

In the spring of 1943, Hitler and Mussolini were near the apex of their powers. Will, an amateur baseball player and US Army soldier, and his beautiful, head-strong, co-ed bride fight to overcome classism, racism, fascism, and Nazism.

Will and Dena: Love and Life in World War II

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Bob Rogers

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This book is a work of fiction based on real events and the deeds of real people during World War II. The names of characters who engage in dialog herein are my inventions, as are Oakton and Cardinal County. The historic men and women referenced, organizations, other places, events, ships, geography, weapons, and the acts of war and kindness are real.

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Chapter 1

Jason crumpled, like a dropped rag doll. Face-first, he fell on Broad Street's sidewalk. The crowd gasped. Several spectators rushed to his side. The softball-size lump of shiny black coal that struck Big Jason's right temple lay next to his outstretched white hand. Blood trickled from his nose. Big Jason lay still and grew pale as the crowd pressed in for a closer look.

The sky was overcast that Friday afternoon and a cold wind blew from the mountains in the west. As the ides of March 1943 approached, winter was refusing to let spring take matters over early in North Carolina's central piedmont region. An early spring would have been fine with Judge Stevens. Oakton had seen its first purple crocuses and was impatiently waiting for daffodils. The forsythia bush at the foot of General Joe Johnston's statute on Oakton's town square had but a handful of blossoms.

By the time that ancient forsythia bush would cover itself with yellow blossoms; baseball would compete with the docket for the top of Judge William T. Stevens' mind. His playing days with the Atlanta Crackers were never far from his thoughts. He opened one of his dirty second-floor office windows for a better view of the town square.

In the confused moments that followed, Judge Stevens saw Cliff Thompson leap to his feet and scramble around the corner and run down the alley as if a ghost was hot on his heels. There was Lil' Will Wallace tapping his mule's reins on her back. Judge Stevens couldn't hear him, but Lil' Will's lips mouthed, "Git up." The mule pulled the rickety old green wagon over the

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pavement behind the crowd of white people gawking at Jason and away from Broad Street toward the road to Lenoir. The wagon's faded red wheels and spokes would pause momentarily in each pothole and then lurch forward. The mule's pace was about the same as that of the people window shopping on Broad Street. Lil' Will's pa, Big Will, followed in a large new red wagon pulled by four mules. Judge Stevens could see that Big Will had positioned his rig so that anyone from the crowd looking in their direction would not notice the two burlap bags of coal among the supplies in Lil' Will's wagon.

"Did you see that?"

"See what?"

Judge Stevens was waving his hands. "Well, come closer – quickly." He put his head out the window and peered toward the road to Lenoir.

The mayor walked between Judge Stevens' desk and his hand-made mahogany credenza. "Bill, I can't see a damn thing but you in the window."

Judge Stevens was so excited that he hit his head on the raised window as he drew it back inside. "Ouch! Dammit! Andy, I'm sorry you missed it. I know this is gonna make us a winner in Denver." The judge was still rubbing his head and smoothing his silver hair.

"Whatever has gotten into you? What did you see out there to put you in such an all-fired frenzy? All I see is a crowd milling around that boy on the sidewalk. Why is he sitting on his tush?"

"Andy, I've never seen the like. Big Jason, was giving poor Cliff a trashing and a crowd gathered. At six feet and a half, Jason was taller than anybody else on the street. Nobody, and I mean nobody, was trying to stop 'im."

"Yep, he's tall. My Dan tells me he's the meanest kid in town."

“Well, lemme tell you. That colored Wallace boy was driving his pa’s wagon down Broad. He took a look at the fracas and stopped his mule over there by that mailbox on the corner of the square. You shoulda seen’im. He reached back and pulled a big lump of coal out of a bag behind him and, without moving from his seat, threw it and hit Jason in the head. Knocked Jason out cold.”

“You mean to tell me he threw it from all the way over there? Why, that’s more’n a hundred feet!”

“If that boy can hit a baseball anything like his pa could, he’s our answer for catcher when we go to Denver this year.”

“But he’s a nigger. Are you outta your mind? And, besides, why aren’t you calling the sheriff – Mr. Officer of the Court? Didn’t you see the nigger assault Jason?”

“Yeah, so what if he’s colored? We played colored teams in the tournament last year and in ‘41. As I recall, they stole bases any damn time they felt like it and beat our asses handily. Oh, and, no, I ain’t calling the sheriff. Jason deserves what he got and more.

“Andy, don’t you remember? Our poor Jimmy never threw out one of those base runners.”

“But playing against a colored team is bad enough and that’s mighty different from having one of *them* play on our team. You know our boys won’t stand for it.”

“Even if it means not winning that *Denver Post* Baseball Tournament prize money – and the fame we need for Oakton?”

“Bill, you know our town. It won’t fly.”

“Andy, level with me. You don’t like my idea, do you?”

The mayor dropped his head and suddenly found the tops of his well-shined brown wingtips to be very interesting.

“Andy, we go way back. I know you never had any truck with niggers. You can tell me straight out.”

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“Alright. No, I don’t like your idea. I know I wouldn’t play with’em. So I wouldn’t ask our boys to do something I wouldn’t do.”

“Not for the prize money? Not for the bigger prize of making this town that no one ever heard of a place to visit and invest in? That’ll help you fill up your hotel – bring vacationers to these hills...”

