

Prologue

THE GHOUL ARRIVES

Greenston, South Carolina, 1934

Big Will Anderson rarely attended funeral services, preferring to stay outside in the cemetery with the gravediggers. Towering over six and a half feet, with a muscle-bound frame and a chest as large and taut as a quarter cask, he could have dug the hole himself with a half dozen heaves of dirt. But he left that chore to the other men, and instead scooped up handfuls of the South Carolina, late-summer soil and dropped them next to where the preacher would stand. The mica-laden dirt sparkled in his palms. *Just don't seem right that ya feel so good and ya look so pretty today.*

Just before noon, the funeral cortege emerged from the church and made its way to the adjacent boneyard. Big Will fixed his gaze on Mrs. Thornton who, supported on each side by her brother and sister, walked behind the small casket that contained her son's corpse. When it started to drizzle, she lifted her chin, letting the falling droplets mingle with her tears, then pulled her veil down and cast her eyes at the ground.

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The mourners surrounded her and exclaimed. By the time the worshippers assembled at the gravesite for the final blessing, the sun had returned. Big Will retreated to the back and interlaced his oversize fingers in prayer. After the reverend spoke his last words, Big Will watched members of the congregation stoop, one by one, pick up bits of the earth he had placed there, and toss them on top of the coffin to pay their final respects.

John, Big Will's father, approached him as soon as all had finished the ritual.

"C'mon, now. Get yo'self somethin' to eat with the others."

"My innards doin' flip-flops right now, Pa. Don't feel like goin' to the repast."

"Since when ain't ya had a hunger, Son?"

Big Will hung his head so far down that it reached the top of his father's.

"Ya know why," he whispered in his ear. "I don't think I can do this."

John took his son by the shoulders and made him stand up tall.

"Ya gotta. All of Sunset's been in the covenant since Samuel Miller's daddy started this thing. You done turned eighteen, so it's yo' time now."

Big Will's broad shoulders caved in around him and his shoes seemed to sink into the soil.

"I gotta take me a walk."

"Go on. But get back here in time. Samuel and the others'll be waitin' for ya when the sun sets."

"Yessuh."

Big Will turned on his heel and trudged to the nearest bald cypress grove. Those trees were just about the only living things

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that surpassed him in height, strength, and weight, and he would seek them out whenever he needed solace and protection. He found the largest one and hugged its trunk for longer than usual. He then turned around, leaned his massive back against it, and tilted his face upward, savoring the sunshine as it danced over his eyelids and spread across his face.

“Ah,” he sighed and breathed in and out . . . slow, deep breaths, “won’t ya just let me bury myself inside ya?” he pleaded. His tears fell quietly at first but then grew into a weeping and wailing so deafening that the woods grew still, as if all its critters had stopped moving in deference to him. The breezes even died down and the leaves ceased their fluttering.

When he’d wrung the last tear from his body, Big Will gathered his wits about him and pondered his fate. He had become the newest member of the vigilante group that patrolled Sunset when he turned eighteen last month. The whole community knew whenever the composition of the posse changed: when a new man was inducted, the longest serving one was released from duty. Always twelve in number they were, plus Samuel as their self-appointed sheriff. They were held in high regard since they kept the peace in Sunset. If some small-time thug acted up, they would set him straight with a good licking. Repeated stealing would get a hand broken, and rape, attempted or otherwise, got a thorough beating below the belt. Big Will shuddered when he thought of how they dealt with murder.

Women would smile at members of the posse with admiration, and the men would tip their hats or step aside to let them pass unencumbered. Big Will cared nothing for the respect or honor that came with this service because of the violence it

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required. Unless a man was too small or sickly, he had to serve, and Big Will couldn't lay claim to either one or the other.

He finally headed back to the church house and ducked behind the building, spying his father with Samuel and two members of his posse assembled along one side of the open grave. The gravediggers, poised to fill the hole, stood motionless opposite them. *Maybe they gonna just let that boy rest*, he thought.

"We'll take care of this," Samuel declared. "Y'all skedaddle. But leave yo' shovels." Once the gravediggers disappeared into the falling night, Samuel ordered his men to haul up the coffin.

