

undo the myths that have robbed them of their humanity as well as their entitlement to sexual fulfillment. Think about it!”

For once, Donny did not even try for a sassy response. “Sister, you just might have an idea there!”

Curia picked up her bag and held out her hand. “Thanks for the interview, Mr. Dancer. . . .” But she didn’t head for the door. She gave Donny a sly smile and then slowly dissolved into nothingness right in front of his widening eyes.

The Last Black Hero

The bomb’s explosion at the antiracism rally was intended to wreak havoc. It did. Six people died. Dozens were injured. All were members of the militant, community-based organization Quad A (the African American Activist Association). Gravely injured in the explosion was the group’s founder and leader, Jason Warfield.

The bombing, far from spelling the end of Quad A—the goal of the white supremacists who carried out the attack—brought the organization thousands of new members, millions of dollars in contributions, and a national prestige that ensured their programs would be taken seriously by the media, foundations, and the nation as a whole. From being just another black leader with a small though committed following, Jason Warfield became a national hope—“a true hero for his people.”

He surely looked the part; with a resonant voice and soul-stirring rhetoric that only emphasized his deep commitment to black people. More important, he lived his heroic role. He had risked his life in every imaginable protest from month-long fasts to thousand-mile marches. He had been arrested, jailed, threatened, and harassed.

Fiercely independent, Jason took enormous pride in saying and doing what he wanted, despite the opposition of whites who deplored his militant rhetoric and growing support from blacks in all sectors. . . .

In a talk-show interview made just before the bombing and frequently replayed after it, Jason said, “My goal is to see racism eliminated from America. Period. I know, though, that racism is such an important component in American life that I may not succeed. But,” he added, “I am not deterred or discouraged. I plan to fight racism as long as I live.”

In the same interview, Jason spoke of his earlier life. "Initially, I wanted to be a singer, serious music. My hero was Paul Robeson. People even thought I sounded a little like him. Then I read a book about his life and decided that a singing career, even if I made it"—and he laughed—"was a trap in this schizophrenic society which welcomes and admires the talent of a black person like Robeson, but rejects him for his race. That's why," he said sadly, "so many talented black people who seem to have it made start acting like such damn fools. It's not that success has gone to their heads. It's that after years of struggle to achieve in athletics or entertainment—fields that seem open to blacks—they come to see that the acclaim they receive is not for them, but for their talent. In this society they, as persons, are still 'niggers.'"

After working his way through college, Jason decided, as Paul Robeson did, to go to law school. "I worked in civil rights law for a few years. It was exciting, but I became frustrated with the law's proclivity for preserving the status quo even at the cost of continuing inequities for black people. It was too much for me."

"I understand," the interviewer inquired, "that Dr. King was another of your heroes?"

"In everything I do, I refer to King's writings, speeches, and especially his actions. He was my reason for turning to the ministry—I even went back to divinity school. King's life enabled me to realize . . . that activism more than legal precedent is the key to racial reform. You can't just talk about, meet about, and pray about racial discrimination. You have to confront it, challenge it, do battle, and then—"

"That is what *you* do," the interviewer interrupted, "but what if every black person in this country adopted your militant stance? Would racism end?"

Jason shook his head. "Universal black militance would end black people. Whites could not stand it. Even now, many whites treat a militant speech like a revolutionary conspiracy. When even a small group of blacks gather for some purpose more serious than a card party, whites get upset. Dr. King was deemed a militant black, as was Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, too many others. . . .

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"Militant black leadership," Jason continued, "is like being on a bomb squad. It requires confidence in your skills. One mistake, and you're gone! Sometimes you're gone whether or not you make a mistake."

The interviewer nodded. "But what are you saying about Quad A, given the history of black groups? I think of Marcus Garvey's 'back to Africa' movement of the 1920s, and Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, both of which floundered after their leaders were imprisoned or killed."

"Quad A ain't no one-man band," acknowledged Jason, lapsing from his customary formal speech. "It's dangerous for black organizations to rely on a messianic leader. That's why even though Quad A started in my church, we've delegated leadership widely, so if anything happens to me, one of my deputies is capable of taking over. We won't miss a beat."

