

ANN JEFFRIES

*Southern Exposures*

*Family Reunion—In The Wisdom of the Ancestors Series*

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A Nigerian proverb says, “Hold a friend with both of your hands.” To that, I would add, “Hold a friend with all of your heart.” There have been true friends during each stage of my life that I hold in my heart with great and wondrous memories. One, in particular, was a working mother with a busy legal career and boundless energy to extend a helping hand to those in need. She made being a supportive wife, dedicated mother, caring daughter, faithful sister, great friend and hostess extraordinaire look like she was reading her many roles from newspaper headlines. She juggled all of those necessary roles, never dropping one of them. The mind boggled at all that she managed to accomplish with warmth and grace. Yet, this remarkable woman took time to read *Southern Exposures* while it was still in its infancy, and critiqued the manuscript in her (ha! ha!) spare time. That, in and of itself, was a daunting task. Still it only goes to prove further the point that she is the type of true friend that you hold with both of your hands and all of your heart through countless years.

Brenda Irons LeCesne, when I grow up, I want to be just like you, the epitome of the phenomenal woman.

“... I have this love-hate relationship with the South. Some of my best and worst experiences took place [there]. I believe that African Americans who have never had southern exposure have a limited prospective on racism. They think it’s all about jobs, but it’s not only about jobs. It’s about land, ownership, and self-sufficiency. Our story might be different, if we had gotten our forty acres and a mule. People who can grow their own food and live independent of salaries are the ones who will survive. Everything else is fleeting...”

—Amanda Wheeler

*Arms of the Magnolia*

A Fawcett Gold Medal Book

Ballantine Books

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## Prologue

*August, five years earlier . . .*

Summertime in the South. The heavy, salty, ocean air pressed the heat down to the fine, damp sand. Labor Day weekend couldn't have been better for the thirty-plus Cousins' Reunion. Five of the young men, surrounded by their history and their ancestry, lay on the sand at Atlantic Beach, South Carolina, whiling away the last vestiges of summer's magic. The big, four-level Victorian house owned by their Aunt Hanna Ivy was the perfect backdrop for the thirty-plus first cousins who flocked to the shore each year at the same time for a Cousins' Reunion. With only a few days left before they would go in different directions back to high school, college, graduate school or other institutions of learning, as the case may be, so many cousins had come from far and wide to spend the last five days of summer's splendor together.

Using his hand as a shield to block the approaching brilliant dawn, Kenneth James Alexander peered out over the Atlantic Ocean at the Air Force jets inbound on the horizon.

"What's that?" he asked his younger brother, Benjamin.

"Uh, sounds like the old F-14s, fighter jets. About six of them," he said without looking. Benjamin—Benny—occupied a blanket, his hands laced behind his head. His closed eyes hid behind sunshades that darkened the sun's brilliance, but not his daydream.

Seconds later, six F-14s streaked overhead, moving inland, the booming sound following in their wake.

"When you're good, you're good," his cousin, Donald Dixon, said dryly, watching the aircraft decorate the sky with their exhaust. "Sure are faster than that old crop duster you've been flying, Benny," he joked.

"Yeah, they'll be crossing over Goodwill in three minutes, on their way to Shaw Air Force Base," Benny said, smugly. "It would take me about half that time."

"He built that airplane all by himself, you know, Donald," said Gregory Alexander, Kenneth and Benjamin's youngest brother, in awe and pride for this older brother's accomplishment. "It's super-fast!"

“Kenneth designed *THE EXPLORER*, Gregory,” Benny corrected. “She’s fast because I followed his plan when I built her.”

“You going to be an aerospace engineer, K.J.?” Gregory asked Kenneth, his oldest brother.

“No,” Kenneth answered. “I’m getting my masters in electronics and telecommunications engineering, Gregory.”

“How long will that take?” the bright youngster asked.

“I’ll be finished this year,” Kenneth said, yawning and propping his head on the palm of his hand.

“Man, that’s pushing it, isn’t it, K.J.?” Donald asked, sitting up on the blanket and hugging his bare knees to his equally bare, muscular chest.

“Look who’s talking. You did MIT undergrad in three years. That’s pushing it,” Donald’s twin brother, James Dixon, interjected as he rolled onto his stomach on the blanket and raised his upper torso, bracing himself on his forearms.

“Got things to do and people to see,” Donald said, grinning. “I told you when I left home, MIT in three.”

“What are you gonna do now, Donald?” Gregory asked.

“Just like K.J. I’m going to get my masters.”

“And then what?” James asked his brother.

“Foreign service, FBI, CIA, NSA or maybe even the Secret Service. The possibilities are unlimited.”

“Law enforcement?” James asked, surprised.

“Somebody’s got to do it,” Donald answered wryly.

“I thought you wanted to stay in Goodwill,” Benny said to Donald.