Big Will had been there the evening that Maurice Jones, all liquored up and driving like the devil, swerved onto the sidewalk and took the life of Timmie Thornton. He, Mrs. Thornton, and Timmie had been sauntering to Wednesday evening church service. On such a steamy night, they didn't care if they were late. *If only I'd stopped that boy from walkin' next to the road but the chile wouldn't pay me no mind. Wanted to be a gentleman and protect his mama just like his daddy used to.*

One of the men opened the coffin and lifted the remains. The group examined the corpse.

"They fixed him up real nice over at Ol' Man Jeter's parlor," John said.

"Where's yo' son?" Samuel asked.

Big Will stepped forward. "I'm here, suh."

"Y'all take Timmie to the car," John said. "Big Will'll put the coffin back and we'll fill this hole up straight away. Join ya at yo' place in no time."

"Awright but don't dawdle," Samuel instructed them. "Mrs. Thornton already gave us the go-ahead. Said his spirit's gone,

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so she don't care what we do with the rest of him. We all want this over and done with."

Two of Samuel's men carried the body to the truck and then all three of them left.

Big Will slid into the hollow, dragged the empty coffin down, and then climbed out.

"Six years a long time, Papa."

"That's the time ya gotta serve. They took it from the Good Book. Six stands for man's weakness and the power of Satan. Every man's been pinched by both."

"But what if I gotta take him into the woods my first time pullin' the straw?"

"Ya won't have to pull the next time."

"But the time after that?"

John nodded.

They finished packing the dirt down and John took his son by the arm and steered him toward Samuel's house.

When the shuttered house was within sight, John dropped his hand and stood still. "Gotta leave ya here, Son."

"Can't ya wait outside for me? Find out if I gotta..."

"Ya know the rules. I ain't part of this now. Can't know anything more'n I already do." John hugged his son and meandered off.

Big Will walked to the front door and reached for the knob, but his sweaty hand slid off before he could turn it. He reached for it again and the door seemed to fling itself wide open.

"C'mon in," Samuel said. Big Will crossed the threshold. He looked around the room at the other men and they stared back at him. In their midst sat Maurice in his underwear, gagged and tied to a rocking chair. Timmie's body lay on the sofa girdled

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in white sheets with only his head visible, like an immense papoose.

Every time Maurice whimpered, one of Samuel's men would pound his foot on the rocker so hard the chair almost toppled forward.

"Ya keep moanin' and I'll start punchin' ya agin," Samuel told him. "I warned ya, ya bastard. Thought I smacked some sense into ya the last time ya went drivin' drunk around Sunset. Seems like ya didn't and now ya gonna pay!"

Big Will watched as Samuel broke off twelve straws from a broom, wishing he could vanish like smoke. Samuel then halved one of them and buried it with the rest. Big Will's hands started to tremble, so he clasped them behind his back. As the newest member, Big Will would pick last. He watched as each man drew a straw from Samuel's fist. When the eleventh man pulled the final long straw, Big Will's body began to shake. Samuel opened his palm and let the short one fall to the ground.

"Now, Big Will, take ahold of yo'self." Samuel surveyed the room to make sure all were listening, then turned back to Big Will. "My daddy got so doggone tired of how the white police did nothin' when one of our own did wrong here in Sunset that he took it upon hisself to deal with no 'counts like Maurice. He set this thing up and based it on what he heard *his* daddy say about how murder was handled where he came from in Africa. We're all in it now, no turnin' back."

"Yessuh, I understand."

"And the rest of ya?" Samuel glanced around the room at each man, and they all signaled their agreement.

"Well, then, get to work."

Big Will watched them begin their respective jobs: two untied

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Maurice; another two grabbed him under his armpits and made him stand as he peed on himself; two more dragged a bin of sheets, ropes, and twine from a corner of the room; and two picked up the embalmed boy and flattened his remains against Maurice—face-to-face. Maurice jerked his head away, but the men secured the two heads to one another with the sheets and cord. Timmie’s feet dangled above the ground so they laid Maurice on the floor with the boy strapped on top of him and tightened them together. Then they stuck a wad of cloth as big as a softball into Maurice’s mouth.

“This one mug ya ain’t gonna never forget while ya burnin’ in hell,” Samuel said.

