

Prologue

1846. Northern Coast of Virginia

Georgie Winthrop followed his five-year-old sister along the shoreline and pretended to be watching after her. Father always said to walk right behind her, that way she wouldn't wander off into the waves and disappear, leaving Georgie an only child at the age of fourteen.

Georgie didn't like being referred to as a child but longed for the days when he was the only one because Emily was truly a problem—an unplanned wedge between Georgie and the occasional affection of his father. But it wouldn't be much longer.

Emily falling out of her bedroom window.

Emily happening upon Father's loaded pistol.

Emily unexplainably dying in her sleep.

Though there were endless possibilities, Emily wouldn't be wandering off into the waves anytime soon. Big Jonah would never allow anything to happen to her. He was six and a half feet tall and whenever they left the house, he was never more than a few steps away, keeping a careful eye not just on Emily, but on both of his master's children.

There was a slight breeze and the dying waves covered Georgie's feet with cool salt water as he and his sister walked across the wet sand. They were there to gather the tiniest of seashells for the necklaces Mother liked to make—the ones she would give to the townsfolk that couldn't afford any of what Father called "real" jewelry. Father was convinced the craft was the only thing that kept Mother busy, and he frequently reminded her that she led a life void of responsibility.

Though it was Mother that inherited the plantation, she never dared talk back to Father, even when he threatened to sell off all the house slaves, Big Jonah included, and render her completely helpless.

The whole town knew they had more slaves than anyone in the county. They also knew the ones that worked indoors were there specifically to serve Father. In fact, Georgie once overheard Mr. Bellamy say, *“George Winthrop has so many negroes in that house, two bits says he keeps one handy just to help him change his mind.”*

Mr. Bellamy had tears in his eyes and begged Georgie to never repeat what he had overheard. It was pathetic to see a grown man cry, and Georgie could only imagine what the man did when he closed the doors to his small haberdashery, less than two months after Father decided to start his own—right across the street from Mr. Bellamy’s.

Georgie shook the burlap satchel he carried. It would normally be full of shells by now, but the three of them had spent the better part of the last hour watching the ships. There were more than twenty of them spread out down the coastline, all grayish in color, and huge. Huge enough that Georgie guessed the one closest to him had to be easily three times the size of those he had seen earlier that summer when he and his fellow cadets from Elm Hill Academy visited the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard up in Maine.

“Look how sparkly it is,” Emily said, the breeze tossing her blonde curls back and forth across her small shoulders.

She was talking about the sun and how it glistened off the silver cannons that stuck out from one of the ship’s sides. There were so many of them, one about every forty or fifty feet for the entire length of the ship. At least Georgie thought they were cannons. If they were, he’d never seen them that color, nor that long, and he couldn’t fathom them all firing at once and the destruction they would certainly bring.

“Georgie,” Emily yelled through the wind. “Look!”

He ignored her because he’d noticed something else about the Navy’s newest ships. Though they were clearly more advanced, they were missing something, something very important, and he was baffled that he hadn’t caught it earlier.

“They don’t have masts,” Georgie said, not sure who he was talking to. “I don’t get it.”

“Georgie!” Emily shouted again.

He glanced over at her and then looked where she was pointing.

Men were heading toward them.

They were about a hundred paces away and coming from the edge of the forest where the shoreline bent back into Carlson Cove. Behind them, Georgie could see the top of one of the ships sticking up well above the tree line.

He counted thirty-two men in two perfectly straight lines of sixteen. Though Georgie excelled in War Theory at Elm Hill, anyone could tell they were military. All looked to be carrying rifles and moving in formation, yet Georgie didn't recognize them as Navy.

Big Jonah stepped out in front of Emily and held his hand up behind him, signifying Georgie and Emily be still. Georgie studied the size of that enormous hand and could only imagine Big Jonah's productivity in the tobacco fields, doing what he was meant to do, instead of babysitting. What a waste of a truly valuable asset.

As the men came closer, Georgie noticed that their rifles were each equipped with bayonets and that the men all wore matching black coats, pants, shoes, hats—

And faces.

The men were all black as well.

But something was different about them.

They didn't move like normal slaves did. They didn't seem sad and defeated.

All had their chins up and were looking straight forward as they held their weapons out in front of their chests. Their left feet all hit the sand at the same time and then their right feet followed, reminding Georgie of a big machine with identical parts, moving with an unstoppable confidence and sense of purpose he'd never seen in people before—not even white people.

Big Jonah craned his neck forward and shook his head, as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. The men were coming faster and fanned out into four lines of eight and then eight lines of four.

"*Nwɔn ti wá,*" Big Jonah said.

Georgie was shocked. Big Jonah would be the last of their two hundred slaves that would even dare to break one of Father's biggest rules, which was to speak in English only.

"Who are those people?" Emily asked.

"I don't know," Georgie said.

Whoever they were, they were now running. And though it scared Georgie, it also made him thankful that Big Jonah had never touched a single leaf of tobacco.

