


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
A LAND MORE KIND THAN HOME

WILEY CASH



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COME HOME

A NOVEL

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—LILY KING, author of *Writers & Lovers*

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The logo for William Morrow, featuring a stylized, cursive 'wm' monogram.

WILLIAM MORROW

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Dedication

For Mallory, again

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Tuesday, October 30, 1984

Chapter 1

Winston did not hear it so much as feel it as it passed over their house and into the trees across the waterway. He opened his eyes into the darkness of the bedroom. Had he been sleeping? He'd certainly been dreaming. If not dreaming, at least his mind had been seeing the same thing he'd seen over the course of so many nights. He blinked, rubbed his eyes. When he looked over at Marie, she was already sitting up in bed beside him, her sunken cheeks and wisps of graying hair tinged red by the glowing numbers of the alarm clock on her bedside table. *Her cancer and sadness are wasting her*, Winston thought, and then he knew the same was true for him. Just that morning Marie had forced him onto the scale after he pushed his eggs and sausage around on his plate. "One sixty-four?" she'd said. "Who's got cancer, you or me?"

Now, in bed, she looked at him as if terrified of what had woken them.

"Did you hear that?" she asked.

"I did," Winston said. He unfolded the covers off his body, and then he sat up and put his feet on the floor.

"It sounded like an airplane."

"It did," Winston said.

"But it's too late for a plane."

Winston turned and looked past Marie toward the alarm clock. It read 3:18 A.M. "It is late," he said.

"It sounded like it came in low," she said. "I haven't ever heard one come in like that before. And never this late."

Winston reached behind him and placed his palms flat against his back. His fingertips explored the knobiness of his spine, and his thumbs closed

around the soft skin on his sides that Marie liked to pinch when telling him he needed to gain weight. He stretched and sighed, curled his toes against the carpet. Then he stood and walked to the back window that looked out on the waterway. The county's tiny municipal airport sat through the trees on the other side of the water. He parted the aluminum blinds and peered out, half-expecting to find fiery wreckage blazing through the grass and disappearing in a gathering plume of smoke at the water's edge. But what he found when he looked out the window was what he always found: the dark, empty backyard; the inky black roll of the water; the thin, ghostly silhouettes of pine trees.

Marie clicked on her lamp. The window became a mirror, and Winston found himself staring into his own eyes.

"Do you see anything?" Marie asked.

"Not now I don't," he said.

"Sorry," she said. She turned off the light, but Winston had already let the blinds close. He reached for his pants where he had left them folded across the back of Marie's reading chair, and he stepped into them and tucked his T-shirt inside the waist.

"Where are you going?" Marie asked.

"Out there," he said. "To the airport."

"Why?"

"To have a look around. To figure out what we just heard."

"There's no sense in you going out there this late," she said. "Send somebody else."

"Nobody else this close," he said, which was true, meaning it was at least true enough to say. It was late October now. Beach season was over. Just about all the tourists had gone home. The county had slashed budgets back in July, and Winston had had to limit night shifts by assigning three officers to patrol the county while keeping someone on call at home and someone on dispatch at the office. Tonight was his night on call, even if dispatch hadn't called him yet.

"Send Glenn," Marie said.

"Glenn's not on call," he said. "And I don't think he's on patrol tonight. I *am* on call, and I'm right here."

"I don't want you to go. It's too late."

"Well, it's my job," Winston said. "At least it's my job until they vote me out next week." He smiled at Marie, then he turned toward the dresser and

pulled a pair of socks from his top drawer.

“Keep talking all hangdog like that and they will vote you out,” she said. “And if you keep going on these calls in the middle of the night, I’ll start campaigning against you.”

Winston lowered himself into her reading chair. He put his socks on. “You’d side with my political enemies out of spite?” he asked. “I didn’t know you had it in you, Marie Barnes.”

“Well, cancer can’t take everything from a girl,” she said. “Believe it or not.”

“Now look who’s talking hangdog,” he said. He stood up and walked to her side of the bed. He bent toward her and cupped his hand under her chin, then he lifted her face to his and leaned in for a kiss. “I’ll be right back,” he said. “Go back to sleep, honey. You won’t even know I’m gone.”

“I always know when you’re gone,” Marie said. “Forty years now, and I always know when you’re gone.”

