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Chapter Fifteen

Mrs. McBee watched as Buster, Junior with the help of Mr. Hanes erected the sign on the highway. It was a large billboard-type construction with block letters painted in green: "FLEMMING'S NURSERY". There had already been an advertisement in the newspaper proclaiming an "Open House: All Flower-Lovers Welcomed."

EVEN SMALL CAPS

11'13
X24
Bark.

1½ px

Three days prior Mrs. Flemming had quit her job: "Now since we got our own thang over there they gimme enough work to keep ten of me going."

Mrs. McBee had received the news with a thud, but she played the innocent: "What is that, Mrs. Flemming?" she asked, though the Lord only knew how anybody could miss the greenhouse. It was almost twice as large as Mrs. McBee's with thermostatically controlled heaters, ventilators, sprayers and four well-lighted bench corners. From her window Mrs. McBee had watched the nailing of each nail, the placing of the aluminum sides. For one whole day she had sat in a chair grimly watching as the glass panes were put in.

11|13

"You aint seen that thang we got over there?" Mrs. Flemming asked in astonishment. "Lordy, it's bigger'n your house and mine put together. You aint seen it?"

"I've been busy this summer," said Mrs. McBee. "There's only one of me."

Mrs. Flemming began rubbing her fingers gently over her mouth, her eyes wide as if some new idea, never discovered before, had been born in her brain. "I guess there aint nobody else, is there?" Her pale fat face was almost serene as she gazed at Mrs. McBee as if for the first time.

"No, but I've gotten along. Work never hurt anybody."

18 pts Mrs. Flemming's eyes began to dart. "And all that pain and suffering you go through just to born them and some of em acts just like you aint even kin."

It was John Bedford she was referring to, Mrs. McBee knew, and she started to sink down on the insecticide crate, agree with her, pour out her troubles. Ever since their words in his room that day they had scarcely spoken. It was like living in the house with an enraged mute.

"Our interests are different here," was all she said to Mrs. Flemming.

"Well, I might can give you a hand ever now and then. I aint never been too busy to lend a hand when a body's in need."

"That's good of you, Mrs. Flemming. But I can easily find another helper."

Mrs. Flemming smiled almost sweetly. "Well, you lemme know now, here."

18 pts That afternoon Mrs. McBee watched her go, watched her until she had gone over the stile for the last time. And when she was out of sight Mrs. McBee collapsed on the insecticide crate. She felt as if some great sound had departed her life, leaving only

the silence of her own frantic mind. ~~Ten~~ Eleven years, she was thinking. ~~Ten~~ Eleven years of singing and yelling and telling of tales. She would miss the woman, not only for the work, but, she realized now, just for the sound. She pictured Mrs. Flemming returning home, the house warm with the noise of babies and daughters and in-laws and friends. All she, Mrs. McBee, had was the quietness of this small building and its eternal spring.

She sat for a long while, her eyes fixed on the chrysanthemum flats. So this is the way it is, she thought. She had never known defeat before, believed it an impossible state. But here it was, and it was a silent thing. Like death one received it alone. No cheers. No toasts. No last words.

Well, I won't have you, she said to herself. I'm not beaten yet. Not yet. There's always been a way. She stood up and hugging her arms to herself began walking up and down the aisles of the tables. She began making lists. And with each list there was a face and after each face a telephone number.

When she had thought it through it was five o'clock. She left the greenhouse, walked the distance to the house, not once glancing in the direction of the Flemmings'.

Inside the kitchen she picked up the phone and dialed a number.

On the other end someone picked up the telephone but all Mrs. McBee could hear was loud music from a radio and a soft breathing. It was as if the faint breaths were in front of her, breathing straight into her face. She held out the mouthpiece and looked at it.

"Hello there," she said impatiently. "You there."

Only the breathing responded.

"Who's there, please? Hello."

Silence.

"Yoo hoo. What is your name?"

"Li'l Velvet," at last came a child's timid voice.

It was Willie's five-year-old granddaughter.

"I want to speak to Willie, ~~dear~~. Will you get her for me?"