"Maybe they want some shells," Emily said.

Left, right, left, right. They kept coming until they were no more than twenty feet away.

One of the men shouted something, and they all stopped at once. Big Jonah began walking toward them. Three men fell out of formation and surrounded

him, one in front of him and one on each of his sides, not as if they intended to harm him, but to protect him.

“*Nwɔn ti wá!*” Big Jonah shouted, his back to Georgie. His fists were raised over his head, and he was jumping up and down as if a prayer had been answered. He finally dropped to his knees and cradled his face in his hands.

Georgie knew what would happen if Father heard Big Jonah speak another language just once, let alone twice. Georgie glanced up the hill and wondered how much longer Father would be in meetings. Though it was well over a quarter mile away, Georgie could still see the entire east end of their plantation. The rear of the mansion was darkened by a shadow cast from one of three pearl-white clouds that hovered over the grounds. To the left of the mansion was the guesthouse and to the far right a dozen of Father’s prize horses pranced around the stables. Father was hosting the governor along with a dozen statesmen, and the second they were through, Georgie would certainly inform him of Big Jonah’s transgressions.

Big Jonah raised his head and looked back over his shoulder at Georgie and Emily, tears streaming down his shiny black cheeks before he wiped them away with the back of his hand.

“Don’t cry, Big Jonah,” Emily said, standing in the waves, which now covered her small calves. She dropped her shell satchel in the water and ran to comfort him. Before she reached him, another soldier left formation and positioned himself between Emily and Big Jonah, bringing Emily to a quick halt.

“I just want to give him a hug,” Emily said. “Can I do that?”

The soldier said nothing. He was a large man, close to Big Jonah’s size with broad shoulders and muscular arms. Thick veins stuck out on both sides of his neck as he looked down at Emily.

Big Jonah stood and walked out in front of the soldier. He leaned over and picked up Emily, who wrapped her arms around his head and hugged him tightly.

Big Jonah closed his eyes and smiled. When he opened them back up, he was staring right at Georgie.

“*Nwɔn ti wá,*” he said yet again.

“I’m telling Father,” Georgie said. “And I look forward to you getting the lash.”

Big Jonah only nodded, then put Emily down. And then he took his shirt off and turned in a complete circle, making sure everyone could see the crisscrossed scars that covered his back.

“Young Georgie,” Big Jonah said, pointing up toward the plantation. “Your father is finished.”

Georgie laughed and looked up the hill.

At least fifty soldiers, all dressed in black, were now spread out around the mansion, guesthouse, and stables. Another hundred were marching up the hill.

"You will all pay!" Georgie screamed. "My father is George Winthrop!"

The soldier that had stepped in front of Emily had been staring at Big Jonah's back. He whispered something to Big Jonah, who then nodded.

"Your father is finished," Big Jonah repeated. "And so are you."

The soldier walked quickly and Georgie cocked back his fist, instinctively assuming the fighting stance he had learned at the academy.

He was ready.

The soldier clenched his teeth and those veins that bulged from the sides of his dark black neck began to pulse as he pulled something out from behind his back and then over his shoulder.

It was a sword.

"Help me, Big Jonah!" Georgie cried as the man raised the sword and gripped it with both hands.

"*Nwɔn ti wá!*" Big Jonah shouted.

"Why do you keep saying that?" Georgie yelled, his heart pounding like an icy mallet at the insides of his chest. "What does that mean?"

Georgie knew Big Jonah's translation would be the last three words he would ever hear.

"They have come."

WILLIE

Up North. The Crown.

The Unwinnable Case.

Modern Day

It was a week after Willie's seventeenth birthday when the whole thing started. His father had finally caved and given him what he wanted. The new car was a great gift and all, but for Dad to fly him up to Detroit to see the outside of the courthouse was beyond anything he'd ever expected.

They were in a white stretch limo and the driver was an older black man that reminded Willie of his grandfather, the one on his mother's side. He had to be in his late sixties and hadn't said a single word the entire time they were in the car. A real pro.

"Keep all the windows rolled up and locked," Dad said, leaning toward the driver. "I don't want them seeing Willie."

The driver nodded, and Willie laughed.

"What are they going to do to me?" Willie said.

The driver shook his head and then looked in the mirror. Willie knew the guy was hoping he hadn't gotten busted making a "this kid has no idea what he is talking about" face. Willie quickly locked eyes with him, making his own face that hopefully reminded the driver which one of them had a father who was the richest lawyer in the country and which one of them drove around all day kissing ass while wearing a stupid little hat.

The driver looked away and then slowly turned on to Commerce Boulevard, revealing skyscrapers to the left and hollow clouds of sewer steam that hung over the limo from both sides of the street. A light drizzle slowed traffic and made the tinted windows even harder to see through.

"What's that noise?" Willie asked.

"It's them," Dad said.

