

Love's Hurricanes

Chapter 1

Friday

Willie

"This damnable affliction, Willie! I can't remember: Have I told you about Chessie's plan?"

The sun, sinking blood-red into the horizon, trails a shimmering red ribbon on a calm sea: Sailor's delight, another perfect Jamaican day to follow. Save for Max's black-and-tan Yorkie curled contentedly at his feet and Chessie's gaudy parrot half-dozing on its perch, they are alone on the sprawling flagstone patio. In the lingering afternoon heat, Willie is in shorts and a white polo shirt; Max, sunk into his white Adirondack chair, unfailingly wears a blue-striped seersucker suit and a tieless blue shirt for sundowners.

"No, Dad. What plan?"

"She wants to take me away, Willie. Thinks I could get better care in Miami."

"Dad, is there something I don't know about? I mean, you all right? Is there something new?"

"No, no, I'm healthy as a horse, except for, y'know, the eyesight. Cataracts thickening a bit. But that's not a problem. It's this Alzheimer's thing. She's found some place in Florida for . . . for people like me."

"Dad, that's crazy! Tookie and K-Bird give you better care right here than you'd ever get somewhere else."

"I think that too, Willie. I want to end my days here. Not soon, either, by the way. Built this place, y'know, for my family but for m'self, too. My refuge from the madding world. I love Chessie, truly I do, but she can't have her way on this."

"Of course not, Dad."

"Most of the time she gets her way because I can't stop her. Can't keep my mind fixed on it, y'know?"

Understandable, Willie thinks. He arrived yesterday for a long weekend's visit, and Dad has seemed somewhat more remote than last summer. This evening, though, he's focused, the old blue eyes kindled under bushy eyebrows. A muscle pulses in the taut jaw. "Willie, you've got to find a way to let me stay here!"

"Dad, I will. I promise. I'll find out more. You've got to stay here."

"Good." He heaves a sigh; his shoulders slump, the jaw slackens. "I'm glad you've come. How was the flight down? Pity you couldn't have shared a ride from the airport with a client we're expecting."

The moment has slipped away. Dad has forgotten already that his youngest son arrived

yesterday; the imagined visit of advertising clients is a recurring fantasy.

“Avast, mates!” the parrot squawks. “Hello, Chessie!”

“Hello, *Horacio*. Hello, Max.” She comes to his chair, leans in from behind to nuzzle him, rumples his hair coquettishly and reaches around to give him a kiss.

“Thank you, m’love. I’ll take another of those, please.”

She comes around to sit on the arm of the chair for a very reciprocal, lingering kiss, then stands again. “Lovely sunset. Has Willie gotten your rum-and-ginger? Good. I’ll just pour my *albariño* and come join you.”

“No, please take my chair,” Willie says; “I’ll get your wine.” The little bar is just inside the house; from that vantage, they look the perfect couple. She wears loose, filmy slacks, not quite black enough to be opaque, and a pastel blouse that clings to a still-shapely figure. She must have been ravishing two decades ago, Willie thinks, when Dad abandoned Mom for her.

Living with his mother after the divorce, an eight-year-old, Willie resented Chessie more than his older two siblings did. She waited patiently for acceptance, never suggesting even after Mom’s death that she be called by any maternal name. Just as well: His real second mother has always been Tookie, their tireless cook-housekeeper.

He pours himself a glass of her Spanish wine, too, bright greenish yellow; she accepts hers and holds it up to find its golden tinges in the setting sun. “*Salud*, Willie! Have you found time today for your project? I have a book of Spanish tales whose simplicity might be helpful.”

He’s begun translating classic children’s fables into Latin, finding it harder than teaching high school students to read Virgil or Ovid. “I’d love to have a look, thanks. Maybe tomorrow afternoon?”

“I’ll bring them.”

“Maybe you can read a few aloud.” Dad seems to have caught up with the conversation. “I love to hear you read Spanish, m’dear. The loving tongue, y’know?”

“I’ll bring a poem especially for you, *vida mia*.”

