

WE MORTAL MEN

A NOVEL BY

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Chapter One

The sun was hotter here, baking the ground and causing thick callouses to form on the feet of local children, of whom there were many. This is where the unwanted came to wait, to hope, to dream and one day die. Women and children cast aside by the men they once believed loved them. Their stories were much the same – out of sight, out of mind – mistresses sent away by their white masters to raise their mixed-breed offspring in a foreign land.

The tiny Mexican settlement was originally called San Felipe, but less often now. Those native to the area had christened the village Los Negras. Clusters of adobe dwellings lined four dirt streets that merged at a square where an ancient water well had been dug, but by whom no one knew. A few weeds cropped up beside the well's brick lining, bringing a brief glimpse of green to an otherwise colorless town center.

It was the absolute belief of one resident woman that a day would come when her children would know something better. Her name was Claire and after seven years of enduring the isolation of Los Negras, she still held fast to her faith and the promise of an old white man named Greene.

Claire's eldest son sat quietly at a small wooden table where he often engaged in his studies. He drew his

fingernails across his forearm and imagined what his life might have been if he'd been born a different color. It wasn't a new thought, but as he matured into manhood it had begun to haunt him. *What would life be like if I was 'a touchin' skin that was white, or even brown?* Surely it would be a far better existence than the one he muddled through now.

Washington gazed through a windowpane of leaded glass onto the wet streets of Los Negras. A light rain had settled the dusty prairie and freshened the air. Outside his younger brother and two Mexican children played, using twigs to draw pictures in the softened earth of the unpaved roadway. They laughed and mocked each other's artwork. Again he gazed at the taut skin of his forearm. His brother Abram did not share his coal black flesh and kinky hair. No, for some reason Abram had been spared from this cruel curse. Abram's skin was light caramel in color and his hair fell in loose ringlets.

It's not uncommon for even the most sane to lose track of the day. On rare occasions the month might flee one's mind. But time had stopped passing years earlier for young Washington, and he was amazed that he could not recall the year. "Mammy, what year we's livin' in?"

His mother sat knitting a yellow flower on the rim of a summer sunbonnet. She was a good woman – kind, strong, intelligent, and loving. Though simply dressed, she was

queenly in stature. Still, in the boy's mind, she had cursed him at birth – bequeathing him black skin. The mother looked up from her needles. "Washington, you done loss your ever lovin' mind, boy? It eighteen and fifty-five."

Washington nodded and returned his gaze to the scratch marks trailing up his arm. "How far a walk is it to the home place?"

"Don't matter none. You ain't goin' there."

"How far?"

"Take near a week, but you ain't going." Again her needlework was interrupted and she sighed in exasperation, "You need to drop this foolery. Dey don't want you there."

"Dey may not want me there, but I's goin' anyhow. Mammy, we poor and I don't want'a be poor no more."

"Boy, you need to count yo blessin's. Your grand-pappy sends us money every season. Look around you. We lives lots better than other black folk round here. Even live better than them Mexicans do. Now stop with dis nonsense."

The young man said nothing for a time but then dared to disturb his mother's work once more. "Mammy, tell me about my daddy. Why he don't want me?"

"Lord boy, what's got into dat head of your'n? You daddy don't care 'bout you cause he got another family he has to care for ... and it just as well." She paused a moment and then corrected herself. "It not he don't care for you. Deep down he

a good man, but he weak. Life demanded he make a choice and we's got pushed to the side. Now, your grand-pappy, he a special man."

"If he so special, why don't he come see us?"

"He old. Now quit lookin' out dat window and come over here to your mammy."

The young man, now fifteen years old, stood up in his new leather shoes, a gift from his grandfather. He went to his mother and she wrapped her lean arm around him and kissed his forehead.

"I know you young and feelin' adventurous. I know you want more. But you gotta be patient. Your grand-pappy said he'd call for us when the time is right, and he a man of his word. All you got to do is let da good Lord lead. In His time your life will change."

Washington might not have remembered the year, but he could recite his mother's counsel verbatim, and it no longer held any meaning for him.

The resident roosters had not yet begun to crow when Washington slipped out of the two-room hut that had been his home since age seven. He blew a quiet kiss to his mother and younger sibling and left them to a restful sleep. It saddened him, but he did not cry. Long before the sun's rising he scurried into the darkness with only a single change of

clothes and half a loaf of pan-bread stuffed into a small spent flour sack.

Washington followed a sandy bottom wash that trailed down from the desert floor and ended at the Rio Grande. The sun was just above the horizon when he reached the water. He stood observing the far bank of a land he prayed would soon become his deliverer. Against his mother's wishes he crossed the river, determined to find a better life.

