

CHAPTER ONE

The blazing, early morning summer sun roasted the ancient tin roof of our tiny house as I watched my husband of fifty-four years make a mess of his supper. Sometimes, James would let me feed him as if he were still a human. Other times, he would become agitated and snatch the spoon out of my hand. Pleading with him did no good now. His mind was so far gone he didn't understand much of what I said anymore.

James would usually put his spoon down when he was done piddling in his plate. Lately, I could only hope he wouldn't throw it when he was done. He had started doing that about a month ago. So far, he had only hit me with it once when my back was turned. I wanted to throw that spoon right back at him, but he wouldn't have known why I did that either. Instead, I thanked God it hadn't been a knife or a fork and went back to doing whatever I was doing before.

The doctor told me James had Alzheimer's four years ago, and that he would forget things and do strange things he had never done before. I thought that diagnosis was funny at the time because corn liquor had been doing that to James for over fifty years. As far as James doing anything he had never done before, I thought that impossible. If he got his back up about something or a load on, James always could and would do some pretty stupid things.

The doctor told me James was physically fine, but he would need to be watched all of the time because people with Alzheimer's had a tendency to wander off and not be able to find their way back home. These people stuck their fingers into electrical outlets and fire on the stove. James has never done either one of those; however, he did decide he wanted to get something out of the well one night. The sun was up by the time we got him out.

None of this disturbed me. I had cared for my mother until she died twenty years ago. That doctor called Mama

senile and gave me the same symptoms as this doctor was giving me for James' Alzheimer's. Mama was a piece of cake to take care of compared to James. My mother forgot some things most of the time, and was mean as hell all of the time. But, Mama had been a pistol all of her life. Expecting her to turn into a sweet, docile old lady would have been ludicrous.

James had slowly forgotten everything in the past four years. Speech had even escaped him most of the time these days, and the last things he said had not made much sense. It's hard as hell watching a man who could rattle the windows with the anger in his booming voice turn into a six foot seven inch, two hundred and forty pound infant; aimlessly wandering around as if trying to remember what he was supposed to be doing all day.

I'm the only one who remembers anything now. All of the ups and downs of the lives and love of James and Ida Evers would disappear forever when I shut my eyes. James had no idea who I was most days, and the constant yelling and wrestling with a man who could snap my neck on a whim could only be done with pure trusting love.

Occasionally, out of the blue, James would still say something that made me wonder if he was all gone. As I cooked and cleaned the house, James would sit in his chair and watch me. The sound of his clear, coherent voice startling me, as he would ask, "Ida, what are you doing?"

"I'm cleaning up this mess you made, James. Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm fine, Sweetheart. Come here."

I would walk over as James held his arms up for a hug. Seeing the recognition in his eyes always ripped at my heart. I knew it would disappear as quickly as it had come. I would give him his hug and a kiss before the light of recognition left. I always kissed him until his body went limp. That would be the signal that James was no longer present. These were the moments I lived for now. Brief glimpses of the original James Evers, though painful, were all I had left.

Our children and the doctor insisted I put James in a nursing home. No one seemed to understand that my life had revolved around James Evers since I was twelve years old. I couldn't comprehend James not being here with me. Abandoning him when he needed me more than ever . . . never . . . I loved him.

Besides, if I had put James away, what would I do with myself? I knew I would never voluntarily live with any of my children. I could wait a while longer to spend the rest of my time cleaning their homes and babysitting their children and grandchildren until my mind went and they put me in a nursing home, too.

I understood they were all afraid James would hurt me someday. He had already done it once or twice when I wasn't looking. Even incapacitated, James was still an extremely powerful man. One day I let him out of my sight for less than five minutes and a loud, earth shaking crash in the front yard told me exactly where he had gone to. James had chopped down a twenty foot tall, five foot round pine tree. He wouldn't give up the axe until that tree was kindlin' either.

I could handle James most of the time. When I couldn't, I just moved out of his way and let him rummage and tear up until he was tired. My job was only to make sure he didn't hurt himself. Before James stopped talking, he would snap out of it and ask, "Ida, who made that mess?" Now, he just sits down when he's done.

This morning James tired of making a mess early. I got up from the table, wet his wash cloth and cleaned him up. With that done, I cleared the table and washed the dishes. I was nearly finished when James got up from the table and headed for the front door. Finishing quickly, I knew I had a little time, because James didn't walk as fast as he used to. As long as I caught him before he reached the road it was okay.

