



And the Walls Came Tumbling Down...

The Secret Life of Senator Jack

Vernadine A. Merrick

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by
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Prologue

It was a cold windy day. It was the sort of day you wished you were home snuggled by a fire with anybody who was willing to hold you close. However, here I sat, in a deserted park on a cold hard bench. Waiting... I was waiting on God knows what was on the other side of this meeting. I was perspiring as if I were in the midst of a Louisiana summer.

Ridder knew he had me. He was one of those detectives that smelled blood and tracked the scent until the prey was caught like a deer with headlights shining in his eyes. I knew my deepest despair would only make his conquest even more rewarding, capturing the high-powered senator - the mover and shaker of D.C. I was the first African-American to ever make it to the Senate from Massachusetts and rumored to be in serious line for the White House. The thought of my future tied to anyone's whim made my hands run cold. *Interesting how you can be burning up and bitter cold at the same time.* I waited for what seemed like an eternity.

“Have you been waiting long?” he said. I turned to see a middle-aged man, with an expression of sobriety and caution written on his face. He was a ‘brother’ too. Chocolate and lanky was the best way to describe him. His posture carried the weight of the world, but with a certain grace and stature.

I decided to be honest, “Not too long. Let's head to Winston's Café and get out of this weather.” We strode in complete silence. I studied my environment as if it were the

first time I had been to D. C. The smell and sight of D. C. was always intoxicating. There was only one word to describe it - power. It was the sexiest city I'd ever encountered. Again, I marveled how a poor boy from Ohio ended up as a senator from the State of Massachusetts. Not just any senator either, but one to be feared and revered.

We arrived at Winston's Café just before the cold heavy rain began to fall. Winston's was one of those trendy cafes that most people go to for the ambience or just to be seen among the politically elite, rather than for the food or drink. Its walls were the warm color of rich burnt orange. The restaurant had granite gray-topped tables with black iron chairs scattered about and an equally hard looking black and white marble floor. Soft music played in the background and well-lit, colorful modern paintings adorned its walls. It was a Sunday, so the usual wall-to-wall crowd was nowhere to be found. We chose a very private table in the corner.

"I'm glad you could meet me," Ridder said.

"Did I have a choice?"

"We always have choices, Senator."

We sat in silence as the waitress took our order. "Just coffee will be fine," I said. Ridder looked up at the perky blond waitress. "Coffee as well and one of those delicious looking cinnamon rolls you all are so famous for. Thanks." "Yes sir," she winked, smiled and walked away. How he knew what this café was famous for was beyond me. Ridder certainly didn't fit the profile of the crowd who were regulars here. But then again, appearances could be deceiving. *I should know*, I thought bitterly as I sipped my coffee.

"So tell me, Ridder, how will this story play out?" I said.

"You tell me, Senator Montgomery, or should I say Senator Baker." He was both formal and sarcastic. We burrowed into each other's eyes trying our best to size up the other to make the best next move. It was life and a game of chess at the same time. My move. Ridder had declared checkmate.

It was a strange time to ruminate on the past, but here I was, the walls of my life tumbling down around me and I was

in reflection. I thought of my pretty, tall, slender, mocha colored wife, Suzanne and how she would react. I married the princess, the daughter of the multi-million dollar attorney from Atlanta. It was sad that I didn't really care what the ice queen thought. *Our marriage was nothing but an appearance, window dressing and duty.* I thought about my mistress Nicola. *How I adored her.* As always, a tinge of guilt overwhelmed me as I thought how I chose power over love. *Nicola was magical with her sassy ways; smooth textured ebony skin and sultry eyes. Even if I had the chance to make it right, would she want me after this?* Then I thought about my beautiful, properly reared children. *How would this affect them, to know that their father was a murderer and a fraud?*

As dark thoughts swirled around in my mind, I somehow drifted back to the days when I was a simple, but mischievous boy from Cleveland, whose only unique trait was the identical twin brother named Jack and a father who loved me, but had just plain given up.