Now miraculously recovered from his injuries and scheduled to return to his leadership post in New York in a few days, Jason was no longer in physical pain. But he was suffering intense emotional distress as he considered how Quad A and black people generally would respond to an unexpected manifestation of his vaunted independence.

As he sat in his hospital room staring out at the Arizona desert, he saw the source of his emotional turmoil drive into the parking lot. Through his window high up in the sanatorium complex, he had an unobstructed view of her sky-blue Z-240 sports car ("my one extravagance until you," she had told him) turning into the parking area, hesitating at a seemingly filled row, and then whipping into what had to be the only open space in the huge lot. . . .

... He owed his life to Sheila's medical skill, supplemented with her almost constant care. The anguish he was feeling now was caused not by his injuries, but by the doctor who had been responsible for healing them. That anguish was compounded by the debt he owed the dedicated group of deputies who, despite dire predictions that Quad A would collapse without Jason's presence, had kept the movement together during his long convalescence. He knew they expected him to return to the racial wars unencumbered by a new love—particularly one not a member of their group. A majority of those deputies were black women. "Why not?" he had always responded when the question of their gender was raised. "They're all smart, hard-working, committed." "And," a news reporter once added, "fiercely loyal to you."

It was true. They were loyal and knew he loved and respected them as they did him. Their relationships had many dimensions, none sexual. Romance was an occasional temptation, but Jason's years in the church had taught him about the troubles that followed romance with women in a congregation. . . .

After Jason's injury, the deputies had selected Neva Brownlee as acting director. Daughter of a prominent Washington, D.C., surgeon, Neva had resigned a tenured professorship at the Howard Business School to join Quad A soon after Jason organized it. As his chief associate, her managerial and fund-raising skills, together with Jason's leadership, had made Quad A an effective force. Despite the deputies' suspicions that Jason's feeling for Neva—and hers for him—might be personal, their relationship had not developed beyond mutual respect for each other's competence.

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His doctors had requested Neva not to contact him about Quad A business during what they feared would be a long and perilous recuperation. They did not want to hurt his chances for a full recovery in the quiet of the remote Arizona sanatorium. Neva responded to her appointment as acting director by redistributing and sharing authority even more widely than had been the case under Jason's leadership. . . .

One day, while having lunch with her mother, Neva poked absently at her tuna salad as she explained that she had not heard from Jason in the more than ten months since he had left. "I don't think it's his fault—but, Mom, I must admit Jason's silence is strange. Even a few words of support and encouragement would be helpful. He must know this. It's not at all like him."

"Is that all?" her mother probed.

"Oh, Mom, not you, too! The Quad A deputies are treating me as though I've been jilted by Jason. We were working associates, friends, and that's it!"

"It's understandable. You two worked so closely together—and you do make a splendid-looking couple. No wonder some of your friends were skeptical when you told them you were joining Quad A just out of respect for the work Jason was doing."

"I guess it may have seemed that way, considering I was giving up a tenured position at a good school, selling my house, and moving myself from D.C. to New York. But, Mom, I was really excited about Quad A's potential for a new kind of civil rights organization. We look to ourselves for everything—skills, money, workers, lawyers, everything! My feelings for Jason are based on mutual respect and the strong bonds of friendship that developed over our years of shared struggle. I love my work, and I like and respect the man I work with." Neva paused, then added wryly,

"Given my romantic history, that may be about the best I can hope for in a relationship."

Her mother nodded. Both recalled Neva's disastrous marriage soon after she finished college. . . . A handsome, talented man, her husband had been immature and threatened by her intelligence. A second marriage had also ended when Neva discovered her husband engaged in an affair that had preceded her meeting him and not ended after the marriage.

"Two failed marriages in seven years told me that my work—not romance or marriage—would prove the reliable foundation in my life. Oh, I brooded about it for a time, but finally came to agree with you when you said to me one day when I was really low, 'Listen, honey, it takes an extraordinary man to be better than no man at all.' And, Mom, I think of that each time a friend's seemingly enviable relationship breaks up because the man has acted like a bully, a dog, or a fool."

