

Some Rain Must Fall

A novel by

Mike Dixon

UNEDITED

First Draft

Chapter 1

Bullfrogs on the Pamlico River banks croaked their satisfaction with the steamy summer night. A tropical storm off North Carolina pumped heat and moisture into the atmosphere over coastal towns and villages and, in Washington, late afternoon showers had just cooled hot asphalt streets. Sticky evening air now clung to human skin and siphoned off the people's energy. Along residential streets, they sat on dark front porches, glided in uncomfortable chairs, and hoped for any breeze. Little orange lights glowed for a second and then faded. Ice cubes clinked in empty glasses. Men and women hoped tobacco smoke and sugary lemonade would take their minds off the sweat trickling down their backs. In the stillness of the neighborhoods, they swore they heard the river sliding by on its way to the sound and into the Atlantic Ocean.

A block off Main Street, the wide, dark Pamlico flowed under the Highway 17 bridge. Local insomniacs took up their favorite places on it, fishing for tomorrow night's supper. From folding aluminum chairs, they chatted, checked their lines, and sipped stale, warm beers. Most of them planned to sleep in the morning when it would be much cooler.

Two public places in Washington had air conditioning in 1951: the Beaufort County Courthouse and Tayloe Hospital. At the hospital, Dr. Littlejohn grumped at a nurse, “We should just turn off the air conditioning if it can’t cool this hospital any better than this. Waste of electricity.” He ran a finger between his neck and sweat-drenched shirt collar.

“Of all the nights,” he muttered to no one. “She doesn’t even want the baby. Giving him up as soon as he’s here.” He shook his head. “Poor kid. He’ll have a better life, though, with the couple that wants him than with his alcoholic mother and whatever worthless lout she’s staying with now. She should be going to football games, not having a baby.”

#

The alcoholic mother, Hayley, worked hard to deliver the burden she’d carried for nine months. She wanted to be rid of it.

When she told her mother she was pregnant again, she begged Hayley not to go to the shady doctor in Greenville who’d gotten rid of her last one. “Give this baby a chance, Hayley,” her mom pleaded. “Give him away if you don’t want him, but please let him live.”

Hayley agreed only because her mother offered money for her and the baby to live on. She took it and went straight to Pete’s house on the other side of the river, near Whichard’s Beach. Hayley thought she was in love with him, but he’d told her she couldn’t bring a baby home to live with them. If she gave the baby away, she knew she could move with Pete to Newport News. He’d been offered a job at a shipbuilding company and he’d told her they were going to pay him more money than he’d ever earned.

Sam and Janie Mason had agreed to adopt Hayley’s baby. She had liked the Mason’s the only time she’d met them. They owned the general store on Main Street. If she let them adopt her

baby, he would have more than she had when she was growing up. But, she didn't want to spend much time with Sam and Janie. Especially Janie. Her kindness made Hayley feel uncomfortable.

In their only meeting, the Mason's explained they had never had any children of their own. Hayley tried to understand, but inwardly she'd smirked, "*This is my second kid and I'm barely eighteen.*"

#

Dr. Littlejohn came in Hayley's room to check on her. "How are you, Hayley."

"How close am I to being done?"

Her indifference annoyed the old doctor.

He checked his patient and said, "About 15 more minutes, I'd say.

"We'll get you out of here as soon as we can. Sorry you've been bothered." He snapped off his gloves, tossed them in a trash can and stalked out of her room.

Hayley didn't care; she didn't like him either. Her mother paid for her pre-natal care; else she would've never met him. She sipped from the bottle hidden under her sheet, as the nurse came into the room. "Hayley, you shouldn't drink. It's bad for the baby."

"But I need it for the pain," she claimed. "Besides, what do you care?"

#

Down the hall, the Mason's waited. Their minds were on the baby being delivered just a few steps away. Janie and Sam sat with a nervous father in the waiting room. He told them way too much about his leaky water heater and having to replace it. Sam tried to listen, but Janie had given up several minutes ago.