Chapter 1:

Growing Up in Cleveland

Cleveland in the late 1960s was one of those northern cities that was hit hardest by the riots when Martin Luther King, Jr. was slain, perhaps because its people were angrier than most anyhow. Between the constant snows, the soot from the factories, hard blue-collar labor, gray skies greeting you on most mornings and feelings of despair floating through the air, most people were looking for a channel to express their rage. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination provided the perfect outlet. In a matter of a few short days, a dreary city became even dimmer. I was only ten then, but I felt the rage deep within my spirit. It's funny how nine years had passed since that dark day. At nineteen, that boy seemed no more than a memory.

My deep-seated indignation in those days came from other things. I don't know if it was because I never knew my momma or that my daddy, though living, seemed like a ghost to me. They said his spirit flew away with my mom's when she died on the operating table giving birth to us. Yet, sometimes, it appeared that his spirit would return when he laid eyes on my brother, Jack. Maybe it was the abject poverty that surrounded us that ignited my fury, swallowing up all hopes and dreams with its unending appetite. However, I knew my torment stemmed most from that 'perfect' brother of mine. He looked

like me, almost to the point where I would get this strange sensation that I was looking into a human mirror. It made my skin crawl just thinking about it. That's where it stopped.

Jack was the apple of Daddy's eye. He did everything right. I remember when we were at the state fair. We were nine then. This old, elephant-skinned, battered woman with bosoms that reminded me of two creamy pillows was selling the most delicious looking fruit I'd ever seen. Papa had left us to get tickets for the rides. I turned to Jack. "How about we go over there and get us some apples?" I said with a wicked smile. He looked at me miserably, "We can't, Papa didn't give us no money." "Who needs money when they have hands and feet," I said. Any other boy our age would have jumped at the chance to prove his manhood and have some fun while doing so, but not 'Mr. Do Gooder' Jack. He furrowed his forehead like he always did when he was disturbed by something and stared at me like I was the devil himself. "Joe, how could you suggest such a thing? You know Papa would have our back sides if he caught us doing something like that." I said with complete exasperation, "Jack, how can we get caught? Who will catch us, that bent-over woman?" He again regarded me as if I was a complete stranger, "No, Joe. It just ain't right." Jack walked away to find Papa, leaving me standing there.

Then I burst out into laughter at the complete soberness of his expression. You'd have of thought I was asking Jack to kill our math teacher or something, not that at times I didn't want to kill that old bat. She'd purposely call on me in class for yesterday's assignments, knowing damn well I hadn't done it. I'd make a joke about it and the class would burst into laughter. Mrs. Rhiner would turn up her nose in distaste and mumble under her breath, "Why can't he be more like Jack." She was always trying to shame me into my brother, the bitch.

Jack and his serious forthright expressions, those facial contortions of his were the best way to tell us apart - maybe the only way. My aunts still mixed us up. Hence, they were always careful to get us everything the same and let us speak first about events in our lives. My Aunt Jean asked Papa one day, "John, how is it that you can so easily tell Jack and Joe apart?"

Papa smiled sheepishly and answered, “One has the sweet spirit of the only woman I ever truly loved.” That would have been Jack. He continued, “The other is just like me back then, a rebel without a cause or a care.” No more needed to be said. I still, until this day, don't know why those words Papa uttered hurt me.

At twelve, I finally convinced Jack to play a trick on Papa. Boy, was that some work. We switched identities. I was ‘Mr. Do Gooder’ Jack. He became me. I could tell he was struggling with his role as Joe. It's hard to be smooth when you're so square. And I was smooth... Sometimes you're just born with the gift. “Man, you gotta do better than that Jack. You're so wound up,” I said.

Papa came home from work. He looked tired and distracted, as he normally did. I still don't know how he could work at that steel mill for twenty years, doing the same dirty menial job day-in and day-out. He never complained though. No one would know how much being a low-wage maintenance ‘gofer’ ate him up inside. His eyes died a little more each time he came home from that job. I remember when my Aunt Eulie took us to Papa's work site because she didn't have time to drop us home without missing her hair appointment. Papa was almost off by then anyway. Those white boys treated Papa like he was just above spit, ordering him to do this and then that. Papa never questioned anything either. He just did what he was told. How can you respect a man like that?