"Really?" A tiny shiver danced off the side of Willie's neck, and he sat up straight in anticipation of seeing *them*—members of the black supremacist group known as The Crown.

Willie leaned forward and looked between the intermittent sweeps of the windshield wipers. Past the older buildings and to the right, he caught the very tops of the enormous pillars down near the end of the street. He could already see the rest of it in his mind, as he had on the internet and television hundreds of times over the previous five months. He imagined the beautiful steps that led up to those pillars and the words that were carved so neatly near the top of the limestone building.

Court House and Custom House.

"Not sure why I waited so long to get you up here," Dad said, patting Willie's leg.

"Me either. I've only been asking you for three months to bring me."

Dad put his hand back on Willie's leg and gave it a little squeeze. Willie studied the *TDG* on his father's custom, gold cuff links and wondered why Dad hadn't come up with something a little more original than just his initials.

"I figured we were long overdue for you to learn just how fortunate you are to be black and to be a Southerner," Dad said.

"Give me a break."

"Give you a break?"

"Yeah," Willie said. "I know I'm fortunate to be black, but slavery ended like fifty years ago. Whites need to get over the whole thing and get their shit together."

"What am I going to have to do to get you to quit cursing?" Dad said, jotting a couple quick notes onto a legal pad before stuffing it into a briefcase that was so packed it could barely close. "But before you answer that question, I want you to tell me what *you* think whites should do to improve their circumstances."

"You mean get their shit together?"

"Should we turn around and take you straight back to the airport?"

"There's a lot they could do to improve their situation," Willie said.

"A lot?" Dad said. "That means you know several things they can do. Why don't you share one idea with me then—*just one*—so I can pass it on to them while we are up here."

"Okay," Willie said. "Tell them to all get on a bus and head south where things are different. Where whites at least have a chance."

"Easier said than done," Dad replied. "But I want you to explain what you mean by *different*."

“You know what I mean. It’s like slavery never ended up here.”

Dad nodded as if he agreed. But he should because he was the black lawyer that was defending a white man by the name of Donald Bondy that murdered—hang on, stop the press before Dad has a stroke—*allegedly* murdered a black man in a trial with a black judge and an all-black jury. The whole world knew there wasn’t another lawyer in the country who would take the case due to the risks of it being *different* up in Detroit. Sure, defending the pinkie back home would have been one thing (as in, a hell of a lot less risky), but the farther north you went, it really did seem like slavery never ended and Michigan is seven hundred long miles north of Georgia.

They were less than a block from the courthouse. Beyond the roped-off sidewalks on both sides of the street, dozens of news crews from all over the country were waiting for things to heat up on the day when closing arguments would be made. Even with the window up, Willie could still hear The Crown from the courthouse, shouting the same word in consecutive shots of three that seemed to shake the entire block.

Ju-stice! Ju-stice! Ju-stice!

“Pull the car over,” Dad said. “I’ll let myself out and walk from here.”

“How long do you want me to park in front of the courthouse?” the driver asked.

“Just long enough for Willie to watch me walk right through them,” Dad answered.

“Just yell *boo* and I’ll bet those hooded farmers scatter like scared rats,” Willie said.

Dad patted Willie on the cheek and then looked back at the driver. He held his thumb and index finger about five inches apart. “When you reach the courthouse, go ahead and crack the window about this much so Willie can get a better look.”

“Yes sir,” the driver said.

“The Crown is early today,” Dad said. He opened his door and the noise rushed in and passed through Willie like a gust of cold breeze.

Dad stepped out, flipped up the collar on his overcoat, and blew a puff of warm air into his dry black hands. Despite being early summer, it was cool and the rain made it feel colder.

“Can you hear them, Willie?” Dad shouted.

“I’m not deaf!” Willie yelled, knowing there was more to Dad’s question than appeared.

“When you see them,” Dad said, glancing down the street. “I want you to remember something.”

“What’s that?”

Dad leaned back into the car. “It’s darker than you. But there is a light inside of you. A light that only you can find. If you find it, turn it on and you will lead others out of the darkness without even trying.”

“What’s darker than me?”

His father just winked at him and then stepped back and slammed the door. The car was still a block or so from the courthouse and Dad hadn’t made it twenty feet before he was surrounded by cameras and microphones that followed him down the sidewalk.

The driver glanced back at Willie and then slowly drove forward. They passed Dad, who kept walking, and Willie edged closer to the window, finding it hard to swallow as the courthouse finally came into sight. As instructed, the driver lowered the tinted window about five or six inches, giving Willie a better view.

Gooseflesh tapped at the side of Willie’s face and then another wave of it seemed to grab his neck.

“This isn’t like back home,” he told the driver as his throat went dry.

The driver didn’t hear Willie. Willie wasn’t even sure if he heard himself.

He struggled to catch his breath. The Crown was the real reason he begged Dad to bring him up here, but he had no idea what he was asking for. Seeing them in person was unlike any other time he had seen them before.

Not on the internet.

Not in any newspaper.

