

The Affliction Provenance

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1 AND SO, IT BEGINS

Sheriff Bill Jackson stared at his reflection in the hardware store window. Without thinking, he wiped the sweat from his forehead with his right sleeve. The late July heat in Bends Creek, Mississippi, made for a high dry-cleaning bill. He looked at his sleeve and sighed at what he had just done. He could hear Mrs. Grandy from BC Cleaners scolding him when he turned in his weekly laundry. “What am I going to do with you, Bill Jackson?” she would ask him. “Do I need to provide you with hand towels? It would be best if you stopped wiping your sweat on your shirt sleeves. Didn’t Betsy teach you better than that?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Bill would answer politely.

Bill Jackson was a third-generation sheriff. He’d lived in Bends Creek his whole life and had grown up wanting to be a sheriff like his father and grandfather before him. Bill stood about six-two and weighed a slim-looking 210. Turning sideways, he looked over his midsection, then did a 180 and checked from the other side. He looked from his

reflection down at his stomach. This morning, he'd had to loosen his belt a notch when he dressed for work.

He grimaced, "Don't know why I can't lose weight in this heat; I sweat enough," he said under his breath as he critiqued himself in the window.

Turning to his opposite side, Bill noticed a man standing behind him in the window's reflection. He watched as the man mocked his movements, never seeing the window. When Bill turned sideways, the other man followed, and so on. After a few twists from side to side, both men stood there and stared into the window. Neither looked at the other.

Bill broke first, smiling and looking toward the man in the reflection. "Okay, that's very funny, Rufus."

Rufus laughed and put both hands on his belly. It protruded so far from his body that his t-shirt didn't completely cover his stomach. His suspenders kept his dirty, baggy jeans from falling, but exposed the top of his butt. Rufus's fat cheeks were between shaves, scruffy but not quite sporting a beard.

"You got a ways to go before you get this pretty, Sheriff," Rufus laughed, moving his belly up and down with both hands.

Bill grinned. "I ain't in no hurry to look as good as you."

“There will come a day when just lookin’ at food will put five pounds on you! There ain’t no escapin’ it.”

Bill turned to face his friend, “Thanks for the pep talk.” He chuckled, patted Rufus on the shoulder, then turned and walked away.

“Anytime, Sheriff,” Rufus yelled at Bill’s back.

Bill tugged on his holster slightly as he walked down the sidewalk; it always seemed more cumbersome in the hot afternoon hours. He hated wearing a gun and was glad he hadn’t used it in over ten years as Sheriff. The last time he’d used a gun was in Afghanistan. He loathed guns but knew they were a necessary evil, especially in violent altercations. Also, people tended to listen better when he wore a gun. It was a sad truth that Bill would like to see changed, but until people shifted their mindsets, the firearm would remain on his waist.

Today seemed like any other Saturday afternoon. People were walking in the streets, visiting different shops: nothing unusual. Bends Creek was just far enough away from any of the nearby tourist traps so as not to attract outside visitors. Just another day in Bends Creek, the “same old, same old,” as his Dad would always say. But that was about to change.

“Sheriff! Sheriff!” a voice came from behind him. The Sheriff turned around and saw an older, bearded Black man walking toward him, his expression anxious. It was Virgil

Porter, one of the town's homeless citizens. Virgil was quickly recognized by his long, grimy coat and old rain boots. His beard and long white hair were dirty, and he reeked of alcohol.

“Virgil, you are going to have a heart attack wearing those heavy clothes in this heat,” Bill said, looking Virgil up and down.

“You want I should take it off, Sheriff?” smiled Virgil, exposing the few teeth he had left.

“Hell no, Virgil! I don't know what's under that coat, and I sure don't want to.” The Sheriff smiled.

“Sheriff, I gots to talk to ya,” Virgil's expression shifted to become serious.

“What is it now, Virgil? Aliens? Ghosts? What?” Bill crossed his arms and shot Virgil a skeptical look. Virgil had a history of sensationalization with made-up stories.

“Sheriff, you gots to prepare for it.” Virgil moved closer to the Sheriff. The smell of alcohol was strong. Bill covered his nose and mouth with the hand towel from his back pocket.

“Come on, Virgil, go down to the shelter and shower! And go wash your clothes while you're at it.”

