

prologue

On an ordinary afternoon in late October I discovered the truth about me. Like fire, that single truth stirred a hunger and created a hurt, but in the end it opened the door to a wholeness beyond my wildest dreams. All in all, I don't regret embracing that truth. I only regret the time I wasted in running from the freedom that came with it.

I was planning to drive to Richmond that Sunday afternoon a few hours ahead of my parents. I told them I wanted to visit old school friends before our Sunday visit to the rest home where granddaddy stayed.

"I know it's kind of a last minute thing," I said, hoping it didn't sound like another one of my lame stories. "But I haven't seen any of them in a couple years."

"Oh?" was mom's response. It had been a long 'oh'. She had stared at me with those big brown eyes over her half glasses and brought her Eartha Kitt-like voice up a half dozen notches. "Sounds interesting, Isaac," she added like she expected to be invited along. Then she winked and said, "Give Senator Holloman's daughter our love."

Dad gave my hair a once-over, wagged his head, and grunted. "Behave yourself. Your mother and I will meet you outside your granddaddy's room around two. Don't go trampling in bothering him before we get there. He needs his rest. You need a haircut. How can you even see to drive?" He screwed up his brown face and went back to rummaging through his briefcase. Making preparations for upcoming meetings at the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals took front seat to his concern over his only son's dishonesty.

Later, I had sat in the Alzheimer's wing outside my grandfather's room for over an hour waiting for the woman I had lied for. A single white rose in my lap.

Her name was Rose. She had eyes the color of milk chocolate, skin like the choicest cream, and the pinkest lips. She was real and easy to be with. Every third Sunday for more than three months she'd dodge work at the front desk and meet me on the bench outside granddaddy's room. We had a special spot in the woods.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the mud colored cinder block wall and pressed the rose to my lips. Then I placed the rose on the seat beside me and linked my hands behind my head.

Someone was walking toward me. The footsteps were muffled and slow. I kept my eyes closed, faking sleep. The footsteps stopped and someone poked me in the chest.

“Wake up, Isaac,” came the whisper.

Another poke to the chest. “Isaac.”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Patterson,” I said without opening my eyes.

He snorted and moved in closer. I felt his warm breath on my cheek. “We’ve been waiting all day, kid.”

He had been eating raw onions again. I coughed. “I’m not doing it anymore. That’s what I told you last time, Mr. Patterson.” I looked up into his blue-gray eyes “It’s over. Remember?”

He stuck out his bottom lip and gave me a squinty-eyed frown.

I shook the hair out of my eyes and looked at him hard. “I’m not doing it anymore.” I waved my arms like an umpire calling a man out. “No more.”

“What do you mean, you’re not doing it no more. Kid, it was your idea.”

“Well, it was a bad idea. And I don’t want to do it anymore. Besides, they know.”

Mr. Patterson sat down beside me and placed his silver cane across his lap. He stroked it with the heel of his hand. His age spots looked like coffee stains on white china. “They don’t know a thing we don’t let them know.”

He looked at me sideways and winked. “You know what I mean, bro.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. Little white men with canes should only say the word bro if they want to be laughed at. “They know.” I winked hard and tipped my head toward the surveillance camera down the hall.

“Playing checkers,” he whispered, “That’s all they think we’ve been doing. Nobody has to know it’s anything more.”

The squeak of a wheel cut Mr. Patterson short. He was looking over my shoulder with wide eyes. The scent of cheap aftershave rose around me.

“Yes, Isaac. It’s just a friendly game of checkers,” said the voice behind me.

I turned and nodded to the thin clean-shaven man in a wheelchair. “Good afternoon, Mr. Smith. Getting a little exercise?” I forced a smile. Sweat glistened on the loose skin of his neck. There was a bead of sweat on his upper lip that made his face look dirty. His eyes, as pale as mine, sparkled irony.

He was pulling at his black leather biking gloves. For a few seconds I couldn’t take my eyes off them. That’s when I noticed what he had tucked in the folds of the blanket spread across his legs – an envelope marked I. Hunt.

Mr. Smith finished looking me up and down then nodded back at me. “Mr. Hunt.” Then he gave Mr. Patterson a smile that did nothing to warm the air and barked, “Bye, George Patterson.”

Mr. Patterson stood and gulped. “Afternoon, Mick,” he said and left.

Mr. Smith stared at me some more. I stared back some more.

“You’re quite the young entrepreneur for a shaggy-headed college student, Isaac Ulysses Hunt.” He jerked his head toward my grandfather’s door. “Old Ulysses would be proud.”