Cardinal County was not a tourist attraction. It was said that the county had more than a hundred different species of trees and right now there were buds on most of them. The little town of Oakton was the county seat and sat near the middle of the county. Cardinal County had sharecropper cotton farms here and there. Corn was grown in quantity, but consumed mostly by families and their livestock. The big industry was furniture manufacturing. The trees of Cardinal County kept the furniture makers supplied with wood and loggers and craftsmen employed. Oakton was functional. It had one of what most towns would have: one general store, a gas station, an ice house, a shoe store, a clothing store, a hardware store, and one hotel.

Andy thought for a moment, slowly rubbing his chin. “Bill, we’ll just have to find another way.”

Judge William Stevens closed his window. “Okay. I’ll see you at the Chamber meeting next week.”

Mayor Andy Mitchell left without another word.

Chapter 2

“Boy, have you done plum loss yo’ mind!? How cum you couldn’t reckon dat one of them white folks would see you throw dat piece of coal?”

Lil’ Will hung his head and half listened to his pa. He carefully studied patterns in the brown wire grass on which he stood holding Della’s reins. Lil’ Will was not little. He was an inch shy of six feet. His muscles were plainly seen to ripple when he swung an axe or a hoe. Lil’ Will and his pa were the same build and size. He was called Lil’ Will because his mother, Rosie, did not want to call him Junior. Beagle sat next to Lil’ Will’s right leg.

Lil’ Will could not believe that anyone could have seen his quick throw. But he made no reply to his pa. He had learned early on not to talk back when getting a dressing-down from an adult – parent, teacher, or neighbor. The fact that he was now nineteen and was as tall and broad shouldered as Big Will made no difference. He was still his pa’s boy.

Big Will glanced over his shoulder again before he continued. “Son, I believe Judge Stevens seed you. I heard his winda open and seed him stick his face out for a betta look.”

Lil’ Will looked up, wide-eyed, jaw agape. “But...”

“No buts. The judge paid no attention to dat crowd around Jason. His head was turned toward you.”

“But...”

“Will, stop sayin’ ‘but’. Ain’t you got nothin’ else to say?”

“But ol’ Cliff was gonna get beat worse ‘cause nobody could stop Jason.”

“Boy, since when is it yore bitness to stop one white boy from beatin’ another white boy? That’s another reason why I think yore head is still empty after all my teachin’. I sho’ hope dis is the last time I gotta hafta tell ya. *Stay* outta white folks’ bitness!”

“But, pa, Jason’s always beatin’ people up and gettin’ away wid it.”

“I’ve heard ‘bout dat Jason. You ain’t listenin’ ta me. Dat ain’t got nothin’ ta do wit you. Lemme tell you how meddlin’ in white folks bitness can hurt me and yo’ little sistah.”

The mules were still in their harnesses and hitched to the wagons. They were standing in the barnyard, looking toward their stalls. Della made a loud snort and shook her mane.

Big Will looked over his shoulder again toward the road to Oakton. “Now, Will, you listen to me careful. I’m a tell ya straight from the shoulder. If Judge Stevens sends the sheriff to fetch you and dey put you on the gang for a stretch, we could lose our lil’ loggin’ and haulin’ bitness. By myself, I can’t cut enough trees and haul enough logs to satisfy Mr. Martin. So, Mr. Martin would jes git somebody who can fill his quota, and dat would be dat. Den, how do I pay de rent on dis place, the mortgage on dis heah new wagon, and save for Willie Mae’s schoolin’?”

The wire grass was no longer interesting. Tears welled up in Lil’ Will’s eyes as he considered what his absence could cost his family. He thought about how much Willie Mae, a fifteen-year-old ninth grader, wanted to be a teacher. She talked about it almost every day. He blinked his tears back and glanced toward Della. He did not want his pa to see him cry.

Big Will took a step closer and put a hand on Lil’ Will’s shoulder. Big Will lowered his voice. “Son, you gotta see further than the tree just in front of you. As you grow into a man, you got to realize dat yore actions can affect yore whole

family. It's a fine thing to want to save one boy from gettin' a beatin' from a bigger boy. Dat makes me proud of you. But you got to start thinkin' like a man. Some day soon, you'll have yore own family."

"Thanks, Pa. I'll do better."

"Okay, son. Now let's get these critters watered and fed."

"Git up, Della. Com'on, Beagle." Beagle was a brown and black and white beagle. He followed Will everywhere without being called. It was Willie Mae's idea to name the dog Beagle.

Will led Della over to the back porch of their bare plank, tin-roof house. Beagle went, too. The planks on the outer wall had never been painted and were various shades of brown. The back porch floor was almost level with Will's wagon. The floor where he stacked supplies from the wagon was weather-beaten and smooth from wear. It had a bleached look from the hot water and lye soap Willie Mae used to scrub it. Later, he and Willie Mae would move the supplies inside the kitchen and the coal bin. Now, he led Della to the barn and parked the wagon in its usual place. Out of her harness, Della shook herself and dust flew.

Will thought of the sweet feeling he got when that piece of coal found its mark and Big Jason went down. The feeling surprised him. He didn't mean it to be revenge. Was it? The memory of Jason beating him last year was now a bit more bearable. That beating was no longer a lost war, but simply a lost battle. Before today, every time Will thought of it, he had felt rage building throughout his being. He never told Big Will that Jason beat him because he would have had to tell his pa that he took the south road. Pa had told him to never take that road from the factory, even though it could serve as a shortcut to the highway toward Lenoir. The south road cut through a white neighborhood.

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One day when Will detoured to visit with his girlfriend, Dena, for a few minutes, he was late getting to the factory to unload and it would have made him arrive home with Della and the wagon after dark. Big Will forbade having the mule and wagon on the highway after dark.

