

Prologue

Brother was screaming. He had come from the front of our trailer, running faster than the time the black snake chased him down the lane. He hid behind some of the bushes at the edge of the woods next to Fat Anne's doublewide.

I could see his little body shaking from where I sat with my older sister Tabby on our back step. He was a fast little rabbit for a six year old but he wasn't very smart. Daddy was sure to find his little tail hiding right there at the edge. He had run and hid in the bushes before and it was always because a beating was coming.

Tabby wiped the back of her hand across her Kool-Aid smile. I could see the red marks on her dark skin even in the shade. They curled like single cherry quotation marks on either side of her mouth. She had already finished two glassfuls. The greedy alligator!

She leaned forward and wagged her finger at the dusty boy in the brush. "He gonna get it this time. We need to teach him how to hide better."

I giggled. The rumble of the sound mixing with the tinkle of ice in my half empty Kool-Aid glass. I was drinking it slowly, savoring it, letting the frosty droplets that covered the bottom of the glass drop on my bare knees.

"Brother, come back here," Mama yelled through an open window. She called him Brother. Well, we all did. Not Junior. Not Quincy, Jr. Just Brother. I thought that was funny.

I was smiling about her calling him Brother when the music started. It was sudden like and way too loud. Daddy's music. Some slow sensual tune. One of the 45s he'd bought from the records Miss Emily sold in the back of her grocery store downtown. Sade, Barry White, Earth Wind and Fire.

Mama yelled again. "Oh, no! No, Quincy!"

Then there were sounds of crashing, breaking. And then a shriek.

I closed my eyes but it didn't stop my mind from replaying the bloody memories from the last time daddy beat her.

"Tabby, Cee Cee," she yelled to us through a window. "Girls! Find Brother. Run. Hide!"

Hide! My mind raced but I didn't, couldn't move. Hide? Tabby yanked me up.

“My glass! What about my glass?” It was my favorite, a Ball canning jar from grandmamma. I looked to Tabby’s, a broken shell on the bottom step.

Tabby gritted her teeth and barked at me, “Come on!” She yanked harder on my arm. I let my glass slip from the fingers. Tabby was big for twelve and, it seemed, at least twelve times as strong as me.

Brother was already running when we reached him; Tabby grabbed his arm anyway. The movement snapped his little round head back.

“Tree house,” Tabby panted.

I wrenched myself free. “We gotta tell somebody.”

“No!” Tabby reached for me again.

“Miss Dusty. I’ll tell her and meet y’all at the tree house.”

“No!”

“But, mama ...”

“I’ll go to the grader for Mr. Abraham after I get y’all to the tree house. Now come on.”

The cucumber grader was on the other side of Thirty Foot Road. That was too far away. Anything could happen to mama by the time Tabby got back with the big white man.

“No,” I screamed back over my shoulder.

Miss Dusty was a better bet. I could see Miss Dusty’s old Ford pickup in back of her trailer halfway down the dirt lane that ran along the edge of the woods.

“I’ll meet you there.” I looked back to see Tabby crouched with Brother behind a big pine. She was breathing hard. Hate in her eyes.

“Cee Cee, you better come straight to the tree house. You hear me!”

Miss Dusty was my classmate Violet’s mama. The mother of five was always working. In fact, I was surprised, but grateful, to see her truck that day. She was forever willing to help mama and us when we needed it. Though mama only took her help grudgingly, saying the word trash under her breath.

Violet met me at the door. The sun slanted in across her bright yellow hair, her light blue eyes. She looked like a fairy princess, except that is for the black eye. It wasn’t fresh; just a puffy

yellow half moon under her left eye, but I still winced when I saw it.

“Mama’s not here,” she said in response to my question.

I looked at the truck and saw for the first time that the one of the rear tires was gone. The metal parts of the wheel were sitting up on cinder blocks.

“Broke down as usual.”

The TV was blaring behind her but I could hear her daddy snoring, kids yelling and throwing mess around.

“Y’all’s phone working,” I asked.

She stepped out onto their cinderblock steps and closed the door carefully behind her. I couldn’t see why since half the screen hung from the frame.

“Naw. Why? What you need it for?”

Suddenly I was embarrassed or maybe just not certain what she could do to help mama. My mother’s screams made me jump.

I took off running for home. Violet followed. She stumbled into me when I stopped, beyond words at the sight of my father making a fire in the trash barrel behind our trailer. Mama sat on the bottom back step.

By the way she was crying I could tell daddy wasn’t just taking out the trash.

He reached into a cardboard box at his feet, pulled out a large brown envelope, and tossed it in the fire.

Mama’s book.

Tears filled my eyes. My mother had been typing on it almost every night for months. Grown folks business, she told tell me whenever I asked to read it. Now it was gone.

“Good God A’mighty,” Violet whispered and covered her mouth.

“What?” I followed her gaze.

Violet had seen what I didn’t at first. Daddy had a gun. As he turned the evil thing, barely bigger than his hand, it glinted like fresh tar in the sun. He pointed it toward mama and pulled something else from the box on the ground.

My Jesus statue.

I had recited the Twenty-third Psalm flawlessly for the VBS lady and received the all nine inches of sanctified plastic at First Baptist VBS on Freeman Street. That meddling white-Negro church, as daddy called it.

More things from VBS went into the fire. Tabby's Noah's Arc drawings and Brother's David slingshot. Then three tiny New Testaments. All consumed by the flames.

I didn't hear Tabby and Brother coming through the bushes. Neither did I hear Violet leave. I used my sleeve to wipe at my tears, choking on the smells from the trash barrel. Thick smoke climbed into the air.

Nearby pine trees had begun to drop their needles from the heat. What else had daddy put in the fire?

"Where'd Violet go?"

"Cee Cee," Tabby hissed, shaking me like she did when it was time to get up for school.

"He's burning it all, Tabby."

"Come on, I gotta get y'all to the tree house."

I followed numbly, thinking of mama's bare feet among the broken pieces of grandmamma's canning jar and Jesus in the fire with mama's novel and all our VBS treasures.

