was preoccupied.

“Sorry to yell,” she said.

“I put my pillow in my bag.”

“Good boy, Harold. What’re you and Roy looking forward to most in Shortridge?” Fixing breakfast and carrying on a conversation at the same time – she was impressing herself.

“Harvard Lake!” they shouted in unison.

Should she disappoint them now? “Remember the trouble you got into last time?”

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Erlene got the cardboard boxes Mr. Balducci had given her at Te Amo's and lined them with paper towels while the boys ate. She put a couple of drumsticks and wings on the paper plate in each box along with a biscuit and a paper tub of potato salad from the deli. She wrapped it all in waxed paper and tied it up in a string.

"We can buy milk and sandwiches on the train," she told them.

Memories of her dinner with Frank on the *Silver Star* kept flooding back – how embarrassed she'd been picking through that assortment of silverware and how she nearly dipped her spoon into the finger bowl before Frank stopped her. The *portière* had come down, but even so, the formality of the dining car and the ram-bunctiousness of the boys weren't a good mix. Packing lunches was the right thing to do.

Thank goodness the subway was only a couple of blocks away. She and the boys loaded into the rust-red train and headed off toward Manhattan. As it rumbled along, she gave them the briefing she had forgotten last spring about how they wouldn't be welcome everywhere in Shortridge.

Her mind went back to summer evenings when the town fire siren signaled the start of colored curfew, when she and Frank would sit in Mama's folding chairs on the creek bank. The quiet so perfectly highlighted what few sounds there were: crickets in the weeds on the far bank, the *tink* of spoon against the bowl of Mama's peach ice cream, the rustle of his shirt in the darkness as he reached over to pull her close and explore the buttons on her dress.

It was nothing at all like the noisy darkness in the subway car when the lights died, sparks flashed and the train bumped to a stop at 34th Street. Penn Station.

"Roy, be sure and bring the chicken."

They exited to the platform, and Erlene herded the boys in front of her into the flow of passengers heading up the steps toward the station concourse. It took only a few minutes at the ticket

window to claim their reservations. The clerk scribbled notations on the slips of greenish paper, whammed down a validating stamp on each, then pushed them and the change from her fifty dollar bill under the grill.

“*Star’s* on Track 14, Mrs. Clifton. Take the stairs over there.”

They descended into the dimly lit subterranean platform area she had escorted them to last spring, but this time they all boarded the forward coach of the long silver train. As she settled into her seat, the pressure of cooking and getting them to the station began to subside, and the sorrow of why they were making the trip began to overwhelm her.

It was because, just like Frank, somebody shot Maddy’s husband in the face.

THE WHITE Chevrolet Bel Air was already parked at the Pit Stop when Wade Marks drove up just before ten o’clock. Tug Peterson came by in the town’s unmarked police car most Thursday mornings for eggs and grits, and he always liked to sit at the booth near the cash register. He was in his usual place when Wade came through the door, sitting on the far side with the straw hat he wore during warm weather lying on the end of the table. Even in mid-morning, Tug’s white, short-sleeved dress shirt was already wilted from fatigue.

Patricia was refilling Tug’s coffee cup, her back to him and a sitting duck for what he planned.

“Sure you don’t want some bacon with that, honey?” she asked Tug. “Miz Marks found a new brand from Virginia, and it’s really good.”

“B’lieve I will,” he told her, smiling as Wade crept up behind her. “I’ll put in a good word for you with the boss. He ought to give you a raise for drummin’ up more business.”

“You’re runnin’ up my expenses, Tug,” Marks said sharply, startling Patricia so badly that she sloshed coffee from her carafe,

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sweeping across the table in a brown sheet. Tug slid out of the booth just in time to keep from being splashed and managed to save his hat as well.

"I'll swanny!" Patricia yelled. She'd have cussed a blue streak if it hadn't been the boss who spooked her. Instead, she just glared, but it was a more hostile reaction than he wanted to deal with.

"I'm sorry," he said meekly. "I'll get a rag and clean this up. Fix Tug some more eggs." After he'd wiped the table down, he poured some coffee for himself and sat down across from the detective. "What do you know about the nigger killin'?"

"Not enough," Tug said.

Wade volunteered that he'd known the victim.

"You know most of the Pullman boys, don't you?" Tug asked. "You're down at the station a lot."

"Know 'em all. Lots've times they call from up the line wantin' cigarettes to sell. But the Montgomery boy was special. Always took good care of me and Mary Kathryn when we went up to the Christmas show."

Patricia was back with a plate of eggs and four bacon strips, and Marks segued into the story of how Mary Kathryn had found the new pork supplier. "Her family had a connection from up near Smithfield," he said. "We first heard about 'em on the *Meter*."

"You ride the *Meter* a lot, Wade?"

"Couple, three times a year," he said. "Mary Kathryn likes the shoppin' and Broadway."

Tug wolfed down a couple more strips of bacon and then wiped his mouth to leave.

"Don't be in such a hurry," Wade said.

"Got some stuff I need to get out of the way early," Tug responded. "Everybody in the department's goin' to be up on the Yard this afternoon."

"Tell me 'bout it. People oughta be stayin' away from that funeral."

Tug peeled four dollar bills off his roll and dropped them on the table. "Patricia, you tell this skinflint to give you a raise or I'm goin' to lock him up."

THE STENCILED notation beside the activity bus door said its seating capacity was forty-two, and Malachi sat in the seat beside Chris. With everybody loaded and Mr. Cooper standing beside his seat at the front, there were no standees for a choir that normally numbered more than sixty singers. As near as Chris could tell without making it obvious, he counted maybe a dozen white singers were making the trip. Mr. Cooper had announced the invitation to the funeral only yesterday, so there hadn't been much talk about whether to go or not among his friends. Daddy's concern had been that he not miss any of football practice, and once reassured, had no problem with his singing.

"Same thing my daddy said," Cam had told him that morning.

But a second glance around the bus answered another question for Chris that he dare not ask aloud. There were no white sopranos or altos aboard. This was the last opportunity to rehearse before the service, and Mr. Cooper blew on his pitch pipe. Despite the wind coming through the windows and the bus grinding through its gears, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" sounded pretty good, especially Malachi's solo.

"You okay?" Chris asked him after they'd finished the run-through. Malachi had never looked so serious.

"People are scared," he said quietly.

"This idn' Mississippi."

Malachi turned away. "Prove it."

The challenge echoed in Chris' thoughts during the five-minute drive to the church. Police were directing traffic along the highway in front, and cars were parked along both shoulders for a hundred yards on either side of the sandy driveway where the hearse was

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parked. The bus pulled onto the shoulder, parked at the end of the line of cars, and everybody filed off.

The echelon of solemn singers processed down the edge of the highway, their robes billowing in the light, warm breeze. Alongside, passing traffic moved slowly through the bottleneck of parked vehicles and police. Mr. Peterson stood where the church driveway intersected the pavement. On the front lawn of the church, more sand than grass, a crowd of mourners quietly milled about, men in dark suits and women in veils spending a final few minutes in the breeze before entering the brick sanctuary with its vertical, stained glass windows down each side wall.

Across the highway in the Seaboard freight yard, the retarders screamed as they slowed another cut of heavy coal hoppers rolling down into the classification bowl. Silence and cacophony, death and vitality, people burdened by sorrow and others with things to do – it was just as unsettling to Chris now as it had been at his grandfather’s funeral a few years before.

“Y’all come around this way,” Mr. Cooper said *sotto voce*, leading the choir to the rear of the church. They entered a door to the Sunday School annex and walked in a column down a hallway to a white door with a single rectangular pane of translucent amber glass. Mr. Cooper made a last check to be sure the sections were in order and quietly briefed them on how they would walk into the church.

After a moment, Chris recognized the gray-haired minister from last summer’s wedding at the McCaslins. He was very solemn in his black robe, and he and Mr. Cooper had a brief, whispered conversation before he turned to the chorus.

“Before we go in,” the pastor said, “I just wanted to welcome you all to Pineview A.M.E. Church and tell you how much the Montgomery family and our congregation appreciate the gift of your singing.”

The organ stopped, and Mr. Cooper led the choir through the door and up three steps to the choir loft behind the pulpit. By the time everyone was in, they had overflowed the choir loft and filled a row of wooden folding chairs that stretched across the width of the sanctuary behind the pulpit. The sanctuary overflowed as well, with men standing in both side aisles, more across the wall in the back of the church and out the open door. The windows along the side walls had been opened, but the breeze had died and the church was hot.

Chris was on the rearmost of three rows in the choir loft. Before him, in front of the pulpit, was a closed gray steel casket surrounded by large formations of flowers. Claryce, in a black dress with white beads around her neck, and four other mourners were seated on the front pew to Chris' right. One of the two women must be her mother, but whether it was the one minding the two squirmy boys he had no way of knowing. Monteenia and Hattie Mae sat in the pew behind them with the rest of the lay committee in white dresses, hats and gloves. On the front left pew were men he guessed were pallbearers, dressed in identical dark blue suits. Their jackets were fastened all the way to the neck with silver buttons. In their laps they held dark caps with silver badges on the front. The three white men from the school board behind them were the only white people in the pews.

The pastor and Mr. McCaslin followed the choir in and sat in large, upholstered wooden chairs to either side of the pulpit. Except for the railroad sounds coming from the yard, there was utter silence for a few moments while Reverend Varick bowed his head and rested the bridge of his nose against his fingertips touched together in prayer.

Then he stood, walked to the pulpit and riffled through the pages of his small leather Bible until he found the right place. "The Lord is my shepherd," he began.

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Chris looked down at Claryce, whose sad, glistening eyes were determinedly focused on the preacher. She clutched a white handkerchief, and every now and then she would twist it into a new tangle.

Then the preacher prayed for the soul of Rufus Spratlin Montgomery Jr. and asked God's special care on his widow and his child. "The love of these friends who've come today to say good-bye to your faithful servant, Rufus Junior, is Your love," he said. "Let it enfold Sister Maddy, Sister Claryce, Sister Erlene and the boys, comfort them in these terrible times and keep them safe. Amen." He nodded to Mr. McCaslin, who replaced him in the pulpit.

Mr. McCaslin sipped from the glass of water to the right of the large Bible. He didn't show any of the unease Chris felt at being in a colored church.

"Rufus Junior was my adversary," Mr. McCaslin began. "He was my tormentor and conscience. And he became my friend. One evening some years ago I sat down with him after a school board meeting to teach him some things about politics and the law, and I learned a lot."

By the time Mr. McCaslin finished, he had covered a ten-year relationship with Rufus Junior that began when he was attorney for the Shortridge School Board. "My original job," he said, "was coming up with ways to forever guarantee white schools in Shortridge. After a few years, my job became putting off integration as long as possible. I failed at both my jobs because Rufus Junior was so good at his. His job was justice."

There was murmuring through the congregation. Mr. McCaslin talked about the arguments he used to have with Rufus Junior after meetings and how those confrontations evolved over time into debates, then discussions and finally collaboration. He talked about their meetings at the State Legislative Building in Raleigh, and finally their trip together to Washington on the *Silver Star*.

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“I used to be tempted to say that Rufus Junior’s job was easier than mine, because justice eventually will be done,” Mr. McCaslin continued. “So when I was at my wit’s end trying to do my job, I consoled myself by saying Rufus Junior had time on his side, that all he really had to do was wait me out. Segregation was going to end sooner or later. But I was just fooling myself. I didn’t want to give Rufus Junior the credit he deserved. Segregation didn’t collapse under its own weight. It wasn’t voted out. It’s ending because people like Rufus Junior held up its meanness so people could see it for what it is. He was there when they took down the *portière*, when the town turned off the Saturday curfew siren and when the hospital closed its colored floor. Monday, all that cost Rufus Junior his life. Somebody believed he could stop integration by killing Rufus Junior. Somebody’s wrong.”

There were a few amens as Mr. McCaslin returned to his seat, but Chris sat frozen in shock. Mr. McCaslin couldn’t give this eulogy at First Presbyterian; he didn’t need to be a political scientist to understand that. But nothing shocked him so much as the fact that a colored man had changed Mr. McCaslin’s mind.

Mr. Cooper stood and waited for a moment while the attention of the choir refocused. He mopped his face with a handkerchief, then nodded to the organist for the opening pitch of the *a cappella* piece.

*“Swing low, sweet chariot!
Comin’ for to carry me home ...”*

As many times as Chris had heard Malachi sing in those first few weeks of school, he’d never heard Malachi’s voice so strong or confident. When the choir got to the final verse, Mr. Cooper turned toward the congregation and motioned for them to rise and sing.

*“The brightest day that I can say,
Coming for to carry me home,
When Jesus washed my sins away,*

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Coming for to carry me home.”

Then Reverend Varick returned to the pulpit for his eulogy, which was just as unbelievable to Chris as Mr. McCaslin’s.

“I know your fear,” he said to the first chorus of amens. “It’s the fear you felt about Rosa Parks. It’s the fear you felt about those children in Little Rock. It’s the fear you felt about Greensboro and Birmingham. It’s the fear you feel when you see dogs and fire hoses. It’s the fear you feel when a police car drives down Dellums Street.”

The amen chorus was gaining momentum, but Reverend Varick refused to adopt the growing stridence of their tone or their quickening tempo. Good conductors didn’t lose the choir.

“Rufus Junior felt that fear, too,” he continued in a softer, slower voice. “He knew the fear of being found asleep on the last night of a run after he’d used up his rest hours for the trip. He knew the fear of getting caught by the police for going in the front door of the newsstand to buy a newspaper. And he knew the fear of getting fired if the train left without him. *But he never let that fear dictate what to do.*”

There was silence in the congregation now, and Chris could sense people returning to Reverend Varick’s direction. “Rufus Junior never obeyed the voice that said ‘Give up,’ but he never succumbed to the cry for revenge. He knew, like Mr. McCaslin said, that time was on his side, but he never relaxed for a minute to push for what was right.”

The amens resumed, but the congregation was now in his hands. “I can’t take away your fear of the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Let the Lord be your shepherd. Fear no evil because He is with you. Let His rod and His staff comfort you. Surely goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your lives.”

Chris wanted to ask Malachi what all the fear talk was about after the service was over. Yet he was afraid he already knew.

“That’s the best I’ve ever heard you do that solo,” he told Malachi instead as they returned to the bus. “I know your mama’s proud.”

Malachi thanked him. “It means a lot to Mama that you came and sang. And I ’preciate it, too.”

The graveyard was almost within sight of the church. Chris had been there many Saturday afternoons as a youngster with his grandmother. They would walk through the granite archway to visit the graves of family and friends. She liked to speak with the dead as if they were sitting together in her porch swing. She and Chris laughed at the strange headstones with their euphemistic inscriptions, and they would sit on the marble coping that delineated family plots, eat pimento cheese sandwiches and drink tea from a Mason jar.

But the bus did not head for the archway. Instead, it followed the hearse off the highway onto a narrow dirt lane that led through scrub oaks to another entrance. There were few headstones in this section of the cemetery. Most graves were marked by small metal signs from the funeral home embossed with a name and the dates of birth and death.

Mr. Cooper formed the choir into three rows on the opposite side of the casket from Claryce and her family, who sat on white folding chairs beneath a green funeral home canopy. Reverend Varick read the mandatory passages about there being a time to die and dust-to-dust, and then the choir did a sevenfold amen *a cappella*. The pastor made his way slowly in front of each row of chairs, stopping in front of each family member, taking their hands in his and expressing his condolences in a low, almost inaudible voice. At the conclusion of his personal visits, he stepped out from under the canopy and asked everyone to bow for the benediction.

Afterward, the choir remained in its place while the mourners dispersed, many of them stopping to hug Claryce, her mother and the other woman. Mr. McCaslin was next-to-last, accompanied by

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Mr. Peterson, and the lawyer introduced the detective to the woman with the boys. She indicated her appreciation by offering her hand.

Claryce took her mother's hand after Mr. Peterson excused himself and led her to the choir, where she dabbed at her eyes and thanked them.

"I just want you to know how much this means to Claryce and me," she said.

chapter **13**

WITH THE SAME fluid motion that he threw a football or walked among his players on the practice field, Coach Henry Austin gently lifted his maroon baseball cap with one hand just far enough to slide the other hand beneath, settling the gray strands beginning to crop up like crabgrass in an otherwise neatly trimmed lawn of dense black hair, and then replaced the cap in exactly the same spot. The sun beating down while Rooster Ledbetter filled his car at the Grab was beginning to make him sweat.

Austin had been wary about taking the Shortridge High job from the start, and Rooster was one of the reasons.

“You’ve seen Wilson’s boy throw,” Rooster said, leaning against the gas pump as he let the last drops of another Blue roll down his throat. “You don’t have to be no football coach to know our boy’s better.”

Once again Austin ran his fingers through his hair and replaced the sweat-stained cap. Rooster was the third man on the Yard to pressure him about the quarterback issue this morning, and his defenses of Wilson were wearing thin. All the vague theories about

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the Comets' losing streak that had floated around town and the Yard had been talked to death: It takes awhile for two groups of players to jell, it takes awhile for a quarterback to mesh with new teammates, it takes awhile for two coaches to learn to work together. But it was the first year of school integration almost everywhere in the state.

"Ain't you takin' up for our boy?" Rooster continued, his voice taking an edge that Austin didn't like. "Why ain't our boy gettin' any practice time at QB? You lettin' that white sonofabitch Wilson walk all over you? Some of us been wonderin' if you aren't the real problem, Henry."

Austin could feel his muscles tense. He'd knocked out tougher men than Rooster. At Livingstone he'd floored his roommate, a kid from Asheville who played left tackle, with one punch. Rooster? He'd always been a slacker. That's why Austin had always played him on special teams at Booker T, or when the Maroons had a safe lead. Austin got in his Studebaker and closed the door.

"Sober up, Rooster," Austin said. "It's way too early in the mornin' for you to be drinkin'."

Driving away, Austin couldn't help but rethink how he got himself into this situation in the first place, taking the job as Larry Wilson's assistant. The blow to his pride had not made him hesitate. Going back to an assistant coaching position after twenty-two years as boss of his own team was unquestionably a step down. But he knew from the moment the integration plan was announced that he would not be named head coach of the Comets. Things didn't work like that in the real world.

From the time he was born in Statesville, he'd been subject to countless customs and laws about where he could eat, sleep, sit and go to school. They had yielded to the extent he could coach alongside Wilson this season in Railroad Park. But times were not so different that he could be Wilson's boss.

“It’s goin’ to be a level playin’ field,” Grampy Harvard had told the combined faculties of Shortridge and Booker T. Washington high schools in a meeting the previous spring. But it was Austin, not Wilson, who had to prove himself. What Austin knew the minute he heard the speech was that he and Mr. Harvard had different perspectives about what a level playing field was. For Mr. Harvard, it was level if Wilson and Austin stood in front of the same bench. For Austin it was level if his experience and championships were fairly considered alongside the five years Wilson had coached with mediocre results.

But Mr. Harvard’s view was the one that counted. It was one Austin had encountered all through his life. He had played against and beaten athletes in high school who went on to play college football at major schools like Minnesota and Ohio State in the Big Ten, places with integrated teams but white coaches. But the same NFL scouts who fawned over those players didn’t believe their stop watches when he ran a 4.4-second forty-yard dash because he had played for an all-black team in the South at a college founded by the A.M.E. Zion Church.

White coaches set the standards Austin had to reach for success, and for the playing field to be truly level, he had to be able to compete against them. Everything he’d done at Booker T carried an asterisk that denoted doubt. But he had suppressed his anger over that. He was fifty-four years old. Enough of his career was behind him that he had some satisfaction in it.

So Austin had accepted Wilson’s decree about quarterback without protest. He was getting the same money as Wilson, nearly eight thousand dollars a year including his work as a math teacher. The step he and his Booker T players had taken together just to get onto Shortridge’s playing field was a huge one.

Head coach? That would come later. Enduring a few years as an assistant wasn’t a bad tradeoff. By the time the itch for his own team grew urgent, public resistance to the idea should have sub-

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sided. Besides, all the faults he found with Wilson's leadership – the intimidation, bullying and self-importance – were common among the black coaches he'd worked with. He even had to admit that he could see some of his own early-career mistakes in Wilson's coaching style, mistakes that time and losing seasons of his own had corrected.

Yet the space between the Rooster Ledbetters and the Larry Wilsons of the world—the space where he thought he could function and be happy – was shrinking. If his mother's unexpected death hadn't given him an acceptable reason to be back in Statesville rather than missing a few Comets' practices, he may have had to invent an excuse to take a break and collect his thoughts.

But what he was about to do ate at him much more than Rooster had. For the Booker T players like Malachi Stevens, Darnell Wilson, Ronnie Tucker and others, this season wasn't a career highlight. It wasn't their crowning achievement. It was a starting point for lives that would have opportunities that he never had. That was the reason he'd supported integration. It was the reason men like Dr. King had marched, the reason men like Rufus Junior had died. These boys were entitled to start at the same place as Wilson's players.

Yet he was parking his car at the home of a player he would ask to surrender an opportunity he had dreamed about as a kid in Statesville. Rooster was right. He *wasn't* standing up for his boy. He was afraid. He had always carried that fear with him, and the murder reinforced it.

He remembered when Wilson came over to Booker T in July to speak with him and meet his players. Wilson had been blunt about quarterback.

He knew what Wilson was telling him: demanding what was fair was still asking for too much. That's what he was going to tell Malachi Stevens, the best quarterback he had ever coached.

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CHRIS FOCUSED on the white paper banner before him. Being the first to break through it was an opportunity he would not get again. Only senior players were entitled to lead the Comets through the banner before home games at Railroad Park, and Coach chose only one senior each game for that honor. Thursday nights before home games the cheerleaders met in the gym to make a new one from butcher paper, stapling it to a ten-foot square wooden frame and stenciling the giant star in silver and blue paint.

But after losing both of the season's first two games on the road, Chris felt his selection for the home opener against Uwharrie was as much a burden as an honor. Usually Coach waited until the last home game to send his quarterback through the banner. But when Coach announced his selection during the team's pre-game huddle at the goal post, he sounded desperate.

"We need this one in the worst way, men," he told the team while looking squarely at Chris. "The time to stop the bleedin' this season is right here, right now on this field."

Uwharrie was beatable; there was no doubt about that. The Mountaineers had opened their season two weeks before against Waccamaw and had to score in the last quarter to get a 7-7 tie. Northampton beat Uwharrie 21-0 last week. But with Claryce's father's murder and funeral, this had been a strange week. Coach Austin's absence and return had been overlooked in the distraction. Somewhere in all that, Harold Yates and Gary Shelton had quit coming to practice, and they were nowhere to found tonight. It was easier to ignore the BTW players who failed to show up. Chris still didn't know all their names, and he was deep into his pre-game mindset that denied what he could see with his own eyes during warm-ups.

As the team waited beneath the goal post for the Mountaineers to make their entry from the other end of the field, Shortridge's two coaches left to walk to the bench by themselves.

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“They haven’t been right all week,” Cam said. His radar for this kind of thing was more sensitive than Chris’, and he didn’t bring up things like this without good cause. But now wasn’t the time to get into it. The Mountaineers had made it to their bench and were pounding each other on their shoulder pads, working themselves into a frenzy, when a voice boomed out over the PA: “Here they come! Your Shortridge High School Comets!”

Chris timed his once-in-a-lifetime run perfectly. He hit the paper at the precise instant the band launched into “Fight on Shortridge,” and the crowd before him erupted into cheers while silver and blue confetti rained down from the press box where Matt Townsend stood, shaking his fist as if he were leading the charge himself.

But the theatrics were better than the game itself. Uwharrie had a 14-0 lead halfway through the second quarter, one touchdown coming on an interception that Chris could see coming before it happened. Darnell Wilson was running a square-out pattern toward the left sideline, and Chris was rolling that way when a spot of red appeared off to his right. He knew it was probably the Mountaineers’ cornerback closing down on Darnell, but his arm didn’t respond to the warning that registered in his brain. As the ball spiraled into the left flat – it would have caught up to Darnell perfectly just before he reached the sideline – the red spot materialized as Number 42, whose timing was also perfect. At the point Number 42 intercepted there was no one in the thirty yards between him and the Shortridge goal line. Chris’ lunging attempt at a tackle fell pathetically short.

“How could you throw that ball?” Cam screamed. It was the kind of question Cam had always saved for their workouts at the saw mill. He immediately recognized it was ill-timed and offered his hand to help Chris up from the turf. But Chris knew he’d lost some of Cam’s confidence. It meant he was playing one of his worst games ever.

In the second half, after the Comets' first two offensive series went nowhere, Chris huddled the team to start its third possession and called for an off-tackle run by Malachi. He hadn't been very successful running the ball all night, but this time, Malachi objected.

"They know we're goin' to run at 'em," he complained. "We've got to throw to get the pressure off."

Chris was mildly shocked at first. The Comets' huddle wasn't as strict as many teams where only the quarterback was allowed to speak. There was always a moment at the start while the team was coming together when players could suggest a play or tactic. Once Chris began speaking, though, discussion was supposed to halt. Time was precious, and it was the quarterback's job to call the play. Malachi had violated that procedure.

"Next play," Chris said after a pause, and then he called the off-tackle run again.

After a mere two-yard gain, Chris called a rollout pass to the right. As Fatback left the huddle and Chris prepared to repeat the call, Malachi spit out his mouthpiece. "I don't have to run any more of your damn plays," he said. "You're killin' us out here."

They glared at each other for a moment. No one in the huddle made a sound. Then Chris turned to the back judge and called time out. He jogged over to the sideline and asked Coach to sub Malachi out.

"What's wrong?" Coach Austin interrupted.

"He won't run my play." Chris left it at that, not wanting to get into detail and knowing he didn't need to. This was mutiny.

Austin reset the maroon baseball cap on his head. "Just a second," he said, and then stepped away from the players to confer privately with Wilson. After a moment, Austin called to Ronnie Tucker and motioned him into the game for Malachi. Malachi passed Chris as he jogged off the field without eye contact.

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The whistle finally blew to end the miserable game at 21-0. On her way to meet Cam, Sherry patted the sweat stain on the belly of Chris' blue home jersey. "Chin up," she said. "You'll get 'em next time."

But Chris wasn't paying attention. He muttered something in thanks, but his mind was on Malachi, who had never reentered the game. Something had happened that the state of denial he adopted for each game had blinded him to – something that explained why one of the team's best players missed most of a half though he wasn't injured, something that explained why Malachi, the one BTW player he had established some sort of normal connection with, had turned on him.

CAM AND Sherry were already at Susan's house, sitting in the front living room and going through some magazines, when Susan answered the door bell and greeted Chris with a hug. For the longest time she held him tight, standing under the front porch light with the side of her head buried in his chest. He brushed the hair out of her face and his fingertip crossed the path of a tear that had slowly migrated down her cheek.

"Cam told you how bad it was?"

"He told me about Malachi. They won't stick with you in the tough times," she said.

He paused and noted her anger. "Could I have one of those?"

Mrs. Marks had set out a tray of freshly toasted ham and cheese sandwiches for them on the marble-topped coffee table in front of her antique couch. Susan sat on the couch and Chris sat on the floor in front of her, his legs stretched out beneath the coffee table. He leaned back and pulled Susan's legs over his right shoulder. Her cool skin was soothing, and he unconsciously stroked her ankles and bare feet that lay against his chest.

He had never dated anyone like her, someone so easy to touch and hold yet so difficult to understand. Sometimes it was easy to

take her at her word that she wanted to break out of the life her parents had planned for her. Other times he wondered if she wanted him to remain with her in a futile grasp for the past – and if that would be such a bad thing if it meant they were together.

When Sherry started in about the prom, it was relief to know the conversation about the Uwharrie game was finished.

“Mama says they’re rentin’ Aladdin’s,” she said. “We’ll have a dinner, dance – everything.”