It felt as if he'd walked for an eternity. The hot desert sand radiating through the soles of his shoes had blistered his feet. Each stride became a difficult and painful task. He was hungry and thirsty. On the sixth day of his journey, like an oasis, a farm appeared on the horizon. Washington hurried towards the establishment as fast as his tired young muscles would allow.

"Nigger, what you doin'?" came a shout from a man standing at the end of a corn row. "Boy, you on private property."

"I's sorry, mister. I just wanted to get a drink from your horse tank over yonder."

Tobacco juice spurted from the gruff farmer's mouth and splattered on the ground. He approached Washington and studied the boy's condition. "All right, go ahead and get ya some water. Then get off my place. Understand?"

"Yes sir, I understands," the boy said respectfully.

After filling his goatskin with tank water, Washington again approached the farmer and asked for directions to what he referred to as the Home Place.

"You're lookin' for the Greene place? It's about a half day's walk, yonder way," he said, pointing toward a wagon-rutted road.

"Thank ya, mister, thank ya." After a few hurried steps up one of the ruts he called back, "And thank ya for da water."

Washington reached his destination at nightfall. Light streamed out through the picture window of a large, freshly painted farmhouse.

Over the long journey he'd convinced himself they would be glad to see him. Surely, he would find a better life here at the home place. In his excitement, he forgot all about the pain in his sore feet. Marching up the front porch steps, he stopped to listen before he knocked. He could hear children's voices and laughter coming from inside. Washington knocked timidly on the door and held his breath.

The door swung open and a tall white man appeared. Washington had left this world at such an early age he could not confirm this man's identity. The man of the house looked into Washington's eyes, then over both his shoulders in all directions. "What you want, boy?"

Peering past the man, Washington could see three children seated at a table. They were clean, well dressed, with

inquisitive wide eyes gazing back at him. The woman at the table was finely dressed, as well. It had been several days since Washington had last eaten, and the aroma of the family's dinner filled his nostrils, leaving him speechless.

"Well, what do you want? Can't ya see we're having our dinner?"

"I's ... I's Washington."

The woman immediately rose from the table and joined her husband in the doorway. She looked at the tattered young boy with anger and disgust. "Take care of this," she said sternly to her husband. "I don't care how, just take care of it."

He flinched at his wife's firm demand and his countenance cowed. He motioned to the porch steps. "Rest there, boy. I'll bring ya some vittles directly," he said and closed the door.

The house was silent for a time, and then the man reappeared at the door holding a plate of food. "Come around to the picnic table in the back yard. There's ample moon for light. You can feed yourself there while we talk."

Washington's hunger trumped his need for conversation and he said nothing as he ravished the food. Engrossed in eating, he did not notice when the man rose to his feet and walked around the table to stand behind him. The man removed a small caliber pistol from his belt, slowly pulled back the hammer, placed the barrel to the back of the boy's

head, and squeezed the trigger. The shot rang out in the night and the boy fell forward onto the table. There, Washington's life ended. His dreams of something better would never be realized.

Chapter Two

After nightfall all the sounds of the city seemed to wind up in Anna's tiny backyard. She flipped the ashes from her cigarette, leaned her head back, and looked up into the heavens. Where were all the stars she remembered as a child? Where was the joy she'd once felt? The past fifteen years had passed in a blur and now the thirty-three-year-old felt defeated, robbed of life, deprived of love, and totally abandoned.

Anna was a single mom, but not by choice. Her husband had left less than a month after the birth of their only child, a boy. She'd given up her proud maiden name of Van Camp to become the wife of a man named Measles. After the disappearance of her husband, she'd chosen to live life bearing the name of a dreaded disease, for the sake of her son.

Over the years she'd managed to move up in the world. By hard work and pinching every penny she'd left behind a dumpy rented trailer house and now lived in a less dumpy house of her own. The small house had only two bedrooms and a single common bathroom. It wasn't much, but it was hers. At first the streets surrounding her home had seemed safe enough, but as the city grew, so did its inner city. Little

by little crime and poverty decayed the area. Then life handed Anna another challenge to overcome – raising a teenager in an unsafe and unpredictable neighborhood.

After her evening smoke, Anna left what little solitude she had and entered the house. She snatched a remote game control from her son and looked directly into his face, ensuring his full attention.

"Clean the kitchen and your bedroom before you go to bed, Shawn. And I don't want you staying up all night. Understand? I'm not expecting to work overtime so I'll see you first thing in the morning," she said, kissing his forehead.

Shawn turned a blank expression toward his mom and said nothing.

"Did you hear me?"

"Yeah, mom. I heard you," he said flatly and took back the control.

"Okay, then. Keep the doors locked and don't even think about leaving the house. I love you, sweetie."

"Love you too, mom."