"That's good advice," her mother cautioned. "But it doesn't tell me how you feel about Jason's silence. Have you tried to reach him?"

"Several times. It's impossible to get through, and he doesn't answer my letters." Neva sighed. "Well, the medical reports indicate he should be released quite soon. I'll just have to wait—and so, Mom," she smiled, "let's stop the interrogation and talk about something else."

Under other circumstances, Neva and Sheila might have been close friends. They certainly shared similar characteristics: intelligence, persistence, and commitment. Their backgrounds, though, were the exact reverse of what one might have expected. Neva, though black, was the child of professional parents who raised her in mainly white, upper-class neighborhoods. Until she entered Howard University, she had attended mainly white schools. Her interest in racial issues developed late, but finally gained priority over her business ambitions.

Sheila, on the other hand, white, and born privileged, had been raised by her mother in a succession of small apartments in Queens and the Bronx. When she was two, Sheila's wealthy father had abandoned her mother who, fiercely proud, refused to seek her husband's financial help, determining to raise Sheila alone while working in secretarial jobs. Sheila learned both how her black and Hispanic peers felt and reacted to racial discrimination, and came to understand herself the meaning of minority status. She was not ashamed to be white, but her closest friends growing up were black or Hispanic. Majoring in black studies in college reflected both her academic interests and her already developed commitment to racial issues.

With her mother's tutoring, Sheila's quick mind and compulsive study habits enabled her to transcend the uneven education available in the public schools. Aided by a series of scholarships, she resolved her dual attraction to both law and medicine by earning degrees in both professions. Medicine had proven the greater challenge, and her work with traumatic injuries at Harlem Hospital had won her both respect among her peers and a staff position at the Arizona hospital that specialized in the treatment of the seriously injured. It was there that Jason was brought and placed under her care.

Jason glanced at his watch. Sheila had left town for two weeks and promised to return at four that afternoon. It was now just a few minutes after two. Did she plan to surprise him by arriving early? Not like her. She knew as well as he what was at stake. He watched her leave the car and then walk away from his building and toward a small park that overlooked the artificial lake that provided welcome relief to the endless cactus and desert.

During the last few months when he had been able to walk again, Sheila had accompanied him to that small park on innumerable occasions. And there she had announced one evening, "You know, Jason, your recovery is going extremely well, but I'm turning over your medical care to another doctor."

At his look of hurt and surprise, she explained, "It's both unwise and unethical to have a love affair with your patient."

Jason protested, "We've talked, we've held hands, but there hasn't been any, you know—"

"There hasn't been any, and, that's the point," Sheila said. "I don't know where our relationship is going, but I can't pretend that seeing you as frequently as I do is solely for your care and treatment. Freed of my medical responsibility, I hope we can be friends, discuss all the things we share and care about, and see where it leads."

After that evening, they walked a great deal and talked daily on that park bench. As their feeling for each other grew, they found they didn't have to talk all the time but were comfortable sitting in silence, looking out over the water toward the mountains far off in the distance. Even after acknowledging their love for one another, they recognized that the social barriers to their relationship were as serious as those facing Romeo and Juliet. "But," Jason assured Sheila—and she agreed—"unlike Shakespeare's doomed lovers, we are not teenagers. We are mature adults committed to our professional missions in life."

Now Sheila sat on their bench and contemplated alone the scene they had so often shared. Seeing her even from a distance reminded him of how much he had missed her. He was tempted to go down, join her in the park, and tell her so. He hesitated. She had carved out this time to think, to prepare for his response to her proposal, made before she left town, that she return to New York with him.

"Despite our love," she had said, "I think I know all the reasons you may never ask me to marry you. It is such a hateful paradox. You have fought racial barriers imposed by whites. Yet your concern about one erected by blacks threatens our future together. I cannot and will not change what I am: a white woman. But, Jason, I reject all the privileges society has bestowed upon me because of my race, and accept willingly all the burdens of yours, including a decision that you must return to your work without me. This is presumptuous, but I want to go back with you. I think I can find work in New York, and I know I can make you happy."