"I'm sorry to hear about your water heater," she said. "When I was growing up, my mother told me 'into each life, some rain must fall.' It sounds like you've had a thunderstorm."

The new father grinned, suddenly aware of how much he'd rattled on about his little problem. "I guess. But it's just a water heater."

#

Thirty minutes later, Janie Mason held a baby boy. She and Sam had decided to call him "Tommy." Tears of joy streamed down her face. "Oh, Sam," she whispered. "We have a son."

Sam smiled, put his arm around his wife and looked at Tommy. "We do, Janie."

"Can we see Hayley?" Janie asked.

Dr. Littlejohn shook his head. "She doesn't want to see you. She said you could have Tommy as soon as he can leave the hospital."

"Is she okay?" Sam asked.

"Hayley Davis is a baby-making machine. God designed her perfectly to conceive, carry and deliver babies. She's fine. She wants to leave the hospital now."

"How about Tommy?" Janie asked. "He seems small."

"He's under-weight," the doctor answered. "We know babies are affected if their mothers drink during pregnancy. Hayley said she'd quit, but his weight tells me she lied to me."

"He may have other problems as he grows. He could be slower to learn. He's gonna be smaller than other kids when he starts school."

"But other than that . . ." Janie searched for assurance her baby was okay.

"Other than that . . . he's a healthy boy."

"I wasn't that good in school either, Janie," Sam consoled. "And I do okay."

"And we'll feed him good," Janie added, adjusting the blankets around her son's face. "Help him grow big and strong."

“If he does well through the rest of the night, you can take him home with you tomorrow,” Dr. Littlejohn said. “How does that sound?”

Now, it was Sam’s turn for tears. “It sounds so good, doctor. Thank you.” He shook the man’s hand with both of his. “We have his nursery all ready for him.”

#

Not long after the Mason’s left the hospital, Hayley snuck out of her room and met Pete, waiting for her in his car. They left quickly for Whichard’s Beach. They had packing to do before the landlord showed up for the past due rent in the morning.

#

Sam Mason had had a few proud days in his life: the day he’d gotten a driver’s license, the day he’d graduated high school despite his teachers’ warnings he wouldn’t and, of course, the day he married Janie Spruill. But this day, the day he and Janie brought their son to live with them in their home above the general store . . . this was the proudest day of his life.

He was a father.

He’d been thinking since he woke up. He and Tommy would play baseball one day and they’d fish off the bridge as often as they could. He’d teach him to ride a bike when he was ready. With Janie, they could have picnics and visits with friends. They’d even go on vacations to Nag’s Head sometimes. Sam looked forward to these things.

Sam drove his wife and son to their home above the general store. As he pulled up to the curb, Janie said, “Look at this, Sam. There are so many people here to see Tommy!”

Sam’s mother and Janie’s parents were there along with too many cousins and friends to name. “This is so nice, Sam.” Janie leaned over to kiss her husband.

Sam parked and went around the car to open the door for the two most important people in the world. His friends patted him on the back and congratulated him, begged him for a cigar. Sam hadn't bought any since he'd never liked them and his wife hated the smell.

#

Janie sensed her mother wanted to hold her baby, but she ignored her. There would be plenty of time later for Grandma Spruill to hold Tommy. Her father, who wanted to be called "Papa Spruill" by his grandchildren, hugged her and whispered in her ear, "I'm happy for you and Sam."

"Motherhood looks good on you, Janie," Sam's mother complimented. "And the buttons on my boy's shirt are about to pop off!"

Janie loved her mother-in-law. A story Sam had told her flashed in her mind.

"Mildred Johnson criticized mom's greasy fried chicken one time at a church social. She laughed at mom not knowing she was coming up behind her. Mom's friends laughed, too, until they saw her reach for her plate of untouched chicken. Without a word, she motioned to Dad they were leaving. She threw the fried chicken out the car window on the way home.

"Dad told me later he'd never seen her so hurt, but she went on as if nothing happened. I guess her friends were too embarrassed to mention it later.

