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Charlie's Gift

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Charlie's Gift

Quaker Hill Press

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CHAPTER 1

ONE CHARLEY ARRIVES AND ONE CHARLIE LEAVES

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The howling, destructive winds of the previous night had slowed considerably and the solid sheets of rain had slacked off to a drizzle when I finally crawled out of what was left of my rented trailer home in the gray, early morning hours of the day after. With my namesake, Hurricane Charley, bearing down on the northeastern part of Florida where I lived, I had chosen to ignore the Governor's order to evacuate. I knew I should have listened to the authorities, though, when I looked around at the nearly total destruction of Westview Acres, the manufactured housing community that had been home to about forty families, twice that many lonely seniors, and a few of us who fell somewhere in between.

Many of the homes were simply gone and those that remained were piles of rubble. Smashed furniture, broken-off palm trees, crushed cars, and bits of aluminum siding were everywhere. I wandered up and down the streets, dodging debris and watching for sharp objects that might puncture the thin rubber soles of my old deck shoes. There was only one other person out, an old woman at the

far end of Westhampton Road. I knew I should see if I could help her, but I got distracted by a desperate, low, pleading voice calling out from the rubble of a doublewide at the corner of Westhampton and Westhaven.

I pulled away palm fronds, twisted strips of aluminum siding, the remains of an expensive set of patio furniture, and a soggy recliner lying on its side before I used a length of landscaping timber to finish breaking out the glass of a sliding patio door. Crawling inside the twisted, broken wreckage of what had once been a home, I located the elderly residents in the living room. They had ridden out the storm just the way I had, huddled under a blanket on a couch, fearful that the roof would fall in on them at any moment. I got the old folks out of their smashed home and took them to the community center, which was made of brick and had ridden out the storm better than the homes.

Three hours later I had been to the remains of every home in the park, checking for survivors. Using a pad and pen from that first house and making a list as I went, I recorded the addresses when I could figure them out and noted whether or not the residents had survived or died if there was anyone in or near the house. Most of the homes had been abandoned, but I did rescue three more people and, unfortunately, found one other neighbor who had ridden out the storm only to die anyway.

By noontime the rain squalls had ended and I was in my car, picking my way down Westhampton Road toward the exit, stopping every few feet to move furniture, parts of houses, or the trunks of palm trees. Luckily, I had packed a few belongings into my car the day before in case I did decide to evacuate and, with even more luck, my car was drivable. It was pretty badly scratched up from flying debris and part of a palm tree had fallen on one rear fender, but all the lights and windows were intact and it

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ran about as good as it ever had, which wasn't saying much.

As I gingerly drove out of the park, avoiding a car that had been crushed by a big palm tree, I saw a police car picking its way through debris on the main road. I flashed my headlights as a signal and the deputy stopped long enough for me to give him the list of the dead and the survivors. I asked him about the grocery store a half mile up the road where I worked stocking shelves. He just shook his head and said I might want to think about getting another job. He told me the roof was gone and two walls were caved in. The deputy pulled into the park to check on the survivors while I sat there figuring out where to go and what to do.

A few strands of sunlight peeked through the cloud cover as I sat there thinking about the immediate future. I was certainly homeless, probably had no place to go to work, and I only had a few hundred dollars in the bank. I was fifty-five years old, retired from the Air Force, divorced from two wives, estranged from three of my four kids and I hadn't had any contact with my family since 1967.

Although it seemed completely illogical, I headed north, away from the destruction of Florida toward the desperately poor, red-dirt farm where I had grown up in South Carolina. I was about as low as I could get, but I thought there might be a chance to redeem myself among the fields of corn and hay and soybeans I had walked as a child. My family had always been poor, so surely they must still be farming that run-down bit of land no one else wanted.

CHAPTER 2

LOOKING FOR A LOST FARM

I approached Spartanburg in the northwestern part of South Carolina with some trepidation a couple of days later. I had left in November of 1967 without telling anyone where I was going and I had never made any contact with my family in all the intervening years.