“Well, I won’t be gone long,” he said.

“You’ve been saying that for forty years.”

“If you take care of yourself and go back to sleep then I’ll be able to say it for forty more.”

“I just don’t want to be—” But she stopped and looked away from him. The room fell into silence, and Winston would swear that he could hear the distant lap of the waterway outside their windows. Or maybe it was the sound of the ticking clock he sometimes heard in his mind. Marie looked back at him after a moment. “I just can’t stop thinking about Colleen,” she finally said. “I wish she’d call us back.”

“I know, honey,” he said. He fought the urge to break his gaze from hers, to drop his chin to his chest. He considered sitting down on the bed beside her, but he knew that doing so would delay his leaving even longer. “I know. Maybe she’ll call tomorrow. If not, we’ll call her. Maybe we can try getting ahold of Scott at work, ask him how she’s doing.” He’d said all of these things many times since he and Marie had come home from Texas, and he was tired of saying them, but he knew that, when it came to their daughter, Marie needed to hear certain things, and he knew that it was his job to say them.

For Winston, what had been a charming bedside scene—a scene of Marie worried over him in the middle of the night—had devolved into a kind of repulsion at Marie’s mentioning their daughter’s name. Winston’s grief for

Colleen was caustic, and he knew it had turned poisonous, infecting his heart and hardening it against Marie's own particular brand of grief and her need to share it with him. Unlike Marie, Winston's sadness was a thing he could bear only when he was alone.

He reached for her, held her fingers with the tips of his, gave her hand a little shake.

"We'll call the house again tomorrow," he said. "And then we'll get ahold of Scott at work if we need to."

Marie smiled a weak smile and lowered herself to her pillow. She closed her eyes, and Winston kissed her forehead again. He stood up straight and looked down at her. He watched her turn away from him and pull the covers up over her shoulders.

When the telephone rang on the dresser across the bedroom, Winston jumped like he'd heard a slammed door or a gunshot. Marie didn't even stir. "I bet that's Rudy," she said.

"I bet you're right," Winston said, trying to hide the breathless surprise in his voice. "There's my call." He left the bedroom for the hallway and took the stairs down to the kitchen, where the telephone was still ringing. He picked it up.

"Calls are coming in about some sort of noise out at the airport," Rudy said. "Sounds like it might be a plane crash."

"We heard it too," Winston said. "I was about to call in and tell you I'm headed out that way."

"You want backup?" Rudy asked, his voice as raspy and whispery as it always was. Winston knew Rudy smoked cigarettes and drank coffee in the dispatch room all night long during his shifts, but Rudy was the best they'd ever had, and he'd work the night shift when no one else wanted to, so Winston was willing to let Rudy's smoking slide.

"No," Winston said. "No sense in waking up somebody who's not already awake or pulling somebody else off patrol."

"All right, Sheriff," Rudy said. "Call if you need something."

Winston found his boots in the laundry room. He took his jacket from the hall closet and slipped it on, unlocked the safe in the back of the closet, and removed his pistol and holster. He lifted his walkie-talkie from the shelf above him and turned it on, its low white hiss breaking the silence of the quiet house.

Once he had his gear, Winston stood at the bottom of the stairs by the front door, listening for something, but for what he did not know.

“Marie,” he said. His voice escaped his throat in a whisper. “Marie,” he said again, “I’ll be right back.”

There was no sound from upstairs. The silence of the house encircled him, but Winston knew that Marie was awake, her eyes closed, her ears trying to do the same. He could almost feel her heart beating from where he stood at the front door, and for a moment he considered going back upstairs and touching her one last time, but he unlocked the front door, opened it, and stepped out into the night instead.

The black sky and its pinpricked canopy of stars pressed down on Winston as if he could reach up and push it away. The air was cool and heavy, and he could smell the trees—pines, yaupons, oaks—the moss that hung from them, the brackish air coming from the waterway behind him, the salty tang of the ocean on the other side of the island. The world was near silent, but he could hear the water moving.

Winston was halfway down the gravel walk when he looked up to find that Marie’s burgundy Regal was parked behind the cruiser. Instead of taking the time to move it he climbed inside Marie’s car and started the engine. The radio came on, a late-night talking head discussing Mondale’s slim chances against Reagan. Winston clicked the radio off and turned to back Marie’s car out of the driveway.