It is such a scene of domestic bliss that Willie begins to wonder if Dad is imagining things. A moment later, when Tookie’s bell summons them to dinner; Dad offers his arm with that gallant way of his; Chessie lets him lead her to the dining room and hold her chair. When he and Dad are seated, Tookie and Miss Angelina, the current second maid, stand heads down at the kitchen door, waiting for grace before serving.

“*Que el Señor bendice estos alimentos para que comamos.*” Chessie crosses herself.

“Amen,” Willie says.

“Amen,” echoes Dad.

“Tell me about Marnie and the children, Willie,” says Chessie over Tookie’s peppery pumpkin soup. “They’re visiting her parents?” She seems genuinely interested; it’s one of her gifts. He tries to scrutinize her: She doesn’t look or act any different. If she’s scheming to dismantle this little paradise, she disguises it well.

“It’s a three-day weekend in Ohio. You two had them this summer; it’s Marnie’s folks’

turn. They want to take them to a corn maze, which is a big thing in Ohio. I just had the urge to come look in on Dad and you, do a little writing.”

“Have you heard from Josh lately?”

“I should ask you. He’s down pretty often, isn’t he?”

“*Es verdad*. He was here last month, wasn’t it, darling?”

Drawing Dad back into the conversation? Willie wonders. Or underlining his frailty?

“Can’t keep track of time like that, y’know. He brought me some nice crisp apples, though, so it must have been fall. What month is it now?”

“October, Dad.”

“Then it was September. Can’t grow apples here. Not cold enough. Josh brings a few almost every time. I love ‘em.”

“I’ll bring you some myself, Dad, next time. And how’s Sis? We don’t talk often, but she calls you regularly, doesn’t she?”

“Seems fine. Called just a week or two ago. Tells me about my other grands, y’know?”

“She calls every Sunday,” says Chessie. “Your father knows that when I go to Mass in Black River, and Tookie goes to church here, Lissie will call.”

Chessie rings the bell that they’re ready for the fish. Miss Angelina appears to clear the soup dishes, and Tookie herself brings on the platter with a handsome snapper in her signature peanut sauce. Chessie serves with graceful ease, dismissing Miss Angelina with a wave of her hand and letting Willie hand Dad’s plate to him.

“Chessie,” Willie asks, “you must get bored, just you and Dad here alone. You’re a city girl at heart.”

“Not at all. Max bought us a very good videotape player that brings the city to us.”

“Amazing technology,” says Dad. “A whole Hollywood movie on a thing the size of a paperback, big as life on the TV screen. I wish I had that account; I’d turn my wordsmiths loose on it.”

“He’s especially fond of the oldies,” says Chessie. “*Gone with the Wind; From Here to Eternity*.”

“Sounds a little boring to me,” Willie says.

“No, no. We found a service that mails us six at a time, as soon as they’re available.”

“*The English Patient*,” says Dad. “Great scenery, desert fighting, defusing mines. And *Evita*. I remember her. Introduced at some soirée in New York. I was a young man. Hoped to snag the Argentina account. No luck. Lovely lady, but hard as nails.”

“Max dozes now and then, but he seems to wake up for the best parts, don’t you, darling?”

“And you, Chessie?” Willie asks. “I remember your going to private screenings of the latest films, don’t I? Someplace in New York with a bit of wine and cheese before the cinema?”

“You have a good memory. It was at Max’s club. Wasn’t it, *cariño*?”

“It was,” says Dad. “Great place to chat up clients. But last movie I remember was here. *Titanic*. Superb. If I’d known they were making it, I’d have persuaded them to have the men smoke Jamaican cigars on that slanting deck while the women and children headed for the lifeboats.”

Willie decides to take the bull by the horns. “Chessie, Dad tells me you’re thinking of taking him to Florida.”

Bad timing: Chessie’s face freezes. He realizes Tookie has come into the dining room. “Another Red Stripe, Mist’ Max? Marse Willie?”

“That might be nice, thank you,” Dad starts, but Chessie cuts him off.

“You know that will get you up in the middle of the night.”

“You’re right, dear. No thanks, Tookie.” He turns to Willie. “Try to limit myself these days, y’know? One rum at sundowners, one beer at dinner. Drank a little harder when I was your age. I remember some terrific night clubs in Miami.”