In dim light Anna walked up a broken sidewalk thinking only of her son. She wanted for Shawn a world she could not provide. She simultaneously cursed herself for not being kinder to him minutes before. She reached the bus stop and leaned against a light pole under its dreary glow. A tear ran down her cheek and dripped from her chin.

It was Saturday night and the lure for a fifteen-year-old of hanging out with friends was simply too great. Shawn left the safety of his home at eleven o'clock and ventured into the inner city. There was little chance his mother would find out about this late night excursion since he planned to be sound asleep long before she returned from work.

A rusty chain-link fence separated their front door from Digger Street, which emptied into Telephone Road. Shawn crossed the busy drag and jogged along the poorly lit streets flanking the notorious strip. Soon he passed under the street lamps along Sesquicentennial Park. Shawn's favorite rap artist boomed through ear buds, hidden underneath his hoodie. He walked faster, eager to reach his friends.

Officer Joe Dupree turned sleepily and reached for his wife. He did it less often now. For over a year he'd been sleeping by himself. Her clothes still hung neatly in her closet, and her makeup lay in perfect order in her bathroom drawers, designated hers when they'd first moved into the house. He clearly remembered her laugh and the smell of her hair. Still, there were times he reached for her in his sleep only to awake to the life he now lived without her. Cancer had robbed the beautiful young woman of her life, and her death had not yet found a place to settle in his mind.

Joe was just building up the desire to roll out of bed when his six-year-old daughter stormed the bedroom and

hopped on his bed. Joe's sister had just picked the child up from pre-school. It was half past three in the afternoon.

"Wake up daddy! Daddy, wake up!" his daughter sang, shaking her father to his senses.

Joe was not sleeping but he faked his wake-up, "Ahhh, good morning, baby girl."

"Morning? Daddy, it's afternoon!"

"You sure right ... dang shift's got your daddy all confused. Never know what time of day it is."

"You should play hooky and stay home with me and Auntie," the little girl said, kissing her father's cheek.

"Oh no, there will be no hooky playing in this family." He tickled his daughter and relished her joyful laughter.

Joe's sister entered the room wearing a smile and pulled Kylie into a hug. "Are you waking your daddy up, young lady?"

On odd months of the year Officer Joe Dupree worked the night shift in Houston's second ward. He and Kylie loathed the odd months, but Joe insisted they not complain and always be grateful for the job. He was a man of faith and saw his job as a way to reach out and serve his God by serving his community.

"Come on, Daddy. Let's go get a snack."

It was Joe's daughter and his older sister, a widow herself, who had kept him sane, seeing him through this most difficult time of life.

Joe hugged and kissed his loved ones that evening, then headed out the door to begin his shift. He loaded into his cruiser and headed down the street to pick up his new partner, a rookie named Perkins. He was a quiet fellow and Joe found him pleasant company. Dupree's longstanding reputation for being a disciplined cop had awarded him the duty of training newly badged policemen and women on the force. He liked the position. It allowed him to not only share his skills but also share his faith with his new co-workers.

A few minutes past eleven Dupree and his partner took a call from the precinct. A convenience store had just been robbed and the night clerk had been shot. When they arrived two other police cars were already at the location, lights flashing. EMS was en route. The small-caliber bullet had passed cleanly through the female clerk's right shoulder and her blouse was streaked with blood. One officer applied pressure to her wound while another questioned her about the robber's description. Dupree took notes while Perkins manned the radio.

"It all happened so quickly," the clerk panted. "He stuck his gun in my face and demanded cash. I gave him what I had

in the register. Then, for no reason, the guy stopped at the door, turned around, and shot me."

"What did the guy look like? What was he wearing?"

"He was a white kid, no more than twenty years old. He was wearing a gray sweatshirt with a hoodie pulled over his head ... faded blue jeans ... he had on faded jeans and white tennis shoes."

"Can you remember anything else about him? Eye color? Scars? Anything physically distinguishable?"

"No, it happened so fast, I ..."

"How tall was he?"

"About my height, five-eight, and he was skinny."

Dupree looked up from his notes and spoke to the officer taking the interview, "Me and my partner will start scanning the neighborhood."

"Good chance he is still in the area with only a ten-minute head start," Perkins said as they both headed for the vehicle.

As they scanned the dark sidewalks and alleyways, a bulletin came in over the radio with the clerk's description of the robber. A minute later they spotted a possible suspect.

"There, walking down the sidewalk," Perkins said. "Looks white and his clothes match the description. May be our guy."

Dupree pulled to the curb and ordered his partner to make the call and inform dispatch of the situation. The hooded subject strode purposefully forward without turning his head and was seemingly unaware of the officer's presence. On he walked under the dim streetlights.

With his sidearm drawn and pointed at the suspect, Joe approached from behind and barked the order, "Police! Stop! Put your hands in the air!"