The earpiece crashed down on something and in the distance Mrs. McBee could hear the child's running feet and then the excited cries: "Big Mamma! Big Mamma!"

"I done told you to quit messin with the telephone," came Willie's voice. "You aint got no bidness with no telephone." Then came a gruff: "Hey-llo."

"Willie, this is Mrs. McBee."

"Mizz McBee? Lawd, is that yew?" yew?"

"Willie, I need your help."

11/13 "Do?"

"I've had to discharge Mrs. Flemming."

"Naw?" came Willie's astonished voice. "That woman been up to something no count?"

"It just didn't work out," was all Mrs. McBee said. "But that's over the hill. I'm going to need someone here to help out for a while."

"Yes'm."

"I want you to be my assistant, Willie. It would be an advancement for you."

Silence.

"You like to garden, don't you?"

"Lawd, Mizz McBee, I aint set out nothin now on to three or four year. ~~Just~~ a tomato vine or ~~tew~~. Can't get nobody to break ground. Place just fulla weeds back here."

"The salary would be steady, of course."

"That's a good thing -- steady."

"And there would be extras, of course."

"Extras," she repeated.

"I need someone in the greenhouse and someone to help in the kitchen."

A long pause, and Mrs. McBee said: "Willie? Are you there?"

11|13 "Yes'm, I'm here. I just wondering. What you spose them hours'd be?"

"All day -- in the fall and spring."

"Well, just to tell you the truth I don't know nothin 'bout no greenhouse now. Lawd knows I doesn't."

"You can learn. We're never too old to learn, are we?"

"That's right. All your mouth is for is to ask."

"Then, that's settled, is it? You can come?"

"I has to see the rest of my peoples. I has four house I go to reglar."

"Well, you see them and be here on Monday."

"I see what they says."

"Now I'm counting on you, Willie. You wouldn't let me down?"

"I try not to. Good as you been."

"Then I'll see you Monday."

"You know old Willie can't do no heavy work since I got down in the back."

"We'll just help each other, won't we? Two old folks together."

Willie giggled. "Yes'm."

"Good-bye then, Willie. I'll see you Monday."

"I try to be there."

Mrs. McBee replaced the receiver. Whether she would come or not was anybody's guess. And if she did she wouldn't be any help, any real help for months. But she had been through that before. First there had been Della, then that Mrs. Hart and all those other women she had trained and fired all in one season. Starting again was nothing new in her life.

Nor were good-byes. She wished she had a dollar for every good-bye she had said in her life. Sometimes it seemed her whole life had been one long good-bye. But thank God for good colored people. She would a hundred times rather have Willie working with her than Mrs. Flemming. Willie was cheerful and sweet and there wouldn't be any more complaining or insulting remarks. Yes, the decision had been a good one.

The talk with Willie gave her renewed vigor for the task ahead. That night after dinner she tore through the telephone book underlining names and muttering to herself. John Bedford was sitting in the wing chair sulking behind the newspaper, and every time she muttered a number he rattled the paper.

Just go on and rattle, she said to herself. Somebody's got to do something around here. But he was distracting sitting there. For the first time in her life she wished he would go off on one of his mysterious trips. He had taken to staying close to the house in recent days. She didn't know what had brought that on. It was almost as if he were spying on her, as if she could see the word "starvation" written in his eyes like a white fear.

Once she had broken their silence: "Just where is your friend Dr. Myer and his colored friend these days?" she had asked out of exasperation with his sitting.

"In New York. His thesis is going to be published, but that wouldn't interest you, I'm sure."

No, it wouldn't. And she said so.

She decided to call Margaret Ewing first. If there was anyone who could get out the word it was Margaret Ewing.

"I'm going to call Margaret Ewing," she murmured, and John Bedford rattled the newspaper.

Mrs. McBee sat drumming her fingers on the table as she listened to the even ringing on the other end.

If Margaret Ewing wasn't in....

"Miz Ewing's rez-dence."

"Is Mrs. Ewing there, please? Is she at dinner?"

11|13

"No'm, she aint at dinner."

Mrs. McBee sighed. "Then would you ask her to come to the telephone, please. This is Mrs. McBee speaking."

