



Good

Dirt

A NOVEL

CHARMAINE
WILKERSON

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *BLACK CAKE*

BY CHARMAINE WILKERSON

Black Cake

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To those whose stories are written in our hearts.

Prologue

ONE MONTH BEFORE

“S HHH,” HER BROTHER SAYS.

She’s giggling. She can’t help it. She tears off pieces of sticky tape and hands them over. Just as her brother finishes with the tape, their mom calls from outside. One day, she will remember them dashing out of the room together, fingers gummy with adhesive, and, despite everything, she will smile.

“Okay, okay,” says their mother. “Let’s take this photo.” She fiddles with her camera. “You can’t show up late on the first day of school.”

But her brother wants them to see what he’s done.

“Mom, I want to take the picture indoors,” he says. “Can we?”

“But it’s so nice out here,” their mom says. Behind her, the pansies and asters are in bloom. The rest is all green against the black-blue of the Sound. This, too, she will remember. The beauty of that first home. How she thought she would never want to leave.

“Let’s just do this,” their father says. She looks up at her dad and reaches for his hand. They follow her brother inside and into the study. When their parents see the old stoneware jar, they laugh. Great big belly laughs. That’s what her brother was going for. He’s put a baseball cap over the top of the jar, and on its front he has taped a handlebar mustache cut out of paper and colored in with a black marker. On the table next to it, he’s stacked a couple of textbooks.

She and her brother haven't forgotten what the jar represents. Who made it. Where it comes from. How very old it is. Their father, and his father before him, have made sure of that. But in their home, they don't treat the jar like it's an antique. They treat it like a member of the family. Her big brother takes up his position next to the jar and leans in close for the snapshot.

"Say cheese!"

Now it's her turn. Then their mother sets the camera on a tripod and they take a group photo.

And thank goodness for the memory.

Because you never know, do you?

Part One

Shattered

2000

LATER, THE RETIRED COUPLE WOULD tell the police they had run over to the Freeman place after hearing the shots. Their exact words would be *shots rang out*. But that was just a phrase that people of their generation had picked up from watching television. On the TV news, people were always saying shots rang out. In the old detective shows, shots were always ringing out. At the box office, Rambo and the Terminator and Serpico and Shaft had all made buckets of money by making shots ring out. But this was real life, in a town with one of the lowest crime rates in the nation. Few people around here had a vocabulary suited to a situation like this one.

The space between houses being what it was in these parts, it was unlikely that anyone else living along Windward Road would have heard the shots, which did not, in fact, ring out so much as make a dull *crack-crack* sound. It was unlikely they would have heard the splitting open of the antique jar when it tumbled from the table in the study. Nor could they have heard the thud of the victim's flank against the floor when he fell. What the neighbors heard for certain was the screech of the van's tires as the panicked robbers tore out of the driveway and took the first road north away from the shore, in the direction of the country club.

The neighbors had been collecting seeds from their coneflowers and black-eyed Susans. It was that time of year. They had been working side by side, knees in the dirt, murmuring to each other as they did. Taking in the

clicks and chirps of their backyard. The whisper of the sea breeze through the tulip tree. The scent of fallen apples warming in the sun. But now they were hurrying past the line of trees that separated their garden from the Freemans', their shoes flattening dirt clods and snapping fallen twigs as they went. They were surprised to see the children's bicycles were still there.

Later, they would recall that this was the moment when panic set in.

Weren't the kids supposed to be gone? The Freeman children were almost always gone during the week, now that school had started up. They would head back out on their bikes after classes, if they came home at all. Piano lessons for her, tennis or debate club for him. The neighbors banged on the side door, now. They called out. They ran around to the front and found the entrance to the main hallway wide open. And that's when they heard it. A sound that would stay with them for years. The voice of a child, bleating like a lamb that had lost its way. A child they had watched grow from infancy. A girl who had played with their own granddaughter for most of her ten years.

It was a sound that could shatter a person's heart.

At Least, This

2018

WELL, OF COURSE THEY HAD hoped for a day like today. If life had taught them anything, it was that a person's path still could be lit by moments of joy, even after unspeakable loss. And here they were. Soh and Ed Freeman smiled at each other then looked up at the window, where they could just make out the crown of flowers on their daughter's head. Peaches and pinks. They glimpsed the dark tone of her arms against her cream-colored dress. No bridal veil, Ebby had insisted. Just the flowers and her granny's gown, the bodice above the flounced skirt adjusted to fit. What a lovely young woman their child had become.

There was a glint of light from their daughter's engagement ring as she moved away from the window. Sapphires flanking a two-carat diamond, handed down to her by her other grandma, Soh's mother. There was no personal keepsake from the groom's mother. Not that it was necessary, but it was the kind of gesture that those who knew the Peppers might have expected.

True, Henry's parents had hosted an impeccable dinner for the couple at their club three days before, but Soh and Ed couldn't help but notice that Henry's mother had not embraced their daughter that night. Hadn't kissed her on the cheek. Hadn't even taken her hand. Henry, though, had stayed close to Ebby all evening. His arm around her waist. His nose brushing her cheek. Love might not conquer all, they realized, especially in a marriage