

A B R I E F M A D N E S S

N E W I D E N T I T Y

A Novel

H A L C R O O K

CHAPTER 1

Sunday, August 17, 7:50 PM, some years ago

THE Saints of Swing sat tall on the bandstand and wailed away on an old jazz chestnut by Charlie Parker called Now's The Time. Four pieces sounding like fourteen. Rocking and jamming and filling the dance floor of the Cutter Avenue Community Center with couples young and old, moving and shaking and sweating enough to soak the fine dress-clothes they all wore.

When the sax solo segued to the quieter musings of the upright bass, Agnes Hampton slid her chair closer to her husband's and put her lips to his ear.

Trust me, William, she said. There's nothing to be upset about. Stop eyeing Jermaine and Shondai like they're criminals. They're our daughter's friends, for heaven's sake. Did you bring your hearing aids with you, I hope?

William patted the pocket of his new double-breasted blazer, purchased for the occasion, and turned his huge frame to look at her.

It's not cool to talk during bass solos, Agnes. Poor Slam's up there working as hard and playing as good as anyone.

I know that, she said. But everyone does it.

No, not *everyone*, he said.

Well, I'm sorry. But you seem upset.

I'm not upset. I'm as calm and peaceful as a...drowned dog.

She looked at him. A what?

Just explain this to me, he said. If Jermaine Saxton is Lynnise's boyfriend what's he doing sitting back there with Shondai White?

They're just sitting together.

At the other end of the hall? Behind the bar? In the dark? While Lynnise sits over there by herself?

They are not in the dark. And our daughter has her hands full with the party. And her children. Agnes shook her head. Drowned dog?

Shh, someone said.

William leaned in closer. Let's hear you do simile with alliteration on the fly.

Maybe some other time, Agnes said. Please let's enjoy this day, baby. It's ours. Lynnise worked so hard planning everything. Decorating the hall. All those party streamers and balloons. Fontaine and the band. Slam thumping away on bass. Look, she's got Aggie and Rosie dressed up in their new outfits. William Junior in his pants suit.

So you're saying you trust Jermaine with that other woman? Like trusting a car thief with the car keys. Plus he's dull as dust. No curiosity. No wonder. About life. About anything. Except maybe Shondai.

Agnes smiled at her husband. And what's making you so bothered by it? Mister Curiosity. Mister Wonder.

Shhh!

William covered his mouth with his hand. I don't understand what Lynnise sees in him, he said. And I don't want her to get hurt again. It's been a year since Kendrick left her in the lurch with three of his children. Their children.

Listen honey, Agnes said. Lynnise said she and Jermaine had a little argument, so this is a little separate time. I get what you're saying, but she's figuring it out. She knows who Jermaine is, what Shondai's about.

Then I guess she hasn't noticed they aren't looking so separate back there. Has Lynnise seen Shondai? What she's wearing? What she's not wearing?

I wouldn't know, Agnes said. But thank goodness you've been keeping tabs.

He smiled.

Lynnise is a smart girl, William. Wise as a wave from a wizard's wand.

William felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned and nodded an apology and then slipped his arm around his wife and squeezed. Show off, he said in her ear. Triple threat is what you are, Ag. Super fine. Super smart. Super hot. Still turning more heads than a celebrity. Every man here has it in for me—and up for you.

Agnes chirped. Lucky you then. Forgive me, though, if I'm not all that impressed by the hot-and-bothered machismo of every man here. Except maybe yours.

William stole a kiss. Such is the conceptual world, sweetie. Home to myriad forms of consciousness. From pure brilliance to pure dumbiance. And Jermaine Saxton is at the bottom of that food chain.

Oh baby, please. Let it be. Tell me again about your plans for the new van. She smiled coyly. Those back seats in particular.

I'm serious, he said. Then he winked. About that too.

You'd better be, she said. Old fool. Pure dumbiance.

Shhhh!

The bass solo had morphed into a pulsating walking line—all the better to penetrate the background chatter—with the drums throwing down a crisp ride-pattern on the cymbals and the piano pounding out block chords, building the energy and volume of the music to a peak. Then eighty-nine-year-old Fontaine Vittale aimed the bell of his vintage tenor sax at the ceiling and laid down the melody line while the band swung hard through the last chorus of Bird's famous blues. When the ovation subsided, Fontaine nodded a humble thanks to the crowd as it cleared the dance floor. Then he raised the mic and

stood his six-foot-two gangly self before it—complete with porkpie hat and spats—and spoke in his gravelly, sleepy drawl. Ladies and gentlemen, he said. Honored guests. Friends and neighbors. Boys and girls. He paused. Well, you're all boys and girls to me.