"Oooo-kay."

Sullen, thought Mrs. McBee. They were all getting sullen. She turned to John Bedford. "I'm calling Margaret Ewing," she said and caught him eyeing her suspiciously over the newspaper. Don't just sit there, she thought. Do something. She turned back to the phone.

"Hel-lo," came the almost singing voice of Margaret Ewing. It was a voice that celebrated life, celebrated its ease, one that wanted to assure cheerful friendship even if the caller might be unknown. Life had been good to her, she would return its gift in melodious charm.

"This is Letitia, Margaret," said Mrs. McBee matter-of-factly.

"Why Letitia. How nice to hear your voice."

"Yes, well. I want to tell you, Margaret, I

have some very unique specimens of chrysanthemums this year."

"Ohhh, I know you do. You always have such lovely things."

11/13

"It's a miracle I have anything at all this year," said Mrs. McBee abruptly. "It's been just one thing after another."

1½ px "Why, Letitia dear, what is the matter?"

"Neighbors. Those people next door. They're no good, you know. They've caused me nothing but trouble." She cleared her throat. "You know there's only one of me and five of them."

"Why -- 1 M Letitia 2 M --"

"They've told lies. I just can't tell you what all they've said, unspeakable things. I just want my good friends to know they're not true. If you've heard anything, Margaret, I just wish you would set people straight. People are willing to believe anything, you know."

"You do sound upset, Letitia."

"Yes, well, I am. I had to let that Mrs. Flemming go. Dreadful woman. She's worked for me for ~~ten~~ eleven years. The things those people have said about me -- 1 M and John

Bedford -- you just wouldn't believe."

"Leave me out of this," mumbled John Bedford from the wing chair.

Mrs. McBee moved her shoulders impatiently.

11/13 "Why, Letitia, I'm so sorry, dear. You don't need any extra worries."

"I'll get along. I always have."

"I'd love some chrysanthemums. I'll try to get out there tomorrow."

"Very well, Margaret. And again if you've heard any ugly rumors please tell our friends they aren't so."

"I'll do that. Now, Letitia, you take care of yourself."

"Good-bye, Margaret."

She hung up and turned abruptly to John Bedford. "She's heard," she said, biting her words.

"Heard what?"

"Mrs. Flemming has already been on the phone to her, I know, trying to flatter her, telling her about <u>their</u> things. That's all right. Margaret's coming <u>here</u> tomorrow. Margaret Ewing is loyal."

She took up the phone book and began turning the pages. If it took one hundred calls she would make

them. If it took all night and all tomorrow and all week she would call everybody she could think of. She didn't have the money to advertise in any newspaper. Any advertisement would have to come from her own mouth.

She was talking to Lucille Templeton when the door bell rang. She looked at her watch. Nine-thirty. There was no reason for anybody to be coming at this hour. John Bedford had long since gone up to his room. But he wouldn't have gone to the door anyway. John Bedford never even answered the telephone when it rang.

"Excuse me, Lucille, there's someone at the door. I'll have to hang up now." She banged the receiver down. And just when I was getting to the good part, too, she fumed to herself.

She strode to the door and started to open it. But she paused for a moment, recalling that family up north somewhere who had been tied up and shot.

"Yes?" she called irritably.

"It's us." The voice was unmistakably that of Mrs. Flemming.

The nerve, thought Mrs. McBee, and she was

deliberately looking at her watch when she snatched open the door.

"We don't kire what time it is," came Mrs. Flemming's 11/13 voice out of the blackness of the night, and then they were all in the hall: Mrs. Flemming, T. J. Flemming and Bertha Mae.

"What is the matter with you?" asked Mrs. McBee, addressing her remarks to Mrs. Flemming's fiery-red face. If the woman had heard anything about her phone calls it didn't matter one whit; she had a thing or two to say herself.

Vaguely she took in T. J. Flemming. She noted he didn't bother to remove his hat and he had the look of one who had been drafted into battle, ~~as if his stern encounter were forced there~~.

Mrs. McBee glanced at her watch again to suggest the lateness of the hour.