“How was your day at school, boys?” Papa asked. He always asked the same damned question when he dragged himself in the door. In fact, that was the first thing to come out of his mouth, even before hello. “You first, Jack,” Papa said. Jack always got to go first. Here would be my grandest performance ever. I hopped from the sofa where we were watching the cartoon “Speed Racer” and munching on potato chips, eager to please. I then said with enthusiasm and complete admiration for Papa that I did not feel, “School was great. I tried out for track today and made the team.” Jack had told me that earlier. “I also aced my math test Papa. I got a ninety-eight.” Papa stared at me for what seemed about a minute, shifting his feet

like he did when he was uncomfortable. It was as though he was attempting to look through me. Then he said slowly, "That's good, Jack. I knew you were a fast kid. Just don't let those grades drop because of some sport. Do I make myself clear?" I replied yes, dropping my eyes because I could no longer look at him. "I want you both to be somebody, and you will if you apply yourselves," Papa said with understated passion in his voice. "That was your momma's dream for both of you. I want you to command the respect I never had."

Papa turned to Jack. "How about you Joe, anything new at school?" I could hear the hope, yet frustration when he asked Joe the question. Jack sat there on the couch, trying to compose himself. He was attempting to look tough, cool or something. He came over to Papa walking like a 'white' boy. Lord knows I would never act like that. Even before Jack rose to meet Papa that furrowed brow began to form. Jack shrugged nonchalantly, "School was okay, Pops, same as yesterday. I didn't ace the math test, but I did pass." Jack proceeded to walk pass Papa, but felt a strong, powerful lion's grip on his left arm. Jack swung half-circle, slightly off-balance. Papa and Jack were regarding each other face-to-face. Papa said in a controlled, low and strangely penetrating voice, "Jack, now really tell me how your day was." I could see Jack physically tremble. Perspiration poured down his face. He squirmed to get out of Papa's grip.

Papa released Jack's arm, but continued to survey his son disappointedly. That was the first time I ever saw him look at Jack that way. Those gazes were usually reserved for me. Jack could not meet Papa's stare. He continued to survey his tattered shoes. Finally he said, "School was fine Papa. It was true what Joe told you. I did make the track team." He then began to yell, "It was Joe's idea to trick you Daddy!" Jack lowered his voice and his shoulders slumped. Tears began to stream down his face. "I'm sorry, Papa."

Papa turned to me with knowing, livid eyes. "Joe, if you want to act like a punk, leave Jack out of it. You are both grounded for a month, no friends, no phone, no TV," he said flatly. Unfamiliar fear shot through my entire body. I stood fro-

zen, incapable of moving. When I found my legs, I shot out of the room, and out to the backyard like a man running for his life. At the time, I didn't know I would get a lot of experiences like that. *I was always running, just different faces behind me.*

I don't think I remember ever seeing so much fury in Papa's eyes. *This time I really screwed up*, I thought remorsefully. I don't even know why he was so vexed. It was just a practical joke, one of my many. Probably his outrage stemmed more from me involving his 'precious' Jack. *I hated him and Jack sometimes!*

Once out back, I ran to the huge worn oak tree posing in the center of the tiny yard. It was the place I went to think. I stood by the tree and cried. It was more like whimpers. My breath got shallow and my chest heaved in and out. My shoulders were rolled up tight and my fists were rolled up to match. Then after what seemed like an hour but was only a few minutes, I stopped. I felt even worse for crying because 'real' men don't. *Maybe I was becoming a loser like my brother Jack.* After that day, I promised myself I would never cry again. I kept that promise, at least until that dreaded day. Sometimes life takes you in circles.