The three remaining men placed the bundle in the back of Samuel’s truck and threw a horse blanket over it. Samuel tossed the keys to Will.

When Big Will started the engine, Samuel reached through the open window and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Only ya gonna know where ya dropped him. And each day that passes? Well, this burden ya carryin’ tonight’ll get lighter. This one’s got no kin and fewer friends. Nobody cares if he lives or dies. And nobody else in town’ll know which one of us took that piece of trash into the woods. We keep this under our hats.”

Big Will gritted his teeth, gripped the wheel, and took off. He drove for miles along a rarely traveled road, tolerating Maurice’s muffled blubbing in the back. He took out his handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his face. The bastard deserved this, he reminded himself, but why did he have to be the one? All he wanted was to roam the rolling hills of South Carolina, sniff the red clay, and fade into the thickets of bald cypress trees.

Before long, the road forked with the right prong leading to

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an unpaved lane just wide enough to accommodate Samuel's truck. He inched forward into the woods and the silence made Maurice's crying more pronounced. This time he wiped away the pooling tears in his eyes with the back of one hand.

When he felt sure he was deep enough in the woods so no one could see him, Big Will stopped the truck, and dragged the murderer and Timmie into the darkness until a red wolf howled in the distance. *This must be the place.* He dropped the end of the bundle. The sound of its fall and Maurice's harrowing groans bounced off the surrounding trees and boomeranged against Big Will's body. He stood there, stunned for a moment, picturing what the wild animals that prowled the backwoods would do to Maurice. He then ran back to the truck, covering his ears to block out Maurice's weeping.

Big Will plopped himself behind the wheel and cursed Samuel, his daddy, and any man who took part in this pact. *How could these God-fearing men do such things and make others do them as well?* The bundle may have been behind him, but Big Will quivered when he thought of what lay ahead. How could he go to church and hold his head up when the preacher exhorted the congregation to praise the Lord to the heights? How could he hold hands with the pretty little lady he yearned to meet one day and profess his forever love to?

His stomach began to curdle and his hands grew clammy, so he floored the gas pedal, feeling as though the earth might swallow him alive if he didn't speed away. *I just gotta get home. I just gotta get away from what I did.* Before he realized it, he had parked the truck at Samuel's and had left the key under the seat. He hurried to his house, tiptoed to his room, and collapsed onto his bed.

But sleep provided no solace. As he dreamed of being nestled

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in the groove of a cypress's bundled trunk, a voice screamed out. *KILLER! KILLER! KILLER!* He jerked his head up and swung it every which way in search of the screeching yell until he saw a ghostlike figure above him. It descended on him like a gossamer cloak. *KILLER! KILLER! KILLER!*, it ranted. He tried to rip it to shreds, but each time he reached for it, the translucent cloth evaporated in his hands. It then shrieked, punched his head with the force of a boxer, and disappeared. Big Will fell backward and slept no more that night. The next morning, he snuck away on an empty stomach without his father or two younger sisters knowing. He ambled toward downtown Sunset, wanting to feel grounded in this community and also hoping to fly away at the same time.

“Whoa there, Big Will. Looks like ya just seen a ghost,” a shopkeeper shouted out as he prepared to open his shop.

Big Will pulled himself up short like a horse being reined in and studied his reflection in the storefront window. His deep reddish-brown complexion had lightened by two shades. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and decided to return home. Then he felt a tug on his shirttail, pivoted, and saw the sardonic phantom.

For the next two weeks, the ghost was an almost constant companion. During the day it trailed him, hammering him with obscenities. At night, it whispered in his ear, just loudly enough to disturb his sleep. All Big Will's praying and church-going and testifying couldn't make it go away. His stomach tolerated little food, and he grew gaunt and became exhausted. Never one for much talk, he remained silent most of the day. The cajoling from his two sisters had no impact. His father, however, let him be.

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One muggy morning, just before the temperatures bowed to autumn's clemency, John insisted that Big Will accompany him to the family's skimpy plot of land where they eked out a living, planting and picking greens and tubers.

"First harvest comin' up soon. Lotta work in front of us," John said. They started to walk among the rows of greens and summer squash and potatoes.

"Papa, I dunno if I can."

"What? Ya don't wanna pick crops? It always makes ya so happy. Thought this'd bring ya back to us."