Jason glanced at his watch. A quarter to four. He looked out the window. Sheila was still sitting in the park, but in a few moments she would leave and enter his building. He could almost hear her familiar knock at his door.

Jason closed his eyes and, as much in inquiry as in prayer, asked, "Lord, why was I spared? By every estimate, the bomb that exploded near the podium where I was standing should have killed me. Others died. I live. Why? Surely, I was not saved to fall in love with Sheila and make her, rather than my death, the instrument that destroys Quad A?"

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Long before receiving the anonymous letter with the photograph of Jason and Sheila seated on the park bench, their arms entwined, Neva had sensed that his long silence reflected something more than hospital policy. The picture, though grainy and blurred, clearly revealed two people very much in love. The writer of the typed note threatened to send copies of the print to the other Quad A deputies unless Neva purchased the negative at a large price which she knew would only guarantee future demands for more money.

Requesting that she not be disturbed, Neva closed her office door and for an hour allowed alternate waves of pain and rage to sweep through her. She was beyond tears. "How could you do this to me, to us, to them?" There was no answer, and she knew deep down that no answer would suffice. She recognized as well that time permitted neither grief nor rage. It would be better if Quad A's staff learned from her about the

photograph and heard her deny its implications. She resolved to meet with them later today and remind them of the seriousness of Jason's injuries and that the note said the woman was his doctor. Jason hugged everybody. This embrace could have been gratitude rather than passion. She would urge them to wait until he returned to explain. She, too, would try to wait.

Late that night, Neva reviewed the long day's events with her mother.

"That was a courageous thing you did today, Neva. I'm proud of you."

"I don't deserve praise, Mom. I'm so angry, so hurt. I tried to explain that photo, but as impossible as it seems, I'm afraid that Jason, my boss, my hero—yes, someone who, if things had worked out, might have become my love—this man is going with a white woman."

"You know, Mom, we black women are always being reminded of how unworthy we are. We're never smart enough or beautiful enough or supportive, sexy, understanding, and resourceful enough to deserve a good black man."

"But, Neva," her mother protested, "suppose Jason's doctor had been black, would you feel less hurt?"

"You're damn right I would! Sure, I'd be disappointed that, after working four years with me, he chose someone else without even giving our relationship a chance, but I wouldn't feel rejected as a person."

"You shouldn't jump to conclusions about Jason that you urged Quad A's members to put aside until he returns," her mother counseled.

"Oh, he loves her all right! And he *will* bring her back here. I know Jason."

"And will you then resign?"

Neva shook her head. "I just don't know. I'm afraid Quad A won't make it without me. . . . Moreover, it would simply confirm what many in the group will think: that Jason has betrayed the organization and me."

"In fact," she continued "he may have discovered what I've been trying to get across to Quad A's deputies during the last year: that true love knows no boundaries of race and politics. For black women in particular to hold the view that we can never marry a white man is the real legacy of slavery and an unjustified restriction on choices already restricted by society's devastation of so many black men."

"If you can believe it, Mom, I've been urging more tolerance of black people who choose interracial love and marriage."

"And now Jason has given you the chance to prove you're ready to practice what you preach," her mother said. "It's a terrible choice, but

one you needn't make tonight. Why not wait a few days before you decide?"

"Waiting isn't my style, Mom. And I've been working my tail off for over a year building this organization and readying it for a big push when Jason returns. Now he has put all of our efforts in jeopardy, and for what? No, Mom, I can't just wait, though Lord knows what I should do!"

"I have faith you'll do what's best, dear."

"Remember, Mom," Neva said wearily, "you warned me once that in a racist society, our black men's self-esteem is under constant attack, so that black women should be a source of strength and comfort for them."

"I continue to believe that's our responsibility."

"Perhaps," Neva said quietly. "But, Mom, how do we accept our responsibility in the face of betrayal and maintain the respect that was a basis for love in the first place?" . . .