“Right away, Sheriff, but you gots to listen to me this time. This is the real deal; you gots to listen.” Virgil spoke with a

desperate tone. The Sheriff had never seen Virgil like this before. He was always calm and laid back. Now, he was standing before him, anxious and excited about something.

“Okay, what is it? I’ll hear you.”

“There’s a change happenin’, Sheriff. People done started losin’ their minds.”

“Like you?” Bill laughed.

“No!” Virgil raised his voice. “This is diff’nt. This is so diff’nt. This changes everything.” Virgil sounded scared now.

“Alright, Virgil, calm down, and let’s go down to the shelter. I was heading that way anyway to pick up my patrol car.”

Virgil stumbled alongside the Sheriff toward the shelter. He kept mumbling and looking up at the sun, all the while, “This is diff’nt. This is diff’nt.”

“Okay, Virgil, take it easy. We’re here; why don’t you do me a favor? Wash up and grab something to eat. I’ll come by later, and we’ll talk about it some.” Bill wasn’t just saying this as a sheriff; he liked Virgil. Virgil had served in Vietnam with Bill’s father, and like his father, Virgil had come back from that war a different man. The returning soldiers with a support system around them fared better than those without. Unfortunately, Bends Creek never offered much

veteran support, and Virgil had no relatives. So Virgil didn't benefit from what help there was.

"Okay, okay, but you gots to come back— it's important," Virgil said as he walked into the shelter.

"I promise, Virgil. You know, I will." Bill looked past Virgil and saw Maggie Carter greeting and welcoming Virgil into the shelter.

"Hey, Virgil," Maggie said with a soft, welcoming voice. "You coming to clean up and grab a bite?"

Virgil looked at Maggie, and his concerned face lightened up and relaxed. He gave her a big smile and said, "Yes, ma'am." He walked by her and left Bill and Maggie alone at the front entrance.

"How's it going, Maggie?"

"I'm doing alright, you?"

Bill didn't realize that he was staring past Maggie, watching Virgil walk inside.

"Sheriff? You okay?"

Her voice snapped him out of his daze. He looked at her, standing at the entrance of the shelter. Maggie was Bill's age. She was wearing tight jeans, sneakers, and a white t-shirt. The sun was hitting Maggie's face and making her

soft, brown skin glow, and the combination of her smile and the glow of her skin was almost angelic.

“Yeah, Maggie. Seeing you just makes my day a little better, that’s all.” Bill smiled and turned away.

Maggie’s smile grew, and her round brown eyes opened wider. “See you later?” Maggie asked as Bill walked to his car.

“Absolutely.” Bill waved to her before he closed the car door.

Maggie smiled and watched the Sheriff drive away. Then she closed the door and went back to work.

Bill still had a smile and was thinking about Maggie when he came across two men yelling at each other in the street. Bill parked his car a block away from them and got out. He drifted slowly toward the argument, observing their behavior. A white man on Bill’s left and a Black man on his right were shouting at each other. As Bill approached the two men, he noticed their argument seemed bizarre. The two men were yelling and cussing at each other while using their first names. They knew each other but acted confused and angry as they looked at each other. Each man was physically scrutinizing the other.

The closer Bill got to the argument, the more confusing it seemed.

“You ain’t, Bob,” the Black man screamed.

“The hell I ain’t,” the white man yelled back. “You sure as hell ain’t, Franklin.”

“The hell I ain’t,” Franklin replied.

Bill squinted his eyes, “What’s going on here?”

The two men stopped at the same time and looked at Bill. The white man looked at Bill, confused and scared, and asked, “Sheriff, that you? Sheriff Bill Jackson?”

“Come on, man,” Bill said. “You know who I am.”

The man squinted and was visibly shaking. “Do you know me, Sheriff?”

Bill looked at the man and said, “Yes, Bob, I know you. You’re Bob Stanton. Now, what’s this all about?”

The other man, who was Black, looked at Bill and asked, “And me, Sheriff? Do you know me?”

“Yeah, Franklin, I know you. Why wouldn’t I? I’ve known you my whole life.”

Franklin was in his mid-sixties, with a muscular build, just a few inches shorter than Bill. He was still doing side work on the old Wilson farm. All the hay baling and working heavy farm equipment had kept Franklin in great physical shape.