I just walked off that struggling farm early one morning, hitched a ride into town on a passing truck, and showed up at the Air Force recruiting office in the big Post Office on Magnolia Street. I had taken my birth certificate and high school diploma from the envelope holding all the important papers that Mama always kept in the old Bible in the parlor. I was eighteen so I knew I could enlist without Mama or Daddy's permission.

I guess it had been a slow month because the recruiter was glad to see me. The day that started with me milking three cows in a ramshackle barn ended as I got off a Greyhound bus in Columbia and waited for a military bus that would take me to the Armed Forces Induction Center at Fort Jackson.

The next thirty-seven years passed quickly as I grew, as I failed, as I picked up the pieces, and as I failed again. I left home because I hated poverty and I was

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continually unhappy when I had money as the years went by. Two divorces and alcoholism beat me down and left me with nothing—even my retirement pay disappeared for child support. I slowly morphed back into poverty, but this time the poverty was mixed with service to others and a growing realization that I actually enjoyed living a simpler life.

The irony of my travels from poverty to middle class and back to poverty had overwhelmed me as I drove from Florida to South Carolina, taking my time, stopping where and when I wanted. The closer I got to Spartanburg as I drove along I-26, though, the more worried I became about the reception I would get. I had been gone thirty-seven years. I had no idea if my brothers and sisters—all younger than me—were still there. I suspected Mama and Daddy were both dead, probably long since worn out from working that hardscrabble farm.

The sun was starting to sink in the west as I took the Reidville Road exit and got my first shock. I had last taken that exit one wet October day in 1967 when I was driving Daddy's old truck after making a delivery of soybeans to a dealer south of town. In 1967 the interstate had been new and the exit had led to a road feeding into the traffic circle at Reidville and Blackstock, but there was no traffic circle now. A big intersection, traffic lights, fast food places, gas stations, and banks covered the area of the old traffic circle and I had to wait behind a line of traffic to turn left and cross over the interstate.

My second shock came as I drove west of I-26 along Reidville and realized nothing was the same. Land that had been pine forests and red-dirt farms that were somewhat better than ours had been replaced with shopping centers, churches, banks, more fast food places, and even a BMW dealer. Further west, Reidville still went up and down hills but it no longer passed by a couple of

dozen farms separated by pine forests. Even most of the kudzu had given way to progress as housing development followed housing development on both sides of the road. One or two farms survived, but I could tell their fate was sealed by the encroaching development.

I slowed down when I approached the intersection with Route 417, thinking the large, prosperous farm where I sometimes worked as a day laborer must still be on the left side of Reidville. The big houses and the signs proclaiming a fancy neighborhood dispelled that thought and I slowed more as I passed Route 417, incurring the ire of a trucker using his air horn about five feet behind my rear bumper before he whipped out and passed me, even though there was a double yellow line. I knew our road had always been the second dirt road past Route 417, but there wasn't even a first dirt road. When I had gone to the point where I figured our road had been, I found only an alien landscape.

I should have seen the old barbed wire and cedar fence posts of the Rufus Wilson and Willie Wilson farms straddling either side of the long dirt road leading back to our farm. Instead, I saw a heavily landscaped, banked entrance with a lush green lawn leading to large brick and wood signs proclaiming my arrival at Orchard Estates. I turned left onto the beautifully paved road, marveling at the large homes on either side. More lush green lawns sloped up to houses made of brick and stone with a lot of wood trim. A few big trees were scattered around, but most of the trees looked to have been planted in the last ten years or so.

I pulled my car over to a curb made of granite blocks and got out to walk around for a few minutes. The houses were huge; each seemed to have at least four and maybe five bedrooms. Three-car garages appeared to be standard. I could see the corners of sunrooms attached to

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the back of each house. All of the houses were well maintained and each lawn was immaculate. A few kids played in back yards and a couple of cars went by with drivers who gave me more than a passing glance.

I realized my scruffy shorts and old, faded polo shirt, considered normal in Florida, were out of place in this neighborhood. I figured my beat-up, faded, long-past-its-prime 1976 Ford Granada was getting a few stares, too. In this neighborhood, even the teenagers were driving new cars.