Tookie retreats to the kitchen. Chessie waits until the kitchen door swings shut. “He’s always enjoyed Florida. Haven’t you, *cariño*?”

Dad’s serene smile is one that savors memories. “We had a condo there, didn’t we? Maybe still do? Haven’t been there in years.”

“We do, love.” She turns to Willie. “Yes, we think a change of venue may be appropriate; a different level of care.”

“That’s hard to believe,” Willie says. “Seems he’s well taken care of right here. Aren’t you, Dad?”

“Everyone looks out for me, y’know. Can’t complain at all.”

“So you don’t want to move to Florida?”

“Willie,” Chessie breaks in, “Max doesn’t always recall details of our plans. Do you, *vida mia*?”

“Loved that condo,” says Dad, with that same smile. “Nice view of the city, lit up at night.”

Miss Angelina comes to clear the dinner dishes. “We can talk later, Willie,” says Chessie.

Halfway down the long driveway, tucked in amongst head-high bougainvillea, is a stone bench Dad had built years ago. Willie remembers coming here to be consoled by Tookie in the early years after Mom’s death. When he looked especially sad she would look up from her cooking to raise an eyebrow, glance in the direction of the drive, and wait for him to wink that he would meet her here. “It’s gonna be *irie*, Marse Willie; gonna be okay,” she would say, and give him a hug. Raised-eyebrow-glance-wink became a code to meet in their special place.

Tonight he goes to his room after dinner, waits a few minutes, then walk out to wait for her to join him, the dishes done and Miss Angelina sent home. The moon, just past full, is up now in the eastern sky behind him; he watches her approach. There is grey in her hair now, and the years have thickened her, but not nearly as much as most Jamaican women; her dark face is still softly handsome, motherly.

It is she who needs consoling; her voice is choked. "It's true, Marse Willie. She thinks I don't know, but she fergits it's me that collects the mail. Envelopes began comin' a few months ago."

She reaches into the pocket of her skirt to hand him list of laboriously penciled names; he holds the paper up to catch the moonlight through the bougainvillea. Mercy Nursing Center. West Gables Long Term Care Center. Saint Eustace Nursing Center. All in Miami. Memorial Long-Term Care Center. Coral Reef Nursing Center. Tookie breaks in when he is only halfway down the page.

"Seems that saint one is what Miss Francesca's picked. How do yu' say it?"

Willie looks back up the list. "Saint Eustace," he says, pronouncing it carefully. "What makes you think that's the one?"

"The others have stopped comin', an' there's somethin' most ever' week from Saint . . . Saint You-stus. An' she's written to them a coupla times, too. Telephoned them, too, when she didn't know I was listenin'. Marse Willie, it just isn't right. We gotta find a way to keep yu' daddy here. It will kill him to take him away."

"I'm going to try, Tookie," he says. He turns on the bench to take her in his arms. She is nearly as tall as he is, her body strong but soft too; she hugs him back, and weeps into his neck. "I'm going to try," he repeats.

"Bless you, Marse Willie. You go on back to the house now."

"You going to be all right, Tookie?"

"Don't yu' worry. I'm just gonna sit here a few minutes, so if anyone is up and about they won't see us together."

Chapter 2

SATURDAY

Willie

“K-Bird, does my father wander around sometimes?”

“Why, he do in fak’, Mist’ Willie. But dat’s no problem.”

K-Bird is Keron Ebanks -- Mister Keron if Willie is being formal, but between the two of them he always uses the village pet name. He is gardener/repair man/pool tender. Dad calls him the manager, whatever that means. Our *factotum*, Willie muses; our Figaro, the one Rossini has sing *Largo al factotum* – make way for the jack-of-all-trades. Willie has thought of calling K-Bird Figaro as a pet name, but he wouldn’t get it. He wonders if they have a pet name for Dad. Probably not. The villagers all love him, but at a respectful distance.