I glared at his white face then clenched my teeth and looked away.

He wheeled himself closer to me and lowered his voice. “They don’t know. That note you received came from me.”

I looked at him. He was a thin pasty old man. His Aqua Velva or whatever it was was starting to burn my eyes. The insulated shirt he wore only concentrated the aroma. His blue eyes were set back under a heavy brow with wild salt and pepper eyebrows. He narrowed those eyes and smiled at me. I looked away.

“That’s a very nice rose you have.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Want?”

“Yeah. This is where you ask me for that little favor so you can keep my little secret.”

He sighed. “If I wanted to black mail you I would have done it a long time ago. Besides it was kind of interesting watching you operate. Getting all these old white folk to trust you with their money. It beat Bingo and reruns of Diagnosis Murder, that’s for sure. What’d you do with the money?”

I stared at him. *That’s for me to know and you to find out.* My turn to narrow my eyes and smile.

His smile faded. “Doesn’t matter, I guess. Push me.”

“I’m waiting for someone.”

“Rose? She’s not coming.”

I frowned.

He glanced down the hall past me. “I’ll tell you outside. Just push me, Isaac. Too many eyes here.”

I laid the rose across the back of his headrest and I pushed.

Mr. Smith directed me toward a back entrance and down a wide leaf-littered path to a clearing with stone benches overlooking a small pond. Dry leaves rattled in the breeze. A few squirrels frolicked on a log nearby. I knew the spot well. It felt empty without Rose.

Mr. Smith shifted in his chair and reached under his blanket. He pulled out a half empty bottle of whiskey.

“Here, hold this.”

I took the bottle and sat on the bench beside his chair.

He reached under his blanket again and pulled out two crinkled paper cups. He handed me one and took the bottle back. His clammy white fingers brushed mine. I flinched.

“Hold your cup closer.”

And you’re against me gambling? I almost said. I rolled my eyes and placed the empty cup on the bench beside me.

“I take it you don’t care to drink with me then.”

Mr. Smith shrugged and screwed the cap back on the bottle before tucking it under his blanket again.

“I need to get back. My parents should be here soon.” Upsetting my parents was only a distant thought, I still had Rose on the brain.

“She’s not coming back, Isaac. Rose, I mean.”

“You’re repeating yourself. How do you know that anyway?”

He slumped and looked out over the pond. “Yesterday, Rose and I sat here and we talked about you.”

I frowned at him.

“Rose was my daughter.”

I couldn’t help but gape.

He shrugged and with a smirk said, “She got her mother’s looks.”

Mr. Smith shifted in his chair and gulped the rest of the whiskey in his cup. He poured himself another and continued. “She’s a bright girl most of the time but put her in the same room with a handsome face and a single white rose and she turns into a naïve flighty little thing. I asked her what she knew about you. Your work. Your family. She said she thought you were in finance and came to visit your mother every month.” He looked at me.

I winced. “We haven’t exactly talked about ...”

“She said she thought your mother was the widow Inez Hunt, a white woman that lives across the hall from me.”

I winced again.

“Then she went on and on about you. Your clothes. Your car. Your looks. ‘He has the most exquisite coloring, daddy.’ That’s what she said.”

Exquisite? She was one for strange words.

He shook his head. “That’s when I knew I had to tell her my little secret. Though I knew as soon as I opened my mouth that she’d do the same thing her mother did ten years ago. Leave me.”

He hung his head and stayed quiet for several minutes. He coughed and ran the back of his hand across his top lip. I stood up. Rose was a wash and I didn’t want to hear the rest of what this old white man had to suggest about me. “Mr. Smith, I ...”

“You know what passing means, Isaac? Passing for white, I mean.”

A stiff breeze blew between us. I pulled the collar of my pea coat in tighter and leaned over him. “I’m not trying to pass, Mr. Smith.”

He tucked his cup and bottle away and stuffed his hands under the blanket. “My daddy was about like your folks. Real fair. My mother she could have passed. But she didn’t. She was a proud woman. Proud to be black. When I was seventeen, they were both killed in a car accident. Daddy’s brother took me in. I graduated high school. Enlisted Army. Did nine months in Korea. That’s where I

was wounded.” He pointed at his legs. “And that’s where I discovered the benefits of passing. I came back. Conveniently forgot my uncle’s address. Fell in love with a white woman. Married her on her daddy’s front porch overlooking the Chesapeake. Had our lovely Rose. Made a nice living passing for white.