Aladdin’s was as exotic and grown-up as anything legal in Sandhills County. Chris had never been there, but he knew it was north of town, beyond the Yard and out in the woods. His parents used to go occasionally when he was younger. Monteenia would come over to fix his supper while they dined and danced. On the nights he stayed awake long enough, he remembered them coming home, his mother’s deep blue evening dress swishing and smelling of cigarettes.

“Aladdin’s a lot cooler than the gym,” Cam said. “It feels stupid bein’ in a tux with bleachers and backboards.”

Sherry cooed. The decorations she was imagining – well, they were beyond any words she could come up with to describe, but that didn’t stop her trying. Soon a room Chris had never seen began to materialize in his mind, the kind of European casino James Bond might visit for a few hands of baccarat before a candlelit dinner with the beautiful Russian spy: chandeliers, champagne, caviar and cleavage. The Uwharrie game was forgotten, replaced by Susan’s calf against his cheek and the vision of beyond-Shortridge sophistication that Sherry was describing.

“You make it sound like the movies,” he said. “Has Shortridge High ever had a party like you’re dreamin’ up?”

“There’s never been a party in this whole town like I’m dreamin’ up,” she said. “This is goin’ to be some serious big city jubilation’.”

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Sherry had achieved escape velocity. Susan, with all her mood swings, was a different kind of girl. As much fun as Sherry was, Chris wondered if so much uninterrupted enthusiasm might be fatiguing. Cam seemed to thrive on it, but Susan – at least when she wasn't in her dark moments – seemed to mesh better with Chris' own temperament. He preferred her companionship during low times like tonight, just being together, touching and relaxed.

"Big city," Susan said. "It'll be nice to get out of Shortridge for awhile, even if it's just make-believe. This town's a complete mess."

"It ought to be open to everybody," Sherry said.

"Cain't be," said Susan. "Not here. My parents are never changin'."

"Give 'em some time," Chris said.

He could feel Susan's fingers in his hair, straightening the part that sweat and his helmet had obliterated earlier in the evening. There was silence as she worked, and he nibbled on a new sandwich. He couldn't see her, but he could tell she was absorbed in her thoughts by the way she accomplished the tedious task of rearranging his hair strand by strand. She had moved from the crown of his head about a quarter of the way forward along the part when she spoke again, and when she started, her voice was barely above a whisper.

"Don't you ever tell Mama and Daddy I said this, but Shortridge has messed us all up. There's no way you cain't be if you live here."

"People will get used to integration after awhile," Sherry countered.

"You came from Jacksonville," Susan said. "You can lose yourself in a city. You can dress different 'cause there's other people like you to be with. Shortridge idn' like that. Your mama and daddy and all their friends will live down the street from you

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the rest of your life. Everything you want to do different is just like tellin' 'em they're wrong."

"Maybe you're bein' unfair," Chris said.

"You just don't do things that way," she replied. "You don't mess with family." She kept working on his hair. "It's the niggers' fault," she said finally. "They got out of their place and we've got to suffer."

chapter **14**

TUG PETERSON COULDN'T sleep. It was well past midnight, according to the glowing dial of his watch, nearly two hours since he'd gotten into his berth. Part of the reason, he was sure, was that he'd never taken a sleeper before.

"The motion will put you out," Miriam had promised. "It's the best night's sleep you'll ever get." But railroad people were a different breed. His wife had ridden on passes growing up. She didn't understand. The motion she described as so relaxing annoyed him, and occasionally the conductor, on one of his patrols down the length of the train, would enter the *St. Petersburg* from the noisy vestibule near his roomette and disturb his peace.

But there were other things on his mind that were equally responsible for keeping him awake, and all of them were related to the Pullman porter's murder. Most of the few murders he handled didn't require much investigation at all. Victims turned up in the parking lots of places that sold beer or in the bedrooms of people they weren't supposed to be with. If there weren't eyewitnesses,

there were people who knew enough about the secret life of the deceased to send him in a promising direction.

But no one had heard a shot the day Rufus Montgomery was blasted in the face. Nobody knew him to drink. As a traveling man, there was always the possibility of a spurned lover or unpaid loan shark in New York or Miami where he had layovers. He wouldn't be the first porter to get himself in trouble like that. But Peterson had turned up nothing so far.

The civil rights motive offered the most potential. At least that's what Lee McCaslin believed. Just getting a call from the local state legislator about a murder up on the Yard was enough to mark this case as unusual from the start. But McCaslin's theory hadn't produced any more than his checks in New York or Miami. Montgomery had pressed the school board on integration for years, but there had never been public demonstrations in Shortridge, and school board meetings had never made much news. Other than the board members, Wade Marks and Balk Clayton, who owned the Witch's Hat, it was hard to find a white person in town who'd ever heard of Rufus Montgomery.

In addition, there weren't the kind of Ku Klux Klan crazies around who so often turned up as suspects in Mississippi or Alabama. Grampy Harvard had argued with Montgomery at school board meetings, and he had a violent streak. Blowing up the dam was evidence of that. But Grampy was deep sea fishing out of Wrightsville Beach the day of the murder and had a motel receipt and confirmation from Capt. Tommy Juell's boat to prove it.

Wade Marks was out of town that day, too. He owned shot-guns and had a reputation as hot-headed. But Peterson had checked around after leaving the Pit Stop the day of the funeral, and Marks had flown down to Lake Mattamuskeet to look at some bird dogs early on the morning Montgomery was killed. Just today Peterson had received a photostat of a receipt from Esso Avitat at the Hyde County Airport showing they pumped thirty gallons of

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110-octane avgas into a Cessna 182, registration number N9083K, and Wade Marks' signature was on it.

But the thing Peterson's mind came back to most often was the conversation he'd had with Maddy Montgomery's sister, Erlene Clifton, after the porter's funeral.

"They did the same thing to my Frank," she told him after the graveside service. "Killed him in the livin' room with a shotgun. Two brothers-in-law, two Pullman men, four months apart."

Peterson's round-trip ticket on the *Silver Meteor* cost more than a hundred dollars, but he was sure there was something in New York he needed to know about. And after telling Sammy Preslar why he wanted to go, the police chief had personally gone down to the station to buy the ticket.

MALACHI KNEW he was invisible among the pines. He had worn dark clothes to make sure, but Chris and Cam's preoccupation with themselves as they passed the football and ran up and down the parking lot at the saw mill helped. The steep hillside where he sat, his back braced against a fallen pine trunk, elevated him above the yellowed field of wood chips where they ran their pass patterns. It was a better viewing angle than sitting on the bench at Railroad Park a few games ago.

Angry as he'd been, Coach Austin had been right about one thing: It was better to be on the field in an unfamiliar position than not playing at all. He owed Coach Austin because Coach had intervened with Wilson and saved him from going through the humiliation of rejoining the team that Fatback had had to endure.

But that wasn't what made his mouth so dry now. He slipped forward from the tree trunk, sliding quietly downhill on his butt over the slippery pine straw to one of the larger trees that still gave him cover.

Chris and Cam were at opposite ends of the parking lot now, punting back and forth to give themselves a rest from running pass

patterns. They were talking about their girlfriends and the movie they'd see tonight before going to the Caboose. When they moved to the far end of the parking lot to resume pass patterns, Malachi was able to slip farther down the hill, concealing himself behind a tree right at the edge of the wood chips. He was running out of cover, but he needed to be as close as possible.

Chris held the football and called signals to an imaginary center while Cam waited for the snap count. On "two," Chris dropped back with the ball and Cam sprinted along the near edge of the parking lot almost directly toward the place where Malachi was hiding. But Cam wasn't looking forward; he was looking back toward Chris over his right shoulder as Chris launched a spiraling pass.

The trajectory was a bit low for the distance. As the ball began to fall back toward earth, Cam had no time to run under it for the catch. The ball streaked just forward of Cam, grazing his fingertips before hitting the wood chips and skittering ahead while he misstepped, lost balance and tumbled.

This was Malachi's opportunity. Stepping quickly stepping out of the trees, he sprinted toward the bouncing ball.

"Hey!" Cam yelled. "Who're ..."

But Malachi had already scooped up the ball and interrupted him. "Go long," he told Cam, who was brushing the sticky chips from his T-shirt.

Cam stood still for a minute as if he didn't recognize Malachi at first. Then, without saying a word, he turned and began a three-quarter-speed run back down the parking lot. Malachi flicked a looping spiral that seemed to float downfield, finally dropping and hitting Cam's upraised palm – a TV-quality pass.

"*You're* the quarterback!" Chris yelled from the other end of the parking lot. It was exactly the reaction Malachi expected.

"Three years on the varsity," Malachi answered. "Last ..."

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“Asshole!” Chris yelled. “You’re a one hundred percent US-DA Grade A asshole. I thought we got all this behind us on the bus.”

They were standing together in the middle of the parking lot now, Chris seething righteousness to which Malachi was sympathetic. “Just cool it a minute,” Malachi said. “Coach wouldn’t let us ...”

“Coach wouldn’t do that,” Chris responded sharply. “He’s as hard on me in the Monday Matinees as anybody else, and you know it.”

“Not Wilson. Austin. He said everybody had to prove himself, and we couldn’t complain. But quarterback was different. He told me to forget about it.”

“Why?” Chris asked, still angry.

This was the question Malachi didn’t want to deal with. But from the moment he decided to walk to the saw mill today, he knew he had to commit to answering it. His mouth was drier than ever.

“Quarterback’s the boss,” Malachi said. “Coach said Wilson wouldn’t let a colored player be boss.”

Malachi kept his eyes glued on Chris. He wasn’t trying to be confrontational; he just needed to gauge his teammate’s reaction, and what he saw was hard to interpret. Chris maintained a stare straight into his eyes that could be a prelude to a fight, but might also be a cover-up to humiliation. Malachi dared not glance away if Chris’ fists were clenched. That’s why Chris’ swing caught him squarely on his left cheekbone.

“Chris!” Cam yelled, but Malachi had already responded with a lunge that missed. His momentum carried him into a collision, and Chris fell backward trying to avoid the punch. Malachi landed on top of him and this time, with Chris pinned against the ground, his right to Chris’ jaw struck home.

As Malachi cocked for another blow, Cam grabbed him from behind and pinned his arms to his sides. "Lemme go!" he yelled, but Cam held fast, dragging him far enough away that Chris had a moment to recover and rub his jaw. Malachi was ready to defend himself by kicking, but his one punch seemed to have been solid enough to give Chris pause, even if he was outnumbered.

Chris got to his feet and stood there, his chest heaving, his eyes glued on Malachi's. But he didn't move forward like he wanted to continue the fight, and after a long moment, Cam relaxed grip a bit and Malachi was able to shrug him off.

"You've been waitin' a long time for that, haven't you?" Chris asked.

But he hadn't come for an argument, just acknowledgment. "I wouldn't have sat with you on the bus if all I wanted was to pick a fight. You know it's not right what happened."

Chris was quiet, still trying to catch his breath. Malachi couldn't read his thoughts. Cam did.

"He's not your enemy, Malachi."

"What am I supposed to do?" Chris finally asked. "You want me to go to Coach and tell him to put you in? Would a colored boy do that for you?"

"I'm not askin' you to do anything for me," Malachi responded. "I came here 'cause I wanted to tell you why I got mad in the Uwharrie game. I'm not a quitter. You'd've been pissed, too."

Chris was beginning to catch his breath, and his expression seemed to soften. "I'm goin' to talk to Coach," he said. "This idn' fair."

Malachi hadn't allowed himself to consider the possibility of this answer. But his response was instinctive.

"That'd get me up shit creek with Coach quicker than anything. I'm not goin' to play quarterback, Chris. I don't like it, but it's not worth it. It dudn' take too much to piss off some redneck."

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“I just don’t get it,” Chris said. “You sound like Varick at the funeral. You got school integration. Civil rights is all over the news. Colored people are winnin’. What’re y’all so scared of?”

Malachi knew where he wanted to go with the conversation now. “You ever heard of lynchin?”

“A bunch of people go crazy and hang somebody.”

“You know anybody who’s been lynched?”

“Course not.”

“Well everybody I know knows somebody who got lynched, or knows somebody who knew somebody who got lynched. What happened to Mister Montgomery was lynchin’ without a rope. You don’t know what it’s like when somebody wants your kind dead.”

Cam plopped the football back in Malachi’s hands. “Don’t be shittin’ us, Malachi. You talk about bein’ colored like it’s a huge deal. This is Shortridge, North Carolina, not Birmin’ham, Alabama.”

They would never understand. They only lived in their world. He lived in his and theirs.

“If somebody knifed your daddy at the Pit Stop, you think the police would try to find out who did it?” Malachi asked them.

“That’s what police do,” Cam replied.

“Well maybe it was their day off when my daddy got stabbed.”

As he began to describe what had happened at the Grab three months before he was born, he realized it was the first time he’d ever expressed any sympathy for his father, even if only in a roundabout way. Daddy was drunk, after all. Everybody who had known him said he’d been drinking that afternoon. Even so, friends wondered why he’d gotten belligerent with the white man filling his pickup. Just how drunk did a lone black man have to be to get into an argument with three white guys coming back from bird hunting? And even if his father was cussing a blue streak, he was unarmed and hardly a threat.

“He never had a chance,” Malachi found himself saying, as much surprised that he had these feelings as he was embarrassed to be revealing them to teammates he still wasn’t sure he could trust.

“We need a play,” Chris said. “Somethin’ we draw up ourselves that nobody knows about. I want Malachi to show what he can do.”

chapter **15**

MRS. MARKS WAS intent on her knitting, and Chris was amused by her concentration. Nothing in her demeanor revealed an awareness of the vibration that shook the back seat where she and Chris sat elbow-to-elbow in the tiny cabin. Nothing that flashed past on the ground outside – clumps of grass, the runway lights mounted on their yellow stalks – distracted her eyes from each stitch of blue yarn.

She was obviously nervous as hell.

Susan pushed the throttle ball steadily toward the control panel. The landing gear’s tap dance over the rough turf and the growl of the engine slowly synchronized into a more pleasant harmony.

“Keep a strong right rudder, Sweetie,” her father shouted above the noise from the right front seat.

Chris turned his eyes to the wall of pine trees in the rapidly approaching distance.

“Sixty knots, Sweetie. Ease back a little on the yoke.”

She pulled the plane’s wheel toward her slightly, and the nose lifted, blocking the trees from Chris’ view.

“Seventy. Stay on that right pedal. Little more back pressure on the yoke.”

The plane’s trajectory gently veered toward the right, and an instant later the landing gear ceased its jitterbug.

“Good angle right there, Sweetie. Roll the trim back until you don’t feel any more pressure in the yoke. It’ll climb all by itself.”

The grass runway at Shortridge Airpark dropped away rapidly, and Chris could see downtown carved out of the pine forest through the milky haze of a mid-October morning. Beyond town, the Seaboard yard spread away from him, its polished rails glistening. There was the high school not far from the station, and across the street was Railroad Park, where the chalk lines of the gridiron on which the Silver Cats had lost last night were mixed with mud.

The game had been unusual because of the way the fans had finally broken through Chris’ veil of self-delusion. He’d been tackled out of bounds in front of the home bleachers, and while clearing mud and grass from his face mask, a group of black students along the sideline chain taunted him about an interception. “Malachi’s not a loser,” one of them had yelled.

It had been easy enough avoiding confrontation with the hecklers – apparent deafness to fans was a skill he perfected long ago – but the chant echoed in his mind for the remainder of the game. The Cessna’s roar drew him back from the night before.

“Head three four zero,” Mr. Marks was saying. “Once we get up around three thousand we’ll start picking up Greensboro on the VOR.”

Mrs. Marks seemed less absorbed by her knitting now, occasionally willing to steal a glance at the pilot. As the altimeter needle approached four thousand feet, the occasional bumps disappeared and the sky outside went from milky white to crystalline blue. To the west, the sharply defined upper boundary of the haze layer they had just climbed through was broken by the jagged green line of the Appalachians.

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“OK, Sweetie,” Mr. Marks said. “Throttle back to twenty-four hundred r.p.m. and level off at sixty-five hundred.”

The roar of the engine subsided and Mr. Marks turned back toward Chris. “She’s a natural-born pilot. One of these days Mary Kathryn’s going to realize it and let Amelia Earhart here get her certificate.”

“Stop it, Wade,” Mrs. Marks said as Susan laughed. “I’m as proud of Susan’s flying as you are.”

“Sometimes you act like the most important thing for a girl to learn is how to look pretty.”

Mrs. Marks refocused on her knitting. “This is serious.”

Mr. Marks turned back to Chris. “I’m more used to bein’ up in these things than Mary Kathryn. My daddy taught me to fly when I was her age.” Then he changed the subject. “What’s going on with the Comets? Heard a bunch of players have quit.”

“I try not to pay too much attention to quitters and stuff. I just play the game.”

“Chris scored a touchdown last night, Daddy,” Susan said. “It was their only score of the game.”

“Really?” Mr. Marks said. “What happened?”

Chris recounted the second-half kickoff that hit the return player in the chest, bounced off the ground and straight into his hands. He had a clear path into the end zone.

“So there’s still no offense then.”

Mr. Marks had a way of turning every conversation into something Chris wanted no part of. But he’d accepted the risk when he accepted Susan’s invitation to fly up to her grandmother’s in Virginia. “No, sir,” he said. “We just couldn’t get anything goin’.”

“Too many niggers,” Marks said. “I wonder how Carolina’s doin’.” He reached for a dial on the instrument panel and in a few seconds, an announcer’s voice was complaining from the overhead speaker about a holding penalty against the Tar Heels, who were trailing Virginia 10-0 in the first quarter.

“There is a god,” Mrs. Marks said, looking up from her knitting again. “Go Wahoos!”

“Damn niggers,” Mr. Marks mumbled. “I’ll bet UVa’s not playin’ any.”

Chris’ anger kicked in faster than his fear of Mr. Marks. “Everybody knows what Carolina’s goin’ to do on offense. All they do is run the tailback up the middle ’cause Bomar cain’t throw a pass.”

Mr. Marks spun around in his seat, startling Susan at the controls.

“Don’t, Wade!” Mrs. Marks yelled.

He held his tongue. But there was no mistaking the ferocity Chris saw in his eyes.

“It’s football, Daddy. It’s just football.”

Mr. Marks turned back toward the instrument panel and snapped off the play-by-play in mid-sentence. Except for his occasional piloting advice, no one spoke again in the cabin until Susan radioed Roanoke Approach Control about twenty miles from Woodrum Field.

Within thirty minutes of Susan’s one-bounce touchdown, Mr. Marks was driving the rental car through the red-leaved October dogwoods up a gravel road on the flank of a low mountain ridge. At the top, he turned left into a short driveway that led to a house whose gently sloping roof was even with the top of the ridge. It was a low, modern design of stone. When the nurse answered the door and led them inside, two-story tall windows looked out on the fiery autumn colors of the forested valley behind the house. She led them from the entry level down slate stairs into the large room, which had a stone fireplace at the end.

“Miz Randolph has been so excited you were coming,” she said. “I’ll bring her right out.”

Mrs. Marks accompanied the nurse down a hallway, while Mr. Marks flicked on the TV and found the Carolina-UVa game with just a couple of minutes remaining. He sat at one end of a long, L-

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shaped sofa and complained about black players not trying hard enough because their uniforms weren't muddy.

"Is that disgustin' or what?" he said, slamming his hand into the seat cushion.

Susan's body tensed next to him, but Chris held his tongue, focusing on the television while the game's final moments ticked away.

Mr. Marks sat with his hands clenched in his lap, his jaw rigid, and then reached into the breast pocket of his shirt for a Chesterfield.

"Ooh, what I wouldn't give for one of those."

Mrs. Randolph's voice was gravelly and faint, as was the cough that followed it. Mrs. Marks, a beaming smile across her face, steered the wheelchair over the rugs on the slate floor and into the area enclosed by the sofa. Susan got up to hug the thin, frail woman with immaculately coifed white hair. She had on a pale, silk dress and was almost buried beneath an afghan of multi-shaded blues and greens.

"You look so pretty, Mimi," Susan gushed, her voice an octave higher than normal. "That's always been my favorite dress. Daddy, didn't Mimi look great?"

"I'm sorry it's been so long since our last visit, Miz Randolph. It's been hectic around the store."

"Taxes will be the death of all of us," she said. She was about to continue, but she paused to retrieve a small paper cup hidden by the arm rest of her wheelchair. When she put it to her lips, she coughed weakly, then again with more force, before setting the cup down again and dabbing at her mouth with a tissue. "Susan, is this your beau?"

Chris, who had stood with Susan, stepped over to her side so her grandmother could see him better as she introduced him.

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“McAndrew,” she said, looking him over while he imagined she was assessing his lineage from that last name. “McAndrew. Welcome to our mountain. Chris or Christian?”

“Christopher, ma’am, but everybody calls me Chris.” He shook her extended hand. It was cool, weak and limp. “It comes from my mama’s side.” His mother’s people, he told her, were from Georgia, around Warm Springs, and they had sold peaches to the Roosevelts during their stays there. He thought he caught a hint of a scowl at that anecdote, but Mrs. Randolph quickly changed the subject.

“We’re going to have a nice meal here in a few minutes,” she said. “My Dorothy’s done a beautiful ham, and I believe it’s nice enough to eat out on the deck today. Mary Kathryn, if you’d wheel me out there, and ask Grace to bring me a new cup.”

Dorothy was just finishing the table settings as they filed onto the stone balcony, which was bathed in warm afternoon sunlight. When the sun began to fall behind the ridge across the valley, the temperature would quickly drop. “I’m so happy we can eat out here one more time this year,” Mrs. Randolph said.

Along the higher ridge to the west, some of the dogwoods were already naked, but as Chris looked along the flanks of the mountains the reds and oranges of trees in the last throes of autumn ecstasy were brilliant in the sun. Here and there along the valley floor were fields that still wore the scraggly beard of harvested corn.

“The view’s fantastic, Miz Randolph,” he said. “I can see why you like to eat out here.”

“My father always loved this place,” she said. “He used to come up here after the tobacco was in and shoot turkey. Many’s the time I’d come along. That was a long time before the house. We camped back then.”

Susan’s mother, who was beginning to fork slices of ham onto her china plate from the platter Dorothy carried, said “Mama didn’t

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fit in with all the Randolphs. They were Tidewater people, but she always liked it up here. Got it from my grandfather. They just liked the mountains.”

The ham slices were almost thin as paper and delicious.

“Have some more, sir.” Dorothy, the silent and removed member of the party kept a close watch on the meal, and Chris accepted her offer.

“This is delicious in a hot biscuit on a cold morning,” Mrs. Randolph said. “I’ll send you home with some, Chris.”

Then she turned her attention to her son-in-law. Part of the reason Mr. Marks deferred to her had to be the way she was familiar with every detail of the operation of the Pit Stop, grilling him about bookkeeping details and whether the parking lot needed re-paving.

“Mother,” Mrs. Marks said defensively at one point, “Wade’s really done a lot with the business this year. You should be proud of him.”

Mrs. Randolph looked silently at her daughter for a moment, then turned to Mr. Marks and said “I never meant to imply you weren’t doing well. Mary Kathryn has bragged on you several times, as she always does.”

The meal was concluded with apple pie made from fruit picked down the slope behind the house, and the Markses wound up the visit as the sun set fire to the western ridge.

“We’ll be back Thanksgiving’, Miz Randolph,” Marks said. “I ’spect Dorothy will do her turkey?”

“Yes, sir,” she answered from nearby, where she had maintained her invisible vigil.

The air was taking on a fall chill as they walked out to the car, and by the time Mr. Marks had returned it to the Hertz lot, Venus and a crescent moon were sharp lights in the deepening sky. Mr. Marks took the pilot’s seat and his wife sat in the front beside him. Susan reached over the rear seatback and retrieved a plaid stadium

blanket from the baggage hold, draping it across both Chris and herself, and by the time the runway lights had begun to fall away, she was snuggled under his left arm.

“Gets cold at night in the plane,” she said, her voice shielded from her parents by the roar of the engine. “Mimi and Papa didn’t know Daddy’s people, and he didn’t have much to his name when he was young. Mama made them put up with him.”

Chris leaned down to hear more of her story. What was the deal with a Georgia nobody marrying into the Randolphs? But Susan’s pause stretched into minutes of silence. In the warmth they shared under the blanket, her breathing had settled into the slowness of sleep.

A MANILA envelope lay in the middle of the McAndrews’ kitchen table, the only room with a light still on when Chris got home. It was addressed to him from Thomas Robertson of the Seaboard Airline Railroad and it carried the Seaboard’s herald with the red heart. Inside was a small paper-bound volume with the Seaboard herald on the dark red cover entitled “Operating Rules for Conductors, Trainmen and Engineers.”

The accompanying letter was brief, explaining that his spinal x-rays had been negative and that he had been accepted for probationary training as a trainman. “As you are a graduating high school student,” the letter said, “you are requested to register for yard and road training on the Shortridge Terminal Extra board and to inform the Call Clerk of your availability during weekends and school holidays in preparation for work assignment upon completion of your studies in June.”

Chris pulled out a chair and sat down. He leafed through the rule book with its pages of color diagrams of signal aspects and their meanings and then reread the letter. He had dreamed of receiving it since the day at the Witch’s Hat when he watched the downtown switcher. But that was last spring, staring into a lazy

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summer. This was the middle of a football season filled with problems to solve and self-doubt about his ability to handle it.

Working for the Seaboard was the last requirement for full Shortridge citizenship. Even Daddy had spent a year on the Seaboard after the war before going to work at the post office. Playing for the Comets was also one of those requirements, but in a few weeks, football would be over, and all that would remain in earning his freedom would be working on the railroad.

JON-FRANKLIN Cooper was an artist and musician in a town of railroad men and football fans. He was a gourmet in a crowd of barbecue-and-cole-slaw palates, a silk shirt among T-shirts. He wasn't expected to fit in because in Shortridge there was no place where he could. But that freed him from the fear of nonconformity that imprisoned so many in town, and he understood and exploited that.

When he plopped himself down beside Chris in a vacant wooden rocker behind the Caboose – normally the preserve of senior boys who perched there, Blues in hand, to talk sex and Comets football – he was Jon-Franklin, not Mr. Cooper. Out of place was his natural habitat.

“I've got an idea,” he said, setting his beer on the low concrete barrier that separated them from the parking lot. “This town's quiet. Way too quiet. Somebody ought to set the tongues waggin'.”

Jon-Franklin liked imitating Patricia's drawn-out accent at the Pit Stop because clowning put people at ease. He pulled a fresh pack of Salems out of his pocket and opened the seal.

“You mean people aren't complainin' enough about the football team?” Chris asked.

“Come on, Christopher. You need to get yourself out of that funk of yours. There's more than the football team for Shortridge to talk about.”

“Gimme a for-instance.”

“How ’bout sleepin’ together?” Beer cans plinked down atop the wall all along the row, and a smile spread across his face now that he knew he had everyone’s attention. “You know, how are we goin’ to keep the girls and boys apart on a trip like that?”

“A trip like what?” Cam asked.

“The glee club tour.” Jon-Franklin said it like it was routine. But the glee club had never gone anywhere and this year wasn’t the year to start. “Sing some concerts, see a play, do the Statue of Liberty, Empire State Building ...”

“I don’t have that kind of money,” Malachi said from the curb boys’ bench at the other end of the Caboose’s patio.

“Raising the money won’t be a problem,” Jon-Franklin said. “We’ll make some money at the Christmas concert in a couple of months. A company in Charlotte is going to tape it and make records for us to sell. And the railroad is interested.”

“Free train tickets?” Malachi asked.

“Mr. Warfield sounded very interested when I told him,” Jon-Franklin said.

Everybody in Shortridge knew Wallace Warfield was president of the Seaboard, but it wasn’t like he was a regular visitor from Richmond. “He came down for Daddy’s funeral,” Jon-Franklin explained without prompting. “He was in New York a lot when I was there. He saw every play I ever worked on. Always sent a note in advance and visited backstage.”

“It’s a great idea, Mr. Cooper,” Chris said, “but we cain’t even have a football dance. Who’s goin’ to let us go to New York?”