"But from then on, she would think of the sweetest things to say to people. I think some of those kind words were spiteful then, but you can tell she means what she's saying now. I'm sure she has strong opinions about lots of people, but she'll never say any of them.

"She never made fried chicken again! Not for my brothers. Not for Dad or me. Not for anyone. Now you know why she only brings a pot roast to family dinners."

#

Miss Vera stood with her hands on her hips and watched the new family on the sidewalk outside her store. She was sure she'd been patient watching the crowd welcome the Mason's and their new baby. When she couldn't stand it any longer, she stomped out of Durwood's High Fashion Clothes next door to the general store and shouted at the well-wishers surrounding Tommy and his parents.

"I'm having my summer sale and customers can't get to my door," she complained.

"Could ya'll go on into the general store? Goodness. How's a person supposed to make a living?" she kidded, but she was so very serious. She held open the door to the general store and waved people in. "That's right," she said. "Right this way."

When Sam, now holding Tommy, moved past Miss Vera, she stopped him.

"Let me see your boy, Sam."

He moved the delicate blanket draped over Tommy's face.

"Ahhh, look at him." She rubbed one of Tommy's feet with her thumb and index finger. "He's a nice-looking fella." She patted the baby's bottom and looked up into Sam's eyes.

"Now, Sam, next Mother's Day . . . you come in the store and I'll get you fixed up with a nice gift for Janie. Every woman remembers her first Mother's Day."

"Thank you, Miss Vera. I'll do that. That's nice of you."

"Well, don't you go telling everyone for goodness' sake. I can't give the whole town a discount. Now, go on in. I believe they're waiting for you."

#

Sam's brothers had set up his store for the celebration for baby Tommy. They'd rolled the cracker barrel to the side and shoved the crates of hard candy toward the cash register. A "closed" sign hung sideways on the general store's door. The Mason and Spruill women had

filled countertops with sandwiches, potato salad, fried chicken (and one pot roast), green beans, corn-on-the-cob and boiled potatoes. There was chocolate cake and a galvanized tub filled with Coca-Colas and ice. A ring of mismatched chairs enclosed the space where the family celebrated.

A table near the canned goods shelves was piled high with presents for Tommy. There'd been no baby shower for Janie since no one knew if or when they'd ever be able to adopt. Carl, because he was the oldest Mason son and now teaching at East Carolina, took it on himself to get the party for his nephew started. He offered a blessing for the feast, making sure to ask that the "food they were about to receive would nourish their bodies."

Family cousins sneaked candy from the crates, hoping Sam wouldn't notice their theft. Once he told them it was okay, they stood around the wooden boxes and consumed at least two pounds of their favorite candy. He knew they'd stop when they'd had their fill.

Half the family talked at the same time; the other half barely listened. Men spoke about the Chinese in Korea. The women gave advice to the new mother and told stories of their first days of being a mom. Everyone enjoyed themselves until Tommy decided he was hungry. Janie took the crying infant up the stairs to her home and the big family began to filter out of the store.

#

When Sam had cleaned the store and put everything back in its place, he turned off the lights and climbed the stairs to his family. He and Janie had made a memory today. His family had showered them with love, food and unexpected gifts. His heart was full.

He found his wife asleep on their sofa, cradling their son in her arms. The sight of them caught his breath. He hadn't expected ever to care for anyone this much. Memories of his father flashed through his mind. He'd been gone six years now. *He would've loved this occasion.* Sam missed him still.

As he walked toward his family, Janie woke up.

“What time is it?”

“Just after 8:00.”

“It’s been a good day, Sam,” she said. “Are you happy?”

“Never happier, sweetheart.” He sat down beside her and drew her next to him.

“Definitely,” he thought. “I’ve never been happier.”

#

“Where are you going?” Janie asked. Sam had gotten out of bed, just before midnight, and pulled on his pants.

“Those kids are back on the loading dock.”

He’d chased off some high school kids a few nights before. They parked their cars behind the general store and sat on his loading dock, watching the river and drinking beer. He’d surprised them and yelled for them to leave. As he went down the stairs, he realized they probably didn’t know he and Janie lived on the second floor. He’d make sure they knew tonight.