Sheila sat staring at the lake without really seeing it. The two-week "vacation" she had told Jason she was taking to give him space to consider her marriage offer was only part of the reason for her West Coast trip. She had also been searching for a new job. Hospital officials, appalled at her so obviously having some sort of relationship with a patient, and a black one at that, had suspended her, allegedly for violating their doctor-patient regulations. She knew she had been scrupulous in her dealings with Jason while he was her patient and understood that racism was the real reason for their censure. She told them as much in her letter of resignation, an action that—as she had discovered on her trip—would not make it easier to find another position.

At this moment, though, her thoughts were on Jason and the agony her proposal was causing him. "What," she asked herself, "does a man who is decisive and fearless do when he is rendered indecisive and afraid?" She knew he was deeply concerned about the fate of Quad A, of the black community, and of his place in history. But he was, after all, Jason Warfield, the last black hero, fearless and decisive. He would marry her and make it work for him, for them. Won't he? Shouldn't he? Is he not his own man?

For a brief moment, her spirits soared on the wings of optimism and then, pierced by an arrow of reality, spiraled down to earth with a pit-of-the-stomach-jarring thud. Why had she done it? Love was the easy answer, but she was old enough to understand the thrust of the title to Tina Turner's hit song "What's Love Got to Do with It?" What, indeed? Love is more than an idle emotion. Real love connotes commitment and the acceptance of responsibility.

She had offered to marry him, she said, to give him a choice, but it was the cruelest of Hobson's choices—the kind of choice, she realized, white people give blacks all the time. “You can have this job, promotion, house, membership, provided you subordinate your thinking to ours and don't make waves on racial issues. Be acceptable and, if possible, grateful.”

Her proposal was not as condescending as many; but had she been totally honest, her marriage proposal should have been, “Jason, I love you and want to marry you. In conformity with the age-old pattern of black sacrifice to serve white needs, will you risk your leadership role in Quad A and the respect you've earned in the black community in return for my love?”

Sheila shuddered and shook her head. “No!” she said aloud to the desert air. She simply would not use her love for him or his for her as the basis for perpetuating in their relationship the pattern of black sacrifice. She must give him his freedom whether he wanted it or not. Her decision made, Sheila rose wearily from the park bench and started toward the hospital. Then, eyes brimming with tears and her determination wavering, she returned to the bench and cried. Finally, she dabbed her eyes dry with her handkerchief. It was almost four o'clock. Jason was expecting her.

One of Jason's admonitions to Quad A members was to make sacrifices for the things you believe in. Well, she was giving up Jason for her belief in what? Not Quad A, whose members would never believe her love for him was real. Not even for Jason, whose terrible ambivalence had made her decision necessary. No, she was making this sacrifice for her belief that it was right. Painful but right.

The knock on his door relieved Jason's tension. Uncertain though he remained, he felt he would make the right decision.

“Come in Sheila,” he called.

The door opened, and a soft voice asked “May I come in?”

“Neva, how did you get—?” Jason's voice trailed off in the shock of seeing her. He realized suddenly how much he'd missed her.

“Hello, Jason,” said Neva as calmly as she could in the equal shock of seeing him after so many months. “I decided it was time to take you home, and I flew out this morning.” She bit her lip, fighting to control emotions that—kept in rein since she had received the letter—now threatened to overwhelm her.

“It's great to see you.” Jason was standing now.

“I'm afraid, Jason, that what some of us consider bad news travels fast.” She opened her bag and brought out the blackmail letter, the grainy photograph, and a copy of the statement she had made to top Quad A

members. Her hand trembling, she handed him the envelope. “I think you should take a look at these, and then whatever you want to tell me I guess I'm ready to hear.”

Jason felt weaker than he had in weeks. He read both letter and statement and then held them in his hand, wondering what to say.

Neva spoke first. “Lord knows, I have tried to understand—but, Jason, how could you allow yourself to fall in love with her? Did you think what it would mean to all the black women who idolize you, who pray daily for your recovery, who view you as their model of what black men should be?”

Neva continued, seeking to answer her question. “Oh, I realize that Quad A's work is frenetic, high-energy, intense, and crisis-oriented. Here, on the other hand, the atmosphere is relaxed and calm, and the relationship with your doctor is one of dependency and intense trust and intimacy. In this setting, you were far more vulnerable to a romantic relationship.”