“If the railroad thinks it’s a good idea, the school board will go along.”

“And the parents?” Chris persisted.

“Some will like it, some won’t. I already talked to your daddy, so don’t worry about it.”

chapter **16**

PRACTICES WERE ALWAYS different and more fun during the week leading into the Northampton game. As unsuccessful as the Comets had been against their arch-rivals during Chris' lifetime – and certainly in part because of the losing streak – the game's importance had grown to the point that it always overshadowed the nine games that preceded it each fall. No matter how poorly a season had gone to that point for Shortridge High, victory over Northampton could erase every mistake and set the season right. That was the hope that invigorated the team and the town.

Northampton week practices were the ones when the special plays were put into the game plan – the fake punts, double reverses and on-side kicks that lifted football strategy from X-and-O drudgery to wild fun. It was the week that silver and blue bunting hung along the eaves of the Seaboard station from the Witch's Hat all the way around the rotunda to the Railway Express office at the end of the other wing. It was the week Mr. Marks covered the cigarette billboard out by the interstate with the Go Comets banner even if he no longer went to the games.

Northampton had won seven of its nine games so far. The Tigers' conference championship was in hand and so was their state playoff invitation. They had sixty players who dressed out in orange and black every Friday night, and undoubtedly every one of them would get to play this week in Railroad Park.

But Chris' mood – everyone's it seemed – had been upbeat since he first entered the dressing room beneath the gym to put on his pads. As he sat there on his wooden bench pulling on his cleats, he noted the cluster of empty dressing stalls in the center of the room. Fatback Haliburton was retying the laces on the back of Malachi's shoulder pads and then whacked him on his fanny.

On the practice field there were only thirteen Comets. Chris made himself count as they warmed up with calisthenics. Before him were two rows of six players each. Their ranks didn't stretch from sideline to sideline as they had in August, as his mind had insisted, all evidence to the contrary. Self-deception couldn't survive nine straight losses.

Ronnie Tucker had been missing for a couple of weeks, and some of his friends and Chris' had dropped out along the way as well. Malachi was on defense because Coach had taken half the team in the offensive huddle and moved them across the line of scrimmage. Nobody lined up to Chris' left as the team came out for the next play in a power-I right formation. Everyone on the left side of the formation had been moved to defense, and Chris was calling only plays that went to his right. It was the only way they could practice. Midway through, Coach swapped the players so that Chris could run all the Comets' plays to the left side.

"A six-man defense makes you look good," Malachi joked to Chris as they stood in the spigot line at the end of practice. "You were sharp."

"It felt different," Chris said. Their brief fight at the saw mill had been a good thing. Malachi was regularly meeting him and Cam there on weekends. "I thought it was the cool weather – eve-

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rybody had more energy today – but I don't think that was all of it. We've barely got enough players for a game – the *Northampton* game – but everything was still snappy. You notice that?"

"We had fifteen last week, Chris. Twenty against Chatham. You been payin' attention?" Cam was laughing. Most of the players in the short line were.

"Stuff like that might turn into an excuse," Chris answered.

"There's excuses, and there's reality," Fatback chimed in. "We've got just enough boys to go out there Friday and get our butts kicked. Everybody's already figured that out, even Wilson. He ain't mentioned Vietnam in three weeks."

CHRIS HADN'T spoken with Wanda Harvard since the lake, and it surprised him when she answered the door at Grampy's house. She lived farther down what had been the lake shore where the cypress trees now stood bare and dying, their roots exposed to the sun. She was excited to see him.

"We're goin' to beat Northampton, Chris!" she said as if she were picking up in the middle of an ongoing conversation. "This is the year."

Bless her. Wanda was a true believer in anything he was part of.

"It might take a miracle this year."

"Oh, Chris," she gushed, "miracles are nothin' for you."

She invited him in from the porch to Grampy's huge living room with the couches arranged on the hardwood floor around the perimeter of the large burgundy and gray rug. The Harvards needed lots of seating at Christmastime.

"I've got the perfect thing for a Christmas present," he said, telling her about the glee club's album. "I figured Grampy might buy one."

Wanda was sure he would, and she asked Chris to wait while she went to the back of the house to get him. Chris explored the

room while he waited. Its walls were covered with pictures of Harvard family gatherings on the decks of their vacation houses in Massachusetts and at Holden Beach on the North Carolina coast. There were lots of babes in arms, unruly dogs scampering across the deck planking and sunburned adults with drinks in their hands.

Grampy entered still wearing the tan alpaca sweater in which he'd played golf that afternoon and invited Chris to the rear of the house. He was smoking a well-chewed cigar, and when the smoke swirled in front of his face, his bulging goldfish eyes involuntarily blinked in protest. But the aroma didn't completely disguise the whiskey he'd been sipping at the back-room fireplace while his golf shoes dried on the brick hearth.

"Want a Coke or somethin'?" Grampy retrieved a short bottle from the refrigerator and poured it over some ice in an old fashioned glass like the one he was drinking from. "Have a seat, son."

He wanted to complain about his golf game for a few minutes, and Chris knew that he couldn't rush the conversation. He commiserated with Grampy about the difficulty of the country club's eighteenth hole. Then Grampy went on for awhile about the cooler weather and how it made his hands hurt when he played. Maybe he'd call it quits for the winter and wait until March to go out again. The club needed to get some work done on the greens, and on and on until all of a sudden he ran out of golf talk.

"So Peanut tells me you're sellin' somethin' for the glee club?"

"Yessir, we're sellin' Christmas albums to raise money for our New York trip."

"A trip. Think that's a good idea, do you?"

"Yessir." The question made Chris nervous, but he pushed on. "Everybody's all excited about New York. Cam McCauley's the only one who's ever been."

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Grampy chewed on his cigar a bit and took another sip of amber liquid. "I mean do you think Shorridge is ready for us and the niggers to do somethin' together like that?"

Grampy didn't have any grandchildren in the glee club but he was on the school board, so Chris had figured he'd be supportive of a school project with the railroad behind it, especially after ten weeks of integration and no incident of any kind at school.

"Things are goin' fine," Chris answered. He tried to say it as assertively as he could.

"We have things pretty much under control, troublewise," Grampy said. "But you're on the football team. You know how bad that's been. You think the Comets would be oh-and-nine if y'all were white? Damn near everybody's quit this year, which tells me they didn' want to be out there together in the first place."

Chris admitted the team was lousy, but Grampy wasn't interested in hearing why.

"I know it's been tough on you boys," he continued. Chris tried again to respond, but Grampy held up his hand. He wanted the floor for awhile. "It's no fun goin' out there week after week and losin'. I know that. I feel for y'all – all of y'all – but 'specially you, Chris, 'cause it was your turn to be quarterback. If I could've done anything to keep this from happenin', I would've done it. But Washin'ton – once they make up their minds to screw things up, it's hard to stop 'em. They're goin' to be our ruination."

When the pause stretched long enough for Chris to feel he'd been left an opening, he tried to reassure Grampy and suggest the glee club trip was an opportunity to do something well.

"Son," Grampy began in an ominous tone, "I don't think you're gettin' my point. I've been followin' you since you first worked for me at the lake. You're a good boy, Chris. You were good to my Peanut. But you're a senior now. Pretty soon you'll be goin' off to college. You're startin' to make some decisions for yourself about where you stand and who you stand with."

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Chris wasn't sure where Grampy was going with this, but it seemed his chances of selling a record were shrinking every time Grampy said something. He tried to squeeze in a "but ..." and was waved off by Grampy again.

"You kids are goin' to have a great time out at Aladdin's. That's the kind of thing y'all ought to be workin' on. That's showin' appreciation for the folks lookin' out for you."

"Sir?"

"What's a Yankee queer like Jon-Franklin ever done for this town?"

Nobody ever called Mr. Cooper queer out loud.

"He got the Seaboard to chip in on our trip," Chris countered. "He talked to Mr. Warfield personally. It'll say somethin' good about Shortridge when our choir sings in New York."

"Son, you've still got a lot to learn. It's not your fault. It's people like me. We didn' raise you kids to appreciate loyalty. We tried to be too nice, tried to shield you from a lot of things hopin' you'd never have to know, and it was a mistake."

"What are you talkin' about, Grampy?"

"We're white, Chris. We're s'posed to look out for each other. When things get tight, you think a nigger's goin' to look out for you? Protect you? Hell no. A nigger will quit on you the first sign of trouble like they did on the Comets."

"White players quit too," Chris objected.

"Don't backtalk me, son." Grampy was leaning forward now, and his hands were shaking. "I've been to bat many a time for boys like you," he said, pointing a crooked finger at Chris. "Proud to've done it. Proud. Gave you a lake to swim in, gave you jobs in the summertime. You're still quarterback today 'cause I wouldn' let Wilson give your position away. I've done stuff for this town you'll never know – don't need to know. I'm not askin' for a thank-you, but you need to learn some respect."

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This was why Mama always feared Grampy and why he was the most powerful man in town. This unsolicited, possibly made-up intercession on his behalf with Coach was supposed to make him feel indebted the way keeping Mama's secret had.

But he refused to feel indebted.

It was difficult enough trying to control himself and subdue the trembling caused by the anger filling his body that Grampy would interpret as fear. Grampy and Coach both had built themselves into heroes on the ruins of people they belittled. He hadn't asked for anyone's help in playing quarterback. He never asked Grampy for anything but a lifeguard job, and that debt had been repaid. Wanda could swim.

Chris stood. "You blew up the lake," he said. "Nobody owes you anything."

He left with the utter shock on Grampy's face burned into his mind as a satisfying memory. He was about to back out of the driveway when a knock on the car window caused him to turn around. It was Wanda with his album order pad; he had left it in the house.

"Daddy will buy one," she said. Then, so quickly that he didn't realize what was happening, she kissed him on the cheek.

TUG PETERSON was going through the piles on his desk at the police station when the phone rang. He would have already been out the door but he couldn't find the funeral home pad with the grocery list. The poor connection tipped him immediately that it was a long distance call.

"We know who did the Pullman porter." It was David Thorn, the NYPD detective he'd dealt with on his trip a few weeks back.

"It was the spaghetti guy, wadn' it? I cain't pronounce the name."

"Bevilacqua. Joe Bevilacqua. We took your suggestion and got the list of reservations from Penn Station to Shortridge for the

few days before your murder. There were only two people who made that trip the whole week, and Bevilacqua was one. We knew then. He got to town the day before Montgomery was killed and returned on the *Silver Meteor* that night.”

The grocery list was under the edge of the blotter, exactly where he'd put it so it wouldn't get lost. Eggs, milk and bacon. Bacon was underlined. Miriam really loved the new stuff.

“Damn,” Tug said. “I bet I saw him at the station that night. You reckon he did the dining car chef, too?”

“Yeah,” Thorn said. “He delivered to the Pullman commissary at Sunnyside. He had to have known everybody who worked through there. A guy matching his description was seen in Clifton's apartment building the day of the Brooklyn murder. The same guy's in Shortridge the day your porter was murdered. Both were shotgunned.”

“What's Spaghetti say?”

“We haven't talked to him yet. The feds are worried we might screw up their investigation.”

“They've been workin' that cigarette deal forever,” Tug complained. “Frank Clifton worked New York-Chicago. That didn't fit a cigarette smugglin' operation.”

“Clifton originally tipped us off about it. Word probably got back to the people Bevilacqua worked for.”

Tug thought for a moment. “You mean my porter got killed because he was involved in cigarette smugglin'? Not civil rights?”

“Didn't say that. You know Marks better than me. If he wanted your porter gone, he could've had people up here do the job.”

Meeting Erlene Clifton at the Pullman porter's funeral had alerted him to the possibility that this killing might not be a racial murder. But learning who killed Rufus Montgomery hadn't settled the question of motive.

“We need to talk to Spaghetti.”

chapter **17**

THE THREE OF them sat together at the table – Chris and his father sawing on their steaks and Monteenia with two biscuits and coffee – talking excitedly about the Northampton game. Nobody on Tom McAndrew’s route expected to get a water bill and Life magazine in the mailbox today. His son was the quarterback.

The band had been excused from school at lunch so they could assemble on the depot platform and play some Sousa marches, college fight songs, “Fight on Shortridge” and the alma mater beneath the silver and blue bunting. But folks didn’t need a pep rally to get riled up. They needed something harmless to fill the afternoon instead of stopping by the liquor store or driving to Northampton to yell at people on the sidewalks and pick fights. That’s the way some fans in past years had worked off their nervous energy the afternoon of the season finale. But after a county commissioner from Northampton was beaten up on the courthouse lawn, the Interdenominational Clergy Fellowship dreamed up the depot concert idea. By the time the band finished, the fish fry – it rotated each year between First Baptist and First Methodist – was getting

under way. The preachers were just being practical. Anything that delayed the start of drinking on this day was a good thing.

When Chris finished his steak, he excused himself to pack his equipment bag. Monteenia had folded his silver game pants and blue jersey fresh from the dryer and put them on his bed. They were still warm.

"If you don't mind, Mr. McAndrew, I'd 'preciate it if you'd just drop me by the park," she said.

"Sure, Monteenia. Is Malachi gettin' somethin' to eat?"

"Bernice Varick's cookin' for the boys this afternoon," she said.

"Tell you what. Just leave those things in the sink."

A few minutes later, they were slowly moving through the traffic on the way to the gym. Northampton fans were beginning to stream toward Railroad Park. A lot of their cars had orange and black crepe paper streaming from radio antennas. Even though the sun hadn't quite set, the light towers were already lit and music was playing on the press box PA.

"Nervous?"

"A little."

"Well, just wanted you to know I'm proud of you for hangin' in there this year. I know it wadn' easy. Win or lose, you remember that."

"Yessir. We've got some stuff cooked up for Northampton."

"Really?" his father said. "Wilson been schemin' this week?"

Chris wanted to say more, but cars were beginning to back up behind them as his father pulled to the curb.

MALACHI WAS unusually animated for pre-game. He was finally loosening up. He wanted to talk about the traffic, the noise and what it was like to play in a game where fans overflowed the bleachers and surrounded the field five and six deep.

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“It’s crazy,” Chris said. “When you go out of bounds you just disappear into the crowd. A few years ago one of the Barlow boys came out of the crowd bleedin’ all over where somebody clobbered him with a bottle. He was lucky he was wearing a helmet.”

They were nearly dressed when the two coaches came into the overheated dressing room to meet with the team. Chris glanced around just to confirm they still had thirteen players. He was proud of himself for counting.

Coach Austin was brief. He was proud of the players who made it all the way to the end. He was proud to be part of a Northampton-Shortridge game. His pride cup was overflowing.

Coach Wilson was relaxed. He’d been relaxed all week. He seemed to have escaped Vietnam for good. He told them they would never play in another game like this, which is what he said every season, but he wasn’t hoarse from shouting it this time.

Chris believed him. This was the fourth time he’d played Northampton in front of a big crowd on a cold night, but never with thirteen players. Nobody, after seeing what the team had dwindled to, would be counting on much from the Comets tonight. Tonight was a night for daring.

“It’s time, Comets,” Coach Austin said.

On the way out of the dressing room, he handed each player a blue cape to wear on the sidelines as protection against the chill, and the small entourage clattered down the concrete hallway in their steel-tipped cleats. The cold, damp night air swept into the basement when Coach Wilson opened the door, and as they stepped outside to climb the steps to the parking lot, fans hanging over the railing erupted in screams. The pregame walk to Railroad Park was single file between two rows of horn blowing fans slapping players’ helmets and shoulder pads.

At first Chris tried to keep his focus far ahead, but that didn’t last long. Too many people were pressing in, cheering and slowing the team’s progress.

“Losers!”

Chris spun his head in the direction of the voice, but the faces were impossible to recognize in the dark.

“You heard me, quarterback. Y’all are losers!”

He began to swivel around again, but Malachi shoved him from behind. “Keep movin’,” he said.

The crowd’s grip on the narrow column of players relaxed, and Chris led the team into a jog to the street crossing where policemen with railroad flares were holding up traffic. “Go Comets!” somebody yelled. “Go to hell, Northampton!” There was scattered applause. Now they were moving through the parking lot packed with cars gleaming from the stadium lights, past the orange and black Northampton bus, and then back into the darkness along the cinderblock wall leading to the players’ entrance. They were temporarily alone now until they burst through the door behind the home bleachers and into a huge milling crowd. The two coaches took the lead – “Comin’ through, please, gotta get to the field, comin’ through!” – and there were mixed shouts of support and derision as the fans parted. Both towns’ police departments worked the game, and a policeman with a Northampton badge stood at the end of the narrow pathway through the crowd. He lifted the security chain that encircled the field. “Duck, boys!” he called out. “Watch your heads.”

Then they were free on the open field, the crowd held back by the chain. The grass had long since turned brown where it still grew, but there was a long swath of dirt down the middle of field between the hash marks, the inevitable consequence of three months of practices and games on the same field.

At the far end of the gridiron, which was already surrounded by spectators in their winter coats, were the Tigers. At first Chris thought there must be a hundred of them in their orange helmets, white jerseys and black pants, but he counted. There were only half that many players doing jumping jacks in the glare of the

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scoreboard lights. It was the first night of the year cold enough to see your breath, and a thin fog bank floated above them.

“Huddle up!” he called out to Cam and Malachi. “Fatback, bring the line over here! Bring it in close!”

When they were gathered in the end zone, he drew the team into a tight group. He wanted everybody, especially the Northampton players, to see just how little was left of the Comets team that started the season. The eyeballs looking at him from within the silver helmets were wide with excitement. The lips of his teammates bulged over their protective rubber mouthpieces.

“Most teams that get down to this many players just forfeit,” he said. “We haven’t quit. It didn’t matter why you stayed, but we’re goin’ to finish together tonight. We’re goin’ to play every down hard and let what happens happen. Everybody who agrees with that put your hands right here.”

Twelve pairs of hands piled atop Chris’. “Let’s go Shortridge!” Malachi yelled. “Let’s go Comets!”

CHRIS WAS face down at the bottom of a pile on his own twelve-yard line when the whistle blew to end the first quarter. He didn’t hear it because someone in the tangle of bodies was screaming “Cramp! Cramp! Lemme up!” But he still had the ball. The linebacker who slapped at it while dragging Chris down from behind nearly dislodged it from his grip, but he’d hung on somehow even as he collapsed beneath a rush of Northampton defenders. Nothing in sports was ever as important as good luck, and the Comets had already had plenty.

Northampton had driven to the Comets’ six-yard line on the game’s opening possession before Fatback slammed into a ball carrier and separated him from his helmet and the ball. Shortridge recovered. Three plays later, Malachi punted and Northampton’s return man fumbled the ball away on his own forty. Three more Shortridge plays without a first down and Malachi punted into the

end zone, which meant that despite two futile possessions, the Comets had pushed Northampton back seventy-four yards. Then the Tigers began a methodical drive from their own twenty that reached deep into Shortridge territory before Malachi picked off a pass at the twelve, which is where Chris was getting up after the Comets' ensuing offensive play.

In twelve minutes of football, Northampton had piled up one hundred twenty-seven yards of offense to fourteen for Shortridge and accumulated seven first downs to none for the Comets. But the scoreboard was dead even at 0-0.

When Chris finally got up from the pile and the referee motioned the players to the other end of the field for the second quarter, he glanced over to the Shortridge sideline where his father and Mr. McCauley were standing against the chain. Daddy gave him a thumbs-up, and then the two men melted into the crowd to make their way down the sideline.

"They're pushin' us all over the field," Chris complained to Cam as they jogged downfield together.

"They've got nothing to show for it," Cam replied. "The more plays they have to run, the more chance they'll screw up before they score."

"It ain't like we used up our good luck this season," Fatback added.

It was encouraging in a perverse sort of way. In the huddle on second and ten, Chris called for power-I left, twenty-three dive option. Either he'd hand off to Malachi over left tackle or keep the ball himself to left end, where he would decide to pitch wide to Cam or keep it himself. He made his mind up on the choices even before he got to the line of scrimmage. Northampton was looking for something straight ahead and simple, judging from the way the Tigers' linebackers were stacked inside. They figured this was no situation for Chris to get fancy. A turnover on a risky play this

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deep in Shortridge territory could be costly, perhaps unleashing a flood of scoring that would bury the Comets before halftime.

But there was no way he was going to send Malachi into the line for no gain. No way would he pitch wide with his back to his own goal line either.

Malachi sold his fake, crashing into a wall of defenders, leaving Chris free to slide down the line. His fake pitch to Cam on the corner wasn't very convincing, but this time it didn't need to be. Northampton's defense had rushed to the middle of the field on the snap, and he had room to wiggle free toward the left sideline where he was tackled into a wall of cursing Northampton fans. The side judge and back judge were there immediately to push the angry spectators back and give him a path back to the field.

The eight-yard gain moved the ball out to the twenty, a more comfortable place from which to call plays. Chris called the twenty-three option again, and against a more spread-out defense, Malachi found room for a three-yard gain off tackle, the Comets' first first down of the game. Cam got the second one on the next play, a swing pass to the right side that gained fifteen yards.

"Feels like somethin' good," Malachi said as they huddled, first and ten on the Shortridge thirty-eight.

The drive stalled after Malachi gained five yards on a sweep. Northampton received the punt and started a drive from its own thirty. But the Comets' three and a half minutes of possession had been refreshing. The game was no longer even entirely because of luck; they had actually contributed to their own cause.

"They're only cussin' us on the Northampton side now," Malachi noted after forcing the Tigers' fastest back out of bounds for a loss on second down. An incomplete pass that should have been caught forced the Tigers' first punt of the night, and Cam had a ten-yard return to the Shortridge forty. Shortridge got another first down when Malachi broke loose on an option pitch and the Com-

ets moved into Northampton territory for the first time. Daddy was hugging Mr. McCauley on the sideline.

For the last six minutes of the half the teams scrimmaged each other between the forty-yard lines, each side fumbling once. Chris was so exhilarated when the halftime whistle blew that he felt barely winded. Jogging to the end zone, Coach Austin came up from behind and whacked him on his butt.

“Smart game, son,” he said. “You and Malachi keep everybody settled down.”

But Malachi was no more settled than Chris. While everyone else lay down on the grassy bank at the base of Railroad Park’s cinder block wall, surrounded by a crush of Shortridge fans, Malachi made his way through the group with the water bucket, slapping their shoulder pads and recalling a play in which each player had done something good.

Wilson and Austin stood off to the side in their own conversation, while Chris watched the fog from their conference coalesce in a cloud over their heads. After twenty-four minutes of play both ways, every player on the team had gotten substantial playing time. None of the backs had missed a single play on offense or defense.

Steam rose from Chris’ body and insulated him from the chill. As the minutes ticked away toward the second half kickoff and the dueling bands fought to a halftime draw, the fans who surrounded them edged closer and began to fill the pep talk vacuum with encouragement of their own. He listened as they suggested plays, trashing Northampton as paper Tigers, but he offered no response or eye contact. It was too soon.

“Huddle up, men,” Coach barked. As the Comets closed around him, the crowd followed, but Coach Austin turned toward them with hands up.

“Please,” he said. “Just the team.”

They held back a respectful distance as Coach went over a few quick points: Stay aggressive on defense. Mix in Tater Peterson on

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more carries. Be patient and ready to capitalize on a Northampton mistake. "Let's have another half like that first one," he said. "There might be only one score in this game. Make it be ours."

As they broke the huddle with a "Let's go Shortridge! Let's go Comets!" Coach moved alongside Chris to jog with him through the crowd and back onto the field.

"Tell you what," he said. "We're receivin'. Let's bite first. Run the reverse."

Chris looked back at Coach and saw the hint of a grin he'd never seen on Wilson in the middle of a game. "Gotcha."

The faces of the receiving team huddle were different from those Chris had seen at the start of the game. Malachi had a black eye. Chris had never seen one on a colored person before. He'd sometimes wondered if you could even tell, sort of the way he wondered if black people ever got sunburned, but there it was, a shiny purple streak through the chocolate pudding beneath Malachi's right eye. The other eyes he saw were not as wide as they had been at the start of the evening. The fact they were not losing created confidence. Fatback was chewing on his mouthpiece almost nonchalantly.

"We're goin' to run the reverse return," Chris said. "I'll call the side. Y'all got it?" There were nods all around. "Okay."

Chris took his position near the right sideline about fifteen yards behind the Comets' six-man forward wall at the forty-yard line. Tater stood even with him in the center of the field with that slow BTW linebacker who'd been pressed into service as Ronnie Tucker's replacement opposite him on the left sideline. Cam and Malachi were back on the ten-yard line in receiving position, Cam to the left.

At the whistle, Chris drifted toward the middle of the field to get a better perspective on the kick as the Northampton kicker began his run-up. The Comets' forward wall began a brisk retreat as

soon as the kicker's foot touched the ball. The kick wasn't very high, but it was hooking toward Malachi's side of the field.

"Romeo!" Chris screamed. "Romeo!"

Instantly the Comets' front six halted their retreat and pivoted on its right end like a giant windshield wiper sweeping the field toward the right sideline. At the same time, Malachi caught the line drive kick chest high and headed toward the left sideline with Cam ahead to lead the blocking. But as soon as the flow of Northampton defenders shifted Cam's way, he reversed himself and headed directly back toward Malachi. Malachi cut just inside Cam's arc and gave the ball a little toss to his left, leaving it hanging in midair as Cam circled by. When Cam plucked it out of the air, there was a unison cry of "reverse!" from the Tigers.

Too late.

The defensive flow charged back across the field, but the wall the Comets had formed along the right sideline shielded Cam's scamper up field. Chris had headed downfield to pick off a defender and caught sight of Fatback flattening a Tiger with a blind-side block. It freed Cam from a bottleneck somewhere around the thirty-five. Before the Tigers could force him into the crowd, Cam had reached the Northampton fifteen-yard line.

The fans spat Cam back onto the field where Chris and the rest of the Comets pummeled him in congratulations. Somebody in the press box was so excited that he tripped the switch on the old steam whistle that normally blew after Comets touchdowns, but it was quickly squelched, and the Shortridge band picked up with "Fight on Shortridge."

"Now's the time," Chris said privately to Malachi and Cam as they walked together toward the huddle. "Just like we practiced at the saw mill."

They had to score. The Comets might never get this close to the end zone again. Nobody else on the team needed to know

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what was going to happen. All they heard in the huddle was power-I left, twenty-eight sweep – a run around right end.

Chris had to yell extra loud at the line to be heard above the noise from the fans crowding the back of the end zone. He settled behind Fatback for the snap and checked the defense to his right. His father had Mr. McCauley in a celebratory headlock on the sideline.

“Down!” The Comets linemen dropped smartly into their three-point stances. “Hut one! Hut two!”

Fatback’s snap stung as it hit his hands, and the laces were perfectly placed between the first and second knuckles of his throwing hand. Chris spun counterclockwise. Two defenders had breached the left side of the Shortridge line and were coming toward him, which was fine. He had already pitched the ball to Malachi for his sweep around right end, and he cut his speed to a trot, no longer part of the play.

But as soon as the defenders turned their attention toward Malachi, Chris was off again directly toward the back left corner of the end zone. When he looked over his right shoulder, he saw exactly what he’d hoped for. Malachi had carried his sweep extremely wide toward the right sideline drawing everyone on the field toward him. Now he was stopped, looking back forty yards across the field toward Chris. The trajectory of his pass carried it above the thin layer of breath fog and up into the lights before it spiraled down again, landing in Chris’ hands two steps before he crossed the end line.

Touchdown.

Chris was swallowed by the end zone crowd, the ball ripped from his hands and his facemask yanked by unseen hands. “The nigger threw it!” somebody screamed.

As he scrambled back to the safety of the field, the fog above the Shortridge grandstand sparkled with silver confetti and the band kicked in. Malachi reached him and pummeled his shoulder

pads in celebration. Fatback's extra point kick floated through the goalposts.

"Perfect pass," Chris told Malachi as they spread into their kickoff formation. It was an understatement.

"Thanks, Quarterback."