Big Will stopped.

"Papa, I gotta tell ya somethin'." He gulped. "I'm haunted."

"What ya mean, Son?"

Big Will explained.

"How long it's been on yo' tail?"

"Ever since that night, ya know, when—" Big Will gulped again. "Papa, I was the one. I picked the short stick... or it picked me."

"Sorry ya had to." John sighed and scratched his head. "Damn near a fortnight ago. What color is it?"

"Ain't got none. More filmy like."

"Does it keep ya from movin'?"

"No, just wears me down, all day, all night."

"At least the haint ain't ridin' ya. They paralyze ya. But some ghouls got into yo' mind and it's messin' with ya, Son."

"But I see him, Papa, and hear him, and feel his breath sometimes," Big Will insisted.

"Ya can beat him, Son, but ya gotta leave town. Change the air around ya."

"But, Papa, where would I go?"

"We gonna let yo' cousin in the big house figure this one out."

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“Ya think Nathan’ll help me?” Big Will asked.

“Yo’ mama, God rest her soul, was Nathan’s aunt and blood’s thicker than any stack of cash the Franklins got. They felt so bad when yo’ mama died. Reached out to give me a boost many times, but I wouldn’t take nothing. Nathan’ll help us all right. Go on over there first thing after lunch tomorrow. Want ya to tell him yo’self. And ya can tell him all of it, ya hear?”

The next day Big Will polished his shoes and donned the suit he’d worn to his mother’s funeral six years earlier.

“Where are ya, boy?” John called out.

Big Will left his cubbyhole of a bedroom and walked toward his father’s voice. When John saw his son, he slapped both thighs.

“Sleeves and legs all short on ya, don’t ya think?”

“I know, Papa, but...”

“Ya haven’t put that on since...” John bit his lip. “Just get somethin’ that fits.” He attempted a smile.

Big Will changed into a pair of britches and a starched white shirt and set off toward the Franklin residence. It sat on the outskirts of Sunset, with acres of farmland surrounding it, and was grander than any house owned by colored people, and some whites, for that matter. Big Will and his family used to go there for eggnog at Christmas and he always felt like a bumpkin crossing the threshold, as he still did today. He took in the substantial front door before he raised the knocker and let it drop.

Clara, the housemaid, answered. “Why, Big Will! C’mon in here.”

“Sorry I didn’t let ya know I was comin’.”

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“What? Ya family. I’ll go get Mr. Nathan.” While he waited, Big Will noticed some specks of dirt on the top of his left shoe. He rubbed it on the back of his right pant leg until it shone again.

Everything in the reception hall looked the same as he remembered. The carpeted staircase rolled down from the second floor like an indigo sea, shimmering brass handrails containing it along the way. A colossal candelabra, outfitted with twelve white tapers, crowned the two-story foyer. Ten-foot-high pocket doors to his left and his right stood open, one revealing the parlor and the other the dining room.

Nathan came rushing from behind the stairway and hugged him.

“You’re a sight, you are! What’s kept you away from us?”

Big Will felt his face flush. “Cousin Nathan, y’all got so many nice things and we, well, we...” Big Will stepped off the massive plush throw rug.

“Don’t talk such foolishness. Never could figure out why your daddy and mama stopped bringing you all here around Christmas. Guess they had their reasons. But you’re always welcome. Now, tell me. How have you been? All grown-up.”

Big Will paused and then blurted out, “I need somethin’ from ya, Cousin.”

Nathan guided him into the parlor and closed the doors. “Big Will, what is it? Have you put some girl in a family way? You know, not facing up to a situation...”

“Naw, Cousin Nathan, nothin’ like that.”

“Well, let’s sit down and you’ll tell me all about it.”

They sat on facing settees. Big Will described how he had carried Timmie and Maurice into the woods and left them there to rot, and how, once at home that night, a transparent beast leapt

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from nowhere and had trailed him ever since. When he ended his story, Big Will turned away from his cousin's gaze.

"Look at me, boy. No shame here. Maybe I should be the one feeling guilty. Money got me out of having to pick a stick. Before Daddy passed, he made sure of that. Paid for some of the funerals. Or maybe that's why Samuel's got that fancy truck. I don't know."