Go get 'em, Fontaine. You rock.

Yeah, guess I do, he said. Been rockin round this old clock for near a century. But this joyous occasion ain't about me. I'm here to welcome you all and present the celebrated couple of the evenin. So put your hands together and show the love for our friends, Agnes and William. Alias, the chatter boxes.

Agnes and William Hampton stepped onto the bandstand and edged their way over to the mic, bowing graciously to the crowd. Then William sidled up next to the drums while Agnes lowered the mic and smiled at the brightly lit hall filled with family and friends.

She cleared her throat and leaned in.

We are overwhelmed, she said, hand over her heart. William and I want to thank every one of you for coming out to celebrate our day. It means so much to us to see you all here.

Cousin Marcus Beardsley, coming all the way from Brooklyn. In his Lamborghini. I'm sure you saw it parked outside. It's the green one. Well, the only one. William is Marcus's personal mechanic and one of the few human beings allowed under the hood of that awesome machine.

And my employers and dear friends, Connie and Simon Rothberg, stopped in on their way home from Mexico, where they opened a new hotel. Congrats, you guys. Talk about awesome, their estate out on Shun Pike has the most magnificent botanical gardens. Enough to keep a horticulture nut like me going gaga for ages.

And my mentor, Mavis Cruthers, is here, who I worked with in the Department of Plant Sciences at URI. And William's co-workers from the shop. And Lynnise's from South County Medical. And Fontaine Vittale and the Saints of Swing, with the marvelous Slam

Pizzicato on bass. And everyone from the neighborhood. Wow. We are so honored.

And to our daughter, Lynnise. Thank you, baby, from the bottom of our hearts. You should not have gone all out like this. *And* picked up the tab. But honey, you won't hear dad and me complaining.

Laughter, applause. *Way to go, Lynnise.*

Lynnise waved from her seat. No complaints here either, she said. Love you guys. Big time.

Agnes blew a kiss and dabbed at the corner of her eye.

And we want to thank Meech Marr at Washington Trust for helping us finance our anniversary gift to ourselves this year. A practically brand new Dodge van. William said the first thing he's gonna do is take out the back seats and take me to the drive-in. For some long overdue...relaxation.

Cheers and whoops. Shouts and whistles.

Okay, okay, Agnes said. Everyone stay calm. He hasn't removed the seats yet. She held out her hand and William stepped forward and took it. She looked into his eyes.

I was twenty-two when I tied the knot with this handsome hunk of loyal, devoted, family man, lover man, superman—William Winslow Hampton, III. And today marks thirty years we've been all knotted up.

She furrowed her brows. Think I just gave away my age.

William leaned into the mic. Lookin mighty fine for forty-two, babe.

Agnes turned to the crowd. He never was much with numbers, she said. Thank goodness. But each year's been filled with more blessings and good fortune than the one before it, despite what the bank book showed. And now we have a wonderful daughter. Three wonderful grandchildren. Wonderful friends. A wonderful home. And this wonderful life we've made together.

Scares me sometimes, she said. But don't get me wrong, it's not perfect. Just wonderful. And I thank goodness for that, too, because perfect sounds boring. I just want to say that to have spent all these years in the arms and by the side of the love of my life, well, I couldn't have asked for anything more.

Agnes stepped aside and William took the mic out of its cradle and held it to his lips. Agnes, he said, doing his best Barry White. My one and only squeeze. My darling, my sweetness. My reason to be. My cool in the heat, my warmth in the cold. My light in the dark, my body and soul. My yearning, my longing. My sun in the morning. My breath, my heart. Mine never to depart. The best thing in life, was marrying my wife. My Agnes you see, means everything to me.

The crowd roared. Laughter. Applause. Amens abounding.

William bowed low and long. Then he stood tall. But what I really said to her was that I'm gonna take her to the drive-in for some long overdue parking and playing around. Never said a word about relaxing.

He took her in his arms. But sweetie, he said, if that's what you want... And he kissed her

Fontaine cued a drumroll as they held the kiss. Then came the cymbal crash and a stirring chord from the band.

When the cheering died down William approached the mic again. One thing's for sure, he said. We're gonna be throwing more parties like this one.

Mine's next, Fontaine said.

No, mine! Lynnise said.

Well, we'll sort it out, William said. But I want to take a minute right here and get serious. He ran his eyes over the room.

I know this is just little old Rhode Island, and even tinier South Providence. And everyone knows as much as they want to know—

and probably more than they ought to know—about everyone else. Their problems in particular.

We hear you, William. No secrets. Not around here.

But just because we live in a small place doesn't mean our problems aren't as big as they are in the big places.