Chris hadn't paid much attention to the Tigers since the second half began. There hadn't been much time. When he looked at the scoreboard to confirm the Comets really had a 7-0 lead, only thirty-four seconds had ticked off in the third quarter. But now he ventured a look at the Tigers' faces, and what he saw was shock. Nobody was looking him in the eye.

"We've got 'em on the ropes" Chris said in the huddle before Fatback's kickoff. "Don't let 'em off. Nail 'em deep and hold 'em."

The Tigers made it back to their thirty-yard line to start their drive, and they managed two first downs before punting. Luck had sustained the Comets during a shaky start, but now they controlled what was happening on the field. Every Northampton possession that ended short of the goal line, every Shortridge series that stretched beyond three plays fueled their confidence.

The teams were stalemated through the remainder of the third quarter and into the fourth, but the Comets could live with that. Impasse was victory. The substitutions began to flow for Northampton, first a shuttling of running backs to match fresh legs against the Comets, and then clean jerseys began showing up in the line.

Still, Shortridge's defense did not crack. A receiver got behind Chris on one pass, and he'd have been gone if the ball hadn't been three yards too long. An end sweep into the secondary nearly got around Cam at left cornerback, but he managed to slow things up just enough for Malachi to come crashing in from safety to snuff the play.

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Less than two minutes remained when a fourth-down incompleteness at the Comets' thirty-three turned the ball back over to Shortridge. Out of timeouts, the Tigers had no way to stop the clock now. Even if Shortridge couldn't get a first down, Chris knew that three running plays to keep the clock moving, a little extra time in the huddle and Northampton would never get the ball back with time to do anything with it.

Everyone in Railroad Park sensed upset. Some Shortridge fans had already breached the sideline chain near the band and were lined up along the chalk sideline. The coaches and two subs were standing a yard out on the field, but the game officials didn't seem to mind. Shortridge police lined the home perimeter, but the Northampton cops on the visitors' side were not being challenged by the quiet visiting crowd.

Chris glanced to the home sideline, but he didn't immediately spot his father, not that he minded with 1:37 on the clock. It would start ticking on the first snap, a straight dive play on the right side to Cam. After a long huddle, the clock should be down to a minute when he ran the mirror image play to Malachi on the left side. A quarterback sneak would take the clock down to around thirty seconds or so. A punt, maybe one desperation Northampton pass, and it would be over.

Chris' fingers tingled in anticipation. As calmly, clearly and slowly as he could manage, he called power-I right, forty-four dive. He let Fatback out of the huddle, and then called the play one more time. He walked to the line. He didn't give a damn about the defensive alignment.

"Hut one!" There was the familiar sting of the snap, and he stepped back and to his right. Cam bore down on the "four" hole, his eyes straight ahead, his arms ready to cradle the football. Chris popped the ball left-handed into his gut, and Cam drove forward with it until he was enveloped by a swirl of silver and orange, blue and black.

Whistles blew and for a moment the mayhem subsided. Then, as he was about to retreat to the huddle, the sea of colors reconverged. Fists flew, and striped shirts converged on the melee. A fan from the Northampton sideline rushed toward the players, and almost as suddenly he went down, tackled by a policeman whose cap rolled crazily on its edge across the grass and dirt until it spun to a stop.

Chris was moving toward the fight when he was wrapped up by a player in a white jersey, pinning his arms to his sides. "Let 'em handle it," the Northampton player said, holding fast against Chris' struggle. Chris quickly relented. He needed to keep his cool.

"Okay," he told Number 64. He hugged his opponent around the waist with his free right arm. When 64's grip relaxed, Chris gave the orange helmet a pat on its crown and then turned to the scoreboard where the clock had ticked down to zero. That was too good to be true.

When order was restored among the players, and police had cleared the fans who had swarmed the field, the officials met briefly. Then the referee jogged over to the Shortridge bench to confer with the two coaches. When he was finished he signaled up to the press box for time to be added back to the game clock.

"We're resetting the clock to forty-five seconds," the PA announcer said. "We must ask fans to please stay off the field. Field incursions may be punished by forfeit at the discretion of game officials."

Forfeiture was an empty threat meant to frighten the crowd into obedience. What bothered Chris was that the fight had stopped the clock. If play had not been interrupted, it would have continued ticking while he was calling the next play in the huddle. Now time wouldn't begin until the ball was snapped.

But he couldn't let that cost him his composure any more than the fight itself. As he called Malachi's dive play in the huddle, he tried to recreate the same tone of voice, the same word pacing as

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he'd called the previous play. He had to reimpose discipline on himself and reassure his teammates that things were back to normal.

At the line of scrimmage, he was about to check the defense out of habit when he remembered: It didn't matter. Hand the ball off. Keep the clock running. Stay calm and deliberate.

"Hut one!"

The snap was solid, and he turned left toward Malachi. As he brought the ball toward Malachi's belly it hit something hard – Malachi's elbow – but then it was pulled smoothly from his hand and Malachi rammed into the polychrome. There was a flash of silver – Malachi's head snapping back – and then a spot of brown.

The ball.

It skittered backward, and the chase was on – a bunch of football players bent over, running as if they were shooing chickens across the yard. Someone touched the ball, propelling it faster, and then a body in the middle of the pack went down, tripping part of the scrum.

Another touch. A kick. Chris was drawn along with the stampede toward the crazily bouncing football as it caromed first one way, then another, a high bounce and then a roll until he saw a clear shot and dove for it. For an instant it was his – then it was gone. Bodies pelted down and the screaming was at full howl for who knows how long. A hand from above grabbed the shoulder pads at the back of his neck and pulled him from the pile. Another official reached into the mass of players and separated two more. Black and white striped arms waved back and forth above the officials' heads, criss-crossing and re-criss-crossing to stop the clock.

Then one striped shirt halted his hand-waving, turned toward the Shortridge goal and pointed toward the end zone.

Northampton's ball.

The deafening noise shifted from Chris' right ear to the left as if someone had changed the balance knob on a giant stereo. The Shortridge side of his head was silent.

There were twenty-two seconds left on the clock, and Chris paused to convince himself it was stopped. Finally, when he could not will it further downward, he dropped his hands from his hips. One set of orange and black players bounded off the field while a fresh set ran on. He looked around. The ball was on the six-yard line.

"Timeout!" he called. "Timeout!" He held his hands up in a "T," the fingertips of his right hand pointing into the palm of his left. It didn't matter now that he was conceding precious seconds to the Tigers. The Comets needed some time of their own to regroup. This was the kind of setback that killed too many teams.

Malachi came walking back toward the line of scrimmage, his eyes on the ground. Chris was the first player to him, and he pressed his face mask against Malachi's to look into his eyes as he held him tight in a hug.

"Shake it off, Mal. Shake it off." Malachi seemed to understand.

As the other Comets surrounded Malachi to console him, Chris left the clutch to visit the sideline. The crowd he jogged toward, so animated before, now stood frozen in horror. Northampton games had slipped away in so many ways before, but this was unbelievable.

"It's okay, we've got a defense," Chris heard. It was Coach Austin's voice. "We've got a defense," the coach repeated.

Wilson and Austin intercepted him ten yards before the sideline. Their arms were around each other and around him. "We're goin' to run a five-four," Coach said. "You're the right cornerback, Cam's the left. Everybody else up on the line. They're not goin' to be tryin' fancy stuff. They're comin' right at us. All we've got to do is plug those holes."

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Suddenly Chris was aware of Coach Austin's face right in front of his own. "You okay?" the coach asked.

"Yeah, Coach."

"Okay, son. Five-four. Plug the holes." Coach Austin whacked him on the butt.

Back in the huddle, Chris called the defense and explained the rationale.

The Comets spread themselves across the line and waited for Northampton to break the huddle. It took only a few more seconds, and then the Tigers jogged up to the line. They were in a straight T formation – basic offensive football – with the fullback directly behind the quarterback and a halfback to either side forming the cross piece of the "T."

The coaches were right. The Tigers were coming straight ahead.

Then a sudden thought pierced his game focus and Chris shouted from instinct. He was sure of it even if he couldn't explain why.

"Long count! Watch the long count!"

Northampton was going to try to gain half the distance to the goal with a penalty before the clock moved another tick. The Tigers were going to sit there in their stances while Number 12 counted up through the signals. They were relying on the tension and aggressiveness of the Comets to cause someone to jump the snap early and draw an offside penalty. "Long count! Long count!" Chris kept screaming over and over.

"Hut four!"

"Long count!"

"Hut five! Hut six!"

The clock, the teams, the fans were frozen while the opposing quarterbacks screamed back and forth to their teams as if the game would be decided by an argument. Just when it seemed the

screaming could go on no longer, a whistle sounded and yellow flags fluttered to the ground. It was a break the Comets needed.

“Delay of game, men,” the referee said, grasping his arms in front of his chest to signal the press box. “Captain Blue, that will be five yards from the line of scrimmage. First and goal from the eleven.”

The referee picked up the ball, paced five yards into the Northampton backfield and put the ball down again on a patch of dirt almost twice as far from the goal line as the original line of scrimmage.

Fatback, who normally called the defensive signals, looked over to the bench where both coaches were holding up fingers. Five on one hand, four on the other. “Five-four,” Fatback said. “Same as before. They’re comin’ right at us.”

Again the Tigers came out in a straight T. They wouldn’t try the offside trick again. On the snap of the ball, Number Twelve turned toward his right halfback, who was coming straight ahead off-tackle. From Chris’ perspective in the secondary it seemed as if the Comets’ line bowed back at that point, absorbing maybe three yards, but the action in the offensive backfield continued to flow away from him. He sprinted to his left and caught sight of the pitchout. The initial handoff had been a fake; Number 12 had lateralled to his halfback who was following the blocking fullback around right end.

The Comets strung out the play toward the sideline with Chris chasing from the rear. He couldn’t get a good read on the angle until they all crashed into the Northampton fans. When they unpacked, the news was bad. The Tigers had gained eight yards to the Shortridge three-yard line, and by going out of bounds they’d stopped the clock with seven seconds left.

Fatback checked the sideline again and called for another five-four. Back to the line came the Tigers. Again they were in a straight T.

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“Plug the holes!” Chris screamed.

“Hut one!”

“Plug the holes!”

“Hut two!”

Snap. There was a sharp crack of plastic pads and helmets. The right halfback came forward again, the same dive action as before, and again the Comets' line yielded. Chris rammed the pile – Number Twelve hadn't even pretended to carry out a fake – and pushed as hard as he could. Time seemed suspended for a moment, and then the pile toppled. There were whistles all around and the scoreboard buzzer sounded as the clock expired. The officials were pulling players off the pile, searching for the ball. There was a huge roar, and when Chris glanced up all the officials were signaling touchdown.

It was all about one point now. Time had expired and the Comets held a 7-6 lead. Northampton could foil Shortridge's victory with an extra point kick, but the Comets could not lose.

While the police cleared fans from the end zone, another reshuffle of players started from the Northampton sideline. There was confusion on the Tigers' bench. Some players hesitated, others turned back. Players and coaches on the sideline were waving, holding up stop signals. There was nothing as comforting at this point as the simplicity of having no options, Chris told himself. He looked toward his own bench and Coach looked directly back at him. Coach rammed his fist into the flat palm of his other hand. Block the kick.

The substitution confusion continued on the Northampton sideline as the Comets huddled. “Extra point defense,” Fatback called.

As they dispersed to their positions, Chris collared Cam for just a second. “Me and you,” he said. “We stop this kick, we win.”

Cam looked directly at him and crashed his fists down on Chris' shoulder pads. “Block the kick, QB.”

Number 12 returned from the sideline to the Northampton huddle. When the huddle broke, he took a position on one knee seven yards behind center to hold for the kick. Number 1, the sparkling white jersey that had not been seen on the field since the second-half kickoff, marched three steps back from his holder and spun around to face the goalpost.

Number 12 stretched out his hands toward center, but he didn't call a signal. He was silent – the crowd was silent. Everything stood still until the center, on his own mental count, snapped the ball.

As soon as Chris saw the center's hands flinch, he was off, angling his course just outside the end. Beyond he could see Number 12, the ball reaching his fingertips, his hands cradling the ball. Chris was clear of the end now and angled further to his left, not toward the ball on the ground, but where it would be a heartbeat after the kick. He planted his left foot and launched himself up and forward, stretching, closing his eyes and waiting – hoping – for the collision of ball and face.

The collision was with something bigger, and it was accompanied by the plastic clatter of shoulder pads and helmets. The impact spun him in midair and all he could see was blue.

Chris crashed to earth. There was dirt in his mouth. The roar swept over him at the same time he opened his eyes to see Cam sprawled across the ground a few feet away, his head up, swiveling, looking for something.

There was a second impact as Chris' mind absorbed what had happened while his eyes were closed, when he and Cam had collided in midair on their rush toward the kick from opposite sides of the ball.

The ball. Where was the ball?

Bodies pelted down on him and Cam now; it was either a fight or a celebration. The crowd noise was coming from both sides of the field.

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The scoreboard still read 7-6, but maybe it was too soon for the point to be posted. He lay there as the stampede rumbled above him, players, fans and cops in a massive herd, then began to rise.

No, he was being lifted.

“You blocked it!” Malachi was screaming. “You blocked it!”

Then someone else was there, reaching for him and pulling him down from the top of the crowd. He turned from Malachi to see Susan, her soft hair, the tears in her eyes, the expression that didn’t make sense.

“We’ve got to go,” she said. “It’s your daddy.”

UNDER THE surgical light, he looked like a cadaver, so still was he with pale, almost blue skin. The blood that had run down the side of Daddy’s face was dried and hardened blackness.

But fresh, vital red oozed within the gash in his scalp where Dr. Moncure was suturing. He pierced the open flap of skin with a hooked stainless steel needle and tugged it across the crimson gap, closing the wound millimeter by millimeter. Painful as it appeared, Daddy sat there in the chair, his head back against the restraint, calm and motionless.

“It’s nothing serious, Chris,” Dr. Moncure said as he blotted a stitch with a bit of gauze. “Just a whiskey bottle. Probably won’t be the last one we have tonight.”

“It was intentional,” the corpse said. Daddy was awake.

“Why do you say that, Tom?” Dr. Moncure’s calm, moderated tone never changed as he patiently continued his stitching. “I do this every year.”

“We weren’t around any drinkers when it happened. Somebody grabbed my hat off and then *wham!*”

“Tom’s right,” Cotton McCauley said. “We were standin’ along the sideline and the people around us were pretty calm, considerin’.”

Dr. Moncure continued his slow progress along the line of the cut, snipping the ends of black sutures after tying each knot and then picking up another needle, which the nurse had threaded, from a paper-covered tray. He kept his focus entirely on the tedious chore, but he was able to talk to the people in the room without distracting himself.

“That was a hell of a game you boys played tonight,” he said to Chris. “We listened to it here in the ER. You did this town proud.”

Chris hadn’t had time to think about it or enjoy the victory. The glare of lights and surging noise of Railroad Park had been replaced by the surgical lamp and the quiet of the operating theater. The in-between had vanished in worry. Watching his wounded father being stitched up in front of him obliterated the joy of achievement.

“It was Malachi’s pass,” he said.

“It was a helluva play,” the doctor said. “Imagine Wilson dreaming up something like that.”

Chris couldn’t take credit. It was the sight – or maybe it was what he imagined he was seeing – as Dr. Moncure closed the scalp wound. The strong antiseptic smell of alcohol and who-knew-what-else didn’t help. Queasiness was rapidly overcoming him and he excused himself, stepped into the fresh air of the hallway outside.

Mama was there along with Susan and Mrs. Marks. Susan had had to pitch a fit, but with some assistance from her mother, the two of them had gone to the game with his parents, leaving Mr. Marks home to listen on the radio.

Mr. Peterson was in the hallway, too. He had driven Chris’ father and Mr. McCauley to the hospital with his blue light flashing to get them through the traffic. Police detectives were used to lots worse than a liquor bottle to the noggin, so Chris wasn’t surprised that he was the calmest of the group.

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By now Daddy was standing in the doorway, a square bandage pasted to the scalp on the right side of his balding head. Dr. Moncure gave him a packet of pills in case he had pain later, but he said there was no sign of serious injury. “Lucky you didn’t get glass in an eye or something,” he said.

As they gathered their coats to go, Mr. Peterson reminded Tom to call him if he thought of any more details, but he cautioned everybody that they might never identify a suspect. “If the crowd doesn’t see what happened and grab hold of the guy,” he said, “they’re usually long gone by the time we get there.”

Mr. Marks drove up as the group left the hospital and shook the policeman’s hand before collecting his wife and daughter.

“This was bound to happen,” he said. “Surprised it took this long.”

Daddy thanked the doctor, and Susan gave Chris a hug – he was still in his uniform, wrapped in the sideline cape – before her father helped her into the car.

“Let me drive, Tom,” Mama said. “You steady to walk?”

“I’m fine, honey.”

The families parted with waves through the car windows. At last alone with his parents, Chris asked his father why he was so sure this wasn’t just a run-of-the-mill Northampton game fracas. Daddy never accepted the straightforward explanation for anything, whether it was the Kennedy assassination or something happening at the post office, but this seemed so obvious.

“That bottle was connected to Malachi’s pass,” he said. “It’s a message. And Tug Peterson says I’m not crazy.”

chapter 18

CHRIS WANTED A few things to toss into his lunch box on the way up to the hump yard for his first training shift. But the Grab would have more than food. The emergency room wasn't the post-game celebration he'd dreamed of or that beating Northampton deserved. There would be people here reliving last night's game and eager to talk about Shortridge's greatest victory. The banner advertising the barbecue special for the game was still up.

The only customer inside, though, was a black man paying Della for some beer. After he left and Chris had fished a couple of hard-boiled eggs from the jar, she surprised him.

"Too bad about last night," she said.

"Huh?"

"What Wilson did" – she glanced around before continuing – "lettin' the nigger win the game."

He stood stock still trying to figure out whether he was disappointed or pissed.

"Standin' down in the end zone last night where you caught that ball, it just hit me," she continued. "If we win, it won't really

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be ours. It's not my school any more. They've taken over. Finally, completely."

The screen door burst open – a group of hunters stopping in for beer and deer urine.

"Gotta go," she said.

Chris didn't get the reaction he hoped for from Yancey Thurlow at the yard office, either. The old yard conductor had been at the Witch's Hat several times over the summer when Chris picked up Salems for his mother. All the talk then was about the upcoming football season. Today he just grunted and focused on the time sheet he was filling out for the 3 p.m. job on which Chris would work.

"They give you an employee number yet?" Mr. Thurlow asked, interrupting Chris' attempt to talk about the game.

"Yessir," he said, pulling the Seaboard's letter from his bag. "See the game?"

"Uh-huh. Got a light? It'll be dark before we get off."

Chris had bought his lantern the week before after sitting in this same depressing cell with its dark green walls "writing the rules," as the yardmaster had said. Starting at nine o'clock in the morning with a test form and the hundred-fifty-page rulebook that he'd received in the mail, he had copied the correct rule onto the test sheet in answer to a list of questions. By four-thirty in the afternoon, Chris had successfully copied every word from the book, from safety regulations covering how to climb the ladder on a box-car to rules governing which trains had superiority in conflicting traffic situations.

It hadn't been an enjoyable way to spend the Saturday before the Northampton game. What should have been a glorious Saturday afterward wasn't working out either.

"Passin' the test dudn' mean you know the rules," Mr. Thurlow continued, still avoiding the game. "It means when they call you in

for the accident inquest, you'll have to testify that you read the rule the railroad claims you broke before they fire you."

"Yessir." Chris paused a moment before bringing up the game again.

Mr. Thurlow looked back at him in silence and then resumed filling in the blanks on timesheet. "Not tryin' to rain on your parade," he said finally, "but out here's real life. They're puttin' niggers out here on the yard with us like the railroad's some kind've game. When you lose out here, you lose an arm or a leg, or maybe somebody gets killed."

His excitement now totally drained, Chris followed the conductor outside into the crisp air where they met with the rest of the crew – two brakemen and an engineer – to start their shift. It would take a few shifts on the hump to learn how newly arrived freight trains were shoved up to the top of the ten-foot tall rise, their cars uncoupled and allowed to roll down into one of the sixty classification tracks in the "bowl." The yardmaster sitting in the top of the control tower next to the hump directed the car to the proper track by flipping switches on the panel at his desk.

Once Chris was familiar with the hump operation on Yard A, Mr. Thurlow said he would work some shifts on Yard B at the south end of the bowl where other switching crews pulled cuts of cars from each track and assembled them into outgoing trains in the ten-track departure yard.

The conductor pushed the button on a metal pole standing near the track to get the orders for their first switching move over the loudspeaker.

"How 'bout bleedin' seven and humpin' nine," the yardmaster's voice from the tower said.

The conductor scribbled the instructions on the pad he carried in his jacket pocket and climbed up on the bottom step at the rear of the red and black switcher. "Stand here by me," he called to

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Chris over the low rumble of the idling diesel. “We’ll go out on number eight, Bubba.”

The engineer grabbed a silver handle and the air brakes released with a sigh. Chris heard him notch the throttle handle and the diesel eased backward with a rickety roar just faster than a walking pace. The conductor explained the numbering system for the ten tracks in the receiving yard where incoming freight trains parked, and then they went over the hand signals Chris had learned from the rule book that he would use to direct the engineer to start, stop, go forward or back.

“Here’s what we’re goin’ to do,” Mr. Thurlow said when they arrived at track eight. “Me and you will get down on the ground here and bleed the brakes on this cut of cars in track seven. That releases the brakes so they’ll roll down the hump. Sam and Bubba will run up to the north end, couple up to those cars over there on nine that have already been bled, and shove ’em over the hump. By the time we’ve finished bleedin’ and get to the north end ourselves, they’ll be ready to come back out and hump our cut.”

Mr. Thurlow signaled his engine to move farther up the number eight track without them and then led Chris to a line of cars that seemed to stretch to the horizon. They towered above the long narrow canyon they were to walk between the tracks. “I call this the valley of the shadow of death, ’specially after sundown,” Mr. Thurlow said. “You gotta be real careful walkin’ in here. We don’t run into hoboes much anymore, but watch where you put your feet and always carry your light with you at night.”

The logic of the hump yard was simple. It could take all day for a crew to break up a hundred-car train in a flat yard and rearrange the cars into new trains classified by their destinations. By humping the cars and letting gravity do the work, the same train could be classified in an hour.

Chris moved slowly along the track, pulling the bleed valve on each car, listening to the hiss of escaping air and the reluctant me-

talic groan as the curved brake shoes pressing each side of the steel wheels relaxed their grip.

“They’ve got handbrakes, too,” the conductor said. “But they’re not much good for stopping anything movin’; they only tie down a car that’s already stopped.”

It was quickly apparent why Mr. Thurlow had been so concerned about stepping carefully. The narrow space between rows of cars was confining, and the ground was rough, covered in loose rock ballast and littered with all kinds of debris. There were pieces of freight cars that had broken off, coupler knuckles, brake shoes, hand-brake wheels and unidentifiable metal scrap. Pieces of pulpwood that had fallen from flat cars and piles of sawdust or coal also made passage hazardous.

The smells changed from car to car. Walking past one might bring the sweet Christmas smell of freshly cut pine for the paper mill; the next might be the noxious odor of ammonia bound for a fertilizer plant. Then there was the stuff that stank but couldn’t be identified. It dripped or oozed into piles and puddles or wafted into banks of mist that drifted through the canyon and sometimes burned the eyes.

Near the far end of the cut was a stretch of about ten boxcars with paper seals on the doors and placarded with red warning signs reading “Do Not Hump.”

“Blowups,” Mr. Thurlow said.

“Sir?”

“Bombs for Vietnam. They put ’em on the boat in Wilmington. We set ’em out on the runaround track – don’t want blowups rollin’ down into the bowl.”

Chris’ turn on the hump came as the sunset faded in a cloudless late fall sky. The breeze was freshening, and the dominant scent was rotten eggs from a cut of tank cars he was releasing over the hump. As the cars were continually pushed up the hill, he walked down the paved path alongside the track to the next coupl-

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ing, lifted the handle that unlocked the coupler and then walked downhill again toward the next car. As each car disappeared over the crest of the hump, he could hear the squeal of the retarders as they pressed against its wheels and checked its speed.

He was on his last assignment of the night, bleeding track one, when a light swept across the sky. Freight motors had fixed headlights. Within moments the southbound *Silver Star* rushed past on the mainline not a hundred feet away, a stream of sparks spraying from its flanks as the brakes began to slow it for the depot a few miles down the long hill into Shortridge.

“A train’s like a herd of cattle,” Mr. Thurlow said. “It looks like one unit but it’s really a bunch of individual cars mostly goin’ the same way. They’ll stampede on you if you’re not careful.”

“I HOPE it stops rainin’ before tonight,” Mama said, checking the turkey that was almost ready in the oven. “I hate to think about you walkin’ around all night in the cold and wet.”

Chris immediately recognized her comment as an invitation for his grandmothers to outdo each other in their sympathy for him, but Grandma and Nanna remained stoic and focused on their Thanksgiving kitchen duties. Maybe, Chris thought, it was because both of his grandfathers, each of whom had been dead several years, had worked so many cold and rainy shifts that a Thanksgiving night working on Yard B no longer held any foreboding for them.

“I’ve got enough rain gear to keep me dry,” he said.

“How’s Tommy’s head doin’?” Nanna asked Chris as she carried her casserole to the table in the dining room, the table they ate on only at Thanksgiving and Christmas.

“He’s gettin’ his stitches out tomorrow, Nanna. He says it’s still a little sore.”

“The darkies at the ballpark have worried me all year,” she said. “I’ve just had bad feelin’s. Birds of a feather, you know. It’s what the Book says.”

Chris was deferential. “Daddy’s not sure who hit him.”

“These things didn’ used to happen. It used to be safe to walk the streets, and now they can come right up beside you on the sidewalk. It happened to Miz Singletary just the other day.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the doorbell. Mr. Cooper didn’t have anyone to eat with this year, and Mama had invited him over partly because she knew he would keep the grandmothers entertained and the conversation off her shortcomings as a homemaker. That was the direction the Thanksgiving table talk had gone in last year.

He drew them out of the kitchen with tales of his mother’s visits to New York when he lived there and that allowed Mama to finish up with the turkey. Soon their cackling had drowned out the voices of the football announcers drifting in from the den and then Mama was calling everyone to eat.

“Y’all pass your plates up here and I’ll get the turkey started,” Daddy said. The good china began to flow around the dining room table, food piling up on each plate as the person who held it added a serving of whatever happened to be within arm’s reach.

“It’s a lovely table,” Mr. Cooper said. “Reminds me of when my mama used to get the family together at the holidays.”

Chris’ mother was touched. “What do you usually do for Thanksgivin’, Jon-Franklin? I know your mama’s house must get lonely.”

“Sometimes I go up North to visit,” he said. “This year I dreaded having Thanksgiving in another restaurant. The day you called to invite me, I was about to tell some of my Broadway people I was going to skip this year.”

“Your mama was so proud of you bein’ on Broadway,” Nanna said. “She always had some news at the grocery store about what

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play you were workin' on, and she loved her nights on the town when she visited."

That launched Jon-Franklin into a story about how his mother, a teetotaling Baptist, first discovered the joys of champagne. "I don't think she'd ever worn a sheath before, and it was just covered with the most exquisite beading," he said of the dress he'd helped her pick out at Macys. "She walked up to a waiter and asked him for a glass like an evening at Lincoln Center was regular part of her routine."

"New York'll do that to you," Mama said. "There's so much craziness up there anyway that you start feelin' like you can let loose. Tom took me up to see Carolina play Notre Dame on our honeymoon and there were coloreds eatin' and dancin' in the restaurant. If that had been in Shortridge we'd've walked right out, but up there you didn't think anything of it. I was more shocked at the price of a shrimp cocktail."

"Oooh, I was so afraid for you that week," Grandma said. "When you told me that I liked to had a heart attack."