Again, I thought, *it's all Jack's fault. If he hadn't behaved so poorly, Papa never would have found out. It could have been the prank of a lifetime.* Instead, there I was, leaning my face into that old tree with one arm draped above my head, feeling less of a man. I felt a hand rest on my shoulder, and I knew it was Jack.

"I'm sorry, Joe."

"Leave me alone, you chicken shit."

"I don't know what to say. I tried to pull it off. Daddy knows us too well."

Not turning to face him, but somehow knowing his eyes were pleading for forgiveness, I said, "Leave me the hell alone." I then turned to look at him just in time to see Jack shudder. I wanted him to see the extent of my rage. I knew why Jack flinched. He never used curse words and he didn't like it when I did. Knowing that I made him uncomfortable gave me a twisted sense of pleasure. Jack faced me with deep grieving in

his eyes. I didn't want to care how he felt, but, somehow, I always did. *It was like he was a part of me that I couldn't shake. He was the conscience that I lacked.* "Just leave me alone, Jack," I said without much conviction. Jack didn't though. He leaned against the tree with me, and we were enveloped in a peculiar silence that reminded us of our nexus. We were connected, and we both knew it.

After we shared the moment of regret, Jack took off on the used bike Papa had bought him as a Christmas present last year. He rode it often, but especially when he needed to get away. Jack practically begged Papa for a bike. *He was always different than the rest of us, I thought in reflection. No one much cared for bikes in this neighborhood. It was considered 'not cool.'*

Our punishment lasted for a month, though not for me. I'd sneak out of the house to hang with the 'boys' in the neighborhood to all hours of the night. Even though we were twelve, we'd smoke cigarettes, drink the liquor gotten from big brothers and play craps like we'd see the older kids do. We were trying to be men. I remember wanting to be grown so bad that one day I actually made the prayer to God. I told Him that if He would just let me be eighteen a little faster, I would behave in church and not sneak out during service and play hooky in the parking lot.

At school, I wasn't much better. I hung out with the 'tough' crowd. Even the teachers themselves feared my friends, Ronny, Rico and Leo. Somehow hanging around them made me feel more powerful. I usually didn't participate in their bully tactics with the other kids. *I was above that. Yet their foul mouths, constant pursuit of girls and pleasure appealed to me.* For the most part, I was bored with school. It was such a waste of time. I skipped half my classes and still would get a C or a B on exams. I sucked up the information like a sponge. My friends would wonder how I did it. They would be 'hangin' out with me and they'd fail. I never let anyone know that I secretly loved knowledge. *The more I knew about any subject, the more invigorated I'd feel.* That was probably the only thing I shared with Jack.

Jack and I didn't spend much time together at school. He was always attending class. The teachers just loved him, always the pet. He never missed an assignment, and, without fail, had the right answers. He got straight A's too. Jack took brown nosing to another level. *What a jerk.*

Jack was equally popular with the kids. He was as good of an athlete as he was with academics. He was on the track team, football and basketball teams. Jack was a star in each. I'd sometimes go to the games and watch him with pride, sprinkled with a lot of resentment. To top everything off, he was nice. Jack never said a bad word about anybody. He motivated his teammates and took up for lesser kids. Unbeknownst to Jack, he had a few enemies. Most of them were just jealous. I secretly protected him. If I ever heard anything bad about Jack, I would have my 'boys' beat up the kid after school. That usually did the trick. *Why I did that I never knew.*

Papa basically raised us himself. My three aunts, Jean, Eulie and Sadie, helped me out as much as possible. They would bring us Sunday dinners. They'd take turns taking us school clothes shopping and would make sure we had some fun at amusement parks, movies and ice cream shops in summer. I felt extremely close to them. However, Papa did the bulk of rearing us.

People used to whisper at church, inquiring why Papa never remarried. One time, he told my nosiest aunt, Aunt Sadie, that it was none of her business. In his mind, no woman could compare to the woman he had in Charlane. I swelled with pride when I heard him say that about my momma, even though I never knew her.

