

Blood Journey – Chapter: “The Fire” (excerpt)

“I can always tell when he’s had his way with you,” Willie Jackson said as he came in the front door and strode over to where Addie sat. He was not a big man, but he had a heavy walk. The room vibrated with each step across the worn, wooden floor. He confronted her as she worked at the kitchen table. Addie was shelling peas. She put the pea pods down on the table and put her head in her hands.

“Walking around town with your head up like you’s white,” he started ranting. “Sending Dorothy May over to him with that lemonade.” He leaned across the table, put his hand under her chin and pulled her head up. “Don’t you think everybody saw that?”

Addie pulled her head away.

“What’re folks s’posed to think? What’re folks s’posed to think about *me*? *I’m* s’posed to be your husband, but my two girls look white! Where’d that come from, eh? It sure didn’t come from me.” He held his hand up to her face. Then he grabbed her hand and turned it over in his own. “You aren’t as dark as me—but you’re still good and brown. None of his white’s rubbed off on you yet. . .”

“Willie, you been drinkin’,” Addie said when she finally spoke, not trying to hide the disgust in her voice. She knew he’d be drunk when he came home from the picnic. He always took to drink whenever he saw Tom Mitchell or thought she had been with him.

“No, I haven’t been drinkin’,” he said, leaning into her face. “Do you think the only time I talk ‘bout him is when I been drinkin’? You don’t think I’m man enough to talk ‘bout him when I’m sober?”

Willie reached out and slapped her across the face. Addie shrieked; the force of the blow almost knocked her out of her seat. She cowered in her chair with her head between her arms.

“Is that man enough for you?” Willie hissed at her.

He turned and stormed out of the kitchen. Addie heard him slam the front door as he left the house. She sat up in her chair, leaned her head back, and cried. The left side of her face throbbed where he had struck her. Then she heard Callie and Dorothy May skipping into the house from the back door. They were giggling between themselves. Addie quickly wiped her eyes with her sleeve.

“Where’d Daddy go?” Dorothy May asked as she walked over to her mother.

Addie turned and looked down at her younger daughter.

“I don’t know, honey,” she said trying to steady her voice. “He’ll be back for dinner.”

She turned and looked over at Callie, “Help me shell these peas, here, and we’ll have ‘em tonight.” Callie sat next to her mother and helped her work. Dorothy May stood to the side and watched them both.

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Late that same night, Addie awoke to the smell of smoke. She thought, “Someone’s got the wood stove burning in the middle of the night.” Then she heard the piercing screams. She bolted out of bed and threw open her bedroom door. She stepped out into the living room and saw the walls covered with flames. She was blinded with the brightness of the fire. She coughed as smoke began to fill her lungs. “Oh God! Oh, my God!” she cried out.

The screams continued. Addie yelled, “Callie! Dorothy May! Where are you?”

Using her forearm to shield her face from the smoke and the brightness of the flames, Addie sped to the corner of the living room where the girls slept on a single cot. Callie was crouched on the smoldering wooden floor at the foot of the bed. She scooped Callie up in her arms. She put the girl’s face close to her breast to shield her from the smoke and heat. Still the screams continued. “Dorothy May!” she cried.

“Mama!” Addie heard a heart-rending wail. It was Dorothy May’s voice, but she couldn’t see the girl. Panic struck her as she waved her free arm and tried, futilely, to disperse the smoke. She frantically looked about the room. Through the thickening haze she saw a strange glow. And, then she saw Dorothy May standing by the kitchen door. Her little white night slip was in flames. The fire leapt up to her face.

“My baby!” Addie screamed. She almost dropped Callie in the middle of the room as she commanded, “Don’t move, Callie!” Then, “Dorothy May, I’m coming back for you, baby!”

“Mama!” Dorothy May screamed. “Help me! Help me! Help--”

Addie bolted to the other end of the room and pulled her daughter to the floor. She rolled her on the floor, trying to smother the flames. She could smell the stench of burned flesh and singed hair. She was feeling nauseous. She couldn’t put out the fire. Smoke had almost completely filled the room.