Chris couldn't help laughing to himself at their horror. If they just came up to school at lunch – but no, that wouldn't reassure them at all. "You know Mr. Cooper's takin' the glee club up there this spring," he said, staying with the New York theme.

It was the first either of the grandmothers had heard of the glee club's trip.

"All of 'em?" Nanna asked. "I would've thought you'd be more respectin' of Shortridge than that, Jon-Franklin."

"Now Mama," Daddy interjected. "These kids wouldn't have anything special their senior year if Jon-Franklin hadn't come up with this. An opportunity to see New York dudn' come around that often. They need to get out and see the world."

"But, Tommy ..."

"Mama ..."

JODY MEACHAM

It was his father's way of signaling the conversation should go in another direction, and Mr. Cooper, who was perfectly capable of handling the situation on his own, seemed to recognize it.

“It'll be well chaperoned,” he said. “I think you'll be pleased with what you see at our Christmas concert.”

chapter **19**

THE STENCH OF urine that permeated their conversations finally prompted Malachi to complain. “We’ve got to stop meetin’ like this,” he said as they stood side-by-side, peeing into urinals in the basement boys’ room at Shortridge High. Chris met him and Cam like this because it didn’t call attention to their friendship the way meeting in the hall would. Full bladders were a legitimate reason to get together and talk; friendship wasn’t. Since football season had ended, none of them felt that meeting at the saw mill was a good idea anymore.

“I like talkin’, too,” Malachi said, “but two minutes a day in this stink hole. Shit.”

They could have gotten together over lunch in the cafeteria. Black and white students shared tables there every day. But they each had standing lunch dates with their girlfriends, and the girls weren’t friends.

“You boys played football together for three months,” Claryce had told Malachi. “I haven’t been hangin’ out with their girls.”

The movies? Too public. The Caboose? Ditto, plus Malachi wasn’t supposed to fraternize with customers.

“Why don’t Chris and I pick you up Friday night when he takes your mama home?” Cam suggested. “Nobody in Northampton knows us. We could just get somethin’ to eat over there and ride around awhile.”

“Your parents okay with that?” Malachi asked.

“We won’t tell ’em. As far as they know, it’ll just be me and Chris, hamburgers at Hardee’s and eatin’ while we ride.”

Monteenia wasn’t as agreeable as Malachi had predicted. When Chris protested that there was no other way for them to get together, she responded that maybe they should take that as a sign from God. “I’m not worried ’bout you boys gettin’ in trouble,” she said. “I’m worried ’bout trouble findin’ you.”

It was another week before Malachi reported a breakthrough with her. “She mentioned it to Reverend Varick, and he surprised her. He had lunch before Thanksgiving with some white preachers at the Coop – they actually called him up and invited him – and said maybe some sneakin’ around could lead to somethin’ good.”

Chris asked to borrow the station wagon that afternoon.

“EVERYTHING OKAY, Monteenia?”

“Yes’m, everything’s fine.”

“You just seem bothered.”

“You know how it is raisin’ a boy, Miz McAndrew.”

“Well it’ll work out. Chris said he’d carry you home tonight. You have a good weekend.”

“Yes, ma’am. You too.”

Monteenia got into the back seat of the McAndrews’ station wagon, and Chris waved goodbye as they pulled out of the carport. “I know you’re worried,” he told her, “but we’ll be fine.”

She didn’t answer, and Chris concentrated on looking for traffic before he pulled onto the street from the driveway. When he got a chance, he glanced into the rearview mirror and saw Montee-

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nia gazing into the dimness of the fast-approaching evening, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue.

They looped past Cam's house to pick him up, and when he got in the car, he turned around to Monteenia to introduce himself.

"Oh yes," she said, her eyes still watery. "Chris and Malachi both talk about you. I enjoyed watchin' y'all play this fall."

"You okay?" Cam asked when she dabbed her eyes again.

When she didn't answer, Chris volunteered that she was upset because she was worried about his parents.

"You boys," she said finally. "I want y'all to be real careful tonight. Just promise me you'll stay out of Shortridge. Y'all are pushin' things mighty fast."

"Yes ma'am," Chris and Cam said in unison.

When they pulled up to Monteenia's house, Chris and Cam were about to walk with her to the door.

"I haven't cleaned up," she said. "I'll send Malachi out. Y'all probably want to get goin' as soon as you can."

It was less than a minute before Malachi slid into the back seat behind them. "First date jitters," he said.

The drive to Hardee's in Northampton took less than fifteen minutes. Malachi slumped in the back as Chris drove up to the bright, garishly lit window and ordered hamburgers, fries and Cokes. With any luck they'd be back into the darkness before anybody saw them together.

"Be careful about your speed," Malachi warned. "All we need tonight is to get pulled."

So Chris kept his eye on the speedometer and the signs along back roads while they feasted and talked about the issues of the day. He hadn't told Susan of his plans because it didn't affect their regular Saturday night date. He and Cam usually sat out at the Caboose on Fridays. "She probably wouldn't mind," he said, "but her daddy'd throw me out if he knew."

JODY MEACHAM

Malachi was interested in the Christmas concert, which was coming up in another week.

“Is your mama lettin’ you go on the trip?” Cam asked.

“As long as there’s some other Booker T kids goin’, I don’t think she’ll have a problem,” he said. “But if it looks like I’m goin’ to be the only one, then no.”

“You sound like the new brakeman on Daddy’s yard job,” Cam said. “He’s lonely and cain’t wait until the Seaboard hires another colored brakeman so he’s not the center of attention.”

Their route took them along a back road past Sumner’s Pond, where the first textile mill in Sandhills County now stood in ruins in the darkness beside the old dam. The brick walls silhouetted against the stars looked like the ramparts of a castle suffocated beneath a blanket of kudzu. The frothy water pouring over the spillway glowed dimly. Farther along, the airport was deserted, a single mercury vapor light casting a bluish glow over the ramp where a couple of Cessnas and the Civil Air Patrol’s Piper Cub were tied down. The windsock across the field fluttered in the breeze. After awhile they arrived at Morrison’s Crossing, where the county road crossed the Columbia highway south of town amid the McCaslins’ peach orchards.

“Not South Carolina,” Malachi said of the right turn option.

“Okay,” Chris said, swinging the car left, back toward Shortridge. The headlights first swept across naked peach trees and then a parked car with a vapor cloud from its idling engine hanging behind it in the chilly air. The driver’s side door was lighter than the color of the rest of the car.

“It’s Alma,” Malachi said. “What the hell’s she doin’ on the wrong side of town?”

“Alma who?” Chris asked.

“Claryce’s best friend. Let’s sneak up on her. Claryce has been tryin’ to figure out who she’s been seein’.”

Chris was reluctant. “It’ll give away that we’re together.”

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“She dudn’ know this car,” Malachi said. “Just roll up behind her real slow with your lights off. Claryce will love me for it.”

A quarter-mile up the highway, Chris turned right onto a dirt road that led over a low hill toward Mr. McCaslin’s peach-packing shed near the railroad tracks. The sliver of moon was bright enough to illuminate the peach trees when Chris turned off the headlights. His parking lights let him follow the ruts. Near the edge of the orchard, Cam told Chris to turn right between two rows of trees.

“We’ll get stuck in the sand,” Chris complained.

“No we won’t. Sherry and I park out here in the summer when the leaves hide you.”

The trees were planted just far enough apart that the car fit through. Some had grown so wide that their branches reached out to scrape the windows. In a couple of moments they had crested the hill, and there, about fifty yards ahead, floated the ghostlike cloud from Alma’s car parked one row over to the right. Chris doused the parking lights.

“Ease down real slow,” Malachi said. “Pull up right beside her.”

“Jeezus,” Chris said, “we’re in some serious trouble if we get stuck.”

“Chicken.”

The windows of Alma’s car were fogged over. Chris let the station wagon roll to a stop even with the Chevrolet. They sat there talking in whispers, and Malachi began to speculate about which of the football players he thought Alma might be with. “She’s already fucked the basketball team,” he said.

A shape rose in the back seat. Two cheeks pressed against the window.

“That ass is white.”

The buttocks slid down the glass followed by someone's back, an expanse of skin so fair it nearly shined in the moonlight. And then there was a head of nearly white hair.

"Fatback!" Chris blurted.

Suddenly the rear door of the Chevrolet swung open and there, under the dome light, was Fatback, his head hanging upside down from the edge of the back seat, his face a mixed expression of fear and deflation. Alma was sitting atop him naked, her hands pointing a pistol directly at them.

"Y'all get your asses out've here this minute or I'm goin' to blow some heads off!" she shouted.

Dirt sprayed from the rear wheels as Chris floored the accelerator and the station wagon leapt forward. "We could've got killed," he said, trembling.

But Malachi couldn't quit laughing in the back seat. "Alma's tits aren't bad."

chapter 20

O HOLY NIGHT” WAS the last piece the chorus worked on before the end of the dress rehearsal in the school auditorium. Even though it had been improved by Mr. Cooper’s rewriting the soprano solo for Malachi, Chris was still tired of it. But Malachi nailed his part, and the tenors didn’t encounter their usual problems, so Mr. Cooper pronounced the piece a success after running through it only twice.

“Be here thirty minutes early tomorrow,” he said. “We need some time to warm up before we get out there in front of Mr. Warfield.”

Susan nudged Chris in the ribs. “What he really means is he wants to be sure all the boys’ ties and collars are fixed right,” she said. “Some of ’em have never worn a tuxedo before, much less white tie and tails.”

“He’s always been particular,” Chris said.

“A lot more particular than Fatback Haliburton from what I hear.”

Chris froze. He had not said a word to Susan about the peach orchard. He was sure neither of his friends had either. "What'd you hear?"

"Fatback's datin' a girl from up on the Yard."

She was almost breathless as she said it, as if this piece of gossip had finally burned its way out of her lungs despite a valiant struggle to keep it inside. "Everybody's talkin' about it."

"Haven't heard anything," he said, which was technically true. He'd seen it. "Who?"

"Alma Hodges." It was Claryce who answered. Malachi was with her, though from the haste with which the rest of the choir was leaving, it was apparent that they were the only people who'd picked up on what Susan had said. "I had to tell her," he said in a stage whisper. "Claryce's been wonderin' who Alma's been goin' with since football."

"You know more than you're lettin' on, Chris," Susan said accusingly, his ignorant act having evaporated in less than thirty seconds. "What's goin' on here that I don't know about?"

"Our boys were out together last week," Claryce said, affecting a haughty tone. "Just ridin' around talkin' and stuff is what they said. But they saw Alma and Fatback parkin' in a peach orchard."

"Nekkid," Malachi added, a huge smile spreading across his face.

"Nekkid in a peach orchard?" Whatever betrayal Susan had sensed from Chris, whatever discomfort she may have felt at being part of Claryce's "our" had been swept away by her curiosity.

"Nekkid in a peach orchard with a gun." Malachi crossed his arms, enjoying the way he could string Susan along by dribbling out the details.

"She had her school pistol with her," Claryce said.

Now it was Malachi's turn to be surprised. "How long's that been goin' on?"

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“Alma’s not the only girl at school with a pistol,” Susan said, glancing at Chris. “Don’t tell Daddy, but I quit after awhile ’cause it was so heavy.”

“Lawsy mercy, it’s time y’all was gettin’ out of here,” Mr. Cooper said in his Patricia voice. His presence, while he was picking up stray music and covering the piano, had been completely ignored once the peach orchard story got rolling. “And you’d best leave your guns home tomorrow night. Important railroad people are goin’ to be here.”

“You heard,” Susan said.

“It’d take a lot more than girls packing heat in this town to surprise me.”

“What about Fatback Haliburton?” she asked.

“Poor Fatback’s going to be made an example of,” Mr. Cooper said. “He and Alma both. Grampy kicked them out of school until after Christmas.”

“How’d anybody find out?” Claryce wanted to know. “Alma’s my best friend, and she wouldn’t even tell me.”

“You think we teachers stand up in front of class all day and don’t see who’s passing notes, who’s pinching whose tush?” Mr. Cooper said. “You think we walk down the halls and don’t notice who’s makin’ eyes or runnin’ off to the bathroom together?”

“So what?” Malachi said. “It’s not the school’s business.”

“Tell that to Principal Dawkins,” Mr. Cooper said. “We’ve all been put on notice to watch out for the wrong girls and boys getting too close. Most of us just keep our mouths shut, but there’s going to be a few squealers.”

“So who was it, Mr. Cooper?” Chris asked angrily, his experience at Grampy’s now refreshed in his mind.

“I’m not getting into that,” he answered. “But you’re taking chances hanging around here in little groups like this. Somebody walking in here now might think you were double-dating. Or worse.”

Chris watched Mr. Cooper as he continued his cleanup. “I didn’t think you’d let rednecks boss you around.”

Mr. Cooper’s mood changed instantly, and he slammed his music down on the piano. “Don’t get judgmental with me,” he said sternly. “I’ve had more experience handling bigots than you’ll ever know.” Then he winked. “All I’m telling you is be careful.”

The couples said their good-byes before they got to the cold outside, where cars were still making their way out of the parking lot in a caravan to the Caboose. Susan was eager to join them, and Chris was reluctant to suggest something different, but he had an idea. “Could we be just a few minutes late?” he asked. “I’d like to see how Fatback’s doin’.”

She agreed. “Fatback’s got no idea what he’s doin’.”

As the cars peeled north out of the parking lot, Chris turned the station wagon south. It was only a few minutes before his headlights picked up the sign that marked the dirt road. “McCaslin Orchard,” read the weathered, barely legible words with the faded picture of a peach. He slowed to make the left-hand turn off the Columbia Highway, and as soon as he pulled off the pavement, he stopped.

Fatback was standing by a peach tree bundled up in a red satin NASCAR jacket with a suitcase at his feet.

Susan rolled down her window and called over to him.

“Who’s that?” Fatback was squinting into the headlights, and Chris turned them off.

“Me and Chris, Fatback. What’s goin’ on?”

“Y’all get out’ve here,” he said. He sounded down in the dumps, and even though he was visible now only as a silhouette in the darkness, he was looking at the ground, toeing the dirt.

Susan got out of the car, and Chris followed. There was a sharp bite to the air, and he stuffed his hands into the pockets of his peacoat.

“G’won and leave me alone,” Fatback said again.

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Susan put her arm around his waist, and his effort to squirm away was pathetically weak. “Are you runnin’ away?” she asked.

“Gettin’ married. Y’all go on.”

“To Alma?” Susan’s tone was simultaneously persistent and soothing.

“We’re elopin’ to South Carolina tonight. She’ll be along any minute.”

Chris held his tongue. He didn’t want to do anything that would disrupt Susan’s rapport with Fatback, and he felt that just standing there in the cold with both of them was somehow an act of solidarity.

“Let’s wait in the car where it’s warm,” Susan said.

“You’ll take me back home. Daddy’s done kicked me out.”

“Cause of Alma?”

“Yeah.”

“Come on, get in the car and talk to us about it,” Susan said. “We’re not goin’ to do anything but talk, right Chris?”

“Right. Here, you can hold the keys. Just get in where it’s warm.”

At first Fatback resisted, but then he held out his hand for the car keys, and they crowded into the front seat, Susan in the middle. Before they closed the doors, extinguishing the dome light, Chris saw the tears rolling down Fatback’s cheeks. “You sure gettin’ married’s what you want to do?” he asked. “Y’all haven’t been datin’ that long.”

“Sometimes you know when somethin’s meant to be.”

He had found a note one day in his locker at school. It was unsigned, slipped through the vent, and it said she’d been watching him in class and in football games.

“She wanted to put her arm around me and walk off the field with me after the game, but she knew that wouldn’t work. No girl’s ever come up to me after a game. Coupla days later I got another note sayin’ she liked the way I threw a block. Nobody but

Coach Wilson ever noticed my blockin' before, not even my daddy. It wadn' long until I was gettin' notes every day, sometimes two or three times."

"How'd you find out who she was?" Susan asked.

"It was embarrassin'. I started checkin' out girls in my classes, and I couldn't figure out who it was. Nobody was lookin' at me any different. I thought it might be Shirley Quick for awhile, and I started payin' attention to her, askin' her questions sometimes. But after awhile, I could just tell I wadn' special. The handwritin' on the notes – it was unusual. Lots of circles and curlicues – the dot on the 'i's and the periods. One day when we were passin' in our history homework, I noticed a paper had those circles. Alma's the only girl on my row."

It was quiet for awhile in the car. Every now and then a pair of headlights would materialize up the highway toward Shortridge, and the lights would grow bigger and brighter until the car passed where they were, never even slowing down.

"Fatback," Chris said finally, "how'd you fall in love with a colored girl? I just didn' figure you'd be the one."

"Me neither," he said. "I just fell in love with the girl who wrote me all those notes, and when I found out who she was, it didn' make any difference."

Another set of headlights was growing in the darkness and then began to slow. Susan quickly opened her door, and they slid out her side of the car. Alma pulled off into the dirt and stopped. "Sorry I'm late, baby," she said through the open window. "Thought Mama was never goin' to bed."

"I've gotta go," Fatback said to Chris and Susan. "I 'preciate y'all not makin' fun of me."

He picked up his suitcase from the dirt, and Susan grabbed his jacket sleeve. She reached up to his face, pulled him close, and kissed him on the cheek.

"Y'all be careful," she said.

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Fatback shook Chris' hand, returned the keys and then got into Alma's car. She looked at both Chris and Susan. Her expression was non-committal, and she didn't say anything before rolling up the window and driving away.

"I feel funny – not laughin' funny, but odd funny," Susan said as the taillights shrank into the darkness. "Fatback's crazy, but how do you tell him?"

WHEN SUSAN helped Chris remove his cutaway coat, the white shirt underneath had been soaked through with sweat except for the thick, stiff front, which still looked as fresh as it did when it came out of the polyethylene bag from the rental store. All around the room – a math classroom by day that was just off-stage from the auditorium – boys who looked royally smashing in their white ties and tails peeled off formal coats to reveal the less glamorous reality of concert performing underneath. And as soon as the coats came off, the shivering began. The clammy cotton shirts clung to torsos in filmy translucence, wicking away body heat in the drafty, steam-heated classroom. Except for the heavily starched, triple-thickness front, Malachi's shirt now was almost as black as the coat he'd just slipped out of.

"Were y'all that nervous?" Susan asked, surveying the locker room scene.

She and all the girls were as fresh during "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" at the end of the concert as she'd been when the choir opened with "Joy to the World" a couple of hours ago. It helped that their identical black sleeveless dresses with the scooped necklines allowed their nervous perspiration to evaporate, but that's not what Mr. Cooper had in mind when he'd picked out Simplicity pattern number 4876.

"Bosoms out, ladies!" he'd say during concert warm-ups. "We want to see some bosoms tonight." It endeared him to the sopranos and altos, not all of whom had breasts to brag about but who

appreciated the thought, and it lowered the pre-performance tension level by a considerable amount.

Singing for Mr. Cooper could get intense. All his swishing and clowning aside, nothing was more important to him than the performance. Just one well-focused look from him during the dress rehearsal for the previous year's Christmas concert had wilted the entire bass section, most of whom were bigger than he. Every singer in the baritone row had slipped a hand down the low-backed dress of the alto in front of him on the Fanny Bright line in "Jingle Bells."

Mr. Cooper's stare had lasted for what seemed like hours but was probably no more than twenty seconds until the tittering among the songbirds ceased and a deathly silence fell over the auditorium. After the smiles had evaporated and order was restored, the altos did not sing sharp the remainder of the year. Mr. Cooper had not uttered a word.

But now he burst into the classroom, wiping his brow for what must have been the fiftieth time this evening, clearly excited by the performance. Mr. Cooper was never stinting with praise, but when he spoke like he was now – talking in detail about the quality of their sound, maintenance of the *a cappella* pitch in "Carol of the Bells" – everyone paid particular attention. He'd been on Broadway.

"Malachi, I don't know what to say but that you ought to do some voice work next year in college," he said. "Your phrasing, your dynamics were outstanding."

He was working his way through the pieces as they came to mind, critiquing each, when there was a knock on the door. It was Wallace Warfield. Not everyone recognized the president of the Seaboard Air Line Railroad on sight, but his perfectly tailored dark suit and silvery hair distinguished him as someone deserving the choir's attention. Quiet fell over the room as Mr. Cooper shook his hand and exchanged a whispered pleasantry.

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“Choir, this is Mr. Warfield, the president of the railroad,” he announced. “He’s on his way back to Richmond, but he’s asked to speak to you before he catches his train.”

Mr. Warfield looked around the room with a smile and a sparkle that said he was happy to have been invited.

“I just wanted to say what a pleasure it was to hear you sing, and what a wonderful beginning of the Christmas season your performance was for Sharon and me,” he said. “We’ve followed Mr. Cooper’s career for a long time, and when he invited us here, there’s nothing that would have kept us away.”

Applause broke out around the room for both the president and Mr. Cooper, who was blushing, and it built until Mr. Warfield held up his hands. “Please,” he said. “You should know that Mr. Cooper has been bragging about you all year, and like most everything he says, we found out tonight how right he was. Merry Christmas to all of you, and enjoy your trip to New York. Sharon and I plan to see you there.”

Mr. Cooper interrupted the cheers for an announcement of his own. “Mr. Warfield’s too modest to mention it, but he’s made a contribution to the glee club for our trip. May I say what it is?” Mr. Warfield nodded. “The Seaboard has donated a private coach for us on the *Silver Meteor* to New York and back.”

This time as they applauded, the singers crowded around Warfield to shake his hand.

Chris turned to Susan. “You’ve got to convince your daddy to let you go.”

chapter 21

SUSAN CHECKED THE mirror again. It was exactly the red she wanted – not the bright, Christmassy red of the decorations above the fireplace where she had opened gifts the morning before. It was darker, almost maroon. It said mystery, not alarm, and it was much more sensual, suited to an evening function where the lighting was subdued and moody, the way it was now in her room in the pre-supper winter darkness. The color complemented her hair, a thick, mahogany cascade that draped over her bare shoulders and framed her breasts above the edge of the bodice.

Mama, who had been working her way around slowly, making adjustments in the back or in the hang of the dress, inserted her thumbs into the front and gave a sharp tug upward, minimizing the expanse of bare skin ever so slightly.

“Mother! You talked about how sophisticated it was at Kathy’s.”

“I know what it’s about,” she said. “But before all that, you’re going to have to get past your father downstairs, and he’s got ideas of his own.”

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Daddy had not been in the cheeriest of day-after-Christmas moods since the phone call from Mr. Peterson. This was the one week of the year that he closed the Pit Stop, stayed away from the train station, left the dogs in the pen and dedicated himself entirely to hearth and home. From the moment he answered the phone at lunch it was apparent that this tradition would be violated. He and Mr. Peterson had been together in the living room for the past two hours talking about things so important that his everyday growl – a trait exacerbated by years of talking in the noisy cabin of the Cessna – was muted, and no one could overhear what he was saying from the kitchen.

The detective's visit – no, it could not wait until next week – had disrupted the household. Mama had chain-smoked all afternoon. There were two crumpled Salem packs in the kitchen garbage.

If tonight hadn't been the night of the Winter Formal, as they'd finally decided to call it on the engraved invitations, Susan would have been more upset, too. The prom had become so important that some of the girls referred to Christmas Day as Formal Eve.

But what this dance meant for her and Chris' future overshadowed everything else. She had shared just two games of the football season with him, and the Northampton game, which should have been their biggest night of the fall, had ended at the hospital. The spring semester would be their last together in high school, and then – what?

For her, she feared it would be her mother's alma mater, Randolph-Macon in Virginia, alone with a thousand girls and far enough from Chris to be forgotten. She knew she was in love. That's what she had discovered in a world turned upside down by integration, during the football season and through the conversations and quarrels they'd had out at the Caboose. Chris hadn't ut-

tered the words, but she would tonight when the time was right because she knew he felt the same way.

“Tug worries me,” Mama said, interrupting her train of thought. “I hope it’s not the business. Your father doesn’t need that kind of stress, not after the year he’s been through.”

Susan wasn’t sure what Mama was talking about. What had Daddy gone through at the Pit Stop that he didn’t go through every year, dealing with the people in Winston-Salem, spending time with his dogs and his evenings at the depot?

“I’m just thankful you haven’t been affected,” she went on. “He’s been putting a lot more pressure on himself, and Mama doesn’t help.”

“Mimi?”

“Last time your daddy and I were up there was terrible. Felt like I refereed a twenty-four-hour fight. I’ve told him that Mama’s too old and too old-fashioned to change and not to let her get under his skin. But he can’t, and Mama won’t give him the satisfaction of knowing he’s good enough for her daughter.”

Mama was right. Daddy and Mimi were locked together in a quarrel they could not set aside, and she had been in the middle of it as long as she could remember.

But she was getting out.

CHRIS KNEW why Susan had asked for a wrist corsage as soon as she descended the stairs. Her gown did not hide an agenda; it announced a young woman. The floor-length dress covered more of her body than the skirts she wore to school, but when she walked it created a fluid sensuousness he had never seen before.

Neither, apparently, had her mother. Mrs. Marks had to have seen Susan arranging herself at Kathy’s or upstairs in her room, but he could sense her discomfort when Mr. Marks walked in and Susan simultaneously glided down from her pastel haven into the front of the house with its history, crystal and antiques.

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Chris helped Susan slide the band holding the white orchids up her gloved arm.

“Daddy, get a picture of us on the staircase before we leave.”

Mrs. Marks handed him the Instamatic and stood aside as Susan took Chris’ arm and led him up to the second step.

“Mama?” she asked. “I left Chris’ boutonniere in the fridge.”

The carnation matched Susan’s dress and, pinned to his lapel, Chris liked the harmony it created between him in his black tuxedo and Susan, with her dark hair overflowing her shoulders onto the deep red of her dress.

When his eyes regained vision after the flashcube’s flare, Chris could see Mrs. Marks motioning them out the door. She was eager to get them out of the house.

“Have a wonderful evening, Sweetie,” she whispered as she kissed Susan good-bye. “I’ll leave the light on.”

FROM OUTSIDE, Aladdin’s was just a name in neon script above a door, not an exotic Arabian destination. Except for the glow of the kitchen lights that illuminated the forest out back, the low, white building was windowless. On a cloudless night like this, a sky full of stars piercing the cold darkness, outside lights weren’t necessary. The sandy ground glowed in the moonlight among the pines, and the chrome on the cars parked in the surrounding woods sparkled among the trees. There was a lonely sigh from the freshening breeze.

It was the first time either Chris or Susan had entered the club and been embraced by its cozy darkness. Candles on the low tables flickered in the faces of classmates sipping soft drinks from high-ball glasses. Chris had never been in a bar before, and even though they were serving only Cokes and ginger ales, the atmosphere gave the event a patina of movie set sophistication he was happy to enjoy.

"I'm buyin' the first round," Cam said to the black man in a white cotton jacket and black bow tie who arrived at their table.

"No charge, sir. It's in the service."

The room was full of tuxedos and formal dresses. The clink of glasses and the swish and swirl of shiny fabrics muffled the conversations. Well-dressed teachers serving as chaperones kept everyone out of the main room where the band was still setting up.

"My god you look gorgeous," Sherry said, kissing Susan on the cheek. "How'd your daddy ever let you out of the house in that?"

"Look who's talkin'," Susan responded, running her finger under the velvet spaghetti strap of Sherry's deep purple dress.

Most of the girls had chosen dark, vivid colors of winter rather than more playful, frivolous styles of the spring formals Chris was used to.

"I wonder where Fatback and Alma are tonight," Cam said as their drinks arrived. A cherry floated among the ice cubes of his Coke.

"I worry about 'em, 'specially Fatback," Chris said. "He was swept off his feet. I don't think he's thought everything through."

"Where are they goin' to stay?" Cam wanted to know.

The chime of spoon against crystal interrupted their conversation. "*Attention, s'il vous plaît! Attention!*" It was just like French class except Mme. Birmingham was wrapped in copper taffeta and propped up on three-inch heels. "We're ready for dinner now," she announced beneath the Moorish arch that was the gateway to the main club. "Y'all come in and find a table."