However, there was one woman Papa did react to. He even dated her for a short time. Her name was Lidia Ruly. Jack and I were thirteen, at the height of my thirst for independence. Ms. Ruly was always at church in one of those great big church hats that looked like it had a garden of flowers attached to it. Her skirts swayed in the wind. Her hips moved like a music box wound up and just released. Her lips were always red, like candy apples. When she smiled, the contrast of white teeth made you think of the leading ladies in Hollywood. Boy, was

she pretty. She had the biggest tits I'd ever seen. I sometimes had to will my hands not to reach out and touch them. There were a lot of men who fantasized about Ms. Ruly, but she had her sights on my daddy. I think she was attracted to the way he looked in his Sunday suit, but maybe she liked him because he was one of the few men who paid her little to no attention.

Ms. Ruly would smile coyly when she would see Papa at church. "How are you today, Deacon John," she'd say, batting her eyes ever so slightly. Unconsciously, Papa would poke out his chest and respond, "Just fine, Lidia. Thank you for asking." This went on for quite a while. And then, one day, he asked her out to dinner, just like that.

Ms. Lidia, as we started calling her, was none too crazy about children. She made that clear to us whenever Papa was not around. She tolerated Jack, but my pranks and sassy talk, as she referred to it, rubbed her the wrong way. Ms. Lidia lasted with my Papa for about nine months. I was worried, as was Jack that they would end up married. Jack had his own reasons for not liking Ms. Lidia. Mostly, I believe it was because he wasn't sure of her motives, not that Papa had any money or anything. Jack used to say that Papa's biggest treasure was his heart. It was worth more than gold. Papa had grown more spiritual as he got older. He was a long way from that mischief, hardheaded boy of his youth. Jack wasn't sure Ms. Lidia wouldn't crush that heart the minute something better came along.

One day, Papa called us into the kitchen to talk to us over dinner. This meant it was serious. He began with trepidation, clearing his throat, "Now, I know you boys have gotten used to Ms. Lidia and I spending time together. She has become a part of the family, so to speak. However, I am sad to say that she and I will no longer be together." That is all Papa said, no other explanations given. He waited for our reaction. We said nothing. Both Jack and I tried not to show our elation. *Thank you God!*

Later, Jack and I heard rumors that Ms. Lidia's ex-boyfriend moved back to town. It was said that Daddy caught them in the 'act.' Though if Papa did, he never said anything about it to us.

That was Papa's way. Ms. Lidia did get married to another man shortly thereafter. I remember seeing them together at a church picnic after they got married. The man looked like a younger version of Papa. He was more prosperous though. I'd see Daddy time-to-time stealing looks at them.

At age thirteen, Jack and I took off on completely different paths. With Jack's academic excellence and athletic prowess, he got a full scholarship to Smith Academy. It was the best private school in Cleveland, if not North Ohio. It was where all the rich white boys attended school. *These were probably the kids of the parents who talked down to Papa at work.*

At thirteen, I was “running” for one of the most powerful bookies in the neighborhood. At fourteen, I started selling small time drugs like marijuana in the Martin Luther King Middle School I attended. When I was fifteen, I moved on to heavier drug trafficking, including crack and cocaine. I also began at that age screwing every woman I could seduce with my syrupy lines and soft brown eyes. If I never said it, Jack and I were handsome men. We stood 5' 11" even at age fifteen. We were lean and muscular. Our nutmeg colored features were strong and chiseled like African royalty. We got our looks from our dad, though his were somewhat withered now. The softness of our eyes I'm told came from Momma. Those eyes were able to do wonders for me with the ladies. *Because of those soft, expressive eyes, I got more 'sweet spots' than should have been allowed for a boy just out of puberty.*

By eighteen, I had a reputation as ‘The Man’ that could get you anything you desired to get you high and the player who could make you forget why. I was very proud of my reputation. By eighteen, I no longer cared when Daddy looked at me with deep sadness in his eyes. I told myself, “He has Jack. That’s all he cares about anyway.”

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