“Be careful, Sam,” Janie called from their room.

In darkness, he walked from the stairs to the store’s back door to look through its window. He wanted to know who was there before he opened it.

He recognized the man he saw and went outside on the loading dock.

“Jim,” he said to the black man lifting crates on to his back steps. “What are you doing? Do you know what time it is?”

Jim looked up from the bed of his faded green Chevrolet pickup. Like him, it was older, showing its age, but still as solid as it ever was. This was Jim’s farm truck, church-going truck and date-night-with-Sharon truck.

“Sharon and me heard you and Janie had a new baby, Mr. Sam. We don’t have money for baby clothes or toys, but we got vegetables. These are from our garden to welcome your new baby. What’s its name?” Sam asked as he stepped up on the dock.

“Tommy.”

“A boy! Oh, Mr. Sam, you done got some help to run your store. That’s good.”

Jim took his friend’s hand. “I’m happy for you and Janie. That’s a real good thing.”

“Thanks, Jim. I appreciate the corn and early potatoes, but you didn’t need to do this.

“Why didn’t you come earlier when my family was here? You could’ve seen my son.”

“Ahh, Mr. Sam. Not everybody wants to see a man like me at parties like that one.”

“We’ve talked about this, Jim . . .”

“I know. I know, but not everybody thinks like you, Mr. Sam. It’s just better for me to drop this off for you when no one’s around.”

Sam looked at his black friend. He’d never understand what Jim experienced most days of his life. He hated it though. Loathed it. How could anyone hate someone like his friend? It made no sense to him.

“Tomorrow, Jim, you and Sharon come to the store — right in the middle of the day — and I’ll give you a Coke and Sharon can hold my boy.”

“Can I have a Moon Pie, too?”

“Yes!” Sam laughed. “They’re my favorite, too. I’ll even give you some for your kids.”

“You know I got five now, right? The littlest one ain’t got teeth yet, so she won’t need no Moon Pie.” The friends laughed together and talked some about being fathers.

“You’ll be a good one, Mr. Sam,” Jim said. “You got a kind heart.”

“Thanks, Jim. I’m going back to bed now. It’s been a long day and I’m tired. Thanks for the vegetables.”

He closed and locked the door and waited to hear the truck fire up.

He heard voices instead.

#

“What you doin’ here, boy?” a drunken Don Absher threatened Jim.

Jim ignored him and opened the truck’s door. “Mr. Don, I don’t want no trouble, now,” Jim said. “I was dropping off something for Mr. Sam.”

The drunk slammed the driver’s door shut and stepped up to Jim.

“You didn’t answer my question! What are you doin’ here?”

“I left some vegetables for Mr. Sam and Janie. They got a new baby.”

“They don’t need your charity, boy. He owns the general store.”

“He’s my friend. I was just. . .”

“Sam Mason ain’t your friend!” Don interrupted. “He’s a white man and you sure ain’t.”

Jim gave up trying to talk to this man. He had to be careful if he wanted to get home.

The door to the store opened and Sam stepped out with his shotgun pointing at the sky.

“Don Absher, you get off my property. Now! You’re drunk and he is my friend. Leave him alone unless you want some of this,” Sam said, nodding at the gun propped on his hip.

“He ain’t your friend, Sam. I was just making sure he won’t stealing from you.”

“You’re a liar, Don. Now leave him alone and leave or I’ll call the sheriff.”

Don sneered at Jim, huffed his disapproval and slapped the hood of the faded green pickup. He moved off down toward the river.

“Thanks, Mr. Sam. Glad you heard what was happening.”

“I’m sorry it happened, Jim. You know everyone ain’t as mean as him, don’t you?”

“Yep. He’s a mean one, though. Especially when he’s been drinking.” He climbed into his truck, started it and put it in gear. “I’ll be here for my Coke and Moon Pie tomorrow. ’Night, Sam.” Jim drove away. He never came to the store to get his Moon Pie.