As a result, he looked ten years younger. Only a few white hairs on his head and beard gave his age away.

The sweat dripped down Franklin's face, shoulders, and arms. Franklin approached Bill slowly. He stopped within an inch of Bill's face, their noses almost touching. As Franklin looked over the Sheriff fretfully, his eyes nearly popped out of his head. He reached up and started touching Bill's face. Bill jumped back, putting some distance between himself and Franklin's hand.

Bill's eyes widened. "Now, hold on a minute, Franklin. Why are you acting all weird and foolish?"

"Bill, I'm losing my mind." Franklin was tearing up as he pulled his shaking hand from Bill's face. Franklin took a few steps back and looked at Bill, then at Bob, and then back to Bill. The frightened look on his face was starting to worry Bill even more.

"Franklin. Talk to me, man. What is going on?"

Franklin's eyes became even more prominent, and he stepped back further, looking Bill over from top to bottom and back up again. He inspected Bill as if he were seeing an alien for the first time.

"Bill, you're Black, man! You're Black!" Franklin shouted, shaking his head.

Bill started laughing nervously. “Franklin, come on, man. The joke’s over. What’s going on?”

“My God, Bill! You are Black!” Franklin was pointing his finger at Bill and Bob as he spoke.

“And so is Bob over here! Y’all Black as the night. What the hell, man! What the hell!”

Franklin bent over at the waist and placed his hands on his knees as though about to vomit. Then, as quickly as he had bent over, he stood straight up with a terrified look. Bill thought Franklin’s eyes would pop out of their sockets. Franklin began rubbing his eyes, stopped stroking, and then started again, trying to rub away what he saw.

Bill was perplexed as he watched Franklin rub his face with both hands several times. Then, finally, Bill realized Franklin wasn’t kidding. He needed help.

“Okay, Franklin. Let’s get you to the hospital and have them check you out. There has to be a good explanation for this.” Bill grasped Franklin’s arm and started guiding him toward his police car. Franklin was coaxed along, defeated, to the vehicle. He stared straight ahead without blinking.

Bob gazed at Franklin and Bill from behind as he stood frozen. He had the same terrified look as Franklin, and he didn’t say a word the whole time Franklin and Bill spoke to each other.

Bill looked over his shoulder and yelled, “Bob! Don’t just stand there; give me a hand.”

Bob Stanton was approximately the same age and height as Franklin. But that’s where the similarities stopped. Bob was so thin that his protruding bones made him look almost sickly. He had a dirty white t-shirt and jeans on. He wore an old straw cowboy hat and black work boots. Bob looked up at Bill and started tearing up. He looked like a child whose ice cream cone had just fallen to the ground. He stared at Franklin and pointed in his direction.

“He’s white, Bill. He’s white.” Bob’s voice was almost a whisper. It sounded eerie, and for the first time, Bill felt fear. Not the fear he felt when he served in the Rangers; this was a different type of anxiety. The stress of watching someone close to him suffering and feeling helpless was a lot different than pulling an injured soldier to safety.

Okay, get ahold of yourself. These guys need your help, Bill reasoned with himself.

Bob’s arm appeared locked in place as he extended his finger toward Franklin. He just left his arm in the air, frozen, pointing.

“What? What’s wrong, Bob? What are you saying?”

“My God, Sheriff, that man is white! I known him all my life, and he ain’t Black no more. He’s white now. And it’s

scary!” Bob was starting to panic, getting more anxious. He was shaking all over as he stood, still pointing.

Get a grip, Bill told himself.

“Okay! Okay! Both of you get in the back seat. We’re going to the hospital. Let’s go!”

After Bill helped Franklin into the car, he walked back to Bob. Bob was still pointing in Franklin’s direction. Bill lowered Bob’s arm slowly. “It’s okay. Let’s get you to the doctor and fix this, alright?”

Bob didn’t respond to Bill. Instead, he slowly moved toward the car.

Bill drove the two men to the hospital. He looked in his rearview mirror repeatedly; his passengers stared out the window, refusing to look at each other. Neither man said a word. Just stared out their windows, expressions of shock frozen on their faces.

