BookGist Summary

The Man I Chose to Become: What I Inherited, What I Survived, and What I Refused to Pass Down

by J. Feagin

Key Takeaways

• A childhood can contain genuine warmth and serious harm at the same time: Marcus remembers music, food, church, cousins, and laughter alongside violence, fear, and family secrets.

• Silence may help a child get through a frightening moment, but it can also leave trauma unspoken and unsupported; telling the truth is an important step toward healing.

• The people who hurt us may also be people we love, depend on, or remember fondly. Holding that complexity allows Marcus to tell the truth about his father without reducing him to a simple villain.

• Breaking a family cycle requires more than declaring that you will be different. It takes repeated choices: managing anger, keeping your word, apologizing, showing up, and making home feel safe.

• A child's behavior can reveal burdens adults cannot immediately see. Marcus's mother responds to foster daughter Maya with patience and care, recognizing the painful experience behind her play with a doll.

• Love is demonstrated through practical presence: feeding children, supporting a partner through caregiving, attending games, and standing by family during unstable times.

• Loyalty and care must coexist with boundaries. Marcus learns to respect Kendall's commitments, protect their relationship, and step back from dangerous or chaotic situations.

• Good intentions do not erase consequences. Marcus's missed classes, reckless partying, unpaid tickets, and risky choices cost him opportunities and nearly cost him his freedom.

• Grief is complicated when relationships were complicated or unfinished. Marcus mourns both his father and his lifelong friend while confronting anger, regret, and conversations that can no longer happen.

• The past shapes a person, but it does not have to dictate what they pass on. Marcus's central project is to give his children the safety and steadiness he did not consistently experience.

Who Should Read This Book

This memoir is for readers interested in candid stories of family, childhood trauma, faith, masculinity, marriage, and parenting. It may especially resonate with people who grew up around both love and harm, who have struggled to name what happened to them, or who are trying to build safer relationships for the next generation. The content includes family violence, sexual abuse, grief, and other difficult experiences, so readers may wish to approach it at their own pace. Readers of memoirs about resilience and family patterns will find a distinctive focus here: Marcus does not present change as a sudden triumph, but as a process built from mistakes, consequences, relationships, and repeated choices. The book's humor and vivid family stories sit alongside painful memories, giving the account a complicated, affectionate view of family rather than a simple story of heroes and villains. Its most practical insight is that breaking a cycle becomes real in everyday behavior—how a person speaks, keeps commitments, cares for children, and makes home feel safe.

Chapter Summaries

Prologue — Under the Flag

Marcus reaches the VA too late to say goodbye to his father, Charles. Seeing Charles's body draped in the American flag brings conflicting feelings—grief, anger, relief, sadness, and unanswered questions—and summons memories of violence and humiliation alongside Grandma Lottie's porch, family food, music, and laughter. The image establishes the memoir's central tension: Charles was both father and provider and a source of deep harm. Marcus connects his memories to a promise he made when his daughter Avery was born: his

children would not grow up in the environment he experienced. He does not yet know how difficult it will be to keep that promise. The memoir therefore looks backward not simply to recount childhood, but to trace how a wounded boy tries to become a safe husband and father.

Part I — The House Had Two Truths

Marcus's childhood in Los Angeles is shaped by two contrasting homes. His parents' suburban house looks like progress from the outside, but inside it holds arguments, his father's volatile moods, and a mother forced to endure humiliation and instability. Marcus recalls his mother sleeping on the living-room floor, an earring hitting the ground when Charles slaps her, a trash bag thrown at her, and Charles planting a for-sale sign in the yard during an argument. These episodes teach Marcus to monitor a room's mood and reveal how children can recognize danger before they can explain it. The chapters also preserve the joy that surrounded the harm: Grandma Lottie's crowded porch, cousins, country summers, church, neighborhood games, Friday-night Al Green, and the warmth of shared meals. Alongside funny stories about risky childhood stunts, Marcus recounts sexual abuse by an older cousin and the silence and shame that followed. The section insists that neither the love nor the trauma cancels the other; both helped shape how Marcus understood trust, safety, family, and manhood.