Susan quickly handed her Coke and shoes to Chris and as best she could in her gown, sprinted for a table she'd picked out near the dance floor. Worldly and sophisticated in the bar with a tall drink, now she was a seventeen-year-old basketball player dashing down court.

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Sherry spoke almost reverently at the table. “When Mama and Daddy said they were goin’ to Aladdin’s, I knew not to ask about too much.”

“I know,” Susan agreed. “My parents used to come out here once a month. They always got dressed up, and Kathleen had me in bed before they got home.”

As the conversation went on, salads began appearing and dressing was ladled over them by waiters and waitresses moving silently and unobtrusively among the tables. Water glasses were filled from sweating silver pitchers. Like the planning and financing of the event itself, everything was happening spontaneously. The weeks of making decorations and hours hanging them in the gym that were part of past proms had been replaced by a party grander than anything they could have staged themselves.

Across the parquet dance floor “The Coastmen,” six black men in sequined, midnight blue dinner jackets, moved into “Moon River.”

“Just like in the movies,” Sherry said.

Chris put his arm around Susan, closed his eyes and allowed her nearness and the piquancy of the Italian dressing to subsume him in a dream world.

“How do you like your steak, sir?”

The waitress’s voice was squeaky, familiar and disconcerting. Without opening his eyes to confirm her identity, Chris knew the evening had changed.

“Claryce,” Susan blurted.

Claryce was wearing dark pants and a white cotton jacket like the bartender, but with a red fez on her head. Her expression was impassive.

Chris couldn’t utter her name. “Medium rare,” he finally managed.

“And you, ma’am?” Claryce’s tone remained flat.

“The same,” Susan said. She was twisting the napkin in her lap.

Every “sir” and “ma’am” from Claryce pushed her further from them until at last, all the necessary information recorded, she left them alone in silence around the candlelit table. Then Susan said she needed to go to the ladies’ room and Sherry decided to go, too.

Tater Peterson’s waiter was one of the basses who sang with Malachi – Roosevelt somebody. The same thing was happening at other tables, and while the musicians played on as if nothing was happening, something was.

Chris and Cam sat and watched as girls from around the dining room began to flow toward the restroom.

“I feel like the time Sherry found out I’d taken another girl to the movie,” Cam said finally.

It was awhile before the girls returned. The restroom had been full, Susan said, but not many needed to pee. “We don’t have anything to feel embarrassed about,” she said unconvincingly. “I don’t invite everybody I know when I have a pool party.”

Chris knew Susan was lying. He’d seen her reaction when Claryce asked for their orders.

“I’m not the only person here feelin’ different,” he said, nodding toward the dance floor. “Hardly anybody’s shaggin’, and it’s not ’cause the salad’s so good.”

“You’re not goin’ to make me feel guilty,” Susan complained. “This is a private party, and I’m not apologizin’ for havin’ a good time.”

She didn’t look up when her steak was served, and she shrank from Chris when he tried to return his arm to the back of her chair. It seemed like a week of silence until Sherry stood and led Cam out to shag to some beach music. Chris and Susan followed.

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“I’m sorry,” Chris said after awhile. “I wadn’ tryin’ to make you feel bad, but seein’ Claryce bothers me. It feels like the first time we went to the Caboose after meetin’ Malachi.”

“I shouldn’t have jumped on you,” Susan whispered, moving closer. “It bothered me the minute I recognized Claryce, and it really bothers me that I don’t know why. Our parents thought this thing up. How can we feel bad doin’ what they say is okay?”

It was difficult to talk and pay attention to the music. Chris was thankful the band had moved on to a slow dance, where all he had to do was hold on and shift his weight around.

“What if our parents taught us wrong?” he finally asked.

“Ridiculous. My parents, yours, they’re all good people; they came from good people. If there was somethin’ wrong, somebody’s conscience would’ve gotten to ’em a long time before now. That’s what conscience is, God talkin’ to you from inside.”

“So it’s not my conscience botherin’ me?”

Susan pulled her head off his shoulder for a moment to look at him. But whatever she wanted to say wouldn’t come out.

An hour into the prom, the four of them took a restroom break and headed down the hallway past the kitchen. The walls were vibrating with the pulse of “Louie Louie” when Chris paused at the kitchen door. Another party was going on through the porthole window, busboys scraping plates and dishwashers up to their elbows in suds, swinging, spinning and singing into invisible microphones like a real-life movie musical.

“Have you ever seen such a thing in your life?” Susan said.

WNOX FADED badly on the radio. It was one of the few rock and roll stations you could hear in Shortridge after WPYM’s sign-off at sundown. Everybody said it was the mountains around Knoxville that made the station hard to hear, so Chris turned the dial to WCFL, where tomorrow’s Chicagoland forecast was blow-

ing snow and a high of eight degrees. Winter, “The Mamas and The Papas” – it was all so far away.

Inside the station wagon it was warm, and every few minutes he’d run the engine to keep it that way. Susan hovered above him, an evolving chiaroscuro shape in the darkness in which he could make out her nostrils and the curved line of her jaw. The odor of apple shampoo enveloped him when her hair descended like a heavy curtain around his face, and he felt the gentlest contact of her lips and nose on his neck.

“I love you,” she said, her voice barely audible above the soft hiss of her dress.

He ran his hand up the back of her neck until he had a thick mass of her hair intertwined in his fingers and pulled her face down to his so he could kiss her again. His clip-on bow tie had come off during the scramble over the seat back, his jacket and rented shoes shortly afterward as they stretched out in the rear of the station wagon on the stadium blanket.

But their frantic tempo had slowed, and for awhile they just talked, Susan using his shoulder as a pillow. They spent some time rehashing their feelings about Claryce and the prom without much further insight. Susan was sure only that they were losing something and that the whole subject was exhausting.

She rolled over and Chris feared she’d brushed against his erection. There was a quiet pop from behind her and like toothpaste oozing from its tube, she slid up and out of the top of the dress. Her breasts were slightly flattened and her belly was a concave plain that stretched down into the cave of her gown.

He’d imagined there would be a gradual wearing down of resistance when this time came, but she was welcoming. Her sigh when he first touched her nakedness hinted at approval and relief. He brought his mouth to her breast and she clasped his head tightly, rolling atop him, her bare toes stroking his calf as he kissed her. His eyes were closed, but his mind sensed brightness. His hand

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found her shoulder blades and her back arched, a deep curving velvet canyon leading his fingers downward along her spine. He pressed against the small of her back, and her thigh worked into his groin. The shallowness of her breathing hardened him further. Her hand went to his belly, sliding beneath the cummerbund. The light in his head now was uncontrollably intense, whiter than bright, and the convulsions he had hoped to delay could no longer be suppressed.

As her fingers reached deeper, grasping him, the eruption began, pulsing from him in waves of warmth and adolescent humiliation. If he could just disappear, erase what was happening, try again and do it better. But all he could do was hold her.

And she held him, not flinching or recoiling. When he was spent, her hand relaxed with him, and her hair enveloped him again, allowing her to kiss him behind the veil that kept his secret between them.

“I’ve got some Kleenex,” she said.

chapter 22

MR. MCCAULEY WAS the right conductor for Chris to work with, and he was the right conductor for Andy Morrison. The conductors Chris had worked with so far had made it clear at some point during the shift that the first black brakeman on the yard wasn't welcome on his engine.

That included Mr. Swain, who had told Chris that "the Seaboard'll be sorry if they stick me with that nigger." He had said that at 3 a.m. a couple of nights before when he arrived back at the yard office from a four-hour "assignment" at the north end of the departure yard. Chris had been left alone in the crew room for half a shift to fight off sleep and certain termination.

"Ralph's been an alcoholic for years," Mr. McCauley said while driving Chris to their afternoon job on Yard B. "If he's got an easy night, the yardmaster will park him on the north end for awhile so he can sleep it off. You're not goin' to learn anything workin' with Ralph."

Mr. McCauley cared about people. Older football players who'd worked summers on the Seaboard talked about their shifts

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with Cam's father, how interested he was in their welfare and what they were studying in college. In the summers he still coached a Little League team with Sherry's daddy even after Cam got too old to play.

"How'd Andy Morrison get an afternoon shift?" Chris asked. "He dudn' have that much seniority."

Mr. McCauley said something about everybody having to work sometime and didn't seem like he wanted to discuss it further. Chris took that as confirmation that some sort of an accommodation had been worked out that let the other conductors avoid getting Andy because everybody knew Mr. McCauley would work with him.

"I don't know how he does it," Mr. McCauley said as they rode their switcher into the classification bowl. "Andy absorbs so much crap he oughta explode, but he just keeps on like nothin's botherin' him."

Midway up track twenty-two, Chris directed the coupling with a cut of pulpwood flats – open-sided cars piled high with sweet-smelling pine logs – and then he and Mr. McCauley set off further up the track to insure they had a solid line of cars while their switcher backed up.

"I heard Andy got mad at least once," Chris said. "I worked a coal train down from the mountains last weekend and they said he complained about gettin' his coffee spilled when the slack ran in."

"Lots of people heard about that one," Mr. McCauley said. "Somebody from Richmond sat Andy down after that, read him the riot act, and he's been doin' a Jackie Robinson imitation ever since."

Farther up the bowl a cut of three black coal hoppers rolled toward them on a parallel track. Despite their slow speed, they did not appear to be decelerating as they closed the gap on a cut of hoppers already stopped.

BLAM! The ground shook under the concussion of the coupling. The stationary hoppers lurched backward fifteen feet, protesting with a violent shriek as they skidded along the rails and a cloud of coal dust mushroomed into the air.

When the reverberation subsided, Mr. McCauley spoke almost reverently. "Not many people 'preciate coal," he said. "We don't want nothin' to do with it. We don't want to touch it and get all dirty. We don't want to be around it or even see it. But you got to respect it and give it its due. We're made out of that same dust."

When it was obvious there were no open gaps in the cut of cars they were pulling, Mr. McCauley motioned to Chris and they caught the grab-irons at the end of one of the moving pulpwood cars to climb aboard. They dropped off at the skid, a steel wedge they placed atop the rail near the end of the track to prevent cars from rolling all the way through the bowl, and then walked across the tracks about a hundred yards to align the switches so their cut could be shoved into track seven in the departure yard. That track now held only a caboose that would bring up the rear of what eventually would become Train 478 to Wilmington, due out before midnight.

When they broke for supper a few hours later, Chris was able to get a small conversation going with Andy Morrison. He had worked at the Ford Motor Company plant near Atlanta before coming to Shortridge. But as to why he left the Atlanta area, Morrison was silent. It wasn't something he was interested in discussing.

They finished eating and walked back outside to a warming fire of spilled coal that crews had picked up off the ground and piled in a discarded oil drum near the speaker where the yardmaster gave out instructions. Chris noticed a light sweep across the sky to the south.

"*Meter's* on time," Andy said in his first unsolicited comment to Chris since they came to work.

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“God dammit!” the yardmaster’s voice spat from a speaker pole. “I don’t want the fuckin’ blowups on the head end where they can kill somebody!”

Andy rubbed his face and then shook his head, which bothered Mr. McCauley. “It’s the yardmaster’s fault, Andy,” Mr. McCauley told him. “We put the coal where Harry told us to put it, and now he’s pissed ’cause he should’ve put it somewhere else.”

This was the art of railroading that had stumped Chris when he was younger and rearranged his Lionel cars by picking them up with his hands. The train they had begun building earlier in the day with the cut of pulpwood flats had grown during their meal break with the addition of a cut of forty coal hoppers headed for Carolina Power & Light’s generating plant near Wilmington. Now another switcher was ready to finish building the train with its fifteen box-cars loaded with napalm bombs.

But this arrangement presented a hazard for the engine crew that would take the train to Wilmington because the bombs would be coupled directly behind the four freight motors on the head end. The solution was to re-do some of the work that had already been done by pulling the coal out of track seven, shoving the blowups in, and then replacing the coal cars. That would put a half-mile buffer between the head-end crew and the explosives.

“You stay on the ground and line the switches, Andy,” Mr. McCauley said. “Me and Chris will stay on the motor.”

They rode the front end of their switcher up the ladder to track seven and coupled to the coal.

“I don’t know if Andy’s goin’ to make it,” McCauley said, barely audible over the diesel rumble. “The N-double-A-C-P asked him to come here and integrate the trainmen’s board. He dudn’ have any family. He dudn’ know anybody.”

“Sounds worse than school,” Chris said.

McCauley circled his lantern for his switcher to back out again. Andy had already thrown the crossover switches so they could

move from the ladder track over to the departure track. That would clear the ladder so the crew with the blowups could shove their cut into track seven.

While they pulled back with the coal, Chris noticed a subtle change where the departure track began its descent toward the mainline. Half a dozen car lengths or so down the decline, he could feel the switch engine beginning to strain against the accumulating weight of the coal hoppers as they, too, began their descent and the slack in each coupling ran in one car at a time. It felt like a gentle bump every few seconds. Each time a car went over the edge added another hundred tons to the weight held back by the switch engine. Forty cars, a hundred tons each – the switcher would be holding eight million pounds of coal on the hill once they pulled their cut into the clear.

“Red, fourteen fifty-nine.” It was Andy radioing for the engine to stop. A few seconds later, after he pulled the coupler pin between the last coal hopper and the first pulpwood flat, he was on the radio again. “Okay, fourteen fifty-nine, back it down into the clear.”

The release of the airbrake tension was palpable, even through the thick soles of Chris’ work boots, and again they began to glide slowly backward. Every few seconds the slack of another hopper ran in on them and another hundred tons of coal thudded against the straining switcher.

“Red, fourteen-fifty-nine,” Andy finally radioed. “You’re in the clear.”

Again the tension built in the idling locomotive as its brakes squeezed to a stop. There was another bump – the slack from yet one more coal hopper sliding over the crest of the hill – and the engine yielded a few more inches, its locked steel wheels skidding along the rail heads.

The radio crackled again with another voice. “Come ahead fourteen-eighteen.” Above them and to their left on the switching

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lead, dark smoke from switcher 1418 erased the stars in the night sky as its engine roared forward with its cut of blowups.

Something made Mr. McCauley turn toward Mr. Sutton in the switch engine's cab and Chris turned to see why. Mr. Sutton's face had a ghoulish look, illuminated from beneath by the instrument dials in front of him. His mouth moved, and Chris heard his voice in the radio strapped to his chest: "No air!"

The tension beneath Chris' boot soles had disappeared. The switch engine was rolling backward.

"Shit!" Mr. McCauley yelled. Already the pace of their retreat down the hill was beginning to pick up. "Get up on those hoppers and start tyin' down handbrakes!"

Immediately Chris reached across the gap from the engine to the grab-irons on the first coal hopper. As he climbed the ladder, he checked the end of the car. There was no brake wheel. It was on the other end, and he needed to get there as quickly as possible.

At the top of the ladder, Chris stepped over the steel side of the open-topped car and onto the coal. He tried to run along the top of fifty-foot long swaying black mound – a hundred tons of coal packs down hard – but the surface was loose, and his third step got away from him. He went sprawling toward the far end of the hopper, sliding sideways down the sloping face of the ridge of coal. Had the top edge of the side been a foot lower, he'd have gone over the edge.

"Hurry!" Mr. McCauley called over the rumble of the steel wheels.

Quickly but carefully he scrambled to the far end and stepped onto a steel platform protruding just below the handbrake wheel. It spun easily at first as he cranked it clockwise. The rattling of the chain that reached down to the bottom of the car and underneath to the wheels told him there was plenty of slack to be cranked out before the brake shoes would begin to tighten against the wheels.

Coal dust was blowing now, stinging his face as the cars picked up speed. He put his head down to keep the particles out of his eyes. The radio on his chest spoke again. It was Mr. McCauley, and Chris could tell he was trying to sound calm.

“Shortridge switch tender! Shortridge switch tender! Yard runaway! Line us for the westbound main!”

The station was just a few miles south. The west main would send them around a sharp curve behind the depot and uphill through the cut behind the hospital.

The slack was gone now from the brake wheel. It was getting harder and harder for Chris to turn it, and sparks were spewing from the wheels below. Still he cranked harder.

“Enough! Move on back!” Mr. McCauley was climbing out of the hopper beside him, but he had to scream to be heard above the wind, the shrieking brakes and the roar of steel wheels.

Chris followed the conductor across the gap to the next hopper, crabbing sideways on all fours through the suffocating black blizzard. At the far end, Mr. McCauley set him to work on the brake wheel and yelled into his ear. Even that close, the violence around them made it hard to hear.

“Harvard Creek! That’s where you jump!”

“What about the brakes?”

“Jump you sonofabitch!”

Then the conductor was gone, vanished into the fury of the storm that raged across the tops of the hoppers.

Resistance was beginning to build again in the brake wheel. Chris gave a quick look forward. They had reached the mainline, but there were two parallel tracks off to the right side – no way could he leap over both of them. They were overtaking a Trailways bus paralleling them on the Raleigh Highway.

He kept cranking and glanced up again to get his bearings in the maelstrom of soot. The outline of Pineview A.M.E. Church

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was in the distance. There was probably another mile to the trestle, a half-mile beyond that to the station.

Suddenly the hopper jerked violently sideways beneath him; the steel brake wheel slammed into his chest. His grip saved him from plummeting down between the cars. Another jerk, this time in the opposite direction. Now there was only one track to his right.

More sparks splayed beneath him. Chris turned to cross the gap to the next car. Luckily the brake wheel was on the near end this time. More brake fire spewed a couple of cars back; Mr. McCauley was cranking away, too.

Another glance, a light beam crossing the sky – the *Silver Meteor*.

This time Chris yelled into the radio. “Shortridge switch tender! We’re almost at the creek!”

There was no more time for handbrakes. Chris could see the trestle through the coal dust and beyond that the gleaming steel rails led directly to the head light of the *Meteor* sitting in the station. Harvard Creek was maybe fifty yards wide, but he had to jump early, like leading a receiver with a pass. But how early at this speed?

He scrambled around the corner of the speeding coal hopper and held the grab-irons facing forward. He pulled his feet up, placing the soles flat against the side of the hopper so that he was crouched, ready to spring, like a spider from a wall. The trestle was coming up fast now and still there was one more set of rails to clear in his leap to reach the water.

When to go?

When to go?

Now!

He dived as far out as he ever had at Harvard Lake. Time slowed. He was in flight, stretching his trajectory as far as he could.

WHAM! The impact on his chest sheared away the radio and knocked the wind out of him.

WHAM! A second impact. He was skipping across the water like a stone.

WHAM! This time it was like hitting a wall. Freezing water crashed down around him as he skidded to a stop against the creek bank.

CHRIS HAD never seen Cam cry. He remembered the pain on his face the time Cam had parachuted out of the scrub oak tree in the back yard as a twelve-year-old and broke his arm, but Cam had not whimpered. But he was crying as Dr. Gordon droned on about the sacrifices and hardships that railroad men had endured since the founding of the town, men who'd been lost in collisions, boiler explosions, crushed.

They had joined the saints, he said, because the way a man dies says as much about him as the way he lives. Our dear departed brother, Pearce Sutton, had stayed with his train until the end of the line like a sea captain with a doomed ship. He was still at his post when it hit the switch that diverted it onto the sharp curve behind the station, away from the *Meteor*, where it derailed beneath an avalanche of steel and coal. We must not overlook the work such men have done for our town and what they mean to our nation. They had built both, linked them one to the other, and it was a shame that it was only at times like these that we paused to appreciate them.

The casket was covered by a white pall with a green cross, and white flowers covered the top. The bare oak at the end glistened under the lights that hung down from the towering ceiling.

Across the aisle in the family pew, Mrs. Sutton was barely visible in the embrace of her brother-in-law, united in grief over the man they had shared.

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“The doctor said Daddy will never talk again,” Cam whispered to Chris. “Piece of steel got his voice box.”

Chris nodded, silent. There were tears in his eyes, too. His Little League coach’s last words had been to call him an S.O.B.

chapter 23

CHRIS CAUGHT SIGHT of Malachi walking Claryce down the hall early in the morning, but he retreated behind an open door and he didn't think they had seen him. On the first day back at school after Christmas break, what had happened at Aladdin's had been erased from in his mind by the humiliating episode with Susan later that night and then the train wreck. Seeing them was a painful reminder.

He dreaded the inevitable meeting with Malachi in the restroom and wondered what to say. He wanted to come up with something satisfactory, which he decided meant something that would quickly put the whole prom behind them and he could go on like nothing had happened, just as he had with Monteenia. Except there were no such words, and he knew Malachi wouldn't let him off the hook the way she had.

"It dudn' mean we're racists," Cam reassured him. "We've done stuff with him."

As much as he'd wanted to accept what Cam said, it was what Malachi thought that mattered. He would have gone to a prom that included Malachi and Claryce. He would have sat at a table

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with them, laughed, eaten and danced. But he had never done a thing to make it happen.

He was a racist, just as surely as those people on the Charlotte TV who had screamed at colored kids going to white schools, and Malachi had seen that in him.

It was Fatback, though, who was at the urinal, his head down, his attention focused as if he were seeing a penis for the first time.

Chris stood still. He knew he'd been noticed, but he didn't know what to say to Fatback, either. So he waited, and when he thought the two of them had been there in silence long enough to rule out some kind of major urinary disorder, he spoke up.

"You and Alma okay?"

Fatback shifted his weight, but otherwise he remained silent. He had to be finished by now.

"Look," Chris said. "I'm not tryin' to embarrass you, just let you know some of us have been worryin' about you."

After a long pause, Fatback looked up to the blank wall above the urinal. "Been stayin' at Grampy's," he said softly, still not looking in Chris' direction.

"Grampy? You and Alma ..."

"Alma's back home."

Chris was confused. Before he could ask another question, Fatback continued. "Did you know it's illegal to marry Alma?" He seemed to be sniffing. "The J.P. looked right at me and told me she wouldn't marry us even if she could."

They had stayed a couple of nights in a motel near Florence, he said, but their hundred dollars had run out, and they had to come home. His parents wouldn't let either one of them into the house, and he'd slept in the back of Alma's car at her house their first night back.

"Do you know what it feels like when your mama won't even let you stand on the porch steps?" he asked, facing Chris at last with tears streaming down his face.

Chris had no idea. "What'd your mama say?"

"She said I'd sinned."

"But you didn' marry Alma."

"I had it in my heart, and that's the same thing."

"It's a sin to marry a colored girl?"

"God said birds of a feather flock together. It's in the Bible."

"You still want to be with Alma?"

"It's not that simple. We cain't stay at my house. Alma's mama and daddy won't let us stay there 'cause they say it'd get 'em killed. So we're stuck. Grampy's been talkin' to Mama and Daddy. He thinks they'll take me back after awhile but only if me and Alma break up."

"You agreed to that?"

"What choice do I have?"

Chris didn't know what to say. Romances around school broke up all the time, but none left him with the empty feeling he had about this one. Whatever passion had brought them together, even if it were only recent, had to be powerful, especially in Shortridge. Whatever despair Fatback felt now was beyond Chris' comprehension. Fatback had been a joke when he was naked in the peach orchard. The night Alma had picked him up on the highway, he was in love.

SUSAN COULDN'T believe anyone would be so mean as to want to kill her daddy. Why?

"If your mama'd been home that day 'stead of takin' care of the Pit Stop, she'd be dead," her father said as she put on her coat to leave with Chris. "It gives me chills every time I think about it."

Just knowing a murderer had stood on her front porch gave her a spooky feeling.

"Are y'all in danger, Mr. Marks?" Chris asked.

"Tug dudn' think so," he said. "The New York police are keepin' an eye on him. Not likely he could get down here again."

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The revelation that Daddy may have been another target of the man who killed the porter was relief in a perverted sort of way. Susan had been begun wondering – privately – if her father was considered a suspect. The long interview at Christmas and Mr. Peterson’s frequent visits looked like trouble. The possibility he was a victim was a more reassuring explanation of the same facts.

“Soon as Daddy told me that nigger was involved in our business I knew he was in trouble,” she told Chris in the car. “He got Daddy caught up in somethin’ dangerous”

“You’re talkin’ about Claryce’s father.”

“I’m talkin’ about a nigger.”

They turned into the McCauley’s driveway. Cam’s Fairlane was there, but Mr. McCauley’s car wasn’t. It was probably still up at the yard. Mrs. McCauley answered the doorbell.

“Y’all come in,” she said. “Cotton’ll be so happy you’re here, and Chris ...” The tears welled in her eyes, and she swallowed him up in a hug. “Thank God. Cotton’s back in the den. Y’all come on back.”

Mr. McCauley was in flannel pajamas and covered up by a blanket in his recliner. His neck was wrapped in gauze. He weakly raised his hand in greeting, and Susan was overcome by Chris’ reaction.

To her the whole train wreck had been one of those male things involving lots of heroic stoicism but made little sense. Chris knelt beside Mr. McCauley’s recliner in tears and Mr. McCauley draped a limp arm around him, squeezing him as best he could.

“I’m sorry, Mr. McCauley,” was the most Chris could utter. “I’m so sorry.”

Mrs. McCauley dabbed at her eyes and spoke up to facilitate the conversation. “Cotton said y’all saved the *Meter*.”

“Is he goin’ to be okay?” Chris asked.

“The doctor said it’ll be slow goin’, but the only lastin’ damage is his voice box. The ribs’ll heal. How ’bout you?”

“I feel so guilty about Mr. Sutton.”

Susan had listened to that story at length, and the most effective help she'd been able to provide was just holding Chris' hand.

Mr. McCauley tapped Chris on the back to request the pad and pencil on the table beside him. It took a moment with shaky hands, but when he was done, he peeled the top sheet off and handed it to Chris.

You did great. Andy's in hell. Doesn't deserve it.

Later at the Caboose, when Susan asked what the note had meant, Chris was coldly direct. “Don't say nigger around me anymore.”

CHRIS WAS startled from slumber by a sharp crack from outside. It was early morning because the curtains drawn across his bedroom window were only dimly backlit. He reached for the alarm clock on his bedside table but, still clumsy from sleep, accidentally knocked it to the floor. He peered over the edge of the bed where the luminescent dial glowed in the semidarkness. Seven-ten, still twenty minutes before it was set to go off.

He was about to drift off again when he heard another snap outside and something thudded to the ground.

The world outside was nearly drained of color when he opened the curtain. Snowflakes swirled down against a backdrop of dark pine trunks. There was a hint of pink in the overcast, but the green needle clusters in the trees had been swallowed up by giant, cottony balls of snow. The pine branches drooped under its weight. Scattered across the white ground were partially buried pieces of limbs that had surrendered to their burdens earlier in the night revealing pale yellow interior wood.

Judging from the roof across the street, six inches or so lay on the ground and more continued to filter through the trees, spiraling and swirling. Even though the wind was light, the brittle pines protested with groans and cracks.

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“Not today, Monteenia.” Mama’s voice was muffled but audible through his closed bedroom door. “We’ll just take it a day at a time. You stay warm. Bye-bye.”

He heard the phone replaced in its cradle.

“Postmaster said don’t bother,” Daddy’s voice said.

“What about ’rain nor sleet ...”

“That’s for places with snow plows. Jimbo’s stuck in his own driveway. What about some coffee?”

Sleep’s after effects were wearing off quickly now. Sense returned to Chris’ head. If the post office was closed, there certainly would be no school. No French quiz, no pressure to finish that last math problem before breakfast. This is the day the Lord hath made, let us be glad and rejoice in it – there was a commandment he could embrace. Snow was like grace: a pure, unmerited gift from God.

By the time he’d found the old long johns that had been stuffed in the back of the bottom drawer for the past two years, Mama had eggs and bacon on the table.

“It’s a shame to have to miss all this on account of school,” she teased.

He didn’t take the bait. He wanted to wax the sled. “Do we have any candles?” he asked.

“In the cabinet,” she said. “Not my good Christmas candles though.”