"Papa thinks I need to get outta town. Says ya might find me a way."

Nathan stood, pulled a bottle of bourbon from the bar shelf, and poured himself a shot glass.

"You want a taste?" Nathan asked. Big Will shook his head. Nathan downed the liquor and sat next to his cousin. "I can help you all right, but I want you with family," Nathan started.

"Mama would like that."

"How long has she been gone?"

"Six years ago. Feels like yesterday."

Nathan patted Big Will's back and looked upward for a moment before he spoke.

"Mama and Papa both passed about a dozen years ago, but it still hurts like a fresh wound."

Big Will watched how his cousin's eyes started to mist over. Nathan refilled his glass and gulped it down as quickly as the first.

"Your daddy's a good man. Been raising you and your sisters all alone and doing a fine job of it."

Big Will wrinkled his brow. "Ya know 'bout us?"

"We keep tabs on all our kin. I've tried to help out your Pa whenever there was an early freeze or the crops came out spare. But he's a proud man and..."

"He sent me to ya."

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“You see there? Only asking for our help when he can’t do it himself. That’s your Pa, all right. And I think I’ve got the answer.” He shook his finger at Big Will. “My sister Sarah!”

“Ya really think she’ll take me in?”

“Sarah’s always had a soft spot for you, and her husband will do whatever she tells him.” Nathan laughed.

“I heard she married herself some big-time undertaker up in St. Louis and...”

“Jordan’s more than just that. They call him the Negro Mayor of St. Louis.” Nathan walked over to the gleaming mahogany rolltop desk in the far corner of the room. He opened it, pulled out a pen and paper, and returned to Big Will.

“I’ll send a telegram straightaway. We’ve been having telephone interruptions, but once they get this—”

“I won’t be in the way, now will I?” Big Will interrupted.

“Don’t talk such foolishness, Cousin. With all that house and the grounds they have, there’s plenty of room, even for someone as big as you!”

Nathan sat down and began to write. “As I was saying, once this arrives, Jordan will find a way to get through to me, so I can explain.”

“I can do whatever they need...the gardenin’, drivin’ the hearse, even housework. Just can’t pull another straw.”

“I understand. It’s done.” Nathan held up the paper and waved it in the air to help the ink dry faster. “I’ll have Davis run this down to the telegraph office.”

“There’s one mo’ thing.”

“Tell me.”

“Wanna leave straight away without Samuel and the others knowin’. Don’t want anybody to think—”

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“You’re a coward?”

Big Will’s chin dropped to his chest.

“This proves you’re a man, Cousin. A kind, righteous, God-fearing man.”

The following Monday, Big Will and his father walked down an unlit road at dusk. Big Will carried a suitcase and John had slung a weighty burlap sack over his back.

“Let’s stop for a minute. I gotta give ya this now,” John said.

He sat the bag down, opened it, and withdrew a small Mason jar, half full of water with seven silver dimes on the bottom.

“Keep this with ya from here on out. Wherever ya find yo’self. The water’s thick with salt. And those seven dimes? Well, ya know seven is the holiest of numbers. This’ll keep that ghost at bay. Don’t let nobody touch it or try to wrest it from ya.”

“Whatever ya say, Pa.”

Big Will wanted no one to see him board a train in Greenston, so his father asked a friend, who lived outside Greenston and owned a wagon, to take his son to the next railroad stop. They walked in silence until John saw the man’s house. He put down the sack again.

“Son, ya gonna be ridin’ up front in this train. ’Bout the only time we get to do that. Jim Crow puts us in the back of the streetcar, the back of the bus, and backs us up against a wall any chance he can. But when it comes to trains, he carves out a special spot for us ahead of all the whites, right behind the coal pit, so we the ones who get coated in soot.” He sniggered.

John stooped over, pulled out a lightweight blanket and a couple of towels, and handed them to Big Will.

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“Use these to cover up. Keep as much of that filth off ya.”

“Thanks, Pa. Ya thought of everythin’.”

“I try, Son. We gotta take care of each other, take care of our own. If we don’t, who’s gonna?”

Big Will folded himself over and hugged his father.

“Go on, now. Mitch’ll be ready for ya. I ain’t good at good-byes, so I’ll leave ya here.”

John turned and walked away.