Part II — Coming of Age in the Fire

As a teenager, Marcus faces bullying, street violence, racism, grief, and the ordinary pressures of growing up. He finally stands up to bully Julian Cross, but discovers that one victory does not erase the fear built by years of intimidation. Other experiences deepen his awareness of vulnerability: he and friends help a frightened boy hiding under school bungalows, deputies stop and rough up boys walking home, a party guest is shot and falls into Marcus's arms, and random gunfire nearly reaches Marcus, his mother, and sister on their way home from Bible study. Marcus also makes choices that bring avoidable consequences. He ditches school, drinks, gets caught in risky situations, acts selfishly in relationships, and misses his high-school graduation because he stops attending English class. His grandmother's joke that he "quit-uated" captures both the humor and cost of his failure. Meanwhile, Kendall shows quiet resilience as she grieves her father and cares for her ailing mother. When Charles offers Marcus a car if he stays, Marcus recognizes the offer as leverage and chooses to leave with his mother, learning that freedom and peace can matter more than an attractive gift.

Part III — Choosing Kendall

Marcus and Kendall's relationship develops amid family secrets, danger, attraction, and repeated mistakes. Marcus discovers that Charles has another daughter, Serena, whose existence was concealed from him. He also sees his father repeat harmful patterns with

another partner and her children, prompting him to recognize that cruelty can spread through families if no one confronts it. Other formative episodes include Marcus's uneasy return to his father's home, a frightening pursuit after its windows are smashed, and the ways friends and relatives offer belonging, humor, and protection. Marcus and Kendall hurt each other through infidelity, jealousy, and pride, but he gradually understands that her steady support is different from attention that depends on status or appearance. She rides in his struggling car, helps him, and stays loyal while maintaining her own strength. After a painful trip and a period of separation, Marcus shows up for Kendall and her mother during the Los Angeles riots, then talks honestly with Kendall about ending other relationships and choosing one another. Their renewed commitment is not a claim that they are perfect; it is a decision to build trust through action.

Part IV — Becoming Safe

Marcus and Kendall move toward marriage through practical decisions as well as romantic ones. They agree to marry at a family wedding, choose a ring with help from Uncle Bishop, and confront the cost and stress of planning a wedding largely on their own. Their ceremony is joyful and distinctly theirs, including Kendall's pointed pause when the pastor unexpectedly adds "obey" to vows she had asked him to omit. Early marriage brings another challenge: Kendall is torn between her new role as a wife and her longstanding responsibility to her ill mother. Marcus has to learn that her caregiving is not a rejection of him and that marriage requires making room for what a partner carries. Fatherhood intensifies Marcus's commitment to change. Avery's birth inspires him to promise that his children will not live with the fear he knew. He and Kendall navigate a frightening accident, the funny chaos of children at home, and the arrival of their son Reggie, whose early health concern eventually improves. Marcus also learns lessons in humility and responsibility from Deacon Chattum, who tells him he need not prove his authority by reacting publicly and reminds him to keep his word. The section presents becoming a safe man as a daily practice rather than a single transformation.

Part V — What We Carry Forward

Marcus and Kendall build family life around their children, their extended circle, and everyday acts of care. Charles's insensitive remarks and failures to know his grandchildren reinforce Marcus's understanding of his father's limitations. By contrast, the home becomes a gathering place for children: Marcus makes grilled-cheese breakfasts, Kendall and Marcus support Avery's cheerleading and Reggie's basketball, and the children grow up surrounded by cousins, godfamily, and friends. Their house also brings new challenges, including expensive repairs and a nearly completed out-of-state home that Marcus gives up when the move would jeopardize Kendall's long-term medical security. He grieves the lost dream but chooses his wife and family's stability. The section's later losses reveal the emotional cost of unfinished relationships. Marcus mourns Grandma Lottie, whose legacy is the sense of belonging she gave people, and regrets that Tee did not attend her funeral. When Tee dies suddenly,

Marcus is left grieving both his friend and the unresolved distance between them. Charles's death at the VA likewise brings mixed grief: Marcus mourns his father, the father he never had, and the harm that cannot be undone. These losses strengthen the book's message that time is uncertain and that truth, care, and reconciliation should not always be postponed.