I stood in the doorway and glinted in the sunlight. James was taking a leisurely walk to God only knew where. He seemed as normal as he had ever been, as I stood there watching James walk up the long driveway. The painful truth

always came crashing in to remind me he was not normal though, and I started toward him before the tears could gather in my eyes.

James was a little better than half-way between the house and the road when I reached him. I walked beside him the way I used to for a few moments before attempting to take him back to the house. It was never a good idea to frighten him. Just for the hell of it, I asked, “Hey, James Evers, where are you going?”

He replied in a strong, crystal clear voice, “I’m going to work, woman. Where do you think I’m going?”

Not prepared for any response, it made me happy just to hear James speak. I had heard all of the grunts and groans I ever wanted to hear. So what if his response was not what it was supposed to be. I said sweetly, “That’s nice, James. It sure is a nice day to go to work.”

“Sure is. Tell the boys the weeds in the garden are looking ominous. I want them pulled up by the time I get home this evening.”

“I’ll tell them, James.” I answered, but it was time for me to turn him around. The road was getting too close. So, I said gently, “Maybe we should turn around now.”

Of course, James ignored my comment and kept walking. I took his arm and firmly tried to steer him back to the house. The light in his eyes went out again. James pulled away from me roughly. As I tried to get another grip on him, he balled up his fist and started swinging at me. Thank God I was still quicker than him. This was what I had hoped would not happen. I was going in circles, pleading with James to stop swinging at me when P.T. Brown happened by. We must have presented quite a sight. Me, alternately pleading and laughing as James kept pursuing me with his fist. James’ mind was gone and my mind was going. This little battle was so reminiscent of the ones we used to have in this same spot over fifty years ago, I couldn’t help laughing. Of course, James hadn’t been trying to hit me back then, but we had gone more than a few rounds anyway.

P.T. yelled from the road, “Need some help with him, Miss Ida?”

“I think I do, P.T.. If you could just help me get him back up on the porch, I would appreciate it.”

P.T. came up the driveway smiling. He began by talking to James as if everything was just fine. P.T. tended to be better with James than our own sons. Of course, P.T. saw James almost every day. When James got too far out of control, he was the one I called, because he was closest. P.T. was the one who had coaxed James out of the well after six hours.

“How ya’ doing, Mr. James? You’re looking pretty good. You had someplace in particular to go today?”

P.T. stopped in his tracks when James said in a joking whisper, “Hey, Boy. I’m going to see if Cassie’s got any corn in her cabinet. I want to taste a little bit before I go home.”

P.T. and I exchanged incredulous glances. James could really make you wonder who was losing their mind sometimes. James held his hand out for P.T. to shake when he was close enough. P.T. took James’ hand, pumped it hard and smiled as expected. Then, he said, “It’s kinda hot for corn this early in the day, Mr. James. Maybe I’ll go get you a little when the sun goes down. You know corn and heat will drive a man crazy.”

“Yeah, it will do that. Okay, Boy. Just don’t tell nobody, ‘cause I’m not s’posed to be drinking corn no more.”

“I won’t tell a soul, Mr. James. Let’s go sit on the porch a while and wait for the sun to go down. Then, I’ll slip over to Miss Cassie’s and see what she got.”

James turned around and calmly walked back to the porch with P.T.. He had completely forgotten I was even out there. I followed them shaking my head. I couldn’t help wondering why James was talking and walking so much this evening. He hadn’t said or done this much in quite a while.

P.T. got James settled into his rocker on the porch and sat down next to him. James started rocking immediately. The usual blank stare was absent from his handsome face. To

me and P.T., it looked like James was still with us. For the hell of it, I asked, “Would you like a cold glass of tea, James?”

“Yeah. That would be real nice, Honey. It sure is hot out here today.”

Turning to P.T. with a confused shrug, I asked, “Would you like some, too?”

“Sure, Miss Ida.”

Afraid to take my eyes off of James, I walked up the porch steps slowly. There was something in the air with him today and I wasn't sure I was ready to face it. As I made three glasses of iced tea for us, I kept telling myself that James would be gone again by the time I got back to the porch. The light hadn't stayed on for more than a minute or two in a very long time, but I could hear James and P.T.'s back and forth banter in the kitchen.

“You sure you feeling okay, Mr. James?”

“Feeling fair today, Boy.”

“Do you know who I am, Mr. James?”

“P.T., why you asking me a dumb question like that? I know you, your mama and your, ain't worth a dime daddy, too. I know everybody you related to.”