On the passenger’s seat were the posters and flyers that Marie had picked up that afternoon in Southport, each one featuring a photograph of a younger version of Winston, the photograph accompanied by the phrase *Vote for a man you can trust*. He had been forty-eight years old the first time he had run for sheriff, and now he was sixty, almost twenty years older than his opponent. Something about seeing his young face and thinking about the even younger face of Bradley Frye—the man who would probably defeat him—embarrassed Winston.

Bradley Frye was the son of a local developer named Everett Frye, who’d spent decades building up this part of the North Carolina coast.

Condominiums, shopping centers, expensive vacation houses. Now that the elder Frye was dead, his son seemed hell-bent on clear-cutting swaths of land and stamping out track homes and new developments on the sandy, swampy soil where forests and wetlands had sat just days before. Winston figured Bradley Frye was either making a fortune or driving himself into

unimaginable debt. Regardless, he now had his sights set on local government, beginning with the sheriff's office. Although he'd gained some small amount of notoriety as a basketball player at Brunswick County High School in the late 1950s, Frye had never left the county after graduation. In his twenties he set about furthering his name by showing up drunk and looking for girls at high school parties, and when county schools integrated in the late 1960s and early '70s, Winston knew Frye as one of the local boys who'd load up in trucks to harass and beat up Black students protesting just up the road in Wilmington. In the years since, Frye had tried to soften the perception that people had of him—a good ol' boy with a rich daddy who could afford to play nationalist—by wearing golf shirts, khaki pants, and work boots while on job sites. And now forty-one-year-old Bradley Frye was the first challenger Winston had faced in nearly twelve years as sheriff, and something about seeing his own much younger face on the campaign posters in Marie's car told Winston that he was probably going to lose. Bradley Frye had used his inheritance to make a name for himself as a businessman, and over the summer he'd papered the county with billboards, yard signs, newspaper ads, and even a television commercial. The election was just a week away, and Winston knew it was all coming down to money; Bradley Frye had it, and Winston didn't, and that made him even more afraid of losing, especially when he considered what the loss of their income and health insurance would mean for Marie.

He'd been worried about her being too tired to pick up the posters and flyers after her treatment, and he'd asked her not to do it, but he wondered now if he'd only been afraid to continue involving her in what he had come to believe was a losing venture. He felt shame creep over him, and he tried his best to push it down and away from him in the same manner he'd learned to vanquish his grief and fear.

But those things—shame and grief and fear—still overtook him sometimes and fell upon him like a weight that wanted to remind him of its heaviness at the very moment he forgot to stoop beneath it. He found that the weight kept him hidden from people, certainly from Marie and Colleen. From the moment his daughter was born, Winston had wanted to make himself known to her in ways his father had never made himself known to Winston, but he knew he had failed because at that very moment he and Colleen were strangers to one another, all of them—Marie included—alone and lonely in their pain.

It seemed cruel and ironic, but over the past few years Winston had dreamed of himself as his father, a man who'd left this world when he was only seventy-two. If Winston's lifetime were to roll along the same track as his father's, that would mean he now had twelve years left, which on some days seemed like too much time, and on other days seemed like not nearly enough.

Winston had a habit, each year around his birthday, of trying to conjure his father's face at that same age. How old did that man seem in his mind's eye? Older than Winston, for certain. Probably wiser too.

Sometimes, in his quiet moments, Winston's mind would flash back to the last days at his father's bedside. His parents had lived their whole lives in the house he'd grown up in at the end of an unpaved, wooded road in a town called Gastonia on the other side of North Carolina. The house had sat at the base of Crowder's Mountain, and while his father was dying Winston and his younger brother had set up a hospital bed in his parents' bedroom by a picture window that looked out over the trees. It had been fall, an October very much like this one, in fact, and they had left the windows open to allow the scents of sweat and medicine and soiled clothes and bedding to leak from the sickroom out into the chilly world. But something else had happened: the comforting rot and waste and piney reek of the forest had found its way inside, so much so that for the rest of Winston's life, whenever he smelled pine, he was forced to confront the loss of his father with the clean, heavy nostalgia of a forest doing its work to live and die and live again.