“Neva,” Jason interrupted, “you don't have to make excuses for me.”

“You misunderstand. I am saying that I can imagine how any seriously injured man might fall in love with his beautiful female doctor, but, Jason, you're not just any man. You are our ideal, our hero.”

“It's a title I never wanted and should not have accepted. . . . I am Jason Warfield. I am not God in heroic form come to save you. The best I can do is to try and save myself and perhaps in my struggle serve as model for you and others as you seek salvation in your own lives.”

“But what kind of model are you Jason when you preach taking care of the sisters and then forsake us for a white woman? It's a departure from everything you said you stood for. I understand love is blind, but I don't see why you want to enter what will be a conflicted, uncomfortable relationship!

“Damn you for a hypocrite!” she said hotly. “Isn't it you who are always cautioning black men, ‘Watch out lest the white woman come to represent a rite of passage to the status of whiteness? Because she's the model of beauty and femininity’”—Neva was mimicking Jason's deep voice, her arms folded, her legs apart in one of his characteristic stances—“a white woman will appear to provide a black man with access to formerly restricted areas and also symbolize achievement. In particular, black men who acquire a measure of education, wealth, or status feel that dating white women is like moving out of the ghetto—a way of doing better for yourself.”

"Just calm down, Neva," Jason said. "I feel bad about disappointing you—and the others at Quad A. But I don't have to stand here and take your abuse. Hell, I've never advocated hate for whites as a component of our black pride program. Of course, we emphasize and encourage strong black families as an essential for survival in a hostile racist society. But Quad A has never barred membership to interracial couples."

"No, Jason, but we do every damned thing we can to encourage black men"—she was mimicking him again—"to look to the sisters," as you said, 'and do not forsake them.' And, 'in black women,' you used to tell us, 'you will find both counsel and civility, love and support, friendship and faithfulness, probity and integrity. For the black man, the black woman is the equivalent of home.'

"There!" Neva concluded. "Just to show you what a fool I was, I memorized that homily of yours, believed it, preached it to others when—evidently—I should have been shouting it to you."

Despite herself, the tears were streaming down her face. Jason felt close to tears himself. He lowered his voice. "You didn't have to, Neva. I believed myself what I told others. I came here to get well, not to fall in love. I didn't want it to happen. To the extent that I considered entering a serious personal relationship with anyone, I guess it was with you."

It was, he realized immediately, a well-intended but ill-timed admission of his earlier interest in her.

"Now you tell me! Now you tell me!" Neva sputtered. "Is that supposed to be a compliment? Am I and other black women the *Avis* of sexual choice for you black men? 'Hey, black women, you are still Number Two! You will simply have to try harder!' Give me a break!"

Unable to bear looking at Jason, Neva turned and stared out the window. Her breath was coming in sharp stabs, and her nose was running. She started to open her bag for a handkerchief, then stopped. To hell with it! she thought. The last thing I care about is looking good for that—that traitor. "Is it any wonder," she said more to the desert landscape than to him, "that so many black women view black men who choose white women with deep skepticism? Is it any goddamned wonder?"

"Neva, save the black woman rhetoric. I've heard it all before. But having a bomb go off almost under your feet that kills your friends and damn near kills you can change your outlook on a lot of things. Sheila literally put me back together. I was grateful, of course, but then I realized she's quite a woman, quite a human being. I feel really alive in her presence."

Neva turned from the window and stared at Jason, hearing him but not believing the strange words coming from that familiar voice. "You betrayed us! You told us over and over these five years that Quad A's work is too important to risk a relationship with me or one of the other black deputies. But now all your concerns evaporate, become mere 'image,' after a few months of close contact with a white woman. For her, you're willing to risk destruction of your organization as well as the hopes of vast numbers of black people."

Even through her anger, Neva realized that Jason had already answered her question. She tried to calm down and made her question more general. "Jason, tell me, why do the very men black women pray for—sensitive; successful warriors for truth and community, courage and integrity—always marry white women—women whose interest in our culture just happens always to include taking our most desirable men?"