I almost dropped the glasses on the kitchen floor. That really was James talking. I had to hurry up with the tea, get back out there and see how long it would last.

P.T. was still laughing at James' last response when I came out onto the porch with the tall glasses of tea. I handed P.T. one first, one to James. When James spoke to me this time, something strange blew through me. Ghostly.

“Why, thank you, Honey. Nobody makes tea like you.”

With just as much devil in him as James today, P.T. asked, “Who is that, Mr. James?”

“Who is who, Boy?” James asked with a perplexed expression.

P.T. point and asked, “Who is she?”

“They got you working in the sun all day, or something, Boy? That's Ida Evers. I married her in 1940. I

know she's a pretty woman, too. So, you keep your distance and I won't have to break nothing on you."

"You got it, Mr. James," P.T. said, laughed and slapped his thigh.

After all of these months of not being able to hold a conversation with James, not having one thing to say, or one question to ask made me feel real stupid. My stunned brain couldn't think of one thing. I just stood on the porch and stared at James. That light was going to go out and let me breathe normally again in a moment.

James took a deep breath and stared back at me. He tilted his head and smiled. The time worn dimples I had fallen in love with over fifty years ago appeared in his cheeks. Tears welled up and fell from my eyes unaware. James put his tea down, stood up and wrapped his long, strong arms around me. The flood gates opened completely. I cried like he had just died, as he asked comfortingly, "What's the matter, Ida? Did I do something I don't remember again?"

"No, James. You didn't do anything. I've just missed you. That's all."

James kissed the top of my head and stroked my hair with his hand for a few moments. I felt him slipping away again. The weight of his arms increased to the now familiar dead weight of unconsciousness. I stood there holding him in my arms, rocked and cried a little while longer. Then, P.T. came over to help me get him back into the chair.

"Are you okay, Miss Ida?" P.T. asked with real concern.

"I'm okay. I'm used to James being gone. Seeing him like that just reminds me how much I miss him. I'm fine, son. We'll be okay now, P.T., if you have someplace to go."

"You can call me at home if he acts up again, Miss Ida. You know I'll be here in short order."

"Yeah, I know. Drink your tea and go on. Thanks for your help."

"Anytime."

I watched P.T. walk up the driveway to the road. He waved before turning off and I waved back. The scorching sun wasn't ready to relent this early and the day steamed. Thank God there was some shade on the porch. Looking at James, I could see that he was safely tucked away in his familiar private retreat.

I said, "James Evers, you know what you said about that boy's daddy wasn't nice, even if it was true. Tommy Brown was, and still is, one of the sorriest men God ever wasted His time on. That boy, P.T., ain't nothing like him though. He's a good man. Kind of reminds me of you a long time ago, James. Always rescuing somebody."

There was no response or glimpse of understanding from James. I smiled when I realized I expected there to be one. If he had said something I probably would have run away from him.

"Do you remember the first time you rescued me, James? Of course, you do. I was twelve years old and you were sixteen. I had cut up in school that day and had to stay over for a half hour of punishment. Everyone was long gone when that old Miss Harper let me out of there. I thought I could catch up with everybody if I took the short cut through the woods. Mama was gonna whip me anyway and I knew it, but if Mama had known I was going into those woods, she would have pulled my head right off and thrown it in a field, too.

"I was doing fine making time through the woods until I ran into those three clowns in there. They scared me so bad, I almost wet myself. They just appeared out of nowhere and started taunting and teasing me. I was sure they were just cutting up until that nasty old Toby Jenkins snatched at my dress and tore it. I didn't know those other two boys . . . and still don't.

"They were chuckers, like you, Honey. They lived in the woods and nobody ever knew who all of the chuckers were. Mama said that there was a million of you all born in the woods every year that nobody knew anything about. I had

also heard that there was a chucker behind every tree in the woods and never believed it, until that day.

“I dropped my books and picked up a long, thick tree limb after that filthy old Toby tore my dress. Nobody picked on me, or beat me up, without a fight. It never occurred to me that they might have had some other things in their nasty little minds to do to me.

“Toby grabbed at the tree limb. Swinging it as hard as I could, I clipped his hand. Quickly clutching a hand with a thumb dangling at a strange angle, Toby started wailing, ‘Damn ya, Gal! Ya done broke my damn finga! But, dat’s all right. I don’t need no fingas ta do what I’mon do ta ya no way!’