“It hurts, Mama. It hurts. . .” Addie heard Dorothy May moan. Then her child was silent.

“Oh, my baby—don’t die Dorothy May. Please, Jesus, please don’t let my baby die.”

Addie heard loud thuds against the front door. A neighbor man pushed in the door and immediately started coughing. The flames grew. “Over there!” Addie shouted. “Get Callie! She’s in the middle of the room. Get her outta here!”

The neighbor fell to his knees and crawled over to Callie. He reached out his arm and grabbed her and, then, dragged the girl out of the house.

Addie was still rolling Dorothy May on the floor. The child was limp. Addie kept rolling. She finally got all of the flames out. She picked Dorothy May up in her arms. She couldn’t see through the smoke and didn’t know where to find the door, but she could feel a gust of air. By instinct, she moved in the right direction and made it out of the house, running into the street. Crowds of people filled the road. She could see their faces clearly because of the brightness of the fire.

Addie turned around; flames were shooting out of the windows. They covered the roof. Everyone stood and watched the spectacle. Then, there was the sound of a horrendous crash as the roof of the house caved in.

It was then that Addie looked down at Dorothy May and gasped in horror—half of her face was burned and misshapen. Then she fainted into a heap on the ground, still clutching her daughter.

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“Fire in Colored Town,” the newspaper headline read. Then the next line, in smaller type, “House destroyed. Young girl badly burned. Cause of blaze unknown.”

“Guess that just ‘bout says it,” Addie said to no one in particular as she glanced down at the week-old paper folded on a table.

She and the girls had been staying down the street at her parents' house since that night. Callie was fine. She was out in the yard playing, wearing a neighbor girl's borrowed dress. All she could say about Dorothy May was that she was alive.

A white doctor came into Colored Town the night it happened, almost at dawn. That fact spread throughout Clarksville almost as fast as news about the fire. About daybreak, a white man wearing a black coat and carrying a worn black leather bag entered the living room, his gray hair still tossed from having been roused from his sleep.

He introduced himself and walked straight to where Dorothy May lay on a pallet on the living room floor. He knelt down and focused on the burned half of Dorothy May's face; he never took his eyes off of the girl.

"Get me a pot of boiling water," he ordered sharply. "Tear a sheet into strips of cloth—wide ones. . ."

Addie tried to talk to him. "Doctor, I thank God you're here. And, I don't know who sent for you, but we've lost everything. I can't pay you now, but I promise. . ."

"Don't worry about the money," he replied tersely. "That's been taken care of. . ." He turned to Addie and spoke deliberately, "You've got to do as I say *right now*—I need boiling water, and I need those cloths—"

Later that morning, the doctor said to Addie, "Your daughter came close to losing her right eye. You got to her just in time. Keep her cool and comfortable. She's in a lot of pain now, and it will probably get worse."

He told Addie to expect a big, watery blister. "You won't recognize much of her face for a while," he warned. "Send someone for me if the blister bursts before I return,"

he said. He wrote his address on a torn piece of paper and handed it to Addie, and then he left.

Dorothy May slept night and day through most of the next few weeks. When she awoke, she cried, and it was a wail that broke Addie's heart. Addie pulled socks over Dorothy May's hands so that she would not touch the blistered skin on her face while she slept. When the girl's appetite returned, Addie attempted to feed her solid food, but there was too much pain when she tried to open her mouth and chew. So, Addie parted Dorothy May's lips slightly with a spoon and fed her chicken broth and pot likker.

Before the blister burst, the doctor returned. "Hold her as tight as you can," he instructed Addie. He leaned in close and burst the blister with a needle and drained it. Dorothy May screamed and thrashed in Addie's arms as the doctor removed the dead skin. Addie looked down at her child: The right side of her face looked hideously red and disfigured. "This will take months, maybe a year, to heal," the doctor said as he left the house. Addie watched him as he closed the front door behind him, and then she wept.