Big as they can be. Right here. Yes, indeed.

And I'm sure we can all agree that it wouldn't hurt if some of the blessings and good fortune Agnes was talking about made its way out to the streets of this neighborhood.

Blessings. Good fortune. Wouldn't hurt.

It used to be you could take a walk out on Cutter Avenue without having to worry about getting home in one piece. Or whether your house would still be standing if you did.

Home in one piece. Still standing. Good luck, sir.

But not anymore, William said. And Doris and Ramsay Davis know this better than anyone.

The room fell quiet and still.

So we decided to take up a collection. Help them rebuild. It's just a drop in the bucket so far, but it's a start. A show of solidarity. Meech is gonna open an escrow account at the bank. Donations of any size are welcome.

Lynnise, honey, he said.

Lynnise got up and walked over to Doris and Ramsay Davis sitting at a front table and handed them the check. The couple sat staring at it. Then at each other. The crowd stood applauding.

William let things quiet down and then he leaned in. Seems to me it's time we got organized, he said. Get a petition going and send someone downtown to talk to somebody. Government reps. The police. Whoever will listen. We're not safe in our own backyards anymore, and we need support.

Not safe. Gotta get organized. Need support.

Our rightful place in this city is being threatened. And it's worth fighting for, if necessary.

Rightful place. Our place. Gotta fight for it.

But let's not be fighting and dying if help is available.

Don't be dying. Help's on its way.

So if anyone else thinks it's worth a try, we need to hear from you. And soon. As in, yesterday might even be too late.

Worth a try. We hear you, William. Before it's too late.

William turned to Agnes. And now I'd like to get back to my bride, he said. He put his arm around her waist and drew her in close. Come on, baby. Let's show them how it's done.

Fontaine launched the band into a sexy shuffle-beat with Ellington's *Things Ain't What They Used To Be*.

Agnes laced her arms around his neck, smiling from ear to ear. Gotcha, baby.

Gotcha right back, he said.

They sat watching from behind the bar at the far end of the room. She tossed down a shot and slipped her hand between his legs. These people are so fucking clueless, she said. And that girlfriend of yours is no exception.

Careful, Shondai. Don't let Lynnise see you doing that. She's been eyeing us. Remember, she's your girlfriend too.

Not in the way I want her to be, Shondai said. And you want her to be. She gave him a tug and then let go and reached for her beer. What do you think about Angel? she said.

Angel Xenon, he said. He's hungry. Experienced. But crazy, too. Like you. What's he using?

Using?

No one gets that happy without help, Shondai.

Oh, she said. He mixes it up. Opioids. Fentanyl. A little meth. Or a lot.

Jermaine pointed to his eyes. Like stones, he said. Not even sure he's human.

So?

Will he get the job done, is what I'm saying.

He never hasn't. Just don't go mentioning his clothes. And if he jokes about his queerness do not respond. I told you about the screwdriver thing, right?

Yeah, you told me.

So you know who you're dealing with, she said. She sipped her beer. Look at them up there. Like kids. Buying all this 'worth a try' bullshit. Government reps. Solidarity. Rightful place.

Seems harmless enough, Jermaine said.

Exactly, she said. And that sorry-ass woman going on about how wonderful everything is. I ought to go up there and slap the wonder right out of her mouth.

That'll take some slapping, girl. Agnes is no push over.

She's hiding something, Shondai said. That family is not that together. That happy. Kendrick proves it.

Come on, Shondai. She said things weren't perfect.

And I'll bet she was thinking of you when she said it. Or me. Or that rags-to-riches cousin of hers, Marcus Beardsley. I didn't hear our names mentioned on her list of wonderfals.

You're drunk, Shondai. Try and behave yourself.

Like this, you mean? She grabbed him again. I'm not nearly drunk enough to behave myself, Jermaine. She tightened her grip. What do you think it'll take to shake them up? Take them down a peg?

Now you're talking weird. Who knows? Something dark. He looked at her. Shit, girl, that feels good.

Doesn't get any darker than Angel Xenon, she said.

Except for you, Jermaine said. And Lester Fleck.

Fleck? Fleck knows?

Jermaine nodded. I cut him in. Insurance. So Xenon delivers on time and in full.

You trust Fleck? All that weird shit he talks? Illusion this, illusion that? Makes Agnes look sane.

You trust Xenon? All that weird shit he snorts? Line of this, line of that? Makes you look sane. Jermaine scoffed. Trust *me*, girl. It's all good.

She squeezed him harder. Fleck'll be more interested in our girlfriend anyway.

How I figured it, Jermaine said. He shuddered. You'd better stop now, baby. Before somebody comes.