Epilogue — Where We Are Now

Years after letting go of the first out-of-state house, Marcus and Kendall eventually move and build a home in a different state when the timing is right. Their children thrive: Avery graduates summa cum laude from an HBCU and becomes a first-grade teacher, while Reggie graduates from college and plays professional basketball overseas. Marcus also reflects on the people who shaped his life—his resilient mother, his sisters, his complicated father, and friends both present and lost. The closing lesson is that breaking cycles is not one heroic act but a long series of ordinary decisions: tell the truth, apologize, keep your word, show up, protect without controlling, and make home safe. Marcus remains imperfect and still learning, but he has chosen not to pass his wounds on as an inheritance. The house he ultimately builds represents not just a structure, but the peace he worked to create.

Notable Quotes

> *"A house can hold dancing and danger at the same time."*
>
> *"Silence may help you survive the moment. But it does not heal the wound."*
>
> *"Some gifts are traps."*
>
> *"Love was not just something to feel. It was something to become."*
>
> *"A man is only as good as his word."*
>
> *"My children would not grow up in the environment I did."*
>
> *"The grind really was the blessing."*
>
> *"Breaking cycles is not one heroic moment. It is a thousand smaller choices."*

Full Summary

When Marcus reaches the VA, his father, Charles, is already dead. He has come straight from Reggie's basketball practice after being told there is still time to say goodbye, but he arrives too late. Charles's body is draped with the American flag, and the sight gathers a lifetime of contradiction into one image. He was a father, veteran, provider, liar, rescuer, and abuser: a man who gave Marcus life and wounds, sometimes helping him and sometimes hurting the family more than Marcus can count. Grief, anger, sadness, relief, and unanswered questions

arrive together. Memories of Denise—whom Marcus calls Moms—being struck, sleeping on the living-room floor, and facing a for-sale sign and a thrown trash bag sit beside memories of Grandma Lottie's porch, cousins, food, Al Green, peach cobbler, and laughter. Childhood, Marcus understands, was never only one thing. Years later, when Avery is born, he promises that his children will not grow up in the environment he knew. He does not yet understand how difficult it will be to keep that promise.

Marcus's story begins in late-1960s Los Angeles, where he is the first child of Denise and Charles. His sister Tanya arrives two years later. Marcus is loud, restless, and drawn to noise; Tanya is watchful and reserved. The family first lives in a modest Midtown apartment, then moves, when Marcus is six, to a suburban house with a yard and driveway. Denise sees the move as progress. Charles, handsome and ambitious, treats the house more like a stage for the success he wants others to see. He leaves his job at a tire company for real estate, dresses sharply, talks big, and spends as though success has already arrived, while bills, arguments, and other women reveal how fragile the appearance is. The children do not know every secret, but they feel the atmosphere change when their father comes home in a mood. At school, Marcus is bright but disruptive, talking when he finishes his work. Sports give his energy a structure: basketball, baseball, and football offer rules for running, hitting, and getting back up, unlike home, where getting back up can be harder.

One of Marcus's first strong experiences of belonging is Grandma Lottie's house. Cousins fill it, adults talk over coffee, and the air smells of cooking, furniture, and hair grease. Grandma warns the children not to run, but Marcus jumps from the porch anyway, splits his head, and earns stitches and a lasting family joke about being hard-headed. Another small lesson comes when he spends ten dollars at the ice-cream truck, gets his treat, and forgets to collect his change. The house teaches through laughter and correction, but also through unwritten rules: children should obey adults, stay out of grown folks' business, and keep family business inside the family. Some rules offer boundaries; others protect the wrong people. Marcus does not yet understand that silence can resemble loyalty and respect while giving harm a place to hide.