K-Bird, Willie thinks, is as close as he has to a friend here. Given their differences -- education, heritage, affluence – that may not be very close, but they get along and share thoughts. K-Bird works for Dad, but increasingly seems to look to Willie for advice or confirmation. At 27, a decade younger than his siblings, Willie is six-two, clean-shaven, YMCA-trim; lean, with just a hint of his father’s massive chest. K-Bird, maybe a half-dozen years older, shorter and twenty pounds heavier, has a muscular build that never needed a gym.

Most people in this village are light-skinned, a legacy of the days of sail when – the story goes -- a shipwreck of Scottish sailors settled here. K-Bird is even lighter-complected, with a close-cropped auburn beard; what Jamaicans call a ‘ginger man’. His hair must be red too, but he could be bald for all Willie knows: He always wears one of those crazy bulbous Jamaican caps, in black and gold and green, that makes him six inches taller.

They stand by the pump shed, inland behind the house, in the still-shadowless dawn. The morning air is fresh and salt; the murmur of the sea, gently scouring the reef below, is barely audible. It is a quotidian rendezvous when Willie is here. He has taken his matutinal – a brisk beach walk a quarter-mile in the half-dark to the fishing cove and back – and has brought coffee in faded maroon mugs bearing his Wilkinson High School logo.

He wears last night’s shirt with its vaguely Lacoste-like reptile on its chest; Sears shorts; no-name white sneakers. His omnipresent bifocals – later in the day he will switch to prescription sunglasses -- are in an inexpensive aviator frame. A day in the Caribbean sun has already bleached his close-cropped blond hair. K-Bird, barefoot, wears faded blue jeans and a Beastie Boys T-shirt that stretches across his chest. Willie has learned to expect a different T-shirt every morning, from what must be a huge collection, gifts brought him by visitors. This one doesn’t seem anything one of Dad’s friends would bring.

“Have you ever heard the Beastie Boys sing?” he asks.

“No, ba’as. Yu’ know them?”

“Only by name, K-Bird. Not my style.”

The pump and its paraphernalia, where K-Bird begins each morning’s chores, are in a shoulder-high cinder block shed, camouflaged by acridly pungent, tall pink oleanders. It is far enough from the bedrooms that neither the hum nor quiet conversation will waken sleepers.

This slice of the South Coast is a geographical freak, Willie thinks, an arid corner of a tropically lush country. Rainstorms, though rare, hammer the metal roof like lead shot when they come, turning the patio and garden into gargantuan puddles. Dad's Jamaican architect designed oversized roof gutters to channel rainwater through a long umbilical pipe to a stone-lined cistern. Daily, K-Bird pumps that 'sweet water' to a tower tank from which it runs to sink taps. Then he pumps water from a shallow well – near enough the sea to be slightly saline -- to a separate tank for gardening and showers.

Tookie leaves a 12-cup electric coffeemaker charged each night; Willie switches it on before his beach walk. By the time he gets back, the fragrance eddies through the house. He is no connoisseur -- a supermarket blend would smell great -- but even he can appreciate the redolence of Blue Mountain coffee. In the whisper of dawn breeze, the aroma eddies into Max's and Chessie's rooms, and Lissie's and Josh's if they're here. They may take a cup out on the patio or back to read in bed awhile, but they know the drill: Leave two cups for Willie and K-Bird.

He times his matutinal to get back a half-hour after the first break of day, just as the sun shoulders over the mountains to the east and K-Bird comes to pump. At this hour Marnie, if she's here, isn't yet up and ready for a connubial snorkel-swim; the two men have a private half-hour. The time hardly varies: Jamaica is near enough the equator that summer's sunrises are only a half-hour earlier than winter's. He's offered K-Bird an alarm clock, but K-Bird doesn't want one.

"No, mon. De sun be my ala'm. It's reliabl'." The linguist in Willie hears an almost-Irish intonation: broad vowels -- 'man' rhyming with 'mom'; dropped *rs* and *hes*, elided end-consonants. A high mesolect. If he weren't so involved in his Latin-for-kids project, he'd like to study it.

"No t'anks, ba'as." Willie didn't like that 'ba'as' when K-Bird began it: too South African, reeking of apartheid. As a child he was Master Willie. Or Marse Willie, as Tookie still calls him. To K-Bird, he is sometimes Mist' Willie, but more often just 'ba'as,' which he came to recognize not as groveling subordination but as informal politesse, the way some folks at home say 'yessir' with no servility intended.