Will was still savoring the day's events as he pumped water for the mules in the corral. The pump stood over a well near the back porch. Big Will had rigged a wooden V-shaped trough that, when swung under the pump spout, guided water to a large tin funnel stuck into a galvanized iron pipe. The vertical pipe connected to an elbow half a foot underground and a pipe that carried the water to a cylindrical metal tank inside the corral. The pipe was not connected to the tank. Instead, it lay over the opening and water poured into the tank.

"Hey, Lil' Will." Will flinched. He had been lost in replaying the memory of Big Jason falling and had not heard Willie Mae arrive at the pump with two porcelain-lined buckets from the kitchen.

With a big grin, he turned to greet her. "Hey, Mae!" Lil' Will grabbed her shoulders. "Wait'll you hear what I did today in town!"

Willie Mae listened while Lil' Will told his tale and pumped water for her and the corral critters.

At tale's end, Willie Mae smiled her best conspiratorial smile. "So, big bro, when Pa said, 'Stay out of white folks bitness,' did you tell'im yo' bitness was jes repayin' an old debt?"

They shared a victorious laugh. Lil' Will had told her all about the visit with Dena and the beating while Willie Mae did her best to repair as much of the damage Big Jason had done to his face before Big Will arrived.

"Well, lil' sistah, does a bear have hind pockets?"

“Will, I’m ready. Com’on. Soon it’ll be too dark.” Big Will was calling from the barn. On his left hand, he was wearing a beat up catcher’s mitt that had a rusty buckle on the back. It was the only mitt Big Will ever used in his twenty years of baseball. His right hand held an old baseball, brown-red with dirt and its leather cover nicked from smashing into rocks and wire backstops.

“Pa, I’m comin’.” Will ran to the barn for his catcher’s equipment. He retrieved his pa’s face mask, chest protector, and knee pads. Each item was well worn and showed its age despite homemade repairs over the years. The catcher’s mitt was Lil’ Will’s. He had used it for two years, since taking over catching from Big Will for the Oakton Bears – a semipro Negro team. He strapped his equipment on for the first time since last season as Big Will watched.

Lil’ Will walked to the side of the barn and tossed a wide-blade hoe that had lost its handle onto the ground in front of him. They were using the barn as a backstop. Big Will would be the pitcher. Lil’ Will was squatting behind the hoe home plate.

“Alright, Will. Let’s go over a few reminders before we start. Dis is important for catchers. You got ta stay ready to block balls in de dirt wid your body. Stay in front of the ball. Next, ‘member to keep your throwin’ hand behind your back until the ball hits your mitt, and...”

Beagle barked. A car drove into the yard and followed the wagon track to the barn. Judge Stevens stepped out from his ’41 Ford.

Chapter 3

The front door slammed. Eighteen-year-old Dena flinched and dropped her pencil on her English homework.

“Dena! Dena. Where are you?”

“Here I am, Ma. Is something the matter?” Dena stepped from her doorway into the hall. She knew something was up when her mother called her “Dena” instead of the usual “Dee.”

Jessie was walking briskly through the front room, removing her hat as she went. “Yes, Dena. There’s something the matter alright. Talk is going around the neighborhood that that no-good boyfriend of yours assaulted a white boy uptown today.”

Dena’s right hand went to cover her mouth as she gasped. She hurried to meet her mother. “What? Ma, are you sure it was Will?”

“Just as sure as I’m sure my name is Jessie Mae Smith Miller. I overheard the principal say to the basketball coach that one of his ninth-grade dropouts named Will Wallace had hurt a white boy in town this afternoon. The nerve! On Broad Street – at the square – and in broad open daylight!”

“But, Ma, how would he know that? Wasn’t he at school all day? Besides, Will wouldn’t hurt anyone.” In spite of herself, worry wrinkled Dena’s brow.

“Hummph! Let me tell you! The principal said his brother called. You know the one, he owns that barber shop on Simpson Street. Well, according to him, your Will threw a big lump of coal and hit a white boy in the head. Knocked him out for a few minutes.”

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“What? I refuse to believe that Will would just up and do such a thing. How would a barber know? Why wasn’t he minding his business and cutting hair?”

“Said a customer he had finished ran back into the shop with the news. Said Big Will and his son were driving their wagons out of town this afternoon when it happened.”

Dena, flustered, suddenly felt exhausted. She looked about for a chair, found one, and flopped down on it. “But, this can’t be. Will never hurt anyone before. Why would he just pick on some random white boy? He doesn’t even know one. Do you?”

“Y’all sho’ making a lotta racket in here. What’s all the fuss about?” Cecilia, Dena’s older sister by two years, entered the front room tying the belt of her chenille housecoat.

Jessie gave a sigh and sat on the sofa, arranging two small pillows behind her. “Dena’s no-good boyfriend is starting some trouble with white folks. Didn’t you use to like him?”

With a big grin and hands akimbo, Cecilia rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. “Sho’ did. What a hulk! ‘Course, he was too young for me. Very reluctantly, I had to let that one pass. Whew!”

Jessie frowned at her daughter. “Cee, don’t be crass.”

Jessie taught fifth and sixth graders in the county’s only colored public school. Dena could not remember how many times she received admonishments from her mother. She always heard Jessie and her father, the Reverend Joseph P. Miller, tell her and Cecilia to be refined and lady-like. After Cecilia worked for a few more months, she would follow her mother’s dream and go to Charlotte in the fall to attend Johnson C. Smith University in the second class to ever include women. As Dena remembered, Jessie was more excited than Cecilia when the acceptance letter arrived from Smith.

