

THE KINDRED

J.M. WRIGHT

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THE KINDRED

A NOVEL

J.M. WRIGHT



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I dedicate this novel to my family.
Without your unconditional love, and lessons, none of this
would be possible.
Thank you.

CHAPTER 1

The South

January 1st, 1960

Hey you, would you mind giving me a light? I've got one last cigarette and I'd like to smoke it before the day is due. It's almost sunrise. Could you bring it a little closer? That's good. Thanks. Hmm, smooth. I haven't seen you around here before. You must be new. Well, that's alright. Just means the last guy is probably dead. I guess that's just how it is in places like this.

You be careful around here. Don't be a hero. Heroes live and die for the sort of glory that's soon forgotten. Survivors live and die for themselves. Be a survivor. Don't be a ghost. Too many of them haunt these halls already. You can hear them howling and moaning all goddamn night. Did you hear them? *Hey!* Don't walk away from me when I'm talking to you. Forget the next guy, I asked you a question. Did you hear them? I can hear them right now. Whispering in my ear. Telling me to tell you what I know. So, I will. But I don't have long.

I know. I hear you. What can a man like me teach somebody like you? I know you've heard the stories, the whispers, the half-truths, and lies. But you've got to promise that you won't make up your mind about me until you've heard the whole thing. Because this "thing", this story of mine—well, it's got roots, branches, knotted bark, hollows, and vines. It lives, it breathes, and walks on its own. And now I know how deep this thing goes. Now I

understand why everything happened the way it did. Why I ended up here on death row fifty years later, while the real monster walks free.

It started with a girl. Ha, I hear you. All stories start with a girl. But this girl, I promise you, she was like no other. She was all blood and honey; her with her sun-kissed skin, rust-red and brown hair. And her eyes, green and shimmery. Like a cat's. She'd been born at night in a rush onto the dusty, hard floor. Her mother tried to be quiet, so as not to wake her husband as she squatted in the corner of the small bedroom...



His first words after the girl was born were, “Get rid of it. *Now!* And stop making all that goddamn noise.”

For a second, the woman almost did, but her desire to be a mother was strong, so she kept the girl. It had once been that simple. But now, years later, she regretted her decision. Too many times, she'd go back to that night in her mind and recall her stupidity. And would tell her daughter she wished she'd never kept her. Which was okay with the girl because she felt the same. After all, the girl might as well have been born into the furnace of Hell. Or been delivered into the open sea for all the torment she lived daily.

Girl was the only name she'd been afforded. Sometimes, whore or bitch. She didn't care. She just didn't want to be hit. Judson, her father, or the man she knew as her father, entertained himself in her shame, her hurt, and fear. His affection for it on display every night after 6 PM when he came home for dinner. Tonight would have been no different than any other night. Judson was into his second glass of gin, and there was nothing the girl did right. A

start like any other; only this night would be just the treacherous beginning to this sordid tale.

“What is this?” said the man in a low growl.

Dark eyes, dark skin, dark. Covered in shadow. The sunset was beautiful and in full view through the window behind him as he sat in his usual spot in the living room, his slowly disintegrating armchair, daring her.

“Lemonade,” said the girl, barely loud enough, her body tense and her stomach turning at the sound of Judson’s voice.

“This is goddamned piss! Warm! I said I wanted ice water. . . and you bring me this,” he hissed.

His black eyes tearing into her deeper than his hands ever did.

“Daddy, you said you—” said one of the twin boys who sat at the rickety dining table, watching.

A look from his father and the son lost his voice. Young, only four, but how quickly they had grown in this house. Learned in this house.

“Do you see this, Ada, the bitch brought me piss water? Is that what you both are up to? *Feed him piss water*, you told her?” Judson glared.

“The Lord is my shepherd,” Ada whispered, eyes closed against her husband, head bowed in prayer, hands balled in her lap.

Today, she wore her best dress. The one she usually saved for Friday. Judson said he never wanted to come home to a raggedy woman. She’d wash her dresses until her hands were red and swollen from the lye. Her hair thin from daily hot comb straightening. Her makeup—oiled lips and dark rings around her eyes. But today, she wore her best dress. It was Wednesday.

“Ah, dumb bitch. What the hell you know anyway? Look at this house. Look at these crumbling walls. Look at the floor. Didn’t I tell you to clean this floor, girl? Didn’t I?”

The girl said nothing. Better to say nothing. That way, he had no fuel, no ammunition to carry on. The girl stood before the man who clenched his fists. Slim and barely fed. Almost a woman. Dirty clothes clinging to the parts she wished she never had. Parts she wished she could hide.