“Sweating like a pig and breathing heavier than a pissed off bull, I snarled, ‘You chucker dog, I’m gonna break more than your finger if you don’t leave me alone.’

“With eyes slanted like the devil himself, Toby hissed, ‘Oh, yeah. Like what, Gal?’

“ ‘Anything your stupid chucker ass puts within swinging distance of me.’

“We all stood still and stared at each other. Toby cradling that wounded hand with fury oozing from his funky pores. The air was thick with tension. Angry air, rushing in and out of my lungs was the only sound I heard.

“Suddenly, they all charged me at the same time. After a lot of kicking, scratching and biting, one of them finally wrestled the stick out of my hand. I fought them like my life depended on it.”

I stopped talking because I thought I heard James trying to say something. When I looked at him, he was as still as ever. Remembering the first thing James ever said to me made me laugh a little.

“James, you appeared from behind one of those trees just like all of the rest. You started snatching up and pitching bodies everywhere. When you tried to pitch Toby, you couldn’t, because I had a big piece of his chest between my teeth.

“James, you said, ‘Let ‘im go, Gal.’

“I must have looked like a mad dog when I let him go. My mouth was full of little pieces of Toby’s dirty shirt, skin and blood. I scrambled away from him and you tossed him off with the others. James, I can tell you now, I had never been so scared in my whole life. If I had died in those woods that day, my Mama would have had a fit because she had told me not to go in there every day of my stupid life.

“That chucker scum was some kind of mad at you, James. They cursed and threatened you something awful. You didn’t even care.

“Like you were saying, ‘Good morning,’ you said, ‘I ain’t no gal, fools. Y’all betta git outta here ‘fore I hol’ ya down an’ turn ‘er loose on ya one at a time.’

“They left mumbling and grumbling. You picked up my books and held your hand out to help me up. I wouldn’t take it and you laughed at me. I didn’t care about you laughing, James. Scared as I was, I wouldn’t have taken my own Mama’s hand that afternoon. Nevertheless, the hand of the tallest, dustiest, barefoot creature I had ever seen.

“I got up on my own and took my books from you. My dress was in shreds. Mama was gonna whip me senseless now, no matter what I told her. That was my best school dress. I wasn’t gonna be the only one getting whipped though. When I told my brother, Toby and his friends were gonna git it, too. My brothers wasn’t scared of no chuckers.

“You walked me the rest of the way through the woods without saying a word, James. Covered from head-to-toe in dirt, I sniffled behind you the entire time; dress in shreds, hair going in every direction. Just as we were about to reach the clearing, you asked me, ‘Wha’s yo’ name?’

“With everything that had happened and knowing that Mama was pacing the yard, switch in hand with my name on it, conversation escaped me. I didn’t answer. You stopped short, James, and I bumped into you. This time, you asked louder, ‘Wha’s yo’ name, Gal?’

“I still didn’t answer. I was scared to death, James. I had almost gotten killed in the damned woods and I was going to get killed for sure when I got home. My name was mud and I wasn’t in the mood to spread it around.

“You said, ‘I bet yo’ Mama don’t know how disrespect’ful an’ ungrateful ya are, Miss. A man help ya outta scrape, an’ ya don’t even say thank ya ol’ dog, or nuffin’.’

“I hollered my name at you, ‘Ida!’

“ ‘Ida what?’

“Frustrated, confused, scared and mad as hell, I yelled, ‘Ida what, what?!’

“In the soft tone I would become so familiar with, you shook your head and said, ‘Neva mind, Ida. I think ya los’ yo’ min’ in de woods. My name is James Evers. Pleased ta meet ya, Ida, whateva de res’ o’ yo’ name is. Now, I want ya ta run on home, an’ don’t ‘proach dese woods agin ‘less ya see me first. Do ya hear me, Ida?’

“If I had seen Jesus in the woods, I wasn’t coming back into it again. But, I sniffed and nodded.

“You nodded back, smiled and barked, ‘Now git!’

“I ran home fast, James. Hell, I didn’t even have a story ready or nothing. When Mama saw the condition I was in when I emerged from the woods, I could tell by the expression on her face that she was nearly as scared of hearing what I was going to tell her as I was to tell her. When I told her that you had tossed those boys like sacks of potatoes before they could do any real damage and led me to the edge of the woods, she let me go and went to find a switch. The woman beat the last tatters of that old dress right off of my back.”

James sat opposite me on the porch, rocking and laughing. He always did get a kick out of me telling that story over and over again. God only knew what he was laughing at now though.