Cecilia sat beside Jessie on the sofa. “Can’t we speak our minds while Pa’s not here and do a little girl-talk? Uh-huh! Will

is one *fine* specimen of mankind. What a body! Good catch, sis!”

Jessie shook her head. For the first time, Dena smiled. Her smile vanished as quickly as it appeared. She worried that the rumors were true. “Ma, what do you think might happen if Will did this thing?”

“What may happen,” corrected Jessie. “Nothing good. White folks may not know who did it – yet. But you can bet that sooner than later, some colored person will tell one of them. Then, who knows? A lynching? A riot? I just don’t know.”

“Aw, Ma. It’ll blow over in a few days.” Cecilia lifted a foot toward the coffee table, glanced at Jessie and caught the look on Jessie’s face. Dena bet correctly that Cecilia would not make the move. Cecilia returned her foot to the floor, leaned back, and crossed her legs.

“Cee, child, oh, how I wish you knew what you are talking about. That is hardly likely. My pa told me about the white-on-colored race riot in Wilmington – right here in this state. He also told me that in the summer after the First World War ended, seven race riots happened in seven different cities in the United States – *seven* in three months! I can’t count how many lynchings happened while I was growing up. When they get the notion that a colored man is forgetting his place, you can’t predict what may happen. Look at the race trouble in Detroit that started just two weeks ago. Now, that’s a riot you don’t need a history book to find. Believe you me, that thing in Detroit is not over.”

Dena leaned forward. She held her face in both hands with her elbows on her knees. She listened with intense interest. She glanced at the usually reserved and calm Cecilia, whose face had changed and now looked as glum as Dena was feeling. She reached over and picked up from the end table a small porcelain figurine of a white woman holding a vase. She turned it over

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several times. Haltingly, Dena spoke to her mother while gazing at the figurine. “Ma, it ain’t fair. Cecilia has dreams. Will has dreams. I have dreams. I don’t see how we can have a chance for a good life anywhere – North or South. Everything is against us. What I see is that there is no way to win.”

“Child, education is the key for us. Each generation that passes brings more progress. Education will help you be ready when opportunities come.”

Dena was quiet. There would not be education or opportunities for working men like the Wallaces. What of Will, another dropout? She was trying to frame her thoughts into words when Cecilia spoke.

“Ma, I agree that education is a better alternative than a life of domestic work or hard labor. But what does a person like Will have to look forward to? Say, Dena marries him. He wants to be a professional baseball player. I’ve seen him play – he’s really good. But he’ll never get the chance to earn much money in baseball. Not even enough to feed himself. It’s a white man’s game.”

“Game? If it pays money that comes from outside the colored community, we don’t control the game. When you go to college, I hope both of you will find respectable young men to marry who are preparing for a profession. Besides, baseball is not a profession. Why, when I was growing up, certain girls avoided soldiers, sailors, and ballplayers.”

Dena’s eyes filled with tears. Jessie and Cecilia were blurs.

Jessie walked over and put a hand on Dena’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, Dee. But we need to end this now. I want you to stop seeing Will Wallace. Associating with him could bring disaster to this house, or even to your father’s church.”

Jessie disappeared down the hallway.

Dena’s tears spilled into her lap in a noiseless flood as she rocked back and forth in her seat. She beat her fists against her

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knees and bit her lower lip, determined not to cry out. She felt an arm embrace her. Cecilia swayed her from side to side, cradling, and drawing Dena's head against her waist. Dena let her head lean on Cecilia while she repeatedly squeezed the figurine with both hands. Cecilia fingered Dena's curly braids.

Jessie called from the kitchen. "Cee, come and give me a hand with supper."

"Yes, Ma. I'm comin'."

Jessie corrected Cecilia. "I'm coming."

Cecilia rolled her eyes. "Yes, Ma. I'm coming."

Cecilia used the soft raised flowers on the belt of her housecoat to wipe the tears from Dena's face. She then turned Dena's face up. Dena saw sadness in Cecilia's eyes. Cecilia reached down and kissed the top of Dena's head. "I hope you won't go to your room and be alone. Please come with me to the kitchen. You can help me fry the fish."

Dena had not reached the thought of going to her room, but realized that she would have if Cecilia had not spoken. Dena felt warmth toward her sister when she realized Cecilia knew her next thought and would guide her away from isolation. Softly, Dena said, "Okay. Give me a minute."

When Dena entered the kitchen, Jessie was using a large bowl on the family dining table in the middle of the kitchen to mix yellow cornmeal, eggs, flour, baking powder, baking soda, salt, sugar, buttermilk, and butter. Cecilia was firing the wood range and melting lard in a large cast-iron skillet. From a cabinet, Dena took a tin pie pan to the small counter near the range. She poured buttermilk into the pan and dipped the whiting pieces that Cecilia had cut in the buttermilk. She seasoned each piece then shook them all in a brown paper bag containing just the right amount of cornmeal. Cecilia gently dropped the battered fish into the hot lard.

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Without a word, Jessie put her cornbread into the oven and checked a pot of rice. Dena slow-fried two pieces of fatback in a pot while she chopped onions and washed and chopped cabbage.

They cooked in silence. Jessie and Dena avoided eye contact. Cecilia made it a point to smile each time she could catch Dena's eye or touch her as they passed in the small kitchen.

The front door opened and closed. "Hello-o-o to my favorite three ladies of all time!" Joe Miller's booming baritone voice was clearly heard in the kitchen.

In unison, his daughters responded, "Hello, Pa. How was your day?" Jessie was clearing the family table. "Hello, Joe. I'm glad you're home."