“I’ll put the boys in bed,” said the girl to the man.

Judson looked her over, every inch, and it made her skin burn. There was the look. It telegraphed his thoughts. And this time, she wished he’d just hit her instead.

“Yeah,” he said, “but come back. I’m ready for a bath. Need you to scrub my back. Better you than your no good mammy over there.”

The girl looked over at her mother as the boys gathered around her, ready to be led to their room. Ada continued to pray, head bowed, eyes closed, rocking back and forth in her seat. Her prayers louder with every passing moment.

“Momma,” said the girl, “I’m gonna put the boys in bed.”

There was no answer. Just prayers.

“For thine is the power, the kingdom and the glory,” Ada said, “forever.”

The girl led her brothers to their room, through the kitchen, and at the very back of the two-bedroom shotgun house. She knew she wouldn’t see her own bed, a pallet in the kitchen near the refrigerator, until much later. After Judson had had his fill of her. After her mother’s prayers had been answered and the night had finally come to a close. Now, she ushered the boys inside the bedroom and closed the door behind them.

“Girl,” whispered the small child, “it’s not your fault. Him did, him did say lemonade. I heard it.”

She looked down into his smooth brown face, broken out of her haze by his chubby fingers tugging at her arms. She smoothed

a reddish-brown curl out of his face and out of his eyes. Studied the little crinkle that formed at the center of his brows. Jeremiah had always been the stronger of the two. She remembered when she gave birth to him how much he screamed and cried. He refused to be silenced by tit or by fear. He didn't care who his daddy was or what he was supposed to be.

"Shhhh," said the girl, "go put on your nightshirt. Josiah, you too."

She looked around in the dim room. Josiah sat with his legs crossed, rocking on the bedroom floor. Now Josiah, he never said a word. Right after his brother's hollering came Josiah, quiet as a mouse and with a smile.

She stooped down to pluck Josiah from the floor and sat him down in his bed. He just stared blankly at her as always. But tonight, he had the faintest curl of his lips. A smile, but not really. There was something disturbing in it. Made her sit back on her knees and stare at him. She removed his clothes in slow motion. Eyed him.

"Girl!" yelled the man, and she jumped, "hurry on, I don't got all day."

She had just undressed Josiah, but soon yanked a nightshirt over his head and pulled blankets across him. Jeremiah started to say something, but she held her hand up to silence him. She kissed Josiah's smile and took a look at him again. Same. She shook it off and walked over to Jeremiah, bent down, and gave him a kiss on his lips. Smelled his baby's breath.

And then the boom. And then another.

She whirled around to the door and froze, the boys shrieked behind her, but she was crippled.

"Momma."

Startled, she spun around to see Josiah standing in his bed,

tears streaming down his cheeks. Jeremiah sat in his bed, staring at his brother.

“Momma,” Josiah cried, looking into her eyes.

She was shocked. His first word. But she had no time for wonder. She went to Jeremiah, picked him up from the bed, and stood him to his feet on the floor.

“Jeremiah,” she said, kneeling in front of the boy, “you know what to do, take your brother and sit in the closet.”

“No, no, please, Girl, it’s dark in there.” Tears spilled out of his eyes, and her heart split at the seams.

“Do it now,” she said, immediately regretting how short she was with him.

But he did what he was told, and when he closed the door to the closet, she opened the door to the bedroom. And regretted that too.

Judson’s eyes looked up at her from the floor. Soft and wide. Dead. She smelled the hot blood that bubbled from the opening in the center of his naked chest. A bright red rug formed around his body. But his eyes, they were softer than anything she’d ever known of him. And it was at that moment she knew where her children truly got their eyes.

“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary, the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour!” yelled Ada.

She looked up, and instead of her mother’s eyes, she was met with the two black holes of a double-barreled shotgun. Warm piss streamed down the girl’s leg. Her thoughts were nothing more than chemical reactions. Her breathing was instinctual.

“M-m-momma, please,” said the girl.

A name she’d never called the woman who bore her. A name that tasted funny on her tongue. Felt foreign to her ears. Ada

did not react, however, as she pointed the gun barrels at her daughter's head.

"Whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world," Ada said, unblinking.

"P-please, Momma," cried the girl, tears streaming down her cheeks, standing in her own urine and shivering with fear.

But something the girl said flipped a switch in the woman because Ada lowered the gun.

"But the God of all grace," said Ada, walking backward from the kitchen and into the small living room again.

One hand busy on the side table next to Judson's armchair, and the other clutching the gun. Her eyes never left the girl. Red. Wild. Focused.