"We come here to tawk!" said Mrs. Flemming. "Tell it, T. J. Go on. Tell it."

Mrs. McBee took hold of the newel post at the stairway. If it was about the phone calls she was prepared. Or about the Black Muslims.

"Go on," said Mrs. Flemming, staring fiercely at her husband.

Mr. Flemming pursed his lips and his brown eyes looked straight at Mrs. McBee. They were the eyes of a man sure of where he stood, a superior about to lecture an underling.

"John Bedford done buggered up Bertha Mae here," he said, and the corners of his mouth turned downward in ~~vicious~~ disgust.

Mrs. McBee looked from him to Bertha Mae who instantly broke into a loud high sob, standing there, not moving, her face scarlet and her fists clenched.

"What are you talking about?" asked Mrs. McBee, rising to a height.

"That son of your'n buggered up Bertha Mae," shouted Mrs. Flemming. "And we're here to tell you we aint gone stand for it." She flashed her eyes at the girl. "Hush up thet er, Bertha Mae!"

The girl let out another sob, and Mr. Flemming went over to her. "Aint no sense in makin no fuss now, girl," he said. Bertha Mae threw her arms about Mr. Flemming and began to whimper.

"See what he done done," said Mr. Flemming to Mrs. McBee, his eyes flashing.

"You git that boy down here," demanded Mrs. Flemming.

Mrs. McBee let go of the newel post and folded her hands in front of her. "Mrs. Flemming, I suggest you lower your voice when you are speaking to me. If that is impossible, I suggest you leave, all of you."

"Don't you put on no airs with me," said Mrs. Flemming. "This here's my baby and she's been ruint by that no-good Communist nigger-loving son of your'n." Her fox's eyes narrowed. "I knowed he wasn't up to no good, settin round doin nothing, eyein my ~~girls~~ galls alla time."

Bertha Mae let out another sob.

"I do not believe it," managed Mrs. McBee. Something was roaring in her head and there was a darkness in front of her. She saw the Flemmings: Bertha Mae, her father, Mrs. Flemming, but there was the darkness and the roaring.

"You go tawk to that doctor if you don't believe it," shouted Mrs. Flemming. "Just go on and tawk to him. He'll tell you that aint no potato inside that ~~girl~~ gall. He'll tell you."

Mrs. McBee first sensed him. Then out of the corner of her eye she saw him. She turned. John Bedford was standing half way down the stairs. He

had a coat on over his wrinkled shirt, and his eyes looked sorrowfully down on the group.

11|13 "What is all this?" he asked, standing tall on the stairway.

The three Flemmings gazed in silence. It was as if some great presence had descended from on high.

"I think you need to explain yourself, John Bedford," said Mrs. McBee quietly, and she took hold of the newel post again. An uncontrollable trembling had taken hold of her body and she was having difficulty swallowing.

Mrs. Flemming sniffed the air and jerked her head around, one eye cocked like a rooster's. "~~Trying to stand there innocent.~~"

1½ px | John Bedford ignored the woman and rested his gaze on Mr. Flemming. "What's the trouble, T. J.?"

"Trouble?" shouted Mrs. Flemming. "Lard, Jesus, trouble?"

John Bedford came down the stairs. "Is there some trouble, old man?"

"Yes sir," said Mr. Flemming. "Thar is. Bertha Mae here done got herself mussed up."

"By you!" shouted Mrs. Flemming. "And she's just

a child; she aint never knowed nothin bout no nature."

John Bedford regarded the woman as if she might be some curious bird. Then with his eyes half-closed he folded his arms in front of him. "You, Mrs. Flemming," he drawled, "are a grotesque woman." He did not take his eyes from her.

Mrs. Flemming gasped. "You heared it, T. J.! You heared him. Hit him! Go on. Hit him, T. J."

Mr. Flemming frowned, stood taller. "You oughtta not said thet er. Naw sir, you oughtta not said thet er." His knuckles were white as he jumped back, his bony fists in front of him.

Mrs. McBee let go of the newel post. "Now, now," she said. "Let's go in the other room and quietly talk out this nonsense."

"It aint no non-sense to me," shouted Mrs. Flemming.