Joe made his way toward the kitchen. "My day was fine, considering I gave a eulogy at the Johnson funeral this afternoon." He entered the kitchen with a smile and a jaunty step. He looked at the three women and stopped in his tracks. "Huh? What's with the long faces? It smells too great in here for there to be unhappiness in any corner." Joe gave them his famous big wide smile with his arms extended as if to hug the whole room.

No one said a word. Dena looked at the floor. Cecilia and Jessie found something to turn or stir.

Joe's arms and countenance dropped. "Okay. Since no one is talking, I guess I know what the matter is. Dee, it's about Will Wallace. Am I right? Your mother probably told you to stop seeing him. Right again?"

Dena's room was next to her parents'. When the kerosene lamps were out and Dena was lying in bed and staring at her ceiling, she could hear her parents debating the matter of Will Wallace. She heard her father say, "Jess, do you remember what

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happened after Mrs. Lillie Mae Smith, my dear mother-in-law, told you to stop seeing ‘that no-good Joe Miller?’”

Before she slipped into sleep, Dena said through clenched teeth, “No matter what Ma thinks is best for me, nothing is going to stop me from seeing Lil’ Will.”

Chapter 4

Beagle barked as loud as he could. At the end of each three-bark sentence, he threw his head back and added a howl. Though he could see the approaching car, Beagle did not leave Lil' Will's side.

Judge Stevens closed his car door. "Howdy, Will. How are you?"

"Why, I'se fine, Judge Stevens. How're you and the missus?"

"Oh, I'm fine and everythin' is fine at home. How about you, Lil' Will?"

"I'se fine, suh."

Though Judge Stevens was all smiles, Big Will maintained a serious and unsmiling face. Big Will came directly to the point. "Judge, is dis heah an official or a friendly visit?"

"Oh, why, of course, this is friendly. On my way home, I thought I'd stop by and chew the fat for a few minutes with a great baseball mind." Bill Stevens gave the smile of a traveling salesman.

Lil' Will exhaled. He smiled and looked at his pa. Lil' Will's face changed and displayed his perplexed feelings, for his pa maintained a stoic look with arms folded. Lil' Will expected friendly banter to begin between the two baseball heroes of Cardinal County. When that didn't happen, he felt confused.

Lil' Will remembered the friendly chatter between the two every time Judge Stevens would come to the ball field to see the Bears play. The judge would be the only white person watching their games. He would sit on the fender of his car and stay for hours. He would call out to players and root for the Bears along

with the players' girlfriends and wives. The judge always offered advice to rookies. He never stopped talking about the Atlanta Crackers and the time he hit this home run or that, or the great play at the plate when an opponent's spike broke his ankle and ended his baseball career. Judge Stevens always told Lil' Will he was partial to his pa because they were both catchers. He claimed that both of them were better talents than Mickey Owen, who, some say, helped the Dodgers lose the '41 World Series by dropping a third strike that would have ended the game.

Lil' Will noticed that Judge Stevens was, for a moment, uncharacteristically lost for words when Big Will didn't respond as expected. Lil' Will remained quiet, waiting for a clue as to how he should behave.

"Hey, Lil' Will, I brought you three new baseballs. Lemme see if you can hit'em."

Lil' Will's eyes lit up. He was stripping off his catcher's equipment and reaching for his only bat. "Oh, yes suh, Judge. I'm sho' I can hit'em. Yessuh."

"Will, I see you have your catcher's mitt on already. Why don't you catch for me?"

"Dat won't be much work, since you gonna pitch."

There was an awkward silence. In a moment, they both made nervous laughter. Too loud, and too long. Lil' Will was grateful. He took two deep breaths and joined the laughter.

Lil' Will stepped up to the hoe home plate in the right-handed batter's box. Instead of pitching, Judge Stevens rubbed his chin. "Can you hit left-handed?"

"I don't know, suh. I guess so. I can write and throw left-handed as well as I can right-handed."

Lil' Will glanced back at his pa behind the plate. Big Will looked suspicious of the judge's intentions and appeared to be in deep thought about something other than baseball.

“Lemme see you hit left-handed.”

Lil’ Will changed sides and his grip on the bat as a left hander would without appearing to think about it. Judge Stevens gripped the ball with two fingers of his right hand tugging at the seams, then wound and threw his first pitch. Lil’ Will could see the red strings binding the white leather appear to flash on and off like a light in the center of the sphere as the vertical back-spinning baseball approached. He swung and connected the sweet spot of his bat on the center of the ball. There was a loud crack and the three men watched the new baseball sail out of sight in the gray sky. While the men watched the ball disappear, Beagle gave chase.

Judge Stevens removed his felt dress hat. “My hat’s off to you, Lil’ Will. That was a hellva smash. Are you sure you never hit left-handed before?”

“Dis de first time. Suh.” Lil’ Will could never quite forget that he was talking to a white man – friendly or not.

“Let me pitch to you with you hitting right-handed.”

Lil’ Will was even more curious now. “But Judge, you’ve done seen me hit right-handed before.”

“Lil’ Will, what I want to understand is how you see the difference.”

Big Will alternated waving both hands in front of his chest. “Son, de Judge means dat opposin’ left-right thing.”

“Precisely.”

Lil’ Will looked from one man to the other as if they were speaking a foreign language.

“Ready, Lil’ Will?”

Lil’ Will shrugged his shoulders to shake off the conversation that he did not understand.

“Yessuh.”

Judge Stevens wound and threw a curve ball that was breaking away from Lil’ Will. He saw the strings rotating on a

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diagonal axis. He adjusted and whacked the breaking ball to what would have been deep right field.