Jason felt Neva's distress and wanted to help her. "I realize this is tough for you to hear. It was tough for me. I've imagined all manner of fantasies to explain how this could have happened."

"Such as?"

"Well, you said yourself that recovering from my almost fatal injuries left me vulnerable in a way I was not back at Quad A. What if my injuries caused by the bomb blast had included blindness? What if, while I was recuperating in this remote place, Sheila had come as doctor and then become, as she has, the most important person in my life? My inability to see would not have insulated me from her warmth, her wisdom, her grace, and, after a time, her love."

Neva's sigh of dismay was close to a cry of pain. But Jason decided to continue. "Despite my oft-stated resolve to remain committed to Quad A, I might have fallen in love with Sheila's presence and then her person, without ever knowing until I regained my sight that she was not my ultimate African queen, as her melodiously throaty voice, her knowledge of black history, and her love of black culture would have led me to believe. If, in short, I had not realized Sheila was white, could I not plead some form of romantic entrapment?"

Neva sighed again and slowly shook her head. "Your deception defense won't work, Jason. In fact, it is more than a little insulting to me and to all black women. The sum of my existence is not confined to a knowledge of black history and a love of black culture. My identity cannot be so readily appropriated by *any* white woman—to the extent that even a blind black man would mistake her for me."

The silence that ensued after Neva's statement was interrupted by another knock on the door. This time Jason was sure he knew who it was. He sighed.

"Come in, Sheila."

For just an instant, Sheila was startled to see Jason had a visitor. Then she realized instinctively who the woman must be, why she was there.

Establishing her claim to Jason, she kissed him quickly on the forehead, then turned to Neva. "You must be Neva Brownlee. I've seen you on the news talking about Quad A. Welcome to Sanctus Sanatorium!" she said, trying for ease in what was clearly a thorny situation.

"So," Neva stated flatly, "you're Dr. Sheila Bainbridge."

Then, with one accord, the two women turned expectantly toward Jason. He, deep in his self-inflicted distress, hoped, for just an instant, that some undiscovered but devastating component of his injury might strike him down and remove him from this impossible predicament.

"Neva," Jason began slowly, looking at her, "I at least owe you candor. Sheila has been away for two weeks so we could each try to decide the future of what you have learned is our romance. Despite the sleazy source of your information, that romance is based on a love that is real. I am hoping we can be married soon."

As Jason looked intently at Neva, Sheila felt like an intruder eavesdropping on a conversation by her lover about their love—and thus hardly welcomed hearing either Jason's protestation of love or his decision to marry her. Deciding to follow his lead, she also addressed Neva.

"Ms. Brownlee, Jason is right. We are in love. But I have decided that I can't marry Jason—not because of his race, but because of mine. I know and think I understand how black people, and particularly black women, feel about losing one of their most able men in an interracial marriage. I'm afraid it would destroy Quad A. I simply will not do that to Jason or to black people."

Neva was furious. "Just a minute, Dr. Bainbridge! You need not play the martyr. We can survive and continue to grow whatever you and Jason do."

Sheila responded evenly, trying not to reveal her emotions. "My martyrdom, as you call it, may be as objectionable to you as your self-righteousness is to me. We both have strong attachments to the black community. And we both have suffered because of them."

"Given your knowledge of black history," Neva said "you will understand that Jason is not the first black leader who has failed to live up to

the people's expectations and hopes. I doubt he'll be the last. He has, in fact, provided us with a needed, if unwanted, reminder that human heroes have feet of clay."

Neva's words hit Jason like a blow to the stomach, taking his breath, rendering him speechless. He remembered—too late—why he had determined not to get caught up in any romantic situations at Quad A. And saw as well that he had himself fallen into the interracial trap he had warned other black men to stay clear of.