At home, Denise keeps a loaded shotgun beneath the bed because Charles works nights and she wants to protect herself and her children. One day Marcus enters as she unloads it, then steps away. Seconds later it fires into the space where he had been standing. He is unharmed, while Denise freezes in horror and relief, confronting how narrowly she has avoided losing her son. There are happier family rituals too. On Friday nights, relatives gather, cards and conversation fill the rooms, and Al Green's music softens the atmosphere. Marcus remembers the warmth clearly: children playing in the streets, summer days at the pool, and adults dancing in the living room. Down south, visits to his paternal grandparents bring cows, pigs, chickens, chores, and mischief. Marcus shocks pigs by laying fig leaves on their electric fence, then accidentally rolls a car toward the road after pulling its gearshift; it stops at a

pasture gate, and his father's question exposes him. Church is compulsory under his deacon grandfather. When Marcus hides his shoes to avoid a long service, the adults take him barefoot, turning his clever plan into a hot, rocky walk to church. At an aquatic center, he lies that he can swim, jumps from the high dive, and nearly drowns before his cousin Skeeter pulls him out and puts him in lessons. The country brings fear as well as comedy: dogs attack the chickens, and when they return growling as Marcus and Kenny collect the dead birds, cousin Lowell shoots them with a shotgun. Such memories are funny in retrospect, but they also reveal how close danger can come.

Around age ten, another kind of harm enters the family world. His older cousin Dre has the authority that older children often hold in a family where children are taught to respect relatives and obey. When Dre tells Marcus what to do—and not to tell—Marcus listens. What happens is wrong, though Marcus recalls it with restraint: there is no penetration, but fear, confusion, secrecy, and a sense of bodily danger remain. The family's rooms and routines appear unchanged afterward, making it difficult for a child to understand how something so disturbing can happen and life can carry on. Marcus keeps quiet for years, ashamed and isolated, trying to act normal by playing ball, joking, and talking too much in class. He later recognizes how the trauma shaped his relationship to trust, attention, tenderness, and control. Silence helps him get through the moment, but it leaves him alone with a wound he should not have had to carry by himself.

The violence between his parents is another truth Marcus learns to read through the air of the house. He remembers the first time Charles slaps Denise. The argument itself fades from memory; the earring that flies from her ear and lands on the floor remains. Tanya goes quiet, and Marcus is too frightened and young to intervene. Denise, hurt but standing, still watches over her children. Later, she sleeps on the living-room floor rather than in her bedroom. When Charles speaks to her dismissively, Marcus finally challenges him: "Why don't you leave her alone?" Charles turns on him, but Denise's warning—"Don't"—protects her son from becoming the next target. Marcus begins to understand that she has been managing danger as well as the household. A home, he realizes, needs more than food and furniture; it must be safe enough for people to rest.

One night before Marcus's baseball game, an argument turns urgent when Denise hears a closet door slide. She rushes the children out, but Marcus realizes he has left his glove behind. When they return, Charles is at the door holding the shotgun. Denise drives away without collecting anything else. She tells Marcus to borrow a glove and say only that he cannot find his own; the family is to keep quiet. At the game, Charles appears in a long black coat, and Marcus spends the evening wondering whether the shotgun is beneath it. Nothing happens, but the fear follows him onto the field. Then, during another argument, Charles threatens to sell the house. He storms outside in his underwear and plants a real-estate sign in the yard. The episode is absurd enough to become a family joke, and Denise laughs when

neighbors ask about it, but the threat also makes the children feel that even the ground beneath them can shift with their father's anger.