The suspect did not heed Dupree's orders and continued his hurried steps.

"Put your hands in the air!" Dupree yelled loudly, sighting his pistol directly at the suspect's back.

It happened in a heartbeat. The young man stopped and then turned abruptly while removing an object from his pocket.

In this neighborhood the distance between living and dying often is measured in milliseconds. Officer Dupree pulled the trigger and shot the suspect through the heart. The male subject crumpled to the sidewalk where a pool of blood quickly framed his body. Joe looked down at the boy whose eyes stared upward, an expression of shock painted upon his lifeless face.

Perkins panted to a stop, his sidearm drawn. He knelt beside the young man and placed his fingertips on his neck,

searching for a pulse. He looked up at Joe and shook his head. Joe was still holding his gun, stunned, unbelieving.

"Look in his hand. What's in his hand?" Joe asked, panic stricken. "Is it a gun? I saw him pull a gun!"

Officer Perkins aimed his flashlight at the dead boy's hand. Carefully he opened his lifeless fingers. "It's an MP3 player."

Joe dropped to his knees and tried desperately to revive the young man, but it was too late. The bullet had done its job, and there was no way to rewind time. No way to undo the tragic accident.

Each of the three major TV stations reported on the shooting, giving limited amounts of time on their morning, noon, and evening news shows. The newspapers also carried the story, but none deemed it worthy of the front-page. And, just like that, the event was forgotten by the city.

Under a heaven empty of hopes and dreams, Anna sat alone in her tiny back yard. The sounds of the city were a cruel reminder of the world to which she had subjected her son. She took a long drag from her cigarette and lifted a bottle of vodka to her lips. Her eyes were swollen from a day of tears. In that moment there seemed to be no God.

Ironically, Shawn was laid to rest in a cemetery not four blocks from the home of the man who'd ended his life. The private graveside gathering was small. Beside the grieving

mother stood two girlfriends from work and a distant cousin. Anna Measles wept as the minister looked down at the pages of his Bible and delivered a generic eulogy over her precious child.

Joe Dupree, wearing his best suit, stood at a distance beside an old oak tree. His eyes were glued to the little mother as she struggled to endure the pain of giving up her only son. Joe had never before questioned his choice to become a law enforcement officer. The life he had taken in the blink of an eye weighed heavily on him and he grieved with the boy's mother.

Chapter Three

A black police officer shoots a white kid. Makings of a great commentary, I'd say. What do you think?"

"It was clearly an accident."

"I know that, but look at what happened around the shooting ... nothing. If it had been a white officer who'd shot a black kid the NAACP would be all over it. There'd be protests in the streets and you can bet Jessie Jackson would be giving interviews. But a black officer kills an innocent white kid ... it's like it never happened. That's why I'm writing the piece."

"I don't know. You're skating on pretty thin ice."

"Maybe so, but there are some strong points that need to be made."

"I can't imagine our managing editor ever allowing it into print."

"I've been an editorial editor for more than ten years. On top of that I've been on the editorial page five years running. It'll go to print."

"Pride comes before the fall ... have at it. Just remember, your lowly co-worker warned you."

Officer Dupree had now been on leave of service for five days. He'd reenacted the shooting a thousand times in his

head and wondered if it would ever get easier. The face of the woman whose son he had killed was ever before his mind's eye.

He sat with his sister Ellen at the kitchen table sharing the morning paper. She shook open her section of the paper and extended it to her brother. "Have you read this?" her words sounding as if she had been dissed by a pervert.

"Read what?"

"This column on the editorial page. What this white man, John Stern, know about bein' black? He has no clue about what it means to be victimized," Ellen huffed.

"You said his name is Stern?"

"Yeah, says it right under his picture, John Stern."

"What does it say?"

"Your name ain't mentioned but it's sure enough referring to you ... and that white boy you-," her next word froze in her throat. "Lord, lord, I'm sorry, Joe. I wasn't even thinking. It doesn't say anything bad about you. This fella, Stern ... he going on about how all men, regardless of the color of their skin, need to rise above their difficulties and so on. Shoot, you spray paint his white ass black and let him give it a try."

"Let me read it."

Ellen folded the paper around the article and handed it to him. He stared at the paper for a few minutes, then placed

it on the table, and nonchalantly sipped his coffee. "Actually it's good ... there's a lot of truth in what he has to say. The only thing wrong with it is a white man wrote it. Been a black man's opinion and the entire African American community would be nodding their heads in agreement, sayin', *he shore right.*"

Ellen frowned across the table at him and pursed her lips.

"You know I'm right," said Joe.

Ellen's frown melted away as she gave it more thought. "Sometimes, brother, you too smart for your own good," she chuckled. "Now how about some breakfast?"