"When you reveal your relationship with Dr. Bainbridge," Neva continued, turning to him, "Quad A may have a rough time for a while. They'll know her only as 'that white woman.' But if you both return and she joins you in our work, there's just a chance that Quad A can come to terms with it, just as many black families do when one of their children marries a white person. I assume, Jason, that Dr. Bainbridge has qualities—other than her race—that attract you. In time, Quad A members may recognize them as well. Since, as I understand it, she is a lawyer as well as a doctor, surely she has skills we could use."

"You can't be serious!" Sheila interjected. "Quad A certainly wouldn't accept me as a staff member."

"On the contrary, Dr. Bainbridge, that may be the only way you can gain acceptance and perhaps prove that your concern for our cause is not limited to capturing one of our best men."

"And what will you do, Neva, if we both return?" Jason asked.

Neva's control escaped her. "Isn't it a bit late in the game for you to become concerned about my welfare, Jason? After not hearing from you for a year, I assumed you didn't care how I felt as long as I kept your organization running for you. I'll do what is best for Quad A. Someone," she added, "has to give the organization priority over their personal feelings."

"You seem to forget, Ms. Brownlee," Sheila said with a hint of irritation, "I have decided not to return with Jason, and I'm certainly not going to disrupt Quad A by trying to join its staff."

"Oh, you'll return with him," said Neva. "Jason can be very persuasive when he wants to be. And I gather he wants *you*! I don't think either of us can do anything about that."

She stood and headed for the door. "I'm planning to take the late flight back to New York, I expect you'll let me know when you plan to arrive. I'll try to keep things going until—"

"Neva," Jason interrupted, "I owe you a great deal."

"Yes, Jason, you do, and I wish you didn't. I'll see you in New York." After Neva closed the door, Sheila and Jason looked at one another for a long time.

"Well," Jason said finally, "Neva was right. Quad A needs your skills. I hope you will join our struggle."

She hesitated. "I would love to work with you and your group—if they'd have me—but I don't think I can compete with Neva. It's obvious she came to see you as much out of devotion to Quad A as out of love for you."

"You don't have to compete with her," Jason assured Sheila. "We can get married right away."

"I've never believed the law of marriage could ensure a continuance of love."

"Then I'll resign from Quad A," he said with determination.

"I know you mean that out here, where we've spent so much time together, away from the real world. But you must return to your world, the only world you know. What will happen to our relationship then? It's awfully risky, Jason."

He took her in his arms and whispered, "Life is a risk, Sheila—and Quad A and you and Neva and I are all part of life. We might as well face up to whatever it brings."

Holding Jason close, Sheila took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Neva was right. You can be very convincing. But this has been quite an ordeal," she added, moving away, "and you should get some rest. I'll come back tomorrow."

She kissed Jason, again on the forehead, but with far less confidence than she had an hour earlier.

"And you'll make our plane reservations?" Jason asked.

Sheila hesitated at the door. Shaking her head in disbelief, she heard herself say, "Yes, Jason, I will make the reservations."

He sank down on the bed and for a long time simply lay there, staring at the ceiling, unseeing and numb. Both Sheila and Neva deserved better than the unheroic mess he had created by trying to do right in a situation where every choice was a snare, every decision a trap.

....

He had prayed for life to continue the fight for his people's rights and well-being—a fight based on his confidence that he would intuitively know what direction to take, what policy to adopt, which to reject. Now his confidence was undermined by, of all things, an interracial romance.

Well, he thought, white folks will be pleased or, at least, relieved. Somehow, the once unthinkable act for a black man—marriage to a white woman—was taken as proof that black men in such relationships were, despite their militant rhetoric, not really dangerous. On the other hand, blacks—and particularly black women—felt generally as Neva did: betrayed.

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Jason pulled himself up, soaked a towel in cold water from the washbasin, and buried his face in its redeeming coolness. He felt better—not heroic, but better. He went to a closet and pulled out his suitcase.

As he began packing, the words of "I Don't Feel No Ways Tired" ran through his head—a favorite old gospel song, he remembered, of Neva's. Then, encouraged by its message and—strangely—by his memory of her humming it as she worked, he opened his mouth and sang:

I don't feel no ways tired.

I've come too far from where I started from.

Nobody told me that the road would be easy.

I don't believe He brought me this far, to leave me.