As they ate, Tom McAndrew turned on the radio where WPYM was running down the list of closings in the county: all Shortridge and Northampton public schools, town and county offices, choir practice at First Methodist. “Not the post office?” he asked as if he were having a conversation with the announcer. “Shortridge Post Office,” the announcer said in apparent reply, “all lessons at Mrs. Bradbury’s Tap & Ballet Academy, the AA meeting at Calvary Baptist, Boy Scout Troop 85 ...” The list went on and on, displacing even the obituaries from the funeral home.

“The Witch’s Hat is open today,” the announcer said. “The Seaboard tells us northbound trains have been running on time so far, but southbound trains will be late. The storm’s really hit ’em hard up in Wake County.”

“Everybody’s goin’ to be over on Capitol Hill,” Chris said.

“Bet you’re right,” Daddy replied. “Honey, when’s the last time you and me went sleddin?”

Meredith McAndrew looked at her husband like he’d just proposed betting the house on the next Shortridge-Northampton game.

SNOW CHANGED the rules. It meant you walked instead of driving a car, and it meant you walked places where you’d never consider walking otherwise, like down the middle of the Raleigh Highway with friends and their sleds. A ceasefire had been declared on the yard. There was no squealing, crashing or diesel horns to be heard; only the swish of cold-stiffened jeans and the chuff of boots through the powdery snow that covered everything.

“I’ve always wanted to try this on Capitol Hill, and we’ll never get this much snow again,” Malachi said.

But Ronnie Tucker was as apprehensive as he was excited and wondered if they’d get into trouble.

“For what?” Malachi replied sharply. “Sleddin’ on a public street?”

“Yeah, but Capitol Hill.”

They’d all been there at one time or another, usually because they’d been hired to mow a lawn or rake pine straw, but never on a sled. It was a quarter-mile or more down from the top, where the two mansions stood on either side of Pine Cone Drive, to the dead-end at the railroad tracks.

This time they were inviting themselves.

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AT EYE level barely above the snow, everything turned into a white blur as they plummeted down the hill on their sled. The hiss of the Flexible Flyer's runners over the packed surface gave way to the screams of throngs of people piled prone atop other sleds. Sandwiched between his parents, Chris' ears were assaulted by his mother's protests.

"Tom!" she yelled. "Tom! Tom!" Her voice rose in pitch and intensity, but all she could get out was the name of her husband, who was steering their projectile from two levels of humanity below.

Snow spray from sleds ahead and flakes falling from the sky stung Chris' face as they accelerated. The wind filled his eyes with tears. There was no way to make out the faces in the clumps of people lugging sleds up either side of the street, but Cam and Sherry were among them somewhere. He had spoken with them around the bonfire at the top of the hill. He'd seen her parents and the McCaslins, Tater Peterson and the new family from Florida that had just joined the church.

The street suddenly flattened at its intersection with Dogwood Road, driving the air from his chest with a grunt. Then they dropped again as fast as before until, in the last fifty yards, the street angled upward toward the railroad embankment and they coasted to a stop.

"Tom McAndrew! If you ever get me on one of these things again I'll shoot you." Mama rolled off the top of the family pile into the snow. She was laughing, still out of breath and blinking to ward off the snowflakes falling into her eyes.

"Y'all watch out!"

Susan's cry startled them, and Mama scampered out of the way. Her sled slowed to a stop with Mrs. Marks lying on top of her.

JODY MEACHAM

Chris took the rope from their sled to pull it as they began to walk up the edge of the street. “How long have you been out here?” Susan asked him.

“First time down.”

WHERE MALACHI turned onto Dogwood Road was only a couple of blocks from the top of Capitol Hill. Ordinarily it was just a residential street, while the Raleigh Highway that crossed it was one of the busiest streets in town. But not on snow days.

Only a couple of cars had passed them on the walk down from the Yard. The hum of their tire chains had been loud enough to warn of their approach. Except for the furrows they’d plowed, the snow on the highway was still deepening.

Dogwood Road was packed snow. A steady stream of people from all over town was walking along it to Capitol Hill. Four boys dragged the detached hood of a car apparently intending to ride it as an unguided missile down the hill. The fire department had parked its only ladder truck at the intersection with Pine Cone Drive to block anyone who might try to drive across Shortridge’s impromptu bobsled run.

“Hey, boys,” one of the firemen called out as they approached the road block. “Where y’all goin’?”

“We’re goin’ to see how many people we can get on this thing,” the tallest of the hood draggers said.

“Not y’all,” the fireman replied. “You boys.”

He was pointing straight at Malachi, and Malachi was surprised by the power that gloved finger possessed. It belonged to a man much bigger than he, dressed in a heavy, soot-smudged yellow coat and a hard hat with the town seal on it.

“We’re goin’ sleddin’,” Malachi answered.

“Really? Where y’all from?”

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Malachi and his group stopped where they were. The stream of arriving sledders continued to flow silently past them. "This is the best hill in town," he said.

"You got that right," said the fireman. His arms were folded across his chest. "Look, son, I don't think y'all would have too much fun over here. Nobody to hang out with. Bet you'd like the hill behind Railroad Park better."

Malachi stood watching the sleds zoom behind the fire engine that blocked their path. There was no other place in town like Capitol Hill on a snow day. He'd heard about it since the first snow-fall he could remember. But Ronnie tugged on his sleeve.

"Railroad Park? Thanks."

Malachi turned and headed back against the flow of white faces that parted to allow him to pass.

SUSAN POINTED as they approached the intersection.

Chris looked up at the four boys bundled in their winter boots and caps dragging sleds away from the fire truck. One of them was wearing a coat like the one he had last year.

chapter 24

JON-FRANKLIN HAD the top up on his red Buick convertible, which held in the sweet aroma of the Krispy-Kremes that were stacked in boxes across the back seat inside where he could enjoy it. Even though the delivery truck had taken nearly two hours to deliver them from Charlotte, the boxes were still warm to the touch when he transferred them to his car. Another two weeks of these early Saturday awakenings to meet the doughnut truck at the fire station and the glee club would have enough money to cover the spring break trip. Until then, his one morning's beauty sleep would have to wait.

Despite the support and encouragement he'd received during his career, Jon-Franklin felt music was unappreciated in Shortridge. His choirs consistently drew top ratings in the annual regional competition, and concerts were well attended. Some of his students had received scholarships, and he felt that Malachi Stevens had the kind of voice that could earn some financial assistance in college. Adding it all up – something he frequently did – he wondered why people showered so much money and attention on the

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Comets, who were mediocre in their good seasons and had produced only one partial scholarship the past ten years.

As much as any motivation for his work, he knew that if the spring trip produced some notice, if a newspaper clipping or two with a New York dateline got back to Shortridge, folks might begin to take notice of what he was doing. Even though people like Wade Marks bad-mouthed Yankees in general – New Yorkers in particular – there was nothing that certified success so much as outside approval, and New York was as big and authoritative as outside got.

He'd done the heavy lifting to bring the trip to fruition, helped by Lee McCaslin's lobbying the school board. Once the commitment from chaperones was complete, the glee club would be ready to go.

He had his own doughnut delivery route, and his first stop was on Capitol Hill where Frances McCaslin was walking back through the morning fog in her pink bathrobe with the morning's *Charlotte Observer*.

"Barefoot in this weather, Frances?" he called out, pointing to her footprints tracked across the frosted lawn.

"You know a little chill isn't going to bother me, Jon-Franklin. Got a hot box for me this time? Last week they were cold."

"Lawsy mercy, Frances," he said, getting into character. "Lee's not warmin' you up anymore on Saturday mornin's?"

"Why don't you come in and ask him yourself? He's up."

Jon-Franklin poked around among the boxes until satisfied that he'd found the warmest of the bunch and then accepted her invitation inside. She led him down the hallway past the staircase and into the kitchen where Lee McCaslin was fussing with the percolator.

"I'd offer you a cup," Lee said when he entered the room, "but I can't get this damn thing to work."

“Instant’s fine. What’s this Frances has been tellin’ me about how you’re not keepin’ her hot ’n’ bothered?”

The lawyer laughed. “She was purrin’ like a kitten when she went out for the paper,” he said. “But she does look forward to your doughnuts. Tell me again – when’s the big trip?”

“Day after Easter.”

“Grampy complains about it every time I see him.”

This time Jon-Franklin laughed. “This is something new?”

He had always gotten along well with the McCaslins. They obviously found him intelligent, entertaining and a good source of gossip, which he knew was extremely useful to a politician and beneficial to the politician’s source. The McCaslins also had been patrons. When he was still in high school playing occasional gigs at Aladdin’s, they would leave five-dollar tips. They attended his first recital at Julliard. When his mother was dying, Lee told him the school board would find a job for him if he would come back home.

Jon-Franklin put the doughnuts down on the breakfast table and, after accepting one from Frances, said “I heard you’re defendin’ Wade. You must be getting along better these days.”

“Where’d you hear that?”

“You didn’t tell me!” Frances butted in.

“I gave him some advice,” Bill said. “I’m not representing him.”

“Still,” she said, “what makes you want to stand up for that redneck?”

“Standing up for people is what attorneys do, Frances. I recommended Spencer Kenan to him. Can’t get any better than Spencer. Wade said he needed the best lawyer around, and I agreed with him.”

Jon-Franklin pressed McCaslin again. “At one point they thought the killer was after Wade, too. Have they changed their minds?”

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“You don’t always know what the police are thinkin’,” McCaslin responded.

“They’re trying to pressure him?”

“Sure. You know as well as I do Wade can get himself in trouble. That’s why he needs to let Spencer handle things.”

Jon-Franklin moved on to the chorus’s trip, talking about how the doughnut sales should finish off the fund-raising. Because of the railroad’s donation and pledges of accommodation at homes on Long Island, where they would sing at two churches, all that had to be covered were a couple of nights in a Manhattan hotel during their sightseeing.

“I’ve got to thank you again for what you did with the school board,” Jon-Franklin said.

“Warfield did it. When the Seaboard president says he wants something, Shortridge will let him have his way.”

CLARYCE WANTED a few more drowsy minutes on the sofa when the knock on the door came, and thankfully Malachi got up to answer it. She had never been an early riser and she was notorious for it. Maybe she got it from her father who hated to rouse passengers for early morning stops and had spoiled her.

Even Mr. Cooper had heard of her penchant for sleeping in, and he chided her about it when he came in from the gray fog outside and she burrowed deeper into the sofa cushions.

“Saturday’s doughnut time,” he said. “We’re almost to the Big Apple.”

She could hear the doughnut boxes being stacked on the floor. “Promise?”

“You’re not excited about the trip anymore?”

She sat up, rubbed the sleep from her eyes, yawned and tried to appear as unenthusiastic as possible. “I know you mean well, Mr. Cooper, but if the whites could sneak out of town alone on this trip, you’d take ’em.”

“Cordelia’s been talking to you hasn’t she? Only woman in the world who holds a grudge long as you.”

“Miz Bethea dudn’ have anything against you,” she told him. “All she talks about is how her mama raised you. To hear her talk about it, y’all’s brother and sister.”

“You might say that.”

That set Claryce on edge. “What’re you hidin’?”

“Not a thing. I’m exactly who you think I am, Claryce.”

The opportunity to pin him down about being queer was so tempting, yet as close as she dared go was shooting him a look. “You’re pullin’ my leg about Miz Bethea.”

“Cordelia and I go way back. Her mama nursed me when I was little.”

Claryce sat there in silence for a moment, fighting to sustain her anger over rising early on Saturday, being shunned at the prom, Daddy’s murder – at the way her senior year had unfolded even worse than she had feared. He was trying to soothe her by talking nonchalantly about something no other white person would dare mention in her presence. She had seen it happen before when he would disarm people with things he’d say.

“Why’d you tell me that?” she asked.

“Cause it’s true.”

“Cause you thought it’d shock me,” she said, determined to beat him at his own game. “Cause you thought tellin’ me you sucked on a colored woman’s tit would make me think you’re okay.”

“I am okay, Claryce. Look – it took me a long time to get over my daddy, too. I know what it feels like when people make you disappear when you’re standing right there in front of them. I’ve cussed the world with words you’re just starting to learn. You can stay here in Shortridge when the choir goes to New York, and you can call me queer when I’m not around and throw fits any time you want. I’ve done all that. Thank God a few people waited for me

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'til I got that out of my system, 'til I got tired of banging the walls and was ready to start living again. If you ever make up your mind that you're going to crawl out of your hole and claim the life God gave you, I can help."

"You'd've liked my daddy."

CHRIS STAYED in the car while Susan carried six dozen doughnuts inside the Pit Stop. Mr. Marks was still trying to give the impression he was selling them only as a favor, and Chris didn't want to listen to that every week.

When she returned, he steered the station wagon back toward town to deliver his six boxes to the Witch's Hat. A couple would wind up on Number 10 if it was on time this morning, and the rest sold well to the local breakfast crowd. It was the next-to-last stop on their Saturday route, which terminated at Wanda Harvard's, where the pines were still reluctant to yield their grip on the rising fog.

He kept the last dozen for the two of them and their spot along the dirt road farther up the creek where the scuppernong crept around the trees and shielded them from the sandy lane. It was different in the misty daylight, Susan slipping out of her gray UVa sweatshirt and jeans and clinging tightly to him. They joked about the messiness of their glazed kisses and then paused at times, perceiving each other's landscape through the antennae of feathery fingertips and lightly pressing palms.

When Susan had licked the last crystal from his mouth, she put her lips to his ear.

"Are we goin' to be like this a year from now?" she asked.

Chris had wondered the same thing. "Somethin's botherin' you. Your Daddy?"

"Chris, what do you look forward to so much about New York?"

Almost everything he could think of about the city: its size, the things he'd seen in pictures that he would finally see in person, just being someplace that was important. But as many times as he'd thought about the trip, it wasn't the Empire State Building or anything specific to New York that he thought about while selling albums or delivering doughnuts. He'd be just as excited if they were going to sing in Denver or Omaha.

"Bein' someplace different," he said. "Not different like Charlotte. Someplace where they talk different, eat different, do things different, think different. I just want to see a part of the world that's different."

"How 'bout the beach?"

How many times had he been to the beach?

"It's about as different from Shortridge as you can get," she continued. "Walkin' in the sand while the sun's comin' up, ridin' the roller coaster in the dark, dancin' at the Pavilion. What's more different and fun than that?"

It wasn't the alternative he was looking for. The beach was Shortridge with an ocean.

Susan was quiet for awhile, drawing imaginary circles on his ribs with her fingertip, her cheek against his chest. "Member *Cat Ballou*?"

"You tasted like barbecue that night, not sugar."

"I didn' sleep much. I worried I let you kiss me too soon."

From the moment she got in the car on their first date and slid over next to him on the seat, she had never given the slightest indication that she was so modest. She had invited their first kiss at the Caboose. She'd been so casual in her living room after the Uwharrie game when he caressed her feet while they talked about the prom. And the prom ... Part of what made her attractive in the first place was that she didn't play that coy charade like so many girls. She wasn't the kind of girl Mama had warned him about; just the kind who didn't pretend.

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“You sure somethin’s not botherin’ you? You haven’t talked about your daddy since the snow.” The circles on his chest stopped. “He’s in big trouble, idn’ he?”

“It’s not right, Chris. They’re houndin’ him. It’s like – I don’t know, but home’s not the same anymore and there’s no reason for it. There’s just no reason.”

The fingers that had drawn the circles now were digging their nails into his rib. He could feel the tension in her jaw against her chest.

“I’ll never forgive Mr. Peterson for what they’re doin’ to us,” she said. “It’s all ’cause they’re afraid of what they’ll say on the news. It’s just another Yard killin’, for Chrissake – the *Yard!* Just another dead ...,” but she couldn’t get the word out because Chris cupped her mouth with his hand.

chapter 25

SUSAN PULLED BACK on the plastic throttle knob and the roar of the Cessna eased, replaced by the less urgent sound of the wind whooshing through the door seals and the vent above her head. At eighteen hundred r.p.m., the plane's rate of descent stabilized at a shallow five hundred feet per minute on the dial, and she held alignment with Runway 5 with just a bit of pressure on the left rudder pedal.

Daddy had been intent on getting out to the airport earlier than usual this morning, and he was more precise in what he'd expected in her airmanship. On her first attempt at a touch-and-go landing he'd criticized her airspeed on final approach, and indeed the extra few knots caused them to float farther before touchdown. But his criticism never crossed over to impatience as it sometimes did when she flew for him.

He was uncharacteristically encouraging when he had her fly for awhile under the hood, a white plastic contraption that fit over her head and focused her attention on the instrument panel by blocking her view out the windows. Her previous attempts at instrument training had always ended in frustration, usually after

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straightening out from a turn. That's when steady needles on the dials tried to convince her that yes, she was flying straight and level while the spinning sensation in her head argued otherwise. Daddy always took the yoke in his own hands when vertigo claimed her.

"Trust your instruments!" he'd snap.

This morning he had sat placidly in the right seat as she rolled out of a standard rate left turn and then battled the lies that her brain continued to scream at her. After a few uncertain moments, she held the yoke steady when the directional gyro stopped even though her head continued to spin. She stole a quick glance at him from beneath the hood; his hands were clasped tightly in his lap, his thumbs pressed together so hard that the blood was squeezed out of their tips. He was fighting the urge to take control, but he remained silent.

When her eyes returned to the instruments, the DG was still pointing due west and the turn-and-bank indicator showed the wings level. The lies from her brain began to fade.

"Okay," he said, not a hint of exasperation in his voice, "let's turn back right to three six zero and climb to thirty-five hundred."

Some right rudder pressure, more throttle and turning the yoke moved the needles again. As the engine r.p.m. increased, she eased back on the yoke and the rate-of-climb indicator crept from zero to five hundred feet per minute. The long hand on the altimeter wound clockwise as the Cessna climbed and the gyrocompass arrived at due north. A bead of sweat formed beneath the headband and tried to reach her brow. She leveled off on the proper heading and altitude without succumbing to her inner voice. Daddy patted her on the knee.

"You're really catchin' on, Sweetie. You've just got to ignore what you feel."

After more maneuvers, Susan began her approach to the runway, and as the brown turf slowly rose to meet them, she was relaxed and confident. Her airspeed was sinking toward eighty knots

and she gently pulled back on the yoke to slow the plane further. The main gear touched down with a thump and rumbled across the bare patches of earth. She held the nose wheel off the ground until deceleration stole the remaining lift from the wings and it, too, gently settled.

They were down to taxi speed long before they drew abeam the concrete ramp in front of the hangar, and Susan goosed the throttle a bit to get them up the slight grade to the parking area. The white car parked at the Marks' tie-down spot was unusual but Daddy peered out the windshield unconcerned. It was when Mr. Peterson got out of the car that she realized what was happening and her father had to take the controls.

"He cain't, Daddy!" she wailed. "He cain't do it!"

She pounded her fists into his shoulder as if he were complicit in what was about to happen, which maybe he was. He seemed entirely too acquiescent as she braked the Cessna to a stop over the tie down rings and cut the power.

"You don't need the cuffs," he said calmly as the detective approached. "Susan, take the car back home and tell your mama to meet me down at the station. Everything'll be okay. Ain't that right, Tug?"

The detective's silence and expression betrayed nothing.

"Go on," Daddy said. "I'll get this taken care of in just a little while."

She'd feared this day was coming, but every morning she pushed the thought of it out of her mind. The idea Daddy could be arrested had been frightening, but the reality of it was insulting. Wade Marks was not just anybody. He was her father, a man of substance and importance. Men of his station were not humiliated by being led through the gray steel door at the back of the police station.

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TOM MCANDREW sat down to a supper of pork chops and greens and asked Chris how Susan had reacted to her father's arrest.

Chris wasn't very forthcoming about their conversation other than to say he didn't understand why Wade wasn't still in jail.

"They wouldn't keep a man like Wade locked up in the jail," his wife said. "He's not dangerous."

"Wouldn't a killer be dangerous?" Chris asked.

"Wade Marks goes to First Methodist!" Meredith blurted.

Tom didn't know what to say, and then his son pressed the point.

"You think he did it?"

Meredith glared, but he kept his voice even: "I wonder, too."

The phone broke the tension, and Meredith answered.

"Mary Kathryn? Tom was just talkin' about y'all ... um-hmm ... Yes, we could all use a break ... O.D.? It's a beautiful time of year down there ... That's so generous, Mary Kathryn, but we'd certainly pay our share ... Well, we just 'preciate your thinkin' of him."

She returned to a kitchen of curious faces and hesitated for a moment. "The Markses are puttin' together a week at Ocean Drive for the seniors. It sounds like a wonderful opportunity, Chris."

Where would they put that many kids, he wondered.

"There's other families helpin'," she said, "and they're not invitin' everybody. Just kids in our circle, she said. They're goin' to rent both sides of that big pink duplex near the fishin' pier and fill it with air mattresses."

"When?" Chris wanted to know.

It was the twentieth – the date of the glee club trip – and Tom wasn't surprised at the disappointment in Chris' expression. "They're sabotagin' Jon-Franklin's trip," Tom said.

"That's always been kind've a crazy idea," Meredith countered. "If the Markses are pullin' out, it just says ..."

“It says they’re tryin’ to ruin things,” Tom interrupted. “Somebody like Jon-Franklin comes along – somebody who’s seen a little of the world and wants to show it to the kids – and ol’ Wade Marks dudn’ wanna lose control.”

“Wade’s good people, Tom.”

“Good’s got to be about what you do, Meredith, not who you are,” he said gently. “It’s got to be.”

When he looked at Chris, his son had buried his face in his hands, and he felt, in fairness, that he had to ask. “You sure you’d rather go to New York?”

“HE’LL COME,” Mary Kathryn Marks said.

Susan had been fretting all day about the plan, and though Mary Kathryn had tried to be sympathetic, hiding her impatience was becoming difficult. Something had happened to Susan’s confidence that had been so strong when she flew Wade’s Cessna and played basketball on Saturdays with the boys.

Susan was dabbing at her eyes again, and that was no help at all. It just made them redder. This was just a simple steak dinner together to remind Chris why he liked Susan – she was someone he could count on, security. How difficult could that be? Susan wasn’t old enough for seduction yet, which always worked with Wade – Kathleen would be there in case things got too romantic – but Chris wasn’t as stubborn as Wade either.

Mary Kathryn had seen Chris respond when Susan would take his hand or slip an arm around him when they left on a date. To appear confident, which was just as essential for boys as it was for Wade, you had to let them know you stood with them when they did something stupid just like you did when they were heroes. That’s all Susan had to do tonight. If Chris was reminded of that in the right way, he would make the sensible decision and think it was his own.

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“You don’t know him like I do,” Susan said again. “If he didn’t quit football, why’s this goin’ to be different?”

Mary Kathryn finished with the mascara for her right eye and shifted to her left. “You don’t think he’d rather be at the beach with you than up the Empire State Building?” She paused for a moment, her eyes darting between her own face in the dresser mirror to Susan’s image behind her. “Besides, I don’t know that it’s all up to Chris anyway.”

Susan came up behind her to fasten the string of pearls she always wore to Aladdin’s. Wade had given them to her in Bermuda on the last night of their honeymoon.

“What time’s Chris coming?” she asked. “Did you put the steaks out to thaw?”

“Yes’m.”

She stood, walked over to the door and closed it so she could check herself in the full-length mirror. The shoes weren’t right, but they would have to do.

“Wade!” she called downstairs. “You changed out of that shirt, didn’t you?”

“I’m wearin’ the blue pinstripe. You ’bout ready? I wanna get out there before the lawyer drains our bottle.”

“Got to go, Sweetie,” she said to Susan. “Boys are still the same as they were when I was your age.”

CHRIS PRESSED the doorbell and heard a stirring in the back of the house. When Susan answered, she was wearing the turtleneck sweater he’d given her for Christmas.

“Kathleen’ll put this away,” she said, taking the pecan pie he brought for dessert. “She’s got most of supper started. We’ll do the steaks.”

They walked together down the picture-lined hallway to the back where the table in the breakfast nook was set with a white tablecloth. Kathleen accepted the pie with a smile.

JODY MEACHAM

“This your doin’, Chris?”

“No ma’am,” he said, acknowledging her tease with a smile. “Monteenia makes these in the winter.”

“How’s she doin’? I ain’t seen her in a month of Sundays.”

“Fine ...”

Susan impatiently tugged at his hand, then retrieved a platter from the refrigerator with two brilliant red rib eyes, fished around in a drawer for the long-handled fork and asked him to get garlic salt from the spice rack.

She busied herself with the coals, glowing red within a coat of white ash, and getting the meat on. “Kathleen acts like she’s the hostess,” she complained to him.

“I ’preciate your goin’ to all this trouble,” he said, hoping to change her mood. “We could’ve gone to the movies.”

“This was a good time for somethin’ special,” she said, poking at the meat with the long fork.

The spit and sputter from the grill was the only noise. It was cold standing out under the clear, full moon, even in his jacket, and he put his arm around her. She reached around him with her free hand and put it in his jacket pocket, talking about yesterday’s French test, moved on to wondering about graduation invitations and when they should order them.

“We ought to have more suppers like tonight, Chris, with candles and all.” She caressed his belly through the jacket pocket. “Come to the beach with me. O.D. could be our special trip this spring.”

“Our trip was goin’ to New York.”

“It’s their trip.”

“Our trip.”

“They took it, Chris. It’s not our fault. But there’s places that are still ours and still fun.”

She sniffled. It was so cold, and he felt her arm tighten around him. Another time and he would have felt warmed and secure like

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when they were naked in the blanket on their doughnut deliveries.
Tonight he felt like a tree slowly being strangled by kudzu.

chapter 26

JON-FRANKLIN WAS tired of answering the phone, answering parents' questions and assuring them that black and white singers wouldn't be sharing rooms at the City Squire. Principal Dawkins had insisted on that when he agreed to the trip.

"I understand Mrs. Clayton," he said. "I understand. Yes ma'am."

Meg Clayton used a toilet seat every day at school that black girls had also sat on, but all of a sudden hotel bathrooms were supposed to be a problem. It was really that Mrs. Clayton just didn't want to run into a friend at the Colonial Store next week and admit that she sent her daughter on an integrated trip to New York – even worse, that she had turned down a competing invitation from good people like the Marksés to do so.

"I hate to be such a worry wart, but you know how kids love the beach."

"Yes ma'am."

But it wasn't defection among the choir members that most concerned Jon-Franklin. Chaperones were. He had six for his forty-eight singers – one for every eight as he'd agreed to – and if any

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dropped out, the trip was off. Chaperones had been difficult to come by, and the next time he answered the phone, his fear of possible cancellation was realized. Mack and Tootie Pittman and their grown son from Atlanta were backing out, Tootie said. Wade Marks did a lot of business at Mack's sporting goods store – hunting gear, shells and all – and it didn't make sense to offend him. Not that the Pittmans didn't think the New York trip would be a great experience, but they were just in a tight spot, and maybe next time.

Jon-Franklin thought first of the McCaslins. They had could handle the talk around town, but their kids had long since graduated. He needed parents of his singers; that's what the school had insisted on.

CHRIS COULD see Mr. Cooper in the depot rotunda animatedly talking with Mr. Dawkins, the school principal. He knew what the subject was, even though from across the track, he could only see their lips move. Mama gave him a reassuring kiss.

"You and Cam carry the bags aboard and I'll wait here," she said.

A lot of the singers had already arrived. The ones who were not keeping warm inside the station with their parents were milling on the platform or, like Cam, were lugging bags down the steps and through the tunnel to the house track where a single stainless steel coach sat coupled to the idling downtown switcher. Nub Johnson, the conductor, stood at the vestibule end of the car, checking names off his list as people climbed aboard. He waved Chris and Cam up the steps as they approached.

Most of the seats were full, but midway back there was a bulkhead that created a small, mid-car lounge area and behind was another seating area that was still empty. Cam pressed a foot pedal beneath a pair of seats and rotated them so that they faced the seats behind. By stacking their suitcases between the seats and placing

pillows atop them, he created a fairly level area where they could stretch out and sleep.

“Your daddy’ll make it,” Cam said.

“If this falls through, as pissed as I am with Susan ...”