Not anywhere.

Media coverage of other cases involving a black victim and a soon-to-be-found-guilty white defendant always included a quick clip of the courthouse exterior and a few brave pinkies squaring off against twice as many Crown.

But not in Detroit.

The Crown was organized. And there were so many of them. Both sides of the courthouse steps, and the steps themselves, were filled with hundreds—maybe a thousand—of them, all decked out in their shiny purple robes and pointed hoods, pumping their black fists in unison and calling for the accused’s head. And there wasn’t a white person in sight. Come to think of it, Willie hadn’t seen a single pinkie on the way there, either. Not even the token white hooker or homeless person. Willie had no doubt, regardless of the verdict in the trial, Donald Bondy was a dead man.

The Crown’s cry for justice had become a pulse, almost deafening, and Dad was walking right toward it, less than sixty feet from the first step that led up to the courthouse.

“How is my dad going to get past them?” Willie said, suddenly afraid for his father.

The driver didn’t have a chance to answer before someone shouted “Hear! Hear!” through a megaphone, and it was like someone hit the mute button on the world’s sound system. Everything and everyone became quiet, as if they knew that making any sound whatsoever would be dealt with immediately.

The cameras and reporters quit following Dad, and as he approached the steps, every member of The Crown that was there, *all of them*, turned to face him.

Willie’s jaw hung for a second when he realized the only noise he could hear were Dad’s shoes hitting the concrete.

And then it was like the parting of a purple sea as they made way for him, creating a lane in the middle of them that went all the way up the hundred or so steps, right to the front door of the courthouse.

“You go, Dad,” Willie whispered.

Dad was all by himself and it seemed like the only other movement within a mile were the heads of every Crown member, only a few feet from him on both sides, following Dad like smart security cameras as he went up each step.

When Dad made it to the top, Willie looked at the upper facing of the courthouse and all the old, Greek architecture that dominated public design back when pinkies ran the country. At the very top were gold-painted floral leaf moldings that surrounded little statues of fluttering and naked angels. He knew they were looking down over his father and were also offering comfort to those in need of something. He could see that one word, the same word, centered, almost balancing itself above a pair of columns that seemed to hold the whole building up. He had heard The Crown chant it hundreds of times in the last few minutes as he and his father drove up the street. But Dad had quieted them, and seeing the word etched into the building made Willie’s heart skip a beat.

Justice.

A pair of armed guards opened the doors for Dad and then shut them in the faces of The Crown and the rest of the world.

The door hadn’t been closed for more than five seconds when Willie noticed that not a single member of The Crown was moving. They were all perfectly still, seemingly frozen as they faced that door.

All except for one. A fat one.

He was halfway up the steps on the left side, right in the middle of the mob. He held his fist straight up in the air, and as the rest of them stayed fixed on the door, he turned and aimed that fist toward the street.

And then a short index finger sprung out from that fist and slowly waggled back and forth as if saying *naughty naughty*.

Willie slid back on the seat and clenched at his pant legs, never so sure of anything in his life.

He is looking at me.

And then he thought about how Dad had walked right through them. And how the window being rolled down only five inches was perfect.

Willie moved back over to the window and then stuck his arm out of the gap as far as he could. He thought for a second about waggling his own index finger back at the fat one, but he had a better idea.

He let a finger spring from his own fist.

He laughed and then waggled the finger, waving it slowly back and forth.

It was his middle one.



THEY WERE EARLY FOR their flight back to Atlanta.

Willie and his father sat at Green's Diner, inside the Detroit airport. Neither of them had touched their food—Willie because the number of pills he had taken that morning wasn't nearly enough—and Dad because his wheels were still turning over his previous day in court.

"How long do you think it will take the jury to decide?" Willie asked, glancing over at one of the security checkpoints. Drove of black businessmen, most of them wearing pricey dark suits, rushed past the guards and headed to their gates. It made him regret not bringing more painkillers with him. The guards weren't checking anyone.

Dad finally tapped some pepper on his eggs and picked up the saltshaker. He paused and stared at it for a second, like the two shouldn't go together, before sprinkling a little on the eggs as well.

"The longer it takes them the better," Dad answered. "And when they do, it'll be the last time I come up here for a while. Maybe forever. Still feeling safe at the house without me?"

"I was going to ask whether *you* felt safe."

"Don't worry about me, Willie." Dad straightened his neck as if he was surprised Willie cared about his well-being.

Dad was born in Michigan and had ties to just about every black leader here, which made his taking this case even more mind-boggling. Just a few days earlier,

Willie had watched a hot little ebony-skinned reporter on the news call Dad's defense of Donald Bondy "the most blatant demonstration of career and political suicide" she'd ever witnessed.

"Even after being here, I still don't get it," Willie said. "Why'd you take the case, let alone do it for free? I've thought about it, and it makes no sense."

Dad took a bite of his bacon and frowned, making him look more like a guy in his fifties than his forties. It wasn't the only time Willie had asked the question, and Dad looked more disappointed in him each time.