In the kitchen, before starting to the pumphouse for their morning chat, he pours himself a cup of coffee black, and K-Bird's with the teaspoon of sugar and dash of salt that he favors. Salt? he thinks every time. Tookie has carefully made coffee with the sweet water K-Bird is pumping at this very moment -- and he'd be just as happy with brackish water from the well. *De gustibus non disputandum est*: No arguing about taste.

Willie supposes that like most men in the village K-Bird uses marijuana, *ganja*, which anyone can grow in this hospitable soil and climate. It's illegal, but the government cares mostly about farmers growing for the export trade that gets American attention. The local police don't usually bother people just supplying themselves or their neighbors a daily toke or two.

K-Bird's father-in-law, Chester Moxam, was Dad's first handyman. A sweet man, a lay pastor, who made Willie his pet. Brother Chester. He died in a fishing accident before he was 60, when Willie was ten. Fishing accidents must be the leading cause of death among men in this village; one wouldn't want to run a life insurance company here. Dad, when younger, went to far sea with the fishermen a few times. He wanted to appreciate the rigor of going fifty miles

offshore in an open boat -- and to be able to describe it in advertising copy. Willie would like to make that trip at least once, but Marnie won't hear of it.

K-Bird had worked with Brother Chester from time to time when a project needed two pairs of hands. He was a hard worker; it was logical that he take over after Brother Chester's death.

"K-Bird, how do you mean, 'it's no problem' if Dad wanders?" Willie intends later in the day to pursue last night's terse conversation with Chessie, and wants to be well-armed.

"Why, Mist' Willie, he do stroll ahff into the village sometime and fergit ware he is. Not all the time, yu' know? Jes' now and then. But it don't matter if he can't rememb' ware he come from or even who he be. We-and-we all knows him. We keeps an eye on him."

A pause. "Yu' know, ba'as, we has people of our own who not quite right."

At home, Willie thinks, we occasionally see someone acting a little crazy, but most people with serious mental illness get put away, out of sight. Jamaica's government can't afford even the cuckoos' nests of straightjackets once common in the States. Here are Crazy Joyce, an old lady who probably has Alzheimer's just like Dad, strolling down the road each morning to sit under a favorite tree chain-smoking. Dalton, a muscled young giant with a menacing scowl, a pyromaniac who must be watched but is docile as a lamb most of the time. Jackson, as normal as anyone so long as he takes the tranquilizers his father buys him from a slim wallet, but who occasionally skips his meds, takes his clothes off, runs up and down the beach scaring young girls, and sleeps in a cave. He must enjoy taking an occasional break from a reality without much future, Willie thinks.

The village looks after all of them, and a few others with less vivid disorders, and tries to keep them out of trouble. There's a lot to be said for that, he thinks; beats locked wards and straightjackets. And they look after Dad, too.

"When he los'," continues K-Bird, "seem like that likkle dog of his know it, and fall to bahkin'. To git our attention, yu' know? Den someone take 'im by the elbow, real gentle an' polite-like, an' steer 'im home. Seem like he always gits led back about de time Tookie or Miss Francesca notice he gone, jes' before dey sen' out a search pahty. Miss Francesca make a big deal out of it, yu' know. Tookie jes' says t'ank-you."

Maybe that's a tip, Willie thinks, for an argument to present to Chessie: She makes a big deal out of Dad's occasional meandering; Tookie knows he hasn't been in any real danger. "Thank you all, K-Bird. Your looking after Dad means a lot to all of us." And that understates it, he thinks as he takes the empty coffee mugs back to the house. Maybe he can persuade Chessie that a caring staff and caring village are overwhelming reasons for keeping Dad here -- and not just incidentally for keeping Si Chaud in the family.

"Willie," Dad told him once, a year or two before the Alzheimer's set in, "I want you and my grandchildren and great-grandchildren to be able always to come here. I've seen to that. You can count on it." And Willie has counted on it. This is where his family relaxes, where his creative juices flow and he writes best. Now Chessie wants to take Dad away, never mind his real wishes, and sell Si Chaud? If Dad can't stop her, his children will have to somehow do it for him.