The uglier moments have no punchline. When Charles declares that the house looks like shit, Denise answers sharply. He grabs a full trash bag and throws it at her. Marcus and Tanya witness the humiliation, while Denise stands her ground. After losing her insurance-company job, she earns a license in hair and nails and becomes a trusted presence in the community, listening and encouraging women who come to her chair. Her strength does not make Charles's cruelty less real, but it keeps his treatment from defining her. The earring, the floor, the for-sale sign, and the trash bag remain in Marcus's memory alongside the music, food, and laughter: different truths held under the same roof.

That resolve did not make adolescence simple. Marcus was still carrying fear and anger, and Julian Cross's bullying gave those feelings another target. Julian took his snacks, pushed him around, and made him dread seeing him. When Marcus grew bigger, he finally punched Julian after Julian slapped a soda from his hand. Julian walked away and never bullied him again, but the years of intimidation had already taught Marcus to expect humiliation and danger.

He also learned that protecting people required more than feeling loyal to them. When girls bullied his shy sister Tanya, Marcus failed to notice how vulnerable she was until one knocked her to the ground. Denise punished him, explaining that he should not have left Tanya alone. He later understood she was teaching him to pay attention and stand beside the people who needed him. At school, he and his friend Sam found a boy hiding beneath the bungalows because he was afraid to go home. They brought him food, then told a teacher when it became clear they could not keep him safe themselves. The boy was placed somewhere safer, and Marcus saw that speaking up could be the difference between leaving a child alone with danger and getting help.

Meanwhile, danger seemed to gather in ordinary places. At a party, a boy was shot at the door and fell into Marcus's arms; he survived, but Marcus stopped going to parties. A bullet narrowly missed the car when Marcus drove Denise and Tanya home from Bible study. Later, after a football game, Marcus and his teammates ran toward Black boys being chased, then retreated when they realized the other group had more people. Their night of reckless egg-throwing escalated into gunfire: men mistook Marcus's car for the one that had egged them and fired buckshot into the back of Denise's car. Nobody was hit, but the damage made clear how quickly foolishness could carry everyone into danger. Marcus's own choices also cost him. He became ineligible in high school, ditched summer school, drank until he passed out in a park, and was left there by friends. Then he skipped enough first-period English to miss his graduation walk. He eventually earned his diploma through adult school, but Grandma Lottie's joke that he had "quit-uated" captured the consequence he could not undo.

Kendall was moving through her own trials with more steadiness. After her father's stroke and death, she helped care for her ailing mother, even though she had scholarships and the ability to leave for school elsewhere. She chose business school and work in the court system so she could remain nearby. Marcus admired her resilience, though he did not yet understand all she had given up. He, too, faced a choice when Charles offered to buy him a car if he stayed rather than leave with Denise. The offer appealed to him, but he recognized it as a way to keep his mother from leaving. He chose Denise and Tanya, giving up the car for the greater possibility of peace.

Marcus and Kendall's relationship was shaped by both affection and hurt. He mishandled her trust, seeing someone she knew and later lying to a girl about a family death so he could take another date to homecoming. Kendall, after he hurt her, had a fling of her own. On a trip, Marcus saw her with the other man and, wounded and proud, declared that he was done. Yet he still drove her to her family afterward. Her aunt saw his pain beneath his sunglasses and hugged him. Later, Marcus kept his promise to collect Kendall and her mother from the airport, even while they were still strained. He realized that Kendall had never judged his small apartment or dilapidated car; she had come to get him when his car broke down and had supported him without making him feel lesser. During the Los Angeles riots, he brought food and ice and stayed close to Kendall and her mother. He and Kendall eventually spoke honestly about the ways they had hurt one another and ended their other relationships. This time, choosing each other meant acting with commitment, not simply assuming the other would stay.

Marcus also began recognizing the patterns he had inherited. Living with Charles again, he found his father towering over and frightening a girlfriend, then mistreating her children through coldness and neglect. Marcus confronted him, seeing the same behavior that had harmed Denise repeat in another home. The children's anger and abandonment wounds showed him how pain could travel, though it did not excuse the harm they later caused. Marcus was also drawn into Darius's volatile life. When Darius stormed toward Marcus's aunt's apartment, yelling and pounding on her door, Marcus drove over and stopped him, challenging him to consider whether his rage was worth going to jail. He had seen enough to know that a man's claim that a woman "pushed his buttons" did not excuse threatening her.