"It took me too long to understand, Willie," Dad said. "But I pray that you will know the answer one day."

"Me too." Willie hadn't prayed in years but it felt like the right thing to say. "But I still don't get it. Defending a pinkie pro bono back home is one thing, but—"

"I don't ever want to hear you say that word again."

"They call each other that all the time."

Willie used the word quite a bit as well. It didn't bother him because somewhere along the way he learned he could get away with it. That's as long as he didn't say it to a white person's face.

"Just because some of them call each other that doesn't make it right."

"Euro-American," Willie said, thinking the "P" word flowed smoother and was more popular in the real world.

"That's better," Dad said, pointing back at the same security checkpoint Willie watched earlier. Two little pinkie boys, maybe three and five years old, were bawling their eyes out as their mother was practically strip-searched by security in front of the whole airport.

"You still haven't given me a good answer," Willie said. "Defending a *Euro-American* up here in Michigan is flat-out stupid. You can't win either way. If he's guilty, the whites will blame you for not getting him off and even worse—"

"The man is white, Willie. And the law says that regardless of what color he is, he deserves a defense. And you were right when you said things are different up here. Just look at the judge, the jury, and the fifteen-hundred visitors that were assembled outside the courthouse."

"There were fifteen hundred?"

"Maybe more," Dad said. "Regardless, the fact that I'm black can only help my client."

"But in the one-in-a-million chance you *do* win, The Crown will blame you for getting him off. And fifteen hundred of those racist morons are more than enough to be dangerous."

“There are two reasons you don’t have to worry about that.” Dad’s tone was unusually nonchalant, practically indifferent.

“What are they?”

Dad paused and it seemed like he didn’t want to say it, as if he was ashamed.

“One...as much as I hate to admit it, you have a family member that’s more than just a little familiar with The Crown. In fact, he went about as high up the ranks as you can go.”

Willie couldn’t believe his ears. He had a relative that owned a purple robe! He thought it was a little pathetic, but after seeing a trillion of them at the courthouse, a small part of him thought it was actually kind of cool.

“Who?” Willie asked.

“Don’t worry about that.”

Willie thought about the fat finger-wagglers and the irrational paranoia that led Willie to believe the guy was looking at him. Then he thought about the waggler’s fourteen hundred and ninety-nine buddies that were parked around him. “How the hell did those haters get so big?”

Dad seemed to consider it and held up his hands before letting them drop to the tabletop. “Hate isn’t contagious. But ignorance is.”

“Pretty deep, Dad.”

“Always a smart aleck.”

“You said there were two reasons I don’t have to worry about The Crown if you win. Other than having a family member ‘more than just a little familiar with them,’ what’s the other one?”

Dad reached over and put his hand on top of Willie’s. Even though the whole touchy-feely, public-affection thing would normally have him yanking his hand away, this time he didn’t.

Then Dad gave him a fatherly wink and shook his head.

“The second reason is I won’t win.”

WILLIE

Dr. Cheever. Car Wash Pinkies.

Pool Time.

“It’s darker than you.”

Though it had been a couple days since his father had said it, Willie still didn’t have the faintest idea what Dad had been trying to get across. It’s not that Willie didn’t pick up on things—he did, and quickly. It’s just that whenever Tyrone Dwayne Gibbons used his courtroom voice, Willie knew it wasn’t his place to ask for an explanation. It was more of a cue not to be a smartass, shut up, and then think about what his father had said until he was sure what it meant.

Regardless, Willie couldn’t get those words out of his head as he and Dad sat across the desk from the family therapist, the esteemed Dr. Jazmin Cheever, the local shrink that all the rich people denied they went to. Cheever was in her mid-forties, a large woman with a bad complexion and teeth that were too perfect to be real. She was also black and a Southerner, and she and Willie had spent a great deal of time in his sessions talking about the benefits of both, undoubtedly subject matter that was inspired by his father.

Dad had already made up his mind that Willie was clean. Otherwise there was no way Dad would leave him at the house while he was in Michigan three days a week handling the trial. Dad usually flew home every Wednesday night, and after several thousand dollars of individual sessions for both Willie and Dad, Cheever figured it was best for the three of them to confer and “shake the trees to study the fruits of their labor.”

On that particular day, it didn’t take Willie long to see that what the good doctor really wanted to do was stab him in the back and declare his blame for the world’s problems. It really sucked, because up until about a minute and a half into that meeting, Willie had really liked Cheever, and truth be told, he didn’t like many

people. He had become comfortable enough with Cheever that he finally reached the point where he could tell her anything, a hundred times more than he could ever tell his father. He guessed it was mostly because he'd really bought into the whole "this is just between you and me and nothing leaves my office" crap she had fed him up until now.

"Willie isn't exactly the emotional type," Cheever blurted. "He uses humor excessively to mask his inability to share his feelings. He's afraid to get attached to anyone and needs to open up and let those closest to him get a little closer."