“From which side did you see the ball better? Wait. That’s not quite what I mean to ask...”

“I get it, suh. From the left side, I saw the spin on the ball right off your fingertips. It was a bit later from the right side.”

“Wow! By Jove, you’ve got it. And, I’m a poor teacher. Reckon you taught yourself.”

At last, Big Will smiled. “So, son, now you can see there’s something to this left-right thing.”

Lil’ Will nodded. “Yessuh,”

Judge Stevens was excited. “Sure enough is. Why, I’ll bet you a dime against a hole in a doughnut that Lil’ Will can raise his average more’n a hundred points this year as a switch hitter. There’re only a handful of lefty pitchers around. You gonna be big this year.”

Big Will could not let a teaching moment pass. “Now, son, you’ve got to ‘member to keep yo’ body back when you hittin’ right-handed and not go flying forward after a pitch – no matter if it looks good enough ta eat. Be patient. Wait. You want all yo’ power and weight to meet the ball at about yo’ center. Now, on the left side, you look lak a natural – lak you were born over there.”

“Listen to your pa, Lil’ Will. He’s an old pro.”

“Yessuh.”

Beagle returned from the outfield and offered Lil’ Will a wet baseball. The three men had a genuine laugh.

“Judge, you threw two pitches and I ain’t caught nary a one. But ol’ Beagle sho’ did.” They laughed like old comrades. With the laughter, Beagle wagged his tail faster, as if he was in on the joke.

Big Will handed his mitt to Lil' Will. "Okay, son. Dusk is comin' on. Put everything away and shet and latch the barn for the night. Then, go on in and help yo' sistah with supper."

"Yessuh. Good to see you again, Judge Stevens. Good night, suh."

"Always good to see you, too, son."

Lil' Will smiled to himself. He wondered if Judge Stevens had made a slip of the tongue. No white man had ever called him "son." What did he mean? What was the judge feeling when he said it? Would he repeat it elsewhere? Aloud, Lil' Will said on the back porch, "Aw, ain't mean nothin'."

Lil' Will and Willie Mae were clearing away the dirty dishes. Lil' Will had wanted to ask his pa during supper what had kept him so long in the yard with the judge. Big Will had talked on and on about the Bears and how much lumber he would haul in his new wagon. Willie Mae must have had the same thought. She spoke first. "So, Pa, what did the judge have to say?"

Big Will leaned back so that the two front legs of his ladder-back chair were off the kitchen floor. He withdrew a pack of cigarettes from a pocket on the bib of his OshKosh B'Gosh overalls and put one between his lips before he remembered his new agreement with Willie Mae to smoke only on the porch. He placed the cigarette behind his right ear.

"Y'all need ta know this. Both of you will soon be grown. Listen to what people have ta say. But, ask yo'self over and over, how will dey gain from what you tell or give dem. Don't give up information too easily. 'Specially, don't volunteer nothin' 'fore you see what dey afta."

Lil' Will scratched his head. "Pa, what you mean?"

"Keep asking yo'self, why is dis person saying dis or why is dis person makin' a present. Sooner or later, you will see what

dey want. And, nine times outta ten, dey get some kind of gain. No matter if dey's a janitor or a judge."

Willie Mae wanted to know, "So, what does the judge want from us?"

"I don't 'xactly know." Big Will paused, staring at the square Sauer's Black Pepper can on the table. Neither child spoke. Willie Mae turned from her dishpan and waited. Lil' Will held his dish drying cloth in front of him. At length, Big Will said in a low voice, "Yet."

Willie Mae broke the quiet. "Why are you suspicious, Pa?"

"First off, I can't 'xactly 'member the last time Judge Stevens stopped by ta chew da fat wid me. I believe last time he come heah was at de end o' the '41 World Series. Second, dis place ain't on his way home from dat courthouse. Third, did he evah give a present to either of you?"

Both said, "No, suh."

"Well, a visit, three baseballs, and lettin' me know that he saw you chuck that piece o' coal upside dat white boy's head got ta add up to somethin'. He want somethin'."

Lil' Will's eyes grew wide, the whites shone. Big Will's gaze was steady.

Big Will paused again, rubbed his chin. "Next thing, why did he want ta see you hit, *and* see if you can hit left-handed? Looks like he scoutin' for somethin'."

Lil' Will and Willie Mae didn't wash or dry another dish. They stood transfixed. Big Will continued rubbing his chin. Finally, he declared again, "He want somethin'. We'd best be careful."

Willie Mae dried her hands and crossed the room to stand before her father. "Pa, do you reckon Judge Stevens has anything to do with Mayor Mitchell's baseball team?"

Lil' Will laughed. "Is a blue jay blue? If you put baseball in front of it, I'll bet the judge gonna be in it."

Big Will let the four legs of his chair touch the floor. “Baby Girl, where and what you hear ‘bout dat team?”

“Well, when I iron some on Saturdays for Mrs. Mitchell, sometimes I hear talk ‘bout the team. The mayor and his friends talk ‘bout making a name for the town. Seems they hope a good baseball team can help make Oakton famous. They say some town in North Dakota did the same thing.”

Big Will interjected, “Bismarck.”

Willie Mae did not acknowledge him. “From what I heard, I think it was the mayor’s idea.”

Big Will frowned. “So, you think dat sorry team could be connected to da judge?”

“You said the judge wants something. You said their team is sorry. I heard the mayor is disappointed about losing year after year. You said folks talk and do things when they want to gain from you. On a day when Lil’ Will coulda been thrown in jail, the judge wants to see him hit and gives him new baseballs. Well, all that adds up in my head to the judge wanting our Will.”