“My sweet Leslie thought the sun and moon rose and set at my command till the day my uncle shows up and I have to tell her my little secret. She took Rose and left. All these years I thought she’d told Rose. Yesterday, when I realized Rose didn’t know ...

He shook his head and ran a shaky hand through his thinning hair. “You know what your granddaddy told me one day? He said ‘A lie is a lie is a lie. No matter how pretty you tell it or how long you live it, it’s still a lie and in the end when it’s brought to light, it breeds misery.’ Right out of the blue. That’s what he said. I was sitting in his room playing old Al Green and he kinda woke up and came to his senses just for a few seconds.”

He glanced at me and stopped short. I was trying hard not to roll my eyes. I’d heard that lie line many times from my grandfather. It was as tired as Mr. Smith’s blanket.

“‘I’m not black, daddy.’ That’s what my Rose said before she left me.”

He stretched out a hand, palm down, and looked at it. His hand started to tremble and he caught his breath. Tears dropped into his lap. I looked away then turned to go.

“Isaac. Wait.”

He handed me the envelope, “From Rose.”

I took it and stood there for a few seconds. Looking at that wilted rose and the shrinking old man. I remember thinking as I shifted on my cold feet that this talk had really been more for him than for me. It was obvious he didn’t care any more for me than the man in the moon but he needed to say these things to unload some guilt. He was old and guilt ridden. I knew the truth about who I was. I wasn’t living a lie, I told myself.

Man, I couldn’t have been more wrong.

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“Where’s Betty’s boy?” came the scream a second time. It was my grandfather’s voice a few thousand decibels louder than anything I had heard coming out of him in a coon’s age, as he would say. And it was certainly louder than anyone at Glenbrook Rehabilitation Center would appreciate.

I chuckled and said something about his medication needing adjusting as I entered granddaddy’s room. My parents weren’t amused. Dad was hovering over his father’s bed. Mom was standing near the door wringing her hands.

When I walked in she pushed me back and pointed to the bench outside the room and said, “Sit.”

“I want to see Betty’s boy.” came another yell. “Can’t a dying man have a last request?”

Last request?

I pushed past my mother. “No, Mama. I want to talk with granddad.”

“Isaac ...” my father started, then muttered, “Chloe, honey, stop him.”

Granddaddy’s eyes widened. He smiled and stretched his yellowing brown arms toward me. “There’s Betty’s boy. Come give me a hug, Isaac.”

I studied the old man from where I stood. His light brown eyes didn’t look like they had three months ago – wild and glassy like those of an animal in pain. During that visit, he’d talked endlessly to an invisible person named Mimi. The woman, I found out later, had been his secretary for a few months during his many years at the Department of Justice in D.C. Their affair had lasted for several years.

“Guilt will do that to a man in his last days,” Ricky Hunt, my father the wise judge had pronounced on the ride back to Raleigh.

Granddaddy had on one of those 9/11 tee shirts with a large bald eagle and flag enfolding the Twin Towers, and the words ‘In God We Trust’ across the top. I stared at it for a few seconds, not sure what to make of the words. *God and Granddaddy?* I chalked it up to another slip in reality for him.

I glanced behind me to where my parents stood – their eyes stretched wide. Dad shifted toward me a bit but stopped short when his foot hit the corner of a bulging duffle bag propped against the wall.

My mind went briefly to Mr. Smith out there crying in the woods. Racked with guilt and regrets. Weighed down with the burden of lying all his life.

What kind of burdens were weighing on my grandfather I wondered?

I stepped closer to the bed. His blue bathrobe, the one I had given him when I was twelve, was

stretched over his thighs. I placed my hand on the worn terry cloth and leaned in. “Who’s Betty, granddaddy?”

“Your mama, Betty Douglas. She lives in North Carolina. In Pettigrew.”

The two adults behind me descended on the old man like an ER team, doing everything but cover his mouth with their hands. Looking back on that day, I think if they hadn’t been so obvious I wouldn’t have gotten so suspicious. I would have marked it up to another Mimi incident. Maybe he had had more than one tryst. He was a handsome old guy with those eyes and that square jaw, and probably had played the field as a younger man.

“What’s going on, Chloe?” asked granddaddy. His body fell back onto his pillow and he gasped, “Good Lord, help us all.”

Ulysses Hunt, the man I had grown to love and trust and learned to call Granddaddy Ulysses, died the next morning. Two days later, I hired a private investigator to help me find this Betty of Pettigrew.