I guessed I was in for a few questions when a tall, gray-haired African-American man driving a golf cart pulled up next to me as I was standing at the first intersection past the entrance gates. He was well dressed, slim, and had the look of authority about him. He reminded me a lot of the officers I had known in the Air Force. I never had a lot of use for officers and I was ready to dismiss this guy until he spoke.

"Good evening. I'm Robert Wilson, but most people call me Bob. I'm a volunteer with the community patrol for Orchard Estates and I'm also the manager of the neighborhood. You look lost. May I help you find someone?"

I must have looked like a common drunk or spaced-out drug addict as I stood there looking from the man to the houses to the golf cart before staring back at his face with what I was sure was a questioning look.

"Sir, is there something I can do for you?" he asked with a bit more directness in his voice. I thought I saw his hand move almost imperceptibly toward the two-way radio on the seat beside him before the fog in my brain finally cleared.

"I'm sorry, I'm just a little lost. I used to live on a farm near here and you look just like Rufus Wilson. He

was the father of a boy named Bobby I used to play with on the farm just up the road from us.”

The man looked me over closely, putting his face near mine and staring directly into my eyes for a minute.

“Charlie Whitlock? You can’t be Charlie Whitlock. He left here more than thirty-five years ago and has never been heard from since.”

“I’m Charlie Whitlock. You look so much like Rufus Wilson that you must be the Bobby Wilson who beat me up every Saturday whether I needed it or not. Bobby, you look great. Life must have been good to you.”

“Life has been very good to me, Charlie. And, by the way, I beat you up every Saturday because your father asked me to keep you in line. Your father never believed in segregation and he thought you were getting a little too strong in your feelings. He could tell integration was coming as the Fifties ended and he figured you needed to know that you couldn’t lord things over a black man. I told him it wasn’t fair what with my being three years older and five inches taller than you, but he said you made up the differences by being scrappy. He was right, too. I had to work pretty hard to beat you up most weeks.”

“Daddy told me that when you went off to college. He said you would be too busy with your studies to beat me up anymore, but I should remember how you proved to me every week that I was no better just because I was white.” I stopped and looked at Bobby again. “I can’t get over how much you remind me of your father. You look just like Rufus, except you’re not wearing overalls.”

Bobby paused slightly before saying, “You look good, too, Charlie.”

“Thanks for saying it, but I do not look good. I’ve got a car that barely runs, the clothes I’m wearing are almost the best I own, and my home and the place I worked were both destroyed by Hurricane Charley. I’ve

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come back to Spartanburg to look for the family because I don't have anywhere else to go. I thought I knew right where the farm was, but I seem to be lost in more ways than one."

"Get in your car and follow me, old friend. We'll go to my house and I'll fill you in on the last three and half decades. I'm sure you'll find a surprise or two in what I have to tell you."

CHAPTER 3

FROM A SHACK TO A MANSION

Surprise was the word of the day for the next two hours. The first was when I drove my car into a long driveway leading to one of those massive houses. Bobby's home was as big, if not bigger, than most of the others I had seen. It stood on a slight rise on the right side of Cornwall Lane. The front yard was dominated by sweeping, curved gardens raised above the level of the lush green lawn and bordered with the same granite blocks used for the curbs there in Orchard Estates. The lawn was broken only by a few dogwood trees, obviously kept in check by careful pruning. I could see the tops of some large trees in the backyard and more of the granite-bordered gardens disappearing out of view along the side yards.

Bobby must have had a transmitter on the golf cart because one of the doors on the side-facing garage magically opened as he turned and headed toward it, waving me to a paved area off the side of the driveway. I was glad the driveway and parking area were covered with asphalt instead of cement. Maybe the oil that seemed to constantly leak out of the old engine would just mix with the black of the asphalt and not be too obvious.

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A tall, attractive woman walked toward the driveway from the backyard, looking quizzically at the rattle trap car and the equally scruffy man just shutting the door, an action that can't be done quietly since the driver's door and front fender don't line up too well. Opening or closing the door involves the sound of tortured metal and tends to draw stares in parking lots. The woman and Bobby and I met in the middle of the driveway as Bobby started introductions.