In previous weeks, Willie and Cheever had discussed his feelings to the point where he actually *felt* a few things, but right then, he mostly felt like finding one of those little airplane vomit bags he'd seen tucked in the seatback on the flight home and loading it with puke. Cheever had already let him know that his lack of emotion didn't mean he doesn't have feelings. What it meant was that he wasn't all that good at showing them, and it was true, but the whole hiding behind humor thing was news to him.

"I think he seems to be opening up a little more," Dad said, glancing over at Willie and then back at Cheever.

"Oh, really?" Cheever asked.

To Cheever's credit, Willie didn't have the faintest idea what Dad was talking about, either. If he had made any progress at all, it certainly hadn't come in the form of expressing his emotions.

"Some parents manage their kids," Cheever added, pulling a piece of lint off her sleeve with those plump little fingers before plopping her hands down on that pot-ass-belly of hers. In fact, he'd never noticed how fat she really was until just then.

"Of course," Dad said.

Cheever held up her hands matter-of-factly and then ran an index finger across the side of her left cheek. The cheek that was so acne-scarred, it looked like somebody had beat her face with a track shoe. Then she dropped what she thought was the therapeutic bomb: "And some kids manage their parents."

Dad crossed his arms and bit his bottom lip. He looked to mull it over before saying, "So you're suggesting Willie runs my life instead of the other way around?"

No, Dad. When she said that some kids manage their parents she meant that you play on a little league team and I'm the fucking coach.

Cheever looked right at Willie when she answered. "Willie is the textbook entitled teen that exemplifies an entitled generation. But to answer your question, that is exactly what I'm saying. Willie runs your life instead of the other way around."

“For example?” Dad asked, redeeming himself. Willie was with him on that one and wanted to know what the hell Cheever meant.

“Addicts can’t survive on their own,” Cheever said. “I’m not talking about enabling. I’m talking about you being manipulated while being addicted to his addiction.”

“Addicted to his addiction?” Dad said, his head teetering toward his left shoulder. “Please explain.”

“I believe that you give yourself some type of psychological reward for having a son that’s an addict. Whether it’s sympathy from others or something else, you need it, and you are addicted to that reward.”

“But Willie has been clean for two years now.”

Dad had no clue. Willie was buzzing pretty good right now and knew every trick in the book on passing drug tests. He was what many call a functional addict—which, as far as Willie was concerned, was the person you thought was high when he wasn’t high. Regardless, he’d been on painkillers for close to three years now, ever since the accident...

“Abstinence and recovery are two different things,” Cheever said. “But that’s not what we are talking about. I normally wouldn’t say this with a patient present, but you are being manipulated by your seventeen-year-old son, whose emotional unavailability is a valid concern, perhaps even dangerous.”

“He always seemed like a good kid,” Willie said, imitating the bewildered neighbor—the one that’s always standing behind yellow police tape at a murder scene on the news, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Enough,” Dad said.

“That’s what she means,” Willie said. “Am I right, *Jazmin*?”

“And there he is with another example of humor masking feelings,” Cheever added, mimicking the voice he used. She leaned forward and lowered her fat chin almost to the desktop before whispering, “I’m not talking about being dangerous to others. I’m talking about being dangerous to yourself. And when we are in my office, you will call me Dr. Cheever.”

Willie glanced out the window at the little statue of the white boy holding a lantern on the edge of Cheever’s porch. Though he’d never do it, he wondered how long it would take him to go get it and chuck it at her black head. Hopefully she would consider that progress.

“I’m not dangerous to myself,” Willie said. “This is absurd.”

"I'm afraid I have to agree with Willie," Dad said. "He's too much of a fan of himself to do himself any harm."

It felt good that his father wasn't buying into Cheever's crap either. He and Dad gave each other looks that seemed to ask what the hell they were paying the bitch for. Then Dad said in a small voice, "But about the not showing his emotions thing. I don't know about the whole gamut, but I haven't seen him cry since he was a baby."

Willie couldn't say that was total bunk. The last time he'd cried was a pretty lousy time in his life. It was way back when he was in fourth grade when it became just him and Dad. He pushed the thought away and then glanced back out at the little statue. It looked smaller...lighter.

"We still have a lot of work to do here," Cheever said, standing and signaling the end of the session. "I've told you both in private that this isn't a drug problem as much as it is a reality problem. Let's just continue to be honest, blunt if necessary, and I'm confident we'll move toward some positive changes."

"Okay, but I still don't understand how I'm being manipulated," Dad said, standing and reaching to shake Cheever's hand. "But I'll pray that I do and will also pray that Willie opens up."

Cheever shook Dad's hand and then pointed out the window with her other hand at the \$125,000 car Dad had bought him.

"Pray for Willie?" Cheever said, shaking her head. "Mr. Gibbons, Willie doesn't need God."

Dad looked puzzled for a few seconds, then held open his hands. "Why not?"