The danger of Charles's chaos became personal again when Marcus returned from a weekend away with Kendall to find his father's house ransacked, its windows and patio door smashed. A large man who had come with Charles's girlfriend later followed Marcus into a fast-food restaurant. Marcus ordered fries and left rather than provoke him, then told Charles he would stay away until the situation was settled. Distance, he learned, could be a boundary rather than a betrayal.

At the same time, Denise was fostering Maya, a guarded little girl who arrived with matted hair, worn clothes, and a doll she clutched closely. Denise patiently worked through Maya's hair, giving care without making her feel responsible for its neglect. Marcus once saw Maya scold and hit the doll because it would not eat, insisting, "You need to eat right now." The behavior made sense when they learned she had been responsible for feeding younger siblings. Denise saw the burden behind the play and responded with patience, food, routine, and tenderness. Maya stayed, called Denise "Mom," and became Marcus and Tanya's sister. When her biological parents sought custody, Maya told the court she wanted to remain with them, and Denise adopted her.

Marcus and Kendall married after deciding at Tanya's wedding reception that they "might as well." Deacon Chattum later corrected Marcus when he snapped at Kendall for calling to him outside church. A husband, the deacon taught, did not need to prove himself publicly; he could answer calmly and discuss problems privately. He also insisted that a man's word mattered: if he could not keep a promise, he had to say so honestly. The lessons gave Marcus a practical measure of manhood, grounded in responsibility rather than volume.

Kendall's caregiving did not end when they married. Her mother was still ill, and Kendall sometimes spent nights at her childhood home or brought Marcus food before returning there. Marcus initially wanted more time with his new wife, then began to understand that she was stretched between two people she loved, not abandoning him. They moved into her childhood home so she could help her mother and they could save money. Six months after the wedding, Kendall became pregnant. When Avery arrived, Marcus felt his old promise sharpen: his children would not grow up in fear and instability. He wanted to be a safe father, not merely a man who meant well. That intention would be tested in the exhausting, ordinary work of caring for a family.

At Christmas, Charles visited and met Reggie for the first time. The baby was curious, watching the room as if he were already trying to understand how everything worked. Charles asked Kendall whether something was wrong with him. Kendall calmly explained that Reggie simply liked to look around, but I was furious. Then Charles turned his attention to the suede jacket I had bought him. Though he called it nice, he pointed to the Members Only label on his own jacket and announced that he wore name brands. In return, he gave us a one-hundred-count white sheet set. What stung most was that he did not even know Avery's name. The visit showed me, again, the difference between showing up and being truly present. Charles was my father, but blood did not mean I had to leave my family's tenderest feelings in his careless hands.

Kendall's mother and her longtime friend, Ms. Clara, watched Avery and Reggie while we worked. It was loving help, though two toddlers could wear down even the most devoted caregivers. Reggie was especially busy: when his grandmother called and could not find him,

she searched the house and finally called Kendall in alarm. They found him hiding beneath clothes in a closet, pleased with his private adventure while everyone else imagined the worst. After that, his grandmother decided he needed to start school. At home, I took the children to elementary school and made breakfast, often grilled cheese, sometimes with egg and bacon. Celeste and Nia's children joined us, too. They looked forward to the sandwiches, and our house became the gathering place where the children felt welcome. Feeding them was a small, everyday inheritance from Moms: make sure the kids leave with something warm in them.

Avery was thoughtful and academically sharp, eventually deciding she wanted to teach. Reggie had my curiosity, questioning how things worked and refusing to settle for an answer without understanding it. Avery found her place in gymnastics and cheerleading; Reggie gravitated toward sports and especially basketball, though he disliked football's contact. Their interests filled our calendar with practices, games, competitions, and drives across town. It was tiring and expensive, but watching them pursue what they loved made the effort worthwhile. Showing up for them was part of the promise I had made when Avery was born: not just to mean well, but to be there.