But he still had that dream of being his father, and he'd had it again tonight before the sound he and Marie had heard had woken them both. In the dream, his father is in the hospital bed back in their house in Gastonia, his hands clenched around the sheet where it is pulled up to his chest. Winston is watching his father sleep and drift toward death, his dry tongue occasionally moving across his dry lips. Winston reaches for a cloth on the bedside table and dampens it with water. He passes the wet cloth over his father's mouth. In the dream, Winston looks down at his own hands and sees his father's, and then he realizes his hands are closed around the sheet, and he is lying in his father's sickbed, and he is dying alone.

Would Colleen sit at his bedside like he'd sat at his father's? Winston wondered if the old man had cared for him as much as Winston cared for his daughter. Surely he did, but it seemed impossible to Winston,

impossible that his own father had been interested in or capable of feeling this love that could only be described as debilitating. It embarrassed him to think of his father loving him that much. And why was he thinking of it? What was he afraid of on these nights when he saw his father's hands as his own? Colleen sitting or not sitting by his bedside, swabbing or not swabbing his chapped lips with cool water? Was he afraid of the hole his passing might leave in her life?

Colleen was just twenty-six, but she had already lost a child, Winston and Marie landing in Dallas too late to even lay eyes on his body. What do they even do with a baby that never drew breath? They hadn't attended a funeral, and Colleen had never mentioned one. He'd been too afraid to ask her; he didn't know if Marie had asked her, and he was ashamed of that. He'd spent so many nights since lying in bed, hurting for Colleen and her lost child, his grandson. Now the thought of his or Marie's passing as compounding that hurt was too much for him, and for a moment he found himself wishing he and Marie had never had Colleen, had not created this life they would hurt for, this life that would hurt for them in return.

Jesus Christ, Winston, he thought, why are you even thinking about this right now? Was it Colleen's losing the baby? Was it Marie's being sick again, this time worse than before? Or was it the plane they'd heard—or at least the plane they thought they'd heard? The specter of a fiery crash flashed through Winston's mind with no sound, only the images of flames and the spinning down of huge engines. But it was just an airplane coming in low, he thought. Or a dream. Maybe he and Marie had dreamed the same thing, and he would arrive at the dark airport and find it just as quiet and empty as his side of the bed back home.

The day before Halloween and not as cold as it would be, but cold enough to send the vacationers scrambling back to work and to school and to their lives somewhere outside Oak Island. Even the soft-spoken, unassuming Canadians—the ones who hadn't headed as far south as Myrtle Beach, whose wives had combed the autumn beaches in one-piece bathing suits while looking for sand dollars, and whose husbands had kept the municipal golf course open into the middle of the month—had all gone home.

The island, thirteen miles long and four miles wide at its widest and sparsely dotted with old single-family homes, fishing shacks, vacation houses, and trailers, was heavily wooded and quiet. It ran east to west off

the southeastern elbow of North Carolina. To people who lived there, it felt like a place that had either gone undiscovered or had been forgotten by the rest of the state, that feeling growing so strong as to be nearly palpable as the island changed seasons and a blanket of unperturbed silence settled over it. As fall turned toward winter, the island always seemed to grow smaller, more remote, more insular.

There was no clock in Marie's car, and Winston had forgotten his watch where he usually left it beside his wallet and keys on the counter, but it was nearing 4:00 A.M. by the time he headed east down Oak Island Drive. Most of the businesses—a fudge shop, a T-shirt store, a pancake house, all the motels—had been shuttered for the off-season. The few places that had remained open for the winter had been closed for hours. After he and Marie had left Gastonia in 1963 and moved to Oak Island, they had joked that the island rolled up its sidewalks at 6:00 P.M., which was ironic only because there were no sidewalks. Winston thought then and he still thought now that the island would make an ideal place for someone to hide, and perhaps that's what he'd been doing all these years.

As he drove across the bridge above the waterway, Winston watched the light from the Caswell Beach lighthouse at the far eastern end of the island strafe the waterway in perfect increments. It flashed in his rearview mirror, and for a moment he could both see and feel its light in his eyes. When Marie's car climbed to the top of the bridge, the beacon light from the tiny airport appeared through the distant trees on his left. He had been at this exact spot on the bridge at night what must have been a million times over the years, and each time he felt like he was leaving the bright gleam of the lighthouse for the tiny spot of the beacon light, a light that was overwhelmed by the darkness of the mainland that waited for him in the woods across the water.