“Nope, not yet. I want to see some of this world first. Explore like our grandparents told us to. Then someday, when the time is right, I’ll come home for good. Until then, I’ll leave my little brother in Summer County to take care of the farm,” he said.

“Little brother?” James snorted. “Donald, you’re five minutes older than I am, and I’m two inches taller than you. I don’t know where you get that ‘little brother’ stuff from.”

“Live with it, younger.” Donald laughed.

“You’re coming back home after graduation, James?” Benny asked.

“Hell, yeah. I’d rather be farming my own land, running my own business instead of working for someone else. When I finish my degree in animal husbandry and commercial farming, I’ll work a few years to learn the business,

and then I'll come home and help Dad and Uncle Bernard run the family hydroponics farm."

"Man, I love living in Goodwill, too, but we're related to everybody in town and half the people in Summer County. I want to meet some women that I'm not related to," Benny interjected. "If you don't get out there and explore your options, how are you going to find a wife, James?"

"First, I've got to get established. You know, build a home, continue to work the farm into a more productive business, have some roots. Something that I can be proud of. After that, I'll find her."

"Man, it's a wonder you two are twins because you sure aren't anything like Donald," Benny said.

"Good thing, too. I like the ladies now! Not later. I don't intend to wait to find Ms. Right. I'm going on my own reconnaissance mission, hunting for Ms. Right Now. Besides, I can't get anywhere with James around. He's wearing my face," Donald said.

"Maybe you've been hanging out with Benny too long, Donald," Kenneth said. "He seems to find more women than he can handle."

"Young blood," Donald deadpanned. "Last night, Benny must have thought there were two of him. He was at a club in Broadway at the beach and had a lady on both arms."

"Just copying what I've seen you do, cousin," Benny said, smugly, to Donald.

"If that was true, you should have had three ladies, not just two," Donald parried.

"I'm pacing myself," Benny said and grinned, his all too handsome face made more so by his youthful, rakish cockiness.

"Hey, you two, don't give Gregory any ideas," Kenneth warned. "Remember the reasons why all the first cousins come here every year for Labor Day weekend: to focus on our goals and directions for our family's future and to make sure that we're all on the right track. Not to get sidetracked on minor issues. We're supposed to be positive role models for our family members.

"I'm being a positive role model for G," Benny defended, mildly. "I'm teaching him restraint. I can't be held responsible when he's out of my sight. He's been on the road all summer playing basketball. Coach told me that he had to do bed check twice every night on G." Benny laughed. "Seems the ladies were crawling in through the window looking for him. After G and I had a little talk, Coach only had to do bed check once every night on him."

"That true?" Kenneth asked his youngest brother, his expression serious.

“K.J., it wasn’t my fault,” Gregory whined, with a sexy grin on his young, handsome face. “They be pressing me, man. Sweatin’ me hard!”

“You’re still young, Greg. If you don’t control yourself better than that you might not fulfill your dream to make it into the NBA.”

“I hear you, K.J.,” Gregory said, sullenly. “I won’t let it happen again, but it’s not half as bad as Benny and Donald did when they were my age, I hear.”

“Oh yeah,” Benny said, demonstratively and laughed. “I remember that summer Donald and I went to New Orleans to play in this big basketball tournament.”

“Uh, you would remember that one, wouldn’t you?” Donald asked dryly, shaking his head.

“Hell yeah! I was what, fifteen or so? I was playing high school basketball and traveling with the team. Donald was captain of the team. Big time senior jock. That summer, I met this fine, fine, truly fine French mulatto girl...Cheri something, uh, Cheri DelaQuois, that was her name, Cheri DelaQuois.”

“Ha! You mean woman, don’t you, Benny?” Donald corrected. “She had to be at least twenty-five. She lived with her brother’s family and he coached one of the other teams that we were playing against in the tournament.”

“Yeah, now I remember. I met her the first day I hit town. The team had to go to this reception for all the basketball players in the tournament. Man, did I get a rush when I saw her! I hadn’t had a lot of experience, but I couldn’t get my hard off after I saw her. After the reception, Donald and I walked around the French Quarter and bumped into Cheri and an even more gorgeous friend of hers, Solonge. They asked us to join them. We did, but before long, Cheri and I were alone in a hotel room and I was learning a whole new language,” Benny said and rakishly laughed. “Man, I just knew that this was it! This was the woman for me. It didn’t matter that she was much older than I was or that I didn’t know anything else about her. I just knew that I was in love. What Cheri taught me in those nine days could fill volumes of any *Encyclopedia*. My basketball game went downhill fast—it was lousy. I couldn’t buy a basket with folding money, and I was averaging twenty points a game before that tournament. Don was getting more bedtime than court time with Solonge than I was with Cheri, but his game didn’t suffer at all! He was still hitting twenty-five or thirty points a game! With no sweat!