Mrs. McBee led the way into the living room. Somehow with the presence of John Bedford she seemed to have got more control of herself.

"You sit there, Bertha Mae," she said, indicating the wing chair. She turned to the Flemmings. "Be seated, please."

Mrs. Flemming swept by John Bedford muttering to herself.

"Be seated, John Bedford," Mrs. McBee said.

John Bedford sat slumped over on the piano bench, and the Flemmings sat side by side on the settee like two breathing furnaces.

Mrs. McBee stood before the mantle, a white handkerchief wadded in her right fist. "Now," she said, "there must be some explanation for all this."

Bertha Mae put her hands slat-like over her face and began to whimper again.

Mrs. McBee ignored her. "Am I to understand you are accusing my son?" she asked, addressing her remark to Mrs. Flemming.

"We aint accusing. We're here to tell it," said Mrs. Flemming.

Mrs. McBee turned slowly to John Bedford. "John Bedford?"

"And how do you propose to prove anything?" John Bedford asked Mrs. Flemming.

"Prove it? There aint nothin to prove. Look ayonder at that child. You done taken advantage of nothin but a child."

John Bedford shook his head.

"Yes, you did, too," sobbed Bertha Mae.

John Bedford smiled to himself and then looking downward with one eyebrow raised he said: "If so, then half the male population of the county must have joined me."

Mrs. Flemming shot up from the ~~sofa~~ settee. "Thet 'er's a lie! Bertha Mae aint never knowed no nature before. And you aint gone git away with nothin neither."

"Now just be calm, Mrs. Flemming," said Mrs. McBee. "We can't get anything settled if we lose our senses, can we?"

Mrs. Flemming jutted her face forward. "I don't kire 'bout no senses. Aint nobody gone set there callin my girl no ho."

Mrs. McBee placed her hand on the mantle. The trembling had taken hold of her once more. "I just think sober discussions are more profitable," she said and she turned from them, trying to gather her breath.

Mrs. Flemming flopped back down and Mr. Flemming moved to one side. "What I think is," he said, and he looked straight forward. "Look to me like you just gone have to mah'y Bertha Mae, John Beford."

Mrs. McBee let out a little cry.

Mrs. Flemming began nodding her head, gazing not at John Bedford but at Mrs. McBee.

John Bedford bat not an eye. "I wouldn't marry that daughter of yours if hell froze over."

Even Mrs. McBee stared at him. He looked mammoth as he sat on the piano bench, like a large ageing impenetrable mountain.

Mrs. Flemming shot up from the ~~sofa~~ settee again. "Come on, T. J. We gone git the po-lice. Come on, Bertha Mae. We gone git the law." She turned to Mrs. McBee and shook her finger. "That boy of your'n gone be where he oughtta be. In jail!"

Mrs. McBee started to say something.

"Just let them go," drawled John Bedford. "The house needs airing anyway."

"You gone think somethin's gone need airing sure nuff after you set rottin in jail," shouted Mrs. Flemming. "Everbody knows about you nohow, runnin with niggers and pickin on minors. Come on, T. J. We gone call the sheriff. Right now!"

She gave one last crimson glance at Mrs. McBee and led the way out of the house. John Bedford followed and Mrs. McBee could hear him shutting the kitchen door.

She put her hand to her forehead and then collapsed

in the wing chair, her hands dangling over the arms of the chair. A hairpin fell to her lap and she sat staring at it, her mouth hanging loose.

11/13 John Bedford came back in the room chuckling to himself. "For one whole year," he said, not glancing at his mother, "One solid year I've been waiting to tell that buzzard where to go." He began pacing up and down the room. "And now I've done it." He put both hands to the top of his head, then stretched out his arms. "My god, I told them all right." He suddenly stopped in his tracks, turned to Mrs. McBee. "You don't think they would do anything so foolish as to call that sheriff, do you?" He dampened his lips.

Mrs. McBee just looked at him. She could say nothing. The corners of her lips began trembling. She got up from the chair, walked the distance through the hall, climbed the stairway and once in her room looked timidly about. Then, as if there were no other way, she fell across the bed sobbing.

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