“That must’ve been some kind of argument.”

“It was awful. She changed somehow.”

“Or maybe she didn’t. What time you got?”

Chris glanced at the Timex that Susan had given him for Christmas. The *Meteor* was due in five minutes. “Let’s go check on Mr. Cooper.”

He had made it through the platform tunnel and was being harangued on the platform by the principal, who was making the case for cancellation.

“Even if Tom makes it, you’ve still got five chaperones. We had a deal.”

“Tom promised he’d get a sixth ...”

“That was our deal. You can’t push me on this, Jon-Franklin. I’ve gone as far out on this limb as I can.”

A light sweeping across the sky distracted Mr. Cooper for a moment. “What’s going to happen if we don’t show up for Wallace Warfield in New York?” he asked. “Wallace Warfield signs a lot of checks in this town.”

“Not mine,” Dawkins said.

Chris tensed when he heard the distant sound of the diesel horn. “*Meter’s* already up to Morrison’s Crossing,” he said. It was the first time the choir director and principal realized that someone had joined them on the platform.

“Time’s run out on your daddy,” Mr. Dawkins said. “I’m sorry, Chris. I really am.”

Mr. Cooper was about to say something when Cam interrupted. “Malachi and Claryce are here.”

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They had emerged from the shadows behind the depot. In another moment, Daddy also appeared with two bags, accompanied by Monteenia.

“Six!” Jon-Franklin yelled. “That’s it, David! All here in the nick of time!”

“Five,” Dawkins said. “You, the Stewarts and the McAndrews. Five. And the *Meter’s* here.”

The wind hit them first, then the train itself screamed into the station, blocking their view of those who had not yet made it through the tunnel to the glee club’s coach.

Mr. Cooper had to shout to be heard. “Monteenia makes six.”

“Her?” Dawkins yelled back over the din. “She’s colored!”

But Mr. Cooper was already running back into the tunnel toward the main platform and the principal took off after him with Chris and Cam.

“Hold up, Jon-Franklin!” Dawkins called as they pressed their way through the crowd. “You didn’ say anything about a ...” He grabbed Jon-Franklin by the arm so he could talk inches from his face. “Grampy’d have my hide.”

“The deal was six chaperones.”

“This is crazy. She dudn’ count.”

Chris interrupted them to introduce Monteenia. She was in her Sunday dress and gloves between Mama and Daddy. “Nice to meet you, Principal Dawkins,” she said, extending her hand.

He hesitated, looking first at her, then at Tom McAndrew and then at Monteenia again. He gave her hand a perfunctory shake. “Can I trust you with these kids?”

“I trusted her with mine,” Mama said. “We’ve got to hurry.”

Jon-Franklin gave one more glance at the principal before he turned back to follow the McAndrews. Nub held the coach for them to climb aboard, and then signaled the switch engine out toward the mainline. Once the coach was cut into the *Silver Meteor* consist behind the second diner, Nub gave the highball.

MR. COOPER stood in the vestibule bundled in a trench coat with the upper half of the Dutch door open so that the frigid wind carried away the smoke from his cigarette. The sky outside was brilliant blue, and the buds in the gray trees flew past in a green and white blur that occasionally parted to reveal a warehouse or a peek into backyards. Suddenly the trees gave way to the white buildings of a small town, and then the ground disappeared altogether leaving them flying above an expanse of brown water that deepened to cobalt miles into the distance.

“Where are we?” Cam yelled above the noise of the wind and screeching, banging metal.

Mr. Cooper hadn’t noticed that Cam, Sherry and Chris had joined him outside the dining car. When he turned to say good morning, his cheeks were red from the wind.

“Havre de Grace,” he yelled back. “Susquehanna River. Y’all are going to freeze out here. Go on in and get yourselves some breakfast.”

Hungry after a fitful night, Chris didn’t need to be told twice. He kicked the black pad at the bottom of the stainless steel door and it retracted, releasing a blast of warm, bacon-scented air. The narrow corridor that led them down the side of the car past the galley made it difficult to squeeze past passengers who had finished eating, especially when the train jerked.

At the far end of the passageway, the three of them stood behind a middle-aged black man in a corduroy sport coat facing a room of retina-bleaching white table linens and glistening silver. A bespectacled steward in white vest and dark jacket approached, absorbing the motion of the dining car with experience and a wide stance.

“How many?”

“Just me,” said the man in the sport coat.

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The steward motioned him to an empty table about halfway down the right side of the dining car and then asked the same question of Cam. The steward led them to the same table and laid silver and blue menus with embossed lettering at each silver-laden place setting. He reached across the table to a small silver container and fished out several pencils, which he dropped onto their menus followed by multi-layered paper forms with "Silver Meteor Meal Check" across the top that he retrieved from a vest pocket. "You folks from the group back there?" asked the man in the sport coat as he placed the linen napkin in his lap.

"Our high school glee club," Sherry answered. While she explained their plans, Chris' parents were escorted to a table across the aisle with Monteenia and Mr. Cooper. Monteenia had given up her gloves, but she still wore her Sunday dress, a deep brown with lapels and a brown-trimmed white handkerchief pinned to the left breast.

"Mornin' Chris," she said, smiling across the aisle. "Y'all couldn't have gotten much sleep last night. All I heard was talkin', talkin', talkin'."

"I must've dozed off somewhere 'cause I remember the train stoppin' at Arlin'ton. Next time I woke up we were goin' under Baltimore."

Monteenia leaned across the aisle so she could speak more softly. "You all right? I know you and Susan were lookin' forward to this trip."

"We'll make up when I get back," he said, not really believing what he said. "What are you havin' for breakfast?"

"I think I'll try the salt mackerel. That's good on cold days."

Malachi and Claryce headed to a table farther down the car. He and Malachi had not had a conversation beyond perfunctory greetings since Christmas, but Malachi was obviously in good spirits. Chris' mood was as bright as the sun on the silver when he

began puzzling over the strange instructions for ordering in the diner.

It required that diners had to fill out the meal check themselves. “Waiters are forbidden to serve verbal orders,” the note at the bottom said in red.

Everyone at the table was mystified except for the black man.

“Relics,” he said when Chris asked about it. “Silver and crystal. Salt mackerel for breakfast. Black waiters who can’t write orders.”

His bluntness was as out of place as his television announcer voice.

“Where are you from Mr. ...?”

“David Thorn.” He extended his hand around the table during introductions. “Going home to Queens. Been down in Carolina.”

Down in Carolina. Definitely a Yankee.

ERLENE’S EGGS were safe in her skillet. She had exactly enough time to put down three placemats, three plates and three sets of flatware before she needed to be back at the stove to fold in the cheese and bacon. Ten months of on-the-job training in the kitchen had taught her how to make a pretty decent omelet, but it had done nothing for her loneliness.

Detective Thorn had told her they were making progress. He’d called her more times in the past month to update her on the investigation than he had since Frank was killed. Yet as the police work intensified, she was beginning to have doubts about just how satisfying the resolution of Frank’s murder could ever be. He was never again coming up the stairs loaded with groceries, and seeing a truck driver held accountable by a judge and jury wouldn’t change that.

Still, the next few days were for setting all that aside, a pleasant break with her niece and her friends in town.

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“You boys hear what I hear?” she called down the hall. “Listen real close.”

Harold loved sirens. Fire trucks, police cars, ambulances – sirens meant excitement, but he didn’t hear any.

“It’s the *Meter*,” she said. “I think I hear the whistle.” She liked to make ridiculous jokes in the morning. Eggs and laughter were the two best ways to start a day.

Breakfast and the subway ride into Manhattan passed quickly. Penn Station was noisy at 10 o’clock on a Monday morning, but a clatter overhead caused her boys to look up to where the arrivals marquee was resetting. The *Silver Meteor* had moved to the top of the board, and the train status column read ARRIVED. Erlene led her boys to the stairway portal for Track 14 just as a stream of passengers began to flow into the concourse. The procession seemed to take forever until Harold spotted his cousin and broke from her grasp.

“Claryce!” he yelled. “Claryce!”

She appeared startled at hearing her name called out in a strange, busy place, but recognition and a smile flashed across her face when she saw Harold running toward her in his red jacket. He leaped into her arms and would have knocked her over, but the boy with her dropped his bags and caught her.

Then they were surrounded by Shortridge passengers surprised to have been greeted in New York City.

“Who’s this?” someone in the crowd wanted to know.

Claryce said her Aunt Erlene had grown up on Harvard Creek, but before she could run down the names of the glee club, Roy spotted somebody he already knew.

“Welcome to my town, Miz Harrison,” he said, which sounded so pretentious that everybody broke out laughing.

“Pleased to be here, sir,” Monteenia responded. “You’re just as cute as you were at my house. You ’member my boy Malachi?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Then another voice, a telephone voice, said “Erlene Clifton. What are you doing here?”

“Mr. Thorn?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said seriously. “I apologize for interrupting, but could I have a word?”

“Of course.”

“In private.”

He led her by the arm away from the group and his expression told Erlene he had bad news.

MALACHI HAD stopped singing, but his voice still resounded throughout the great sanctuary on Madison Avenue, sustained by reverberations off the slate floor that stretched into the dark distance, the stone walls that towered above the chancel, the marble altar and stone statues of the saints. Chris felt the hairs on his neck rise in salute to music so beautifully reluctant to dissipate. Mr. Cooper stood still by the dark wood of the console with his hair in disarray from the emotion of the concert. His eyes were closed, and his face glistened from sweat and tears.

As the final notes faded, the applause swelled from the congregation in the dimness. Mr. Cooper had said they would be Holy Trinity members, stockbrokers and copywriters who regularly attended the church’s weekly concerts, choirs from high schools where he had contacts, and Mr. and Mrs. Wallace Warfield.

The singers filed out of the choir stalls and down into the nave where Mr. Cooper was surrounded by people he’d known while he lived in the city. As he began introducing them, a thin, blond man worked his way through the crowd to engulf him with a hug. He looked familiar to Chris, and when he started in on how the concert was “*sooo* wonderful,” Chris remembered.

“Mr. Bergman? The weddin’ in the pine straw?”

Recognition spread across George Bergman’s face. “You liked salmon. Where’s – there you are,” and he wrapped Chris and Cam

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in his slender arms. “Welcome to New York. What’s Jon-Franklin shown you so far?”

“Penn Station and the hotel,” Cam said. “We only got in this mornin’.”

“Jon-Franklin, you’ve got to get these kids out on the town. Some place to eat, some place to dance, some place they can’t go to back home.”

“Like?”

“The Cellar, maybe?”

“They’re teen-agers, George. Someplace they can have a pizza. Most of ’em have never had one.”

“Pizza and dancing. There’s a place downtown ...”

“Why don’t you ride with us on the bus?”

George called ahead from the church office to make sure there was room at Buona Notte. There was, but there was no live music tonight, the voice said, just a jukebox.

“That’s fine,” Jon-Franklin said. “We just need a place where these kids can let go for awhile.”

The restaurant occupied the ground floor of a five-story building in lower Manhattan. Toward the rear of the L-shaped dining room, a wooden railing separated the carpeted dining area from an empty wooden dance floor with a stage, some floor microphones and a drum set covered by green cloth.

The owner, a rather rotund man who seemed to always be in a hurry, had rearranged the tables near the dance floor into three long rows at George’s request. Cam, Sherry and the three McAndrews sat across from Monteenia, Malachi and Claryce at the end of one. George solved the problem of which pizzas to order by having several kinds delivered to each table. Choosing the selections on the jukebox was more difficult.

Cam said he couldn’t find any music to shag to. “There’s some Motown, but they don’t have the Tams,” he said. He started dropping in the quarters he’d collected on the bus and punching in

songs he recognized: the Dave Clark Five, Herman's Hermits, Gary Lewis & The Playboys, Elvis, the Beatles. Chris hung out by the rail talking to Mr. Cooper and Mr. Bergman while watching the dancers.

"You think you'll be in trouble when we get back home?" he asked Mr. Cooper.

"He'll stick me with morning bus duty for a few weeks, but that's all. He knows this foolishness can't go on forever. So he gives me mean looks for awhile. Who cares?"

"But you're not friends with Mr. Dawkins. If you were, it'd be different."

"You're not talking about me, Chris," he said, seeing clearly through Chris' obtuse statement. "You're talking about Malachi. You don't think he deserves to feel like he got stabbed in the back? Let's get this cleaned up right now."

"He's dancin' ..."

But it was too late. Mr. Cooper tapped Malachi on the shoulder right in the middle of shagging to Petula Clark, and after a conversation Chris couldn't hear, Malachi came over to the rail.

"What're you interruptin' me for, Quarterback?"

"It wadn' my idea," Chris stammered. "We can talk about it when you aren't busy."

Malachi was insistent. "Look," he said as the dance floor crowd yielded to Mr. Cooper's moves. "I know what's botherin' you. You ain't looked at me straight since Christmas."

Chris couldn't look him in the eye now, either. "I didn' mean it to happen like it did."

"Y'all never do," Malachi said. "'Not meanin' to' means y'all're always off the hook."

Chris glared. "You pissed at 'y'all' or just me?" But then he paused. Anger made it easier to talk, but it drained the sincerity from his words. He did owe it to Malachi. "I was wrong," he said.

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“I acted like you didn’ matter. I did that to your mama once, and I promised I’d never do it again.” He paused. “I’m sorry.”

Malachi softened. “It wouldn’ve bothered me so much except for the night in the peach orchard. I thought maybe we were startin’ to ...”

“I know.”

“Quarterback?”

“Yeah?”

“I wadn’ that mad. But Claryce can carry a grudge.”

Chris glanced back toward his parents at the table where they were sharing their first pizza with Monteenia. They were absorbed. “Mind if I dance with her?”

“Chris McAndrew’s goin’ to dance with a colored girl in front of his mama and daddy? I wanna see this.”

Chris worked his way into the clot of dancers and stood in front Claryce. Mr. Cooper yielded, and she looked at him as an intruder. Her passiveness amid all the couples slowly revolving to “Moon River” was excruciating until she finally raised her hand and opened herself to him.

He took her in a loose embrace, and they began to dance stiffly. Her hand felt sweaty – maybe it was his – and her sweater scratched his arm through his shirt. He fought the spinning in his head behind his closed eyelids, but he held her, and she offered no resistance. Slowly he – they – allowed the music to sweep them into its current. Their walk evolved into a stroll and then into dance.

“Malachi made you, didn’ he?”

“He didn’ think I’d do it.”

“I’m only here ’cause Daddy ...”

“I know. I should’ve said something to you at the funeral. It’s easier to talk a long way from home, but I need to say this to your face: Your daddy did a great thing for Shortridge.”

He felt the muscles in Claryce’s back relax.

“There’s nothin’ that would’ve made him any happier than this trip,” she said.

He pulled her closer in his relief and she put her cheek against his chest. Her tear felt like a pin prick when it soaked through his shirt.

“You think integration’s really goin’ to change anything?” she asked.

He had no answer. He loved Shortridge enough to care and knew it too well to hope.

“Susan’s daddy is goin’ to get off,” she said.

“What?” His arms suddenly felt limp. He had held two girls this year, one whose father committed murder and now, he realized, the one whose father was the victim.

“The detective told us this morning at the station,” she continued. “The guy Susan’s daddy hired turned up dead in the river. He was the only witness.”

Chris pulled her closer and let the wet spot slowly spread across his shirt.

epilogue

INTERSTATE 95 HAD been flat and boring for hours since leaving Jacksonville, but it was the only practical way for Mama to return home to Shortridge. Since Daddy died she had made it a habit to visit he and Wanda for a few weeks over Christmas so she could spoil her granddaughters and again in the summer to enjoy the St. John's River. But she didn't like riding the *Silver Meteor*, the only passenger train Amtrak still ran through town.

"You just never know who they'll sit beside you in the dinin' car," she said to Chris as she opened the letter. She had kept her copy for twenty-five years since he wrote to the committee after the class's first reunion. He wouldn't come to another segregated party, he wrote. "Please invite everybody who crossed the stage at Railroad Park on our graduation day."

"You had to push for that," she said.

Wanda placed her hand on his thigh. Mama hadn't said it as direct criticism because she didn't directly criticize. It was meant to sound as if she were mumbling a passing observation to herself. All this time and the old letter obviously still bothered her. She had tried to persuade him to attend earlier reunions, not because anybody in Shortridge had ever said anything to her, but because

people knew why he wasn't there and his absences made her feel the object of attention.

If he had simply given some ordinary excuse – even no excuse – she wouldn't have felt this way. Or if Daddy were still there to reassure her, to tell her that it didn't matter, she wouldn't have said it. But he wasn't, and it did matter.

He had known that when he sat down to write the letter. Every new draft had been another attempt to find a way to keep Mama from feeling like she had been left alone in Shortridge to fight his battle. But he hadn't found the words to prevent that, just the conviction that he would never allow the kudzu to claim him.

Chris looked at her in the rearview mirror. The paper was now folded like a tent over her face to shade her eyes while the hum of tires over the interstate lulled her back to sleep. She didn't stir again until he flipped off the cruise control for the Pit Stop exit.

"Who's Sandhills playin' tonight?" Chris asked about the county high school when he pulled into the driveway.

"One of the Cape Fear schools," Mama said. "I don't keep up like I used to."

They unloaded the car and sat on the screened porch sipping sweet tea and dozing until suppertime. They ate takeout fried chicken from the Coop and listened to Sandhills' 28-0 victory over Wilmington on the radio. Then Mama was ready for bed.

"You and Wanda go on. You know where the key is."

Chris never came home to Shortridge without at least one trip to the station to see the *Silver Meteor* slip through town. Amtrak's phone message said it was an hour late at Raleigh, but that still didn't give him much time.

Highland Avenue was deserted, and most of the houses they passed were dark except for an occasional light in the back where someone was watching the late news in the den or eating a last scoop of ice cream. Chris paused at the intersection with Pine Cone Drive and looked down the dark street that tunneled beneath

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the overhanging oaks. The street light at the precipice of Capitol Hill illuminated an overgrown fence at the Marks' empty home.

The old depot looked as haggard as his Nanna had in her failing years – peeling paint and graffiti-streaked wood covering the windows. The Amshack nearby on the platform sat deserted in the garish glow of a mercury vapor lamp. The saving grace of the poor lighting was that it masked the ghastly orange of Wanda's Florida Gators sweatshirt, which she had pulled on against the midnight chill. He hated the orange even more than the humidity when they'd visit their youngest daughter on football weekends and see a game in the Swamp.

Wanda put her arm around him and held him close as they leaned against the warm hood of the car, gazed north up the mainline and looked for the first hint of the *Meteor's* arrival.

"I 'preciate your indulgin' this part of the pilgrimage," he said.

She hugged him tighter, silent.

Beyond the reach of the light, the rails disappeared into a black void. The faint metallic squeal of the retarders reminded him that railroading in Shortridge hadn't died, it had just moved almost entirely to the yard. Then, from behind, came the crunch of tires on gravel. The headlight beams illuminated the maze of silver rails and the coal embedded in the ground sparkled like diamonds.

"Thought you'd be down here."

Cam still had on his pilot's uniform, although he'd discarded the jacket and unclipped his black tie. Sherry got out of the passenger's side of the white rental.

"He ought to be here any minute," Chris said. "When'd y'all get in?"

"Came straight from the airport," Sherry said. "Cam figured he'd miss y'all if we went home first."

"When's our tee time?"

"Ten-thirty. Know who we're playin' with?"

“Didn’ think to ask. Tater’s takin’ care of everything. His daddy was at the Coop tonight, but I couldn’t get his attention.”

“I don’t know if Tug would have paid any attention to you,” Cam said. “Mama says he keeps to himself, mostly.”

“He was a hero, you know,” Chris said.

“Not to a lot’ve people.”

Wanda shushed them. There was the low groan, then the sharp wooden crack of a cross tie lying somewhere out there in the sparkling darkness. The dim glow from beyond the curve gradually brightened into an intense blaze of locomotive headlights. The muted blast of the air horn reached their ears first, then the screeches and squeals of the approaching train. As the silver and blue diesels decelerated past, the conductor leaned out of the lead sleeper and pointed toward the four of them on the platform.

Chris gave him a highball.

The conductor brought a walkie-talkie to his mouth, and the diesel answered with two quick blasts. The slack ran out with a bang on the now accelerating *Silver Meteor*. The two sleepers, diner, lounge car and four coaches crested the hill by the signal before disappearing toward McCaslin’s orchard. It was over in thirty seconds.

“Some people would think we’re crazy,” Cam said.

LEONARD HALIBURTON Jr., was a young man, tall and a bit thickly built with skin the color of the Milky Way he pulled from the zippered pocket of a huge golf bag. His name was written down the side in script.

“Candy bar?” Little Fatback asked.

Chris accepted. The round was making him feel weak, and not from the September heat. Little Fatback had out-driven him again even though his own tee shot had been solid and, for once, straight. A little sugar couldn’t hurt.

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“You’ve kicked my butt all the way ’round this course,” Chris said, as he lined up a five-iron shot uphill to the green. “Your foot sore yet?”

Chris’ shot was solid, the clubface clicking sharply before taking a shallow divot. The ball arced to mid-height, drawing slightly, and took two bounces before it rolled up on the front edge of the green. “What’ll you be hittin’? An eight?”

Little Fatback seemed embarrassed as he walked up to his ball. “Nossir. A wedge.”

“Don’t take it so hard, Quarterback.” Malachi was laughing. “Twenty-five years ago you were hittin’ a wedge from here, too.”

Probably a seven-iron, Chris thought to himself.

“His mama made sure he got some good coachin’,” Malachi continued, *sotto voce*, as Little Fatback addressed the ball. The shot floated forever, then alighted on the green with one hop before it spun back toward the hole, rolling to a stop four feet from the flag.

“Alma comin’?” Chris asked. “I haven’t seen her in years, prob’ly since your daddy’s funeral.”

“Mama’ll be here,” Little Fatback said. “She was shocked when they asked her to help with the plannin’.”

“Who asked?” Chris wanted to know.

“Mr. Peterson’s wife.”

“I knew Becca’d come through,” Chris said.

Malachi braked the cart to a stop near the ninth tee and pulled the putters from both bags on the back. Chris accepted his and walked toward his ball on the front edge of the green. Little Fatback marked and picked up. Cam blasted out of the bunker on the left to join them on the dance floor.

“Three bogies and a bird,” Cam said when they putted out. “Are we goin’ to meet your wife, Malachi?”

“I’ve already warned Virgie about you and Chris. She thinks Shortridge is full of crazy people. We met in the music school at ECU. It’s nice to be near her parents since Mama’s gone.”

JODY MEACHAM

“How long since she passed?” Chris asked.

“Seven years. Your mama wrote me a note after the funeral. They used to have coffee at Hardee’s.”

MALACHI PARKED his SUV alongside Chris near the clubhouse and the four of them walked in together. Becca Peterson and Alma Hodges were checking names off the registration list at a card table, passing out CDs of beach music and forwarding people to the table with blue Comets T-shirts so they could pick out the right size. The Platters were on the stereo.

“Well if it idn’ the soul brothers,” Alma teased.

“I haven’t seen you since the peach orchard,” Chris said.

“I understand it was a pretty good look.”

“Burned in my mind forever,” Malachi said.

They were all laughing through the introductions and do-you-remembers until Chris asked about Fatback.

“Lots’ve boys didn’t come back,” Alma said. “You knew he wouldn’t put up with bein’ in an office in Saigon or somewhere.”

She reached for him and he hugged her tightly. “I didn’t do anything to help him,” he said.

“There wadn’ anything you could do. But I’ve got Little Fatback.”

“He’s a helluva golfer. A real pro.”

“He dudn’ let much get in his way once he decides he likes somethin’,” she said.

“Still in touch with Claryce?”

“Off and on. I’m hopin’ she’ll make it.”

There weren’t many retired teachers left to invite, but as long as he could do Patricia imitations and tell stories, Mr. Cooper would always be in demand. He came over to the table where the McAndrews, McCauleys and Harrisons were sitting to rest after another dance, sweat hanging from his eyebrows like he’d just directed the “Hallelujah Chorus.”

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“Y’all are goin’ to wear me out,” he complained, but nobody believed him. “Think she’ll be here?”

It was becoming the topic of the evening.

“Too many bad memories,” Sherry said. “I heard she went back to Virginia with her mama.”

They shared stories as the music played until long after the view of the golf course had gone dark and the party food on the buffet had been thoroughly picked over. It was nearly ten when Alma returned from a restroom visit and said someone was in the parking lot.

They headed outside where church music drifted from the open window of a car and Malachi recognized Claryce instantly.

“What’re you doin’ out here?” he called to her.

“You cryin’?” Chris asked as opened her door.

For a few moments she wouldn’t speak. Then she stood and kissed him on the cheek, then Malachi and Cam.

“I didn’ want to come, but somethin’ made me. Alma kept askin’ me ...”

Alma and the other women arrived and swept Claryce up, blotted her face with tissues and worried all over her until they got her inside.

“Why’d you ever think like that?” Sherry asked.

“It’s been so long.”

“She came to Booker T reunions,” Alma said, “but when I told her about this one ...”

“Alma kept sayin’ ‘They’re tryin’ to reach out to you. You gotta meet ’em half way.’”

She began to recount the evening thirty-five years before when she had cried herself to sleep in her father’s arms.

“I wish ...” Claryce shushed herself with her fingertips. “She here?”

“No,” Chris said. “Everybody’s been askin’. After all the shame I really didn’ expect her to.”

“Shame? What shame?” Claryce’s fists clenched. All she knew was that the only place in Shortridge where her daddy’s murder had caused a stir was up on the Yard. “A jury should’ve ...”

“A federal jury did,” Sherry said. “Some kind of tax thing up in New York.”

Claryce sat stunned. Chris had hoped the news that justice had finally caught up with Wade Marks, that his wife had left him when he went to prison might be some kind of consolation. Claryce deserved at least that.

But Claryce wasn’t so easily consoled. “Taxes,” she said finally, looking down at the table. “He killed my daddy and all they got him for was taxes. God will strike me down for this, but I can’t forgive that man.”

Chris laid his hands on top of hers and didn’t try to say any more. It was quiet for awhile at the table until Claryce spoke again.

“Introduce me to your wife, Chris.”

“I guess Wanda’s the only one here you don’t know,” he said. “But she met your New York cousins a long time ago.”

CHRIS ALWAYS routed his drive out of Shortridge through the stone arch of Town Cemetery so he could visit the family plot. It was difficult to grow grass where the McAndrews were buried because it was on the slope of a gentle hill and rain would wash sand over the coping. But Mama kept the place watered as best she could to give the greenery a fighting chance.

His father and grandparents felt close when he’d stand there and talk to them. Wanda had learned after a few such visits to stand aside and let him go on. When he finished his monologue over the graves, he took her by the hand and led her to the low fence that marked off the black section of the cemetery. He helped her over and they walked slowly across the hard-packed ground while he looked for the marker. It was near the tracks.

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“I miss you,” he said. “Malachi’s doin’ fine, and his wife’s real nice. They’re still goin’ to church.”

The other grave was more difficult to find. Some of the metal markers were missing or covered with sand. But he remembered the general location from the funeral, near a corner in the fence. The soldiers from Fort Bragg had lined up there that morning, their flags heavy and still in the rain when the chaplain gave the dust-to-dust speech and recounted how the platoon had frantically dug through the tangled pieces of helicopter.

The paint on the marker was nearly gone, weathered away from the silvery metal, but the embossed letters on Leonard Haliburton’s grave marker were legible. It was next to Alma’s parents.

“Alma’s doin’ fine,” Chris told him. “You’d be proud of your boy. I’m goin’ to keep in touch with ’em.”

The first breath of fall sighed in the pines, and he looked across the tracks to where the forest stretched into a Pullman green carpet to the horizon. A vibration began in the ground and ascended his legs. There was an air horn, then the loud roar of diesels from the afternoon coal drag beginning its slow assault on the hill to the yard, and Chris allowed himself to absorb the power of it all.