Cheever leaned forward and smiled, showing off those fake-ass teeth of hers. "Because he has you."



ON THE WAY BACK from Cheever's office, Willie stopped by the drive-thru car wash to give his birthday gift a good once-over. He waited in line behind three other cars, freaking out about his tires lining up on that little track at the entrance to the wash. He could drive with the best of them, but the people waiting in line behind him made him nervous as hell. He'd been up there a hundred times on his bicycle, but only three times with his car, and on each of those trips, he'd missed the track horribly, setting off the alarm that let the whole town know he'd screwed up. Then the idiots behind him would start having their own aneurysms: honking their horns and yelling until the pinkies that worked there had to stop the wash and back him up to get him resituated. Embarrassing as fuck.

He took a deep breath as yet another car in front of him entered the wash and aligned perfectly on the tracks. Next to the car was Evan Keller, his pill guy. Evan was one of those Nordic pinkies with *white*-white skin that actually turned pink when he spent too much time in the sun. He had shoulder-length greasy blond hair and always wore the same black ball cap with a white capital *E* on the front. Willie had met Evan about three years earlier when Evan worked on the crew that tended their lawn at home. Even though he was a drug dealer whose legitimate job was two-handing a foamy brush and scrubbing tires, Evan was pretty sharp for a white dude and though Willie would never admit it, he always liked him.

As Willie sat there, three other car-wash pinkies came out from the far side of a pickup truck in front of him. Unlike Evan, who was so skinny you'd think he had cancer, the other guys were all big dudes and in good shape, not one of them wearing socks and each wearing pants that were straight floods—easily three inches above the ankles, worn just like all pinkies like to wear them. Willie guessed they were all former athletes that probably weren't good enough to play in college, which left them perfect candidates for the military, the drug trade, or in more honest jobs like working at car washes.

Willie avoided the other side of the bridge where most pinkies lived. Evan was the only white guy he ever really communicated with and that was always on his way to the car wash, normally on his cell phone and riding his bike to get a baggie of painkillers from him. Willie would normally call him up and when Evan saw his bicycle coming up the road, Evan would drop the baggie of pills in a garbage can near the self-serve vacuum and when Willie picked it out, he'd drop an empty soda can with cash in it right back in the garbage.

"How can I help you today?" Evan asked, checking out the new car. Willie rolled the window a little farther down. Evan was sweating and had a funny smell to him, which reminded Willie of a wet dog.

"Hey, dipshit," Willie muttered. "I'll take the ten-dollar wash."

Evan was smart enough to reach into the car instead of Willie reaching out. He dropped the baggie on Willie's lap and took the money. Eighteen-hundred (folded perfectly in half) for the drugs, and eleven bucks for the wash. He quickly pocketed the eighteen-hundred without anyone possibly seeing and then walked over to the register, put the ten bucks in, and dropped the extra dollar in the tip bucket.

Evan came back to the car and ran his hand across that sweaty forehead of his before tapping his knuckles on the roof.

"This car is too damn sweet to run through a wash like this," he said. "I've told you before to get this hand washed. It's gonna get scratched up if you keep coming here."

"I didn't pay for it," Willie said.

"Your daddy hook you up with this ride?"

"What do you think, dumbass?"

Evan was the only white guy on earth that Willie would ever talk to this way. He guessed part of Evan deserved it, though, because whenever he was around other pinkies, Evan acted a lot different, a lot whiter, and when they were in groups, they always scared the living fuck out of Willie.

"Keep running that mouth of yours and shit's gonna happen someday," Evan said, giving a dismissive look, followed by a little smile that told Willie that though he was a little serious he was also just playing with him. "Show some respect, cuz you got no idea how good you got it."

"I'm not washing cars, so I must have it good." Willie lifted the baggie a few inches off his lap. "And I ain't selling this shit, either."

"You ain't got four kids, either," Evan said, wrapping his knuckles back on the roof of the car. "And I wasn't just talking about you, Willie. I was talking about *all* of you."

"That sounds a little racist, Evan," Willie said with a grin. "Maybe one day my people will get our very own entertainment channel like the one *your* people have, The White Entertainment Network."

"You already do," he said.

"Which one is that?"

"All the other channels except T.W.E.N.," Evan said.

Willie pondered it for a second and realized that Evan was more than just a little right.

"Touché," Willie said.

"Speaking of television," Evan said, "I see your daddy on TV about every day. It's a pretty noble thing he is doing, defending that Bondy guy up in Michigan."

"I think what he's doing is crazy," Willie pointed at Evan's coworkers. "Speaking of crazy, you are nuts for not carrying a gun, particularly with them around and all the cash you carry."

"Guns scare me," Evan said.

"How many times have you been robbed, dumbass?" Willie asked. "Isn't it like three? An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

"Never had a gun and you will never see me with one. They are nothing but trouble."

"Don't worry," Willie said. "If you ever get a gun and find yourself in trouble, I'm guessing my father would defend you."