“The night before the last game, I told Donald that I was in love with Cheri and that I wanted to marry her when I got out of high school. He told me to ask her to marry me *after* we beat her brother’s team in the championship

game. I didn't see then what that had to do with it, but I agreed to wait. We won the tournament. I had my best game ever. Man, you couldn't tell me anything! My head was in the clouds! As soon as the game was over, I found Cheri and asked her to marry me. She acted like I was first cousin to E.T., like I was some kind of alien. I was shocked, hurt, and very disappointed. My ego wasn't just bruised, it was crushed. I thought that she felt the same way that I did. Man, was I confused, but Donald knew what was happening all along. Cheri's brother had put her and Solonge up to distracting me, Donald, and a lot of other high scorers just so his team would win the tournament. Donald told me then never to think with the wrong head. He said that we were only having sex...not making love and that one day I'd know the difference between the two. I'll never forget that lesson."

"You are practicing safe sex, right, Greg?" James asked.

"I wouldn't call it practice, exactly," Gregory said and grinned smugly, "but, yeah, I remember what y'all taught me."

"Oh, so you think you've got pro status now, huh?" Benjamin asked.

"World class," Gregory said, all thirty-two showing on his handsome man/child face.

"That's your responsibility, Benny. You handle it," Kenneth directed.

Benjamin's long-suffering sigh was audible before he sat up, took off his sunglasses and looked his younger brother in the eyes. "Look, G, I think you missed the moral of my story."

"Oh, I got it all right," Gregory said, laughing. "I won't ask a hunnie dip to marry me until *after* I'm making big, stupid money. Then she'll think twice before she refuses. Everybody knows there ain't no romance without finance. And ain't no love without the glove," he said, as if it was one of the Ten Commandments.

"Greg," Benjamin said, shaking his head in frustration, "we're definitely going to have a little talk before I leave to go back to the Air Force Academy,"

"You still thinking about playing pro ball?" Donald asked Gregory.

"Only for a little while. After I get in and make some money, I want to go into business for myself just like James."

"Doing what?" James asked.

"Stocks and bonds. Investments, financial planning. Something like that," Gregory answered. "Uncle Calvin works on Wall Street and he said I could go into business with him."

"He's a good teacher, too," Kenneth added. "Three or four years down the road, I'm thinking about starting a computer software and hardware company.

Something I can make grow. Uncle Calvin is going to help me to do the finances.”

“I thought that you were going to work for Sandoval Anniston Corporation in San Francisco after graduation?” Benny asked. “They’ve been after you for several years, since you were in undergrad.”

“I am, but I’m not planning to make a career out of that.”

“Whew! Glad to hear that!” Benny said demonstratively.

“Why?” Kenneth asked, confused.

“Cause, there are some fine women in California! I was planning on visiting regularly.”

“Maybe I better have a little talk with *you* before I leave to go back to Georgia Tech,” Kenneth said, dryly. The young men all laughed. “Look, little brother, the same thing I told Greg goes for you, too, remember? You’ve got a few more years at the Air Force Academy, then flight training school and then I expect you to get a master’s degree. Those are your only priorities for now, not the ladies.”

“You include any time for me to breathe, K.J.?”

“I’m sure you’ll find time to breathe in Colorado Springs. There’s nothing but air up there. And, by the way, I expect your grades to stay above a 3.5 GPA this year unlike last year.”

“Your grades dropped?” Gregory asked, surprised.

“Only in one subject, G,” Benny said, reluctantly.

“What was it?”

“Physical Ed,” he said, reluctantly.

“*What!*” the young men all said in unison.

“How’d that happen?” James asked.

“Claudette, Naomi, and Sarah, that’s how,” Kenneth added, dryly.

“Pay up, Benny,” Donald said, holding out his hand, palm up. “You know the rule. Anybody gets lower than a 3.5 they pay.”

“K.J., did you have to tell it?” Benny asked, reaching into his shorts and pulling out five dollars for each person.

“Those are the rules, remember?”

“I gotta cut back.” Benny sighed. “This is costing me.”

Everyone laughed.

“Hey, family!” Vivian Alexander, the third eldest of the Alexander’s five children, and sister to Kenneth, Benny and Gregory approached the young

men, carrying her sleepy baby sister, Aretha, propped on her hip. The six-year-old little girl reached out to Kenneth and he took his baby sister, readily kissing her chubby cheeks and hugging her close to his heart.

“Hey, Viv,” they all said in unison.

“Is this a private conversation or can anybody join?” She flopped down on a space on the blanket.

“Hey, cousin, you’re not just anybody, you be ‘De Judge’,” Donald joked and grinned.

“Uh-huh, I know what you’re after, Donald Alexander Dixon. Her name is Dakota Sinclair.”