Lil’ Will burst into laughter so loud that Beagle barked from his place under the back porch. He laughed so hard that he pretended to need to lean against the wall to keep from falling. “Lil’ Sis, you forgot ta notice dat I’m colored. Dat team is white.”

Willie Mae looked at her brother and shook her head. “You sho’ are silly.”

Big Will ignored Lil’ Will’s antics. His face was grim. He put his elbows on the table and supported his face in both hands. He slowly looked up at Willie Mae, took a long look at Lil’ Will, and turned to Willie Mae again. Then, he groaned. “Mae, child, as odd and as unlikely as it sounds, I reckon you nailed it. Dis could be de beginnin’ of a whole mess o’ trouble.”

Chapter 5

“Hey, Willie Mae. Where’s Lil’ Will?”

Dena was looking past Willie Mae, hoping to see Lil’ Will. Though she checked several times during the Sunday morning worship service, she had not seen him sitting in the rear of the church where the young men and boys usually congregated. Older men sat with their wives or in the “amen corner” at the front of the church. Concern lined Dena’s face. Since Friday, she had looked forward to seeing Lil’ Will at church. She had no way to get a message to him since the Wallaces lived in the countryside and did not have a telephone. Dena was desperate to see him. She wanted to know directly from Lil’ Will if he had hurt anyone and, if he did, why. She also wanted to work out how they would see each other without her parents knowing.

“Hey, Dee. Come on. Let’s go outside so we can talk.” Willie Mae gave her friend a big smile. The two young women hugged and touched their cheeks to each other without disturbing their pillbox hats. They held hands and stopped several times on their way to the exit to greet friends, classmates, teachers, and neighbors. All the while, Dena’s face grew wearier from her forced smile.

They stopped by a clump of junipers at the edge of the cemetery and checked to see if they were out of earshot. Both started to talk at the same time. Willie Mae giggled and put one hand over her mouth and, with the other, pointed to Dena to go first.

“Oh, Mae, where is he? Did he do it? Why did he do it? Why isn’t he in church today? I’ve been sick with worry.”

“Whoa! Wait. One question at a time; I can’t keep up with you. Where is he? He’s at home where I told him to stay today.”

“What? Why did you do that? How did you get to church?”

“I caught a ride with the Johnsons. Now, Dee, don’t repeat this, but Lil’ Will and Pa arrived home at sunrise from the Cabin in the Pine. They reeked of moonshine and had a little trouble walking. Other than that, they’re fine – this time. Thank God.”

Dee used both hands and held her temples. “What? Both of them drunk?”

“Yes. I’m afraid so. They’ve been drinking buddies since Lil’ Will took over as catcher for the Bears.”

“Why in the world does Lil’ Will drink?”

“I think it’s because he doubts his abilities. He’s been that way ever since his ninth grade English teacher told him he’d never amount to much. Even as important as baseball is to him, he can’t accept how good he is.”

“Never mind the drinking. Mae, did he do it?”

Willie Mae looked over her shoulders and checked behind Dena before whispering her response, though there was no one nearby. “Dee, you must not repeat a word I tell you – not even to Lil’ Will. Promise me.” Dena was nodding her head vigorously. Dena had both gloved hands over her mouth, her purse dangling at her elbow.

Willie Mae took a deep breath. “If you mean, did he throw and hit that boy, yes he did.”

“Oh, no! Why did he do such a thing!?! Did he know that boy?”

“The ‘boy’ was Big Jason, the town bully. Jason was beating another white boy.”

“What in God’s name did Lil’ Will think that had to do with him?”

Bob Rogers

“Shh-h-h. Not so loud. More than anyone knows.” Willie Mae whispered. “Yes, Lil’ Will knew him. Big Jason caught Lil’ Will on the south road last year and beat him.”

Dena held her head again. “Oh, my! I-I-I need to sit down...”

Willie Mae caught Dena’s elbow and led her to a picnic table behind the little wooden church that sat on the edge of the colored side of town.

Dena spent the afternoon starting and tearing up drafts of letters to Lil’ Will. She was less distraught now that she knew why Lil’ Will would strike Jason. Still, she saw his action as a bomb that could ruin her dreams. Carefully, she outlined her plan for Lil’ Will to meet her. Dena wanted the letter to be perfect when she delivered it at school the next day. By the light of a kerosene lamp, she finished what seemed like her hundredth draft. After she read the latest draft the third time, she signed it, “With all my love, your Dee.”

Cecilia stood in Dena’s doorway. “May I come in?”

Folding her one page letter into a tight triangle for her courier, Willie Mae, she didn’t look up. “Sure, Cee. Come in.” The triangle reminded her of the folded United States flag given to Widow Griffin when her soldier-husband was laid to rest last month. Ever since she saw the young Mrs. Griffin sitting in church on the first pew facing her husband’s coffin, Dena thought that she could someday be sitting in her place.

Cecilia put a hand on Dena’s shoulder. “President Roosevelt would be proud to have you join the WACs.”

Slipping the letter into her dress pocket and opening her history textbook, Dena still did not look up. “How cum?”

“Spies couldn’t do better than you. First you carefully tear up all your drafts. Next, you burn them in the stove. And then, to

beat all, you stir the ashes! I know the president would be so proud of you.”

Dena had not laughed for some time, but she now laughed softly with her sister. “You’re the spy. I had no idea you watched me that closely.”