"Maybe," Evan said. "You should be proud of him."

"I am," Willie said. "In fact, I was just up in Detroit with him. Saw over a thousand Crown on the courthouse steps. They told me to tell you hello."

"That ain't funny, man. To hell with them."

"Whatever," Willie said, followed by a short laugh.

Evan took a few steps back, reeling his index fingers and guiding Willie slowly into the wash as the other pinkies began spraying the passenger side of the car. Willie rolled his window up and his heart felt like it was trip hammering right before he felt the bump of his front left tire as it went over the edge of the track.

Fuck.

That pain-in-the-ass alarm went off and he could see the beginning of a smile form at the edge of Evan's mouth.

He knew Evan's pinkie ass made him miss.

"Go back a few feet and let's try again!" Evan shouted, pointing behind the car to the entrance.

Willie put the car in reverse and before he took his foot off the brake, rolled the window down just enough to give Evan an above-average look at his middle finger.

Evan's smile widened, and he tapped on the window. "I told you shit was gonna happen."



WILLIE SLEPT THE NEXT day until almost noon.

When he finally got up, he'd jumped in the shallow end of the pool and had been chilling with his arms and legs hanging over the edge of an oversized red inner tube for close to an hour before Dad walked out of the house.

"Your lunch is ready," he said. "DeeDee made us a nice salad."

DeeDee was the live-in maid. She was white, in her fifties, but looked a lot older. She always talked about how washing your hair only once a week was a valuable beauty tip. She had no idea how greasy it looked and Willie had told her at least a thousand times that she needed an oil change, but she never got the joke.

The house had twenty-three rooms in it and they rarely saw DeeDee unless some type of cooking or cleaning was in process. She stayed in one of the bedrooms

on the second floor and had been with them even before Willie's mom and sister died. She was dumber than a bag of dog shit, too stupid to steal, and her three primary gifts included speaking only when spoken to, being able to make the best peach pie in the history of man, and an extrasensory ability to walk into a room immediately after Willie silently farted.

DeeDee knew Willie still took pills but was too afraid to tell his father. She had once told him she "understood things" when it came to his addiction and then explained the reason she never drank anymore was because she had already taken enough alcohol for one lifetime. Willie usually ignored her when she babbled about that stuff. Besides, he really didn't care if she was a wino because she was really good at her job, which was doing whatever he asked her to do. In fact, she obeyed him more than she did his father and Willie knew it was because he scared the shit out of her. Maybe it had something to do with that emotional unavailability Cheever blabbered about.

"I'm not hungry," Willie said. "I think I'm going to pass on DeeDee's salad."

"What do I pay DeeDee for?" Dad asked. "And when you get out of the pool, dare I ask you to straighten up your room a bit?"

"That's what you pay DeeDee for," Willie said, smiling and using his arms as oars to paddle away from Dad. "Have her do it."

"What would you do without us?"

"Most likely wither up and die."

Dad stepped closer to the edge of the water and crossed his arms. He never went in the pool. In fact, Willie had never seen him with his shirt off. "Have you been in the safe?"

Dad was a perpetual candidate for the cover of *Rhetorical Question Magazine*.

"Yeah," Willie said. Some form of honesty was always the best policy. Of course, he had been in the safe. Dad had given him the new combination as a reward for his impeccable abstinence. Oops.

"Why?"

Willie lifted his midsection out of the water and above the inner tube before tapping on his swimsuit.

"I needed a new pair of trunks and some socks."

Willie needed new swimwear like he needed eye cancer. Or like he needed Dad asking him about the safe. Besides, Dad usually kept at least thirty or forty grand in there and never knew the balance or what Willie took out, so it was really no big deal.

“Okay,” Dad said, apparently believing Willie, which was a surprise. Then Dad stood and nodded before saying, “Just remember the money is in the safe for emergencies.”

“I know,” Willie said, justifying his pill withdrawals as bona fide 911 material. He took a deep breath, leaned back on the inner tube, and closed his eyes. Then he smiled and took a good ten to fifteen second piss in the pool, knowing there was no way Dad would know about that either.

“Why don’t you come in the house and let’s spend some time together before I head back up north?” Dad said.

“Maybe later. Can you have DeeDee bring me a couple towels?”

“Maybe you should get off your backside and get them yourself,” Dad answered. What Dad had in courtroom authority rarely—actually never—translated into parental sternness. Willie pretended to close his eyes (the old close them, but not all the way trick) and waited Dad out. Dad finally gave up and shook his head before walking back in the house. Willie opened his eyes all the way and wondered for a second if maybe some of that garbage Dr. Cheever fed them about Dad being manipulated was starting to sink in.

Three minutes later, DeeDee came out with a pair of towels tucked under her arm. Willie stretched his arms out behind his head and closed his eyes again. This time all the way.

Life was good.

And with a fresh supply of pills and his father going back up north to Michigan, it was about to get a whole lot better.