“Who’s that, Viv?” Benjamin asked his sister.

“Senior at Spelman. She’s a runner. Could have made the U. S. Olympic team if she wanted to, but she decided against it. Donald has a thing for athletic women. He’s been pressing me to get her contact information for him. He met her last year when he ‘just happened to be in the neighborhood’ with some of his frat brothers. Spelman wasn’t ready for him and his friends, and it wasn’t the same after they left,” she said, followed by hearty laughter.

“Oh, so now you got my little sister finding ladies for you?” Benjamin asked Donald.

“Man, you ain’t seen shit sharp sisters until you’ve been to Spelman,” Donald said, dramatically. “In Vivian’s dorm alone were the future Ms. Americas: JaiHonnah Hawkins, Savannah Logan, Kristen Bryant, Constantina Justice, Cheryl Lawrence. Man!” he said, shaking his head slowly. “Spelman women make you humble!”

“Oh yeah? How come whenever I’m there checking up on Vivian, these fine foxes aren’t around?” Benny asked.

“Benny, you didn’t have any trouble booking Spelman women. You’ve spent more time on Spelman’s campus than I have, and I go there,” Vivian teased.

“Oh, he does, does he?” Kenneth asked, with a raised eyebrow.

“Now you’ve done it, Viv,” Gregory said, sighing. “You know what’s coming next.”

“Look, big brother,” Benny began in his defense, “It’s my responsibility to look after Vivian, right?” Benny reasoned. “That’s what we were taught. We take care of each other. That’s what I was doing. I had to go to Tuskegee for training, so I thought I’d check in at Atlanta and see how Vivian was doing.”

“K.J., he was there for three days. Booked more women than Carter has little liver pills,” Vivian said, laughing.

“Oh, like you’ve been so innocent. Listen up! I rolled up on Vivian in the gym playing basketball and beating the hell out of *three* brothers! One of them was this big time basketball jock, Carlton Andrews out of Clark Atlanta.”

“I needed to make a point,” Vivian defended. “The brothers were tryin’ to play me, so I took them to the hoop.”

“Yeah, you made your point alright and about thirty dollars, too,” Benny said, snorted.

Vivian sheepishly looked toward her oldest brother. “K.J., you understand, don’t you?” she pleaded. “Some people don’t think bull horns will hook. The brothers needed to be taken to the clinic. You know, so I taxed them a little.”

“Uh oh, here it comes,” Gregory moaned.

Kenneth remorsefully shook his head. “What have I been trying to teach you?” Kenneth asked his family members. “Especially you, little sister. If you want to sit on the Supreme Court someday, basketball is only a means to an end, not a financial opportunity.”

“You taught me that I don’t have to prove who I am to anyone but myself, K.J., but—”

“No buts, Vivian Lynn. We all have to remember what our ancestors tried to teach us—all of us,” Kenneth said, looking from face to face. He laid Aretha on the blanket and then stood with arms akimbo. “Donald. First principle.”

Donald sighed and stood beside Kenneth. “We strive for and maintain unity in the family, in our communities, in our nation and in the human race.”

“Benny. Second principle.”

Benny stood next to Donald. “We define ourselves, create for ourselves and speak for ourselves.”

“Gregory. Third principle.”

Gregory stood next to Benny. “We build and maintain our communities together and make our sisters’ and brothers’ problems our problems and we solve those problems together.”

“James. Fourth principle.”

James stood up next to Gregory. “We build and maintain our careers, stores, and industries and profit from them together.”

“Vivian. Fifth principle.”

Vivian stood up next to James. “We use our collective vocations to build and develop our communities in order to continue our ancestors’ traditions.”

“James. Sixth principle.”

“We leave our communities more beautiful and financially sound than when we inherited them.”

“Donald. Seventh principle.”

“We believe in our family, our parents, our teachers, our leaders and the necessity to improve ourselves to reach higher levels of understanding.”

“The eighth principle is that we honor ourselves and treat everyone with love, kindness, and respect, learning always to appreciate another point of view.” Kenneth thrust his fist into the circle. Everyone clasped hands on top of his. “That’s why we all wear these gold chains around our necks as a symbol of what this family stands for and what we’re all struggling and expected to achieve. What our ancestors struggled to make possible for all of us. We stand for something or we’ll fall for anything. We are the links to an unbroken chain. We will not fail.”

“We won’t forget, K.J.,” Donald said. “No matter what we do in life, we’re a family.”

“Let’s wake up the rest of the cousins so that we can all renew our dedication to family unity and purpose.”

The dawn’s light rose on the gathering of family members united in their missions. Looking up at her family with big, smiling, bright eyes, little Aretha Alexander, the youngest of the cousins, stood at the center of the circle of thirty, first cousins. As bright as the dawn’s early light and as knowing as the wisdom of their ancestors.