Laughing quietly, Cecilia whispered. “If I were a counter-spy, I would report to Ma at headquarters that you have a secret letter in your dress pocket and that you will probably take it to school tomorrow in your bra and slip it to agent Willie Mae for delivery to who knows what enemy operative.”

“Girl, you’re a mess! I don’t think anyone has a big sister as great as mine.” Dena closed her history book, stood, and gave Cecilia a hug. “Thank you so much for watching after me.”

“Dee, you’re welcome.” Cecilia eyes were vacant. “This war has pried too many men apart from the women who love them. When separation is imposed, it is particularly painful. I don’t believe it would be less so if imposed by a parent. Could be more...”

“You must miss Herbert so much. I forget. How long has it been since he was drafted?”

“It was over a year ago when he waved good-bye from the window of a Greyhound.” Cecilia stared at the wall. “I can still see the tears in his eyes, trying not to let me see him cry. His tears made me love him more – the silly man.” Cecilia sniffed and forced a little laugh.

After a sigh, Cecilia closed the door and sat on the edge of Dena’s bed. She continued in a low conspiratorial voice. “In spite of what Ma said, I can see that you have every intention of seeing Lil’ Will. If you love him like I think you do, girl, you go for it.”

Dena had her history book open on her lap again. Her eyes moistened. She looked at Cecilia and smiled.

Bob Rogers

Dena heard Cecilia's normal voice again. "Dee, I don't know which would be harder. If Herbert was in Oakton and I could not see him..." Her voice trailed off. "I think that knowing he's in Oakton and not be able to see him would be worse than believing that he's fighting in North Africa right now. There's an ocean and an army separating us – not the wishes of a parent."

In the busy school hallway, Willie Mae dropped the letter handed to her by Dena as she passed. Mrs. Wiggins, the science teacher, saw the triangle-shaped paper hit the floor. She, of course, would recognize the classic shape students used to pass love notes written during classes. "Aha! Delivering a love note, huh? Little Miss Wallace, pick it up and bring it to me."

Dena was two steps away when she heard Mrs. Wiggins. She turned and saw her letter on the floor and Willie Mae standing petrified with her jaw agape. Dena dropped her books, shoved a girl aside, and made a desperate lunge. She snatched the letter from the floor before any of the snickering girls in the hallway could grab it and happily hand it over to Mrs. Wiggins on the opposite side of the hall. Dena returned the letter to her bra and faced Mrs. Wiggins with one hand behind her back motioning for Willie Mae to go away.

Before the astonished Mrs. Wiggins could say a word, Dena spoke. "Mrs. Wiggins, this letter is my private property. I wrote it at home and asked Willie Mae to deliver it for me to a person not enrolled in this school."

"Well, you know this love note passing is against the rules. That's what it looks like to me. So, hand it over." Mrs. Wiggins held out her hand. Students, mostly girls, stopped and gathered.

Dena felt cornered. She looked about and discovered that a friend was retrieving her books. She turned again to Mrs. Wiggins. "This letter does not break school rules. I wrote it at

home. I am sending it to a non-student, not some ninth grade boy in Willie Mae's class. Remember, I'm a senior."

"Well, Miss Miller, I won't know that any of what you say is true unless I read it. So, hand it over." Mrs. Wiggins still held out her hand.

Dena realized that, with an audience in the hallway, Mrs. Wiggins would not back down. She knew she could not let her mother hear about it. She had a thought. If she did not obey, Mrs. Wiggins' next move would be to take her to the principal or threaten to send for her mother on the elementary school wing.

"Mrs. Wiggins, let's go see the principal."

The loitering girls let go with an audible, "Uh-oh!"

The mulatto colored Mrs. Wiggins flushed at being outmaneuvered. She looked at the students eavesdropping and sent them to their classes. "Okay, little Miss Miller, you may have outsmarted yourself. Let's go." Mrs. Wiggins tossed her curls.

Dena took her books from her friend and marched in silence side by side with Mrs. Wiggins. After each had presented her case, the principal, Mr. Franklin, took a deep breath and looked from one to the other. "Okay, I think I've got it. Mrs. Wiggins, thank you very much. I'm going to detain Miss Miller." He pointed to a chair. "You may sit there and wait for me." Dena was crestfallen. She saw a triumphant grin emerge on Mrs. Wiggins' lips and her chin rise.

"Thank you, Mr. Franklin."

He did not look at her. "Not at all."

Dena sat and listened as Mr. Franklin's footsteps caused the wooden floor of their Rosenwald building to creak under his considerable weight. From the sound, he was headed down the elementary wing's corridor. Dena was more dejected. "Now, what else can go wrong!?"

Bob Rogers

Mr. Franklin returned in five minutes with a handful of papers. Surprised, Dena quickly prepared her argument against handing over her letter. But, instead of asking for her letter, Mr. Franklin went to his desk as if she did not exist. He moved a pile of papers, picked up a red marking pencil, and began grading papers from his health class. Dena was confused.

She assessed her circumstances. The letter had to get to Lil' Will in time for him to respond and let her know if he would meet her two nights hence in the cemetery. Mr. Franklin had not told her mother – he was not gone long enough. But the immediate problem remained: how to keep control of her letter.

After ten minutes, Mr. Franklin looked at his Bulova wristwatch. He wound the stem a couple of times. Without glancing up from his papers, he said, "Miss Miller, you may go to your class."

Dena's jaw dropped. She stammered, "Y-y-yes, sir." Slowly, she stood in disbelief, dropped a book, bent and retrieved it, dropped another, grabbed that one, and stumbled out of Mr. Franklin's office.

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