Meanwhile, our house began demanding more from us. First came leaks and repairs, then an entire wall had to be replaced, followed by a new roof. With problems stacking up, a visit to Marissa's parents in another state unexpectedly turned into a tour of model homes. One house caught my imagination: five bedrooms, four bathrooms, and a theater room, built from the ground up for $237,000, with a $1,000 deposit. It looked like a chance to leave our repairs behind and begin again.

The timing seemed to fit. Kendall had been injured at work and was considering retirement disability; my job could transfer me, and our children liked the idea of moving. I put down the deposit and moved ahead to help with the transition. Then Kendall learned she could lose the benefits tied to her long service, including medical coverage for life. I told her I was coming home. At the construction site, I cried for the future I had pictured in those rooms. Poppa Langston reminded me that choosing my wife and her long-term security was not failure; the house might simply not be ours yet. We found another home in a Los Angeles suburb, only a few houses from Tanya. The move brought family closer, gave the children new opportunities, and turned Reggie's driveway basketball into the start of his journey toward organized teams. Avery developed into a cheerleading leader, eventually becoming a captain. The house we chose was different from the dream we lost, but it held a life of its own.

Grandma Lottie's death reached me on an ordinary morning while I was cooking breakfast for Reggie's teammates. Tanya arrived crying, and I understood before she could say it. I could not bring myself to see Grandma's body; I needed to remember her alive—in her kitchen, laughing, feeding people, and making everyone feel important. Her funeral reflected how

widely she had loved. Yet my grief carried another hurt: Tee did not come or call, though I had once shown up for him at his father's funeral. Later, Charles died of cancer at the VA. I rushed from Reggie's practice after a call urging me to come say goodbye, but arrived too late. His body was under an American flag. I felt sorrow, anger, relief, and grief for both the father I had lost and the father I had never had. The flag honored his service, but it did not erase the harm or simplify the man. Charles had given me life and wounds, help and warnings; death ended the argument without answering every question.

Then Tee's wife, Monique, called to say he had died after falling in the shower and striking his head. Tee had been my closest friend since childhood, my brother in all but name. Though we had grown distant, and I still carried hurt that he had been absent after Grandma's funeral, his sudden death made the unfinished business feel permanent. I wished we had talked while we still could. I loved him, and now I had to mourn both him and the conversation we never had.

Years later, Kendall and I moved out of state, and after retiring from thirty-five years of service, she joined me in a home built from the ground up. This time the timing was right. The home we had wanted was not merely a set of rooms; it was the peace I had been trying to build. Avery graduated summa cum laude from an HBCU and became a first-grade teacher. Reggie graduated from college and plays professional basketball overseas. Maya, once a little girl caring for a doll as though she were responsible for a hungry sibling, graduated from college, married, and now has three sons. Denise still looks forward and pours love into the next generation. Tanya remains my sister and part of the story we shared; Percy is surrounded by his children and grandchildren. Dre has died, but his death cannot undo what happened. Telling the truth, rather than letting silence own it, remains part of healing.

Tee is gone, but the laughter, loyalty, and memories remain, along with the regret that we did not repair our distance. Rico and I are still close, sharing cigars and trips to Cigar Week events. My life holds pain and foolishness, but it also holds people who fed me, corrected me, prayed for me, and showed up. I am still imperfect and still learning. Breaking a cycle is not one grand declaration; it is repeated choices: answering calmly, keeping my word, apologizing, telling the truth, feeding the children, attending their games, protecting without controlling, and loving without making anyone afraid. My children did not inherit a perfect father. I hope they inherited enough safety and love to build lives beyond the pain that came before them. The house was never only a house. It was the work of becoming a man who could finally live in peace.

www.bookgist.ai