"...who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus."

"Please, Momma, it's over," said the girl, "we're free. We don't have to go through this. He can't hurt us anymore."

A tear dropped from Ada's eye. Her busy hand stilled, formed a fist around what she'd found.

"After that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you," Ada said as she gently laid the gun to rest against the arm of Judson's chair, chose a match from the box, and with a quick stroke, the match was lit.

The girl struggled to breathe and dared not to move.

"To Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

Ada dropped the match on Judson's armchair, torn at the arms, oily with years of grease and sweat, it caught fire immediately, and the flame grew.

The girl made a move to the chair, but Ada grabbed the gun once again and pointed the barrels at her face. Just above her eyes. The girl backed away, sobbing, pleading with her mother

until she traded places with the woman who now stood over Judson's dead body.

Ada was quiet now. But the girl hadn't seen her take the bottle of gin out and splash its liquid against the walls and the floor. She was numb to the heat that licked her neck and arms. Blind to the flames that rolled over the armchair. But her ears were flooded with the inconsolable cries of her babies. Her babies needed her. Wanted her to save them.

Ada presented a lit match to her like a single-stemmed orange-petaled wildflower. Urging her to take it.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..." began Ada.

"Momma, no," said the girl, dropping to her knees. "Please no! They're babies!"

"... I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

Ada's wild eyes closed. Her head bowed in prayer.

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over..."

The wispy, yellowed curtains caught fire, and flames climbed to the ceiling. Smoke filled the room, and still, the sermon continued. The girl was beside herself. Her babies' cries were muffled behind the door and drowned out by her mother's prayers. She clawed at her own wrists until they bled. Wishing it were Ada's face. But daring not to go for the woman with the gun. If she was to save them, she had to live.

"Oh God, please help them!" screamed the girl.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

Ada dropped the match she had in her hand. The burst of flames made the girl cower back from where her mother stood.

Flames streamed across the interior of the kitchen. Fire already made short work of the living room behind her.

Her mother danced in the flames and screamed. Cries only a dying person would make. The girl smelled the heat of the flames cooking her own tender skin. The pain was white hot. She rushed past her burning mother towards her boys. She kicked the door and soon recoiled in pain as flames crawled over her bare foot. She did her best to stamp out the flames as they seared her flesh.

Her mother, wracked in pain and covered in melting flesh, shot off a round from the gun, just missing her before collapsing on the floor, wailing in pain. The girl smelled burning wood, hair, and flesh. Smoke seared her lungs, and she grasped a hand to her throat, desperate to breathe. To live. To survive. Without a thought, she ran through the flames toward the front door.

The door burst open, slamming against the burning house on her exit. The flames followed. She stumbled off the front porch, hopped into the cool, wet grass just below, and rolled in it. Burns twisted the skin on her feet, ankles, and arms. As soon as she stood, she turned to go back into the house.

She ran to the side of the house towards the boys' room, but her heart sank deep in her chest as she remembered that there were no windows, no way to get in or out of the boys' room from outside the house. She ran to the woodpile and grabbed an ax and started on the side of the house. She made little progress as she whacked the boards of solid oak. Sweat slid down her face as she attacked the building with all her strength.

Crumbling. A terrible breaking sound. She looked up to see the roof crushing down into the house. Collapsing. Falling. And she knew there was nothing she could do. And nothing to be done. They were gone. All of them. Gone.

Orange slivers of light danced in her eyes as she watched the flames lick what was left of the roof of the little old, grayed house. Acrid smoke burned her nose and filled her lungs. Her bare feet sank deeper into the black mud that covered the hill where she'd grown. Cold gnawed on her bones, and her limbs began the slow process of dying. None of these things stirred her, not even her body and the violent tremors that ran through it. Fear had gripped her and refused to release her into the reality of the situation. Her life had changed in a matter of minutes and seconds. A lifetime of hurt, sorrow, and scraps of happiness had been replaced with emptiness. Now she was lost in the cold dark countryside, standing feet away from the burning house that had been her hell. And held her hope.

Long after her screams had been carried from her throat into the wind, after her voice had broken, after the chill well set in her bones, she stood. The light of the tall dancing flames flickered over her body. A blast of black smoke carried the hint of burning meat.

She ran in the chilly night across the clearing to the dark woods at their end. Her freezing feet never felt the damaging effects of the icy grass, stones, and twigs beneath them. Instinct told her she had survived, and that to continue to, she needed to find warmth. At the end of the clearing, farther than she'd ever been in her life, was a dim light through the trees.