

CHAPTER ON EXCERPT FOR GOD DON'T LIKE UGLY

Chapter One

To this day I don't know exactly where Mr. Boatwright came from. He slid into my life one dark miserable day in October 1956, when I was six years old. I arrived home from school and there he was, decked out in a fleecy white suit and a lopsided fedora. He was grinning all over the place as he removed his musty things from a large military bag and placed them on our already cluttered living-room floor. His pointed-toed shoes lined up in our hallway looked like a row of little missiles.

"Who are you?" I asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

He looked about a hundred years old. I stayed close to the door and kept my hand on the doorknob, ready to run if I had to. First, he looked me up and down, bobbing his head like a rooster. A lot of people did that the first time they saw me. I was probably the only first grader in Ohio who weighed almost as much as an adult. Suddenly, and for a brief moment, I suspected and hoped that he was the grandfather I had never met. He was a heavysset man with copper-colored skin and sparkling brown eyes that looked out of place on his wide, flat, heavily lined face. His lips were thin for a Black man. I looked around for Mama. She appeared within seconds with a smile on her face that stretched from one side to the other. She stopped in the middle of the floor and started wiping her flour-covered hands on her crisp white apron. Standing close to the man, I could see that he was not much miler than Mama and she was only five-foot-two.

"Annette, this here is Brother Boatwright. He fixin' to move in with us," Mama informed me.

Stunned, I looked from her to him then back to her. "Is this my granddaddy?" I asked. My heart was beating about a mile a minute.

"No." Mama chuckled. "you ain't got no grandfolks no more. Brother Boatwright is just another brother in need of a place to live."



"He's just a strange man?" I gasped, disappointed. I was the only kid I knew who didn't have grandparents to visit and expect gifts and money from. I tightened my grip on the doorknob.

"No, he ain't no strange man!" I could tell that Mama was getting frustrated with me by the way she narrowed her eyes and jerked her head from side to side when she talked. "Him and Reverend Snipes go waaaaaay back," she told me, waving her hand dramatically. I did not want some strange old man, especially one that might start bossing me around, invading the space I shared with Mama.

"Oh," I mumbled. I let go of the doorknob and moved closer to Mama. "Is he going to sleep with you like a husband, Mama?" I asked anxiously. I had been praying for Mama to get married again and have a baby sister or brother for me to boss around. I rolled my eyes at the man. The mean look I gave him upset him, and I was glad. A puppy-dog expression replaced his annoying grin, but I didn't care.

"Don't you never disrespect Brother Boatwright like that again, Bride of Satan," Mama hissed. There was a look of embarrassment on her face as she pulled me into a corner. "Sleep with me? Brother Boatwright is a man of God." Mama turned to the old man with another smile, and continued, "Brother Boatwright, you arrived right on time. I know you know your Bible. You see the mess I got on my hands? This young'n is out of control. We don't keep a eye on her, next time we look up, she'll be robbin' banks or tryin' to shoot President Eisenhower."

I returned to Mr. Boatwright and apologized. He smiled and tickled all three of my chins. His smile seemed empty and false. There was sweat all over his face, and it wasn't even hot in our house. He removed a flat box of Anacin pills from his shirt pocket and rapidly gobbled up a handful.

"Ain't it the truth, Sister Goode. I'm gwine to keep both my eyes on this girl! Praise the Lord!" he shrieked, nodding for emphasis. I jumped almost a foot off the floor. The old man and Mama laughed.



"Mama..." I started.

"He walks with Jesus so he say that sometime when he get excited," Mama explained. I didn't care how holy he was. The way he was looking at me, making me feel like I was something good to eat, I should have known he was up to something nasty even then. "Like I said, Brother Boatwright and the Reverend Snipes, they go waaaaaay back. He get a disability check every month from the white folks so he goin' to he'p us pay our bills. And he just loves to dust and mop and sweep and cook."

"You got any kids I can play with, Mr. Boatwright?" I had to force myself, but I managed a smile.

"I sure ain't. But if I did, I declare, I'd want me a little gal just like you. You just as thick and fine as you wanna be. I bet you can pull a plow by yourself. I bet you can tear down a house by yourself!" he exclaimed, squeezing my arm.

His statements frightened me, as they would have any other lazy child. I went out of my way to get out of doing housework and any other chores, let alone something as strenuous as pulling plows and tearing down houses. He'd be the type to boss me around like I was a slave, I thought. He'd have me washing dishes, mopping, dusting--things Mama had always done while I lounged on the couch watching television and nibbling on snacks. I sensed a future filled with doom and despair.

Mama turned to me, and a serious look appeared on her face. When she folded her arms and started tapping her toe, I took a few steps back. "God led Brother Boatwright to us for a reason. In addition to providin' you some spiritual guidance, you just now heard him agree to keep both his eyes on you while I am at work. You better mind him and do everythin' he tell you to do. Do you hear me?" Mama snarled, stabbing me in the chest with her finger.

"Yes, Ma'am." I sighed with defeat.



Mama then turned to the old man, and continued, "Brother Boatwright, you got my permission rightcheer and now to coldcock this numskull whenever you feel she need it."

"OK, Sister Goode," he said eagerly. I could smell his sour breath from a foot away. Looking into his terrible eyes, I was certain he was insane. I knew then that my life would never be the same again.

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