And for themselves.

Keron

The sun is up, the morning brightening, warming; the shadows of tall coconut palms stripe the driveway. The first John Crow is aloft, its great buzzard wings working as it seeks an early thermal that will carry it to lazy sentinel height. The fresh water reached its overflow pipe just as Mist' Willie started back to the house. Full. Keron turns to the well water, a meditative half-hour's work.

He wishes they could really talk. Not just chit-chat -- *labrish*, gossip – but a heart-to-heart. Not likely. He's heard Mist' Willie call him a best friend here. That's not saying much: He obviously doesn't think Keron near enough equal to say what's on his mind, let alone ask what's on the mind of his 'best friend'.

Never mind; Keron knows: Miss Francesca wants to take Mister Max away. Tookie told him. She was out here last night with Mist' Willie, almost certainly talking about it; she was in tears when he went back to the house and she came to where Keron was topping up the tanks. Take him away? Unimaginable, Keron thinks. But Mist' Willie won't talk about that. He'll ask how the village looks after Mister Max, but not say why he's asking. To Mist' Willie, Keron is just K-Bird, the hired help who speaks a corrupted English. Maybe he should give Mist' Willie a full dose of real patois. Keron remembers Miss Lou:

My Aunty Roachy seh dat it bwile her temper an really bex her fi true anytime she hear anybod' a style we Jamaican dialec as 'corruption of the English language'. . . . Jamaican Dialec did start when we English forefahders did start mus-an-bound we African ancesters fi stop talk fi-dem African Language altogedder an learn fi talk so-so English, because we English forefahders couldn understan what we African ancestors dem wasa seh to dem one anodder when dem was talk eena dem African Language to dem one anodder.

Jamaica's beloved poet Louise Bennett. In his teen years he listened to her on radio several times a week. Mister Max sent him to Munro, one of Jamaica's distinguished secondary schools, on the mountain blue-green behind them. A rare opportunity for a village kid, and he made the most of it. Loved it. Students were reprimanded, though, if they spoke anything but standard English. Mister Max had to rescue him, his very first week up there; persuaded the headmaster not to throw him out.

"K-Bird," he said, "I understand. It's a way to express your national identity. More power to you. If you were French, you'd want to keep up your French. I can speak French. A little bit of your patois, even. But not when I'm talking with a client in New York City. You're growing up living two lives. That's hard. But it's what you have to do."

So while furtively using only a few words of *dialec'* at school, he learned – memorized – some of Miss Lou's poetry and writings. Strictly speaking, he thinks, it's English Creole, and it gets a lot thicker than Aunty Roachy. Rastas -- the ones whose dreadlocks inspired his -- *wen dem young, dem did wheel dem hair fi mek locks. Dem neba cut dem locks. Dem mek ee grow fi beat di world wit* – speak the heaviest patois. And the

raunchiest. Fishermen aren't far behind. *Raw-chaw*, Miss Lou called it.

By contrast a Jamaican like himself, who has learned to speak American or British English, is sometimes challenged: *Wa mek you so speaky-spokey?* He tries not to be *speaky-spokey* around the village and the fishing beach. Has learned to live two lives.

Three, maybe. The three siblings know he manages this place. He never speaks standard English to them, though. None of them knows what their father has been to him. Mister Max insists it be that way. "This is our secret, little K-Bird," he said at the very start. "Your Uncle Gordon knows we spend time together, of course, and Tookie and Miss Francesca. Some others might be jealous, though, so it's our secret. Irie?"

The fisherman who sired him disappeared long before he was born. His mother got a chance to go to the States when he was four; promised to send for him, but wasn't heard from again. She'd persuaded Gordon Ebanks, the boatbuilder and dean of the village, to take him in. . Mister Max found him in Uncle Gordon's boat yard; took a shine to him. Or maybe took pity on an orphan, Cinderella in a house full of real sons and daughters. "What's your name, young man? K-Bird? A good name. Can I be your friend?"

Keron became his project.

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