When Colleen was a little girl, both when they reached the apex of this bridge and the even taller and more magnificent drawbridge that spanned the Cape Fear River, her voice would come from the backseat, asking, "What would happen if we fell from here?" and Winston would consider what would cause someone to topple from such a height to the water below. Suicide? A vehicle fire? A bridge collapse? He pictured himself and Colleen holding hands and climbing over the guardrail before leaping into the still waters. No matter how many times she asked, he always answered her question with the same response: "I would save you."

But as she grew older her questions became more particular: “What would happen if we drove off the bridge?” or “What would happen if our car flipped over the side?” The more questions she asked, the more her fear became corporeal, and she began to construct detailed stories of the tragedies that would await them. Winston always knew the answers to the questions she had, because he had trained—made his deputies train, as a matter of fact—for water rescues. The county was dotted with water: lakes, canals, creeks, and waterways disguised as rivers. They had encountered submerged vehicles before, and he’d pictured himself seat-belted into the driver’s seat of a car upside down underwater, Colleen in the backseat. There would be about thirty seconds before the interior filled with water. He would remove his seat belt, reach back, and do the same to Colleen’s. He would pull her into the front seat, and, as water poured into the car, he would use the spring-triggered pin on his key chain (he made Marie and all his deputies carry them) to break the window and climb out. He would remind himself to follow the bubbles to the surface, Colleen clutched in his arms, his eyes searching for the light above him while his lungs waited for air.

But he didn’t explain all of this to Colleen when they passed over bridges during her childhood. Instead, he would look at her in the rearview mirror when she was young enough to sit in the backseat, or he would turn his head to look at her when she was old enough to sit beside him, the water through her window stretching out below them beneath the bridge, and he would always say the same thing: “Don’t look down, don’t look back. Just look where we’re going.”

When Winston pulled Marie’s car into the otherwise empty gravel parking lot at the airport, the only thing he found waiting for him was a two-door white Datsun with North Carolina plates. It surprised him to find a car parked here this late, but he wasn’t concerned. Perhaps it had broken down on Long Beach Road and someone had helped the driver push it into the lot before giving them a ride home. Perhaps someone had parked it here before piloting a private jet, although, given the make of the car, that seemed unlikely. Perhaps it was just abandoned.

He was not driving his cruiser so he did not have his standard-issue flashlight, but he cupped his hands around the Datsun’s driver’s-side window and peered into the car’s interior. There was nothing to see aside

from a crumpled pack of crackers on the passenger's seat, an open cassette case of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* on the center console, and an empty Styrofoam cup of what looked to have been coffee resting beside it. A child's seat was installed in the backseat, and an unzipped gym bag rested beside it, but from what Winston could see through the window it didn't hold anything interesting. This car could have belonged to Colleen or certainly to someone her age, and the contents revealed no great clues as to who owned it or why it was parked in an empty airport parking lot in the middle of the night.

Winston took his walkie-talkie from his belt and radioed Rudy.

"How's it look out there?" Rudy asked.

"Quiet," Winston said. "But there's a vehicle in the lot. If you'd run the plate for me."

"Of course," he said.

Winston stepped around to the back of the car and read out the license plate.

"Back in a second," Rudy said.

Winston slipped the walkie-talkie onto his belt and walked around to the front of the car. He folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the Datsun's fender. He looked toward the trees on the other side of the runway, his eyes searching for movement or a beam of light or whatever it was that could have made the sound that had woken him and Marie, but there didn't seem to be anything to see. His nose caught the cool, swampy scent of the waterway, just a mile or so to the south, and he thought of Marie on the other side of the water, lying awake in bed and waiting to hear the noise of his keys turning the lock on the front door. He thought of the sound they'd heard that had jolted them from sleep; the way it seemed to vibrate along the roof of the house, the deep hum it had sent through his body. He didn't know what else to do while he waited to hear back from Rudy, so he set off across the grass-covered field toward the runway.

The lot where Winston waited sat closest to the south end of the runway, where two white lights marked either side of the landing strip, and Winston knew that if what they'd heard was an airplane then this was where it had touched down. The runway was made of grass—it would not be paved for a couple more years—and it was useless to search it for tracks that this potential airplane or any other may have left behind. The expanse of