

Chapter 1

“AW-SHUCKS, NOT HIM AGAIN!” I mumbled as I stepped into our tiny cluttered living room. It was only our second Friday night in the country when I laid eyes on Mama’s bald-headed boyfriend, Mr. Fred, from Marshall Village. He didn’t even give us time to get used to our new house out here in the woods before he showed up last Friday night.

Mr. Fred stood toe-to-toe in front of Mama like a skinny tree swaying in the wind. His shiny bald peanut head bobbed a wee bit above Mama’s five-foot chocolate frame. Her tiny hands gripped his waist to keep him from falling.

Let him fall! I thought. A good bump on his head might knock some sense into him. I chuckled and stepped up my pace. He turned his head and looked at me as I stomped past them. I’m sure he noticed that this nine-year-old girl didn’t like him one bit. When I rolled my eyes like I was slicing him with a knife, he knew better than to say a word to me. I hated seeing him in my mama’s face like that. There was no way he could ever take my daddy’s place. NEVER! NEVER! NEVER!

The puckered linoleum rug squeaked real loud as I crossed the floor. I wanted to startle the two lovebirds. In my head, the floor screamed, “Go home! Go home!” to the rhythm of my footsteps. I rather enjoyed the rhythm because the words clearly expressed how I felt. I brushed past Mr. Fred and Mama as I headed for the kitchen. Playing kickball outside in the June heat had made me thirsty. I wished I could kick him out of our house but I knew that pretty soon he and Mama would disappear into her bedroom. In a way, that was good because I couldn’t stand to see them together.

I was tired of that man stealing my mama from us. It was bad enough that he stole her from Daddy. Ever since we moved, we never see much of her until after Mr. Fred is gone.

I placed the old beat up metal bucket full of water I had just drawn from the well on the kitchen table and muttered softly, "Seeing that sloppy drunk all weekend is just as bad as taking a dose of Cod Liver Oil. Both of them leave a bad taste in my mouth and make me want to puke. Ugh!" I made an ugly face and smiled at my thoughts.

I imagined myself thumping Mr. Fred on the head as I scooped eight dippers of water and poured them in the half-gallon plastic pitcher. I picked a pack of cherry Kool-Aid from a sealed plastic container on the table, thumped it a couple of times to loosen the powder, ripped open the pack at one corner, and emptied the bag into the water. I stirred in two cups of Dixie Crystals granulated sugar that I took from the five-pound bag in the airtight grocery can. I could imagine Mr. Fred's head throbbing from a thump on his head.

I don't know how Mama with her pretty teeth can stand to look at that man's snaggleteeth and smell his whiskey breath. I can't stand the way he brags about being good at everything but never shows anything he's done. My Uncle Clyde says, "That man can't even hold his liquor!"

I stirred the drink with a long silver spoon and tasted a little bit on the tip of my tongue. "Ummm. Needs a little more sugar," I said to myself. I dumped in a tad more sugar straight from the bag then turned to the refrigerator for a lemon in the vegetable bin. Wouldn't you know? No lemons.

I wish I could go, one... two... three... and poof! Mr. Fred would disappear. I smiled at how silly that sounded. Last week I wished Mr. Fred would disappear and never come back. Well, he showed up the same time this Friday night. It seems to me that he'd be able to see that our little country house is full of children and there's no room for him. I'll bet his mama's glad to get rid of him when he comes out here on Friday night.

“C’mon Sunday night and take what Uncle Clyde calls ‘this poor excuse of a man’ out of our house,” I cried softly.

I dumped a whole tray of ice cubes in the red liquid and poured myself a full glass. Then I snatched open the café curtains so I could see what was happening in the living room. I saw Mr. Fred stagger backward while Mama held on to him until he plopped down on the sofa. The moment the springs squeaked on my bed I yelled at him, “Get off my bed! I don’t want to smell your pee like I did last week. Mama, make him get up!”

“I’ll take care of him!” Mama yelled back. “You just mind your own business!” She yanked Mr. Fred’s arms and practically pulled him off the sofa bed. She flung his right arm over her shoulder and guided him to her bedroom.

“Yep! There they go!” I said as I let go of the kitchen curtain.

I heard the mattress squeal as Mr. Fred fell on it with the thud of a chopped down tree. “If only he’ll just stay in the bedroom until it’s time for him to leave on Sunday night,” I mumbled. I closed my eyes, crossed my middle and index fingers, and made a wish. “Stay in there!”

I liked it better when we lived in Marshall Village and Mama went up to Mr. Fred’s apartment while Daddy was in the hospital. But now that Daddy’s gone and we’ve moved to this country house, Mr. Fred pays somebody to bring his drunk self to visit Mama. Daddy never got sloppy drunk and peed on himself, but this man falls down, vomits, and staggers around all the time.

It’s downright disgusting the way he likes to hug everybody and slobber on us. He talks so much he foams at the mouth like a mad dog. I’m glad he knew I meant what I said when I screamed at him, “If you ever touch me again I’ll hurt you!” Even if I am nine I gave him a piece of my mind ’cause he deserved it.

I drank the tall glass of cherry Kool-Aid then poured another half glass. While staring at droplets rolling down outside my glass of cold drink, I said, “I can’t figure out

what Mama sees in him anymore than I can figure out how water drops got on the outside of this glass.”

The drink was a pretty red color and it smelled and tasted good too. But Mr. Fred? I shook my head. Oh yeah, I guess Mama puts up with him for the twenty dollars he gives her every Friday night. I wondered how he lived off whiskey most of the time. Having him at our house made no sense. If Mama just wanted a man, she could have stayed with Daddy.

I gulped the last of my drink, rinsed out the glass and put it in the dishpan. Here I am drinking a five-cent pack of Kool-Aid that has to be shared with my whole family while that man has money to spend on Jack Daniels whiskey, I thought. I just don't understand it. I headed back outdoors wondering how anybody could pay more for something to drink than for food to eat.

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Later that night, I pulled the sofa away from the wall and pushed on the back to turn it into my bed. I was thinking, if only Mama knew how hard it is to fall asleep when my nostrils have to smell Mr. Fred's pee! As if the smell of his old pee wasn't bad enough, I told her that bedbugs crawl on me as soon as I get comfortable. I fight the little critters as long as I'm awake but I can't stay awake all night. I tucked a sheet in the cracks of the sofa and laid my pillow on one end. I tied a scarf tight around my head to keep bedbugs from crawling in my ears. I sighed when my bed was made. I knew if I managed to fall asleep, I could at least get a little rest before the bedbugs attacked.

“Bedtime!” I shouted. My brother Harry and little sisters Vera, April and Gladys came running over to me. I glanced over at Mama's closed bedroom door. “Oh well!” I sighed again.

We joined hands in a circle to recite our nightly prayer together: “Goodnight. Sleep tight. Don't let the bedbugs bite. Do what's right, with all your might. Goodnight.”