"Donna, you won't believe who I found on the street."

The woman's face registered no surprise that her husband had found me on the street since I looked like I belonged on the street and she looked like she thought I ought to return there as soon as possible. Bobby, seeing the look on his wife's face and realizing it for what it was, decided to get down to business.

"Donna, don't you recognize Charlie Whitlock, Josh and Alma's oldest son? Charlie, I bet you don't remember Donna. She was that little girl the Willie Wilson family took in and raised as their own. Donna used to tag along after us when we went off exploring in the woods on Sunday afternoons."

Donna's expression softened immediately and she put out her hand before thinking better of it and then gave me a hug instead.

"Charlie Whitlock. Most people thought you were dead since no one has ever heard from you. Bobby, have you told him? Has he been over there yet?"

"Slow down. I haven't told him anything. I literally just found him on the street a few minutes ago. Charlie's looking for the old farm, but I thought I'd better bring him here first. He looks like he could use a good meal and based on the aromas coming from the backyard, I'd say we're eating well tonight."

“Wait a minute, wait a minute. You two are confusing me. You were Donna Wilson who lived on the Willie Wilson farm across the road from the Rufus Wilson farm? Rufus and Willie were brothers. Doesn’t that make you Bobby’s cousin? And what did you mean when you asked Bobby if he had told me yet? What is Bobby supposed to tell me?”

Donna laughed and took my arm as she led me toward the backyard and the aroma that could only come from food grilling on an open fire. “I was raised as Donna Wilson, but I was an orphan girl the Wilson family took in. My daddy and Willie Wilson had been best friends. When my parents died, Willie just took me in and raised me as his own daughter. I thought you knew that all those years ago.”

Still looking perplexed, I stumbled over my response. “No, I didn’t know that or at least I don’t remember you were an orphan. But I’m still confused about so much. Rufus and Willie Wilson were just as poor as my family. They worked their farms as hard as my Daddy did, but no one made any money. I don’t mean to be out of line, but you two must be millionaires to live in a neighborhood like this. How did you go from being the kids of poor red-dirt farmers to living like this? And, where are the farms? Did I turn off Reidville Road too soon?”

It was Bobby’s turn to laugh as he slapped me on the back and led me to one of the most comfortable looking patio chairs I had ever seen. Donna reached into an outdoor refrigerator built under a counter on the patio and offered me a beer, but I waved her off and asked for a club soda or mineral water if she had one. Donna handed me a small tray of munchies and headed toward the kitchen door, saying she would be right back.

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Bobby didn't say much as he tossed three of the thickest steaks I had ever seen on a charcoal grill set into a brick structure that also housed a gas grill.

"These should be ready in about ten minutes unless you want yours well done."

"Medium is fine for me, but are you sure you're going to have enough? You weren't expecting me, so maybe you don't have an extra steak."

Donna had returned by that time, handing me a beautiful crystal glass filled with tiny ice cubes and almost spilling over with some kind of mineral water. "Don't worry about us having enough steaks. Bobby's a big eater and I usually cook two for him. He'll just have to get by with one tonight."

"Thanks for the mineral water. I've got a little problem with alcohol. Well, actually, I had a big problem with alcohol, but I haven't had a drink in more than ten years and I don't even want one anymore."

"I figured that might be it when you refused the beer. I don't like generalities, but most military men I've met liked beer," Bobby said as he took another look at the steaks, turning them forty-five degrees to get a perfect cross-hatch burned into the surface.

"I appreciate the chance to have dinner with you. I'm sure it will beat a hamburger at Hardee's, although I was also thinking of driving back toward town to see if the Beacon is still around. I've got a lot of questions and I hope you've got some answers."

Donna and Bobby looked at each other before either of them answered, communicating with that silent thought process couples develop after being married for a long time. That was something I never developed with either of my wives.

Bobby looked at his feet for a long moment before finally responding. "We've got answers for you, Charlie,

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and I can imagine what questions you want to ask. Let's eat first, though. Your questions have waited for more than thirty-five years. I guess they can wait another hour or so."

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