“Guys, it’s all going to be okay. We’ll get it all sorted out at the hospital,” Bill said softly, looking into the rearview mirror. Bill noticed his palms were damp on the steering wheel.

Get a grip. Man. That’s easier said than done, he thought.

He wasn’t sure what would happen, but he couldn’t let the two scared men in his car know that. Bob and Franklin

reminded Bill of two teenagers who had gotten into trouble and whom he had to bring home to their parents in his patrol car. They sat in silence, scared, waiting, not knowing how their parents would react when they got home. Only home, in this case, was the hospital. And they had no idea how the doctors would respond.

Bill was confused as he tried to understand what they were going through. One person acting insane was one thing, but the two men seemed to be stricken with the same problem. He hoped the hospital had an answer because he didn't.

He pulled into the hospital's parking lot and opened the back doors to let the two men out. He let them walk in first and followed behind them. Both were taking short, deliberate steps as if they were scared to discover what was wrong with them. Bill came up behind them and put one hand on Bob's back and the other on Franklin's. He gave them each a gentle push. "You guys go take a seat, and I'll get the doctor."

The two men turned in unison and walked to the seats in the waiting room, keeping their heads down and refusing to look at each other. They sat opposite each other in the patient waiting room, and neither man was taking their eyes off the floor directly in front of them. Instead, they stared blankly and occasionally reached up to wipe the tears running down their cheeks.

Bill approached the receptionist. “Hey, Judy, how ya doing?”

“Just fine, Sheriff. What’s going on?”

“I have a small problem with these two; they need to see a doctor ASAP.”

“They look okay to me, sheriff. What’s the problem?” Judy said as she looked over at Bob and Franklin.

“I don’t know exactly; it may be in their heads, but whatever it is, they both got it.”

“Got what? I got to tell the doctor something to get him out here.”

“Come on, Judy; this is serious. Tell him they’re having a nervous breakdown or something.”

“At the same time?”

“Yes, that’s why I brought them here. What Bob and Franklin are going through is the same for both of them. So please get the Doc out here.”

“Okay, give me a minute, Sheriff. I’ll be right back.” Judy got up from her desk and walked toward the door directly behind her. She paused as she opened it, looking back at Bob and Franklin. Then, she sighed, shook her head, shrugged like she didn’t understand the problem, and walked through the door.

Bill walked over to the two men sitting in the waiting area. They looked as though they were about to explode any minute. He wanted to fix this problem for them, but he knew it was out of his wheelhouse. Not being able to fix this situation made him feel weak and useless.

He started talking in a calm voice. “Guys, it’s all going to be okay. The doctor will be right out. He’ll probably get you something to calm your nerves.”

Neither man looked up; they both kept staring at the floor. Franklin talked first. “This ain’t about my nerves, Bill. It’s more than that.”

Bob talked over his shoulder to Bill, not looking at either man. “Franklin’s right. This ain’t no nerves.”

“Okay, alright, maybe so, but we’ve got to calm you guys down so we can work through this.”

Bill gazed at Bob and Franklin sympathetically, knowing that was all he could do. Both men nodded their heads in agreement.

“We’ll figure this out. Let’s take it one step at a time.” Bill gently patted Bob on his shoulder. Bob just nodded slowly in agreement.

The men appeared calmer, but Bill noticed they were still shaking in their seats.

“What’s going on, Sheriff?” It was Doctor Darryl Brown, an older Black man, just a little shorter than Bill and sporting a short white beard. He wore a white clinician’s coat and had a stethoscope hanging from his neck.

“Hey, Doc,” Bill greeted him with a handshake. “We got a peculiar one here.”

The doctor came up to Franklin first. “What’s going on?” he asked Franklin.

Franklin looked up at Doctor Brown with tears in his eyes. “I see Black people, Doc. I see them everywhere.”

The doctor looked at Franklin incredulously. “And that’s a bad thing?”

“Hell no,” Franklin raised his voice a little. “It ain’t a bad thing! It’s just terrifying!”

“Seeing Black people is terrifying?”

“No,” Franklin shouted, “what’s so scary is everyone I see is Black! People I know is white; they look Black now!” Franklin was getting hysterical.

“Okay, let’s calm down and go into a patient room and see what we can do.” The doctor turned to address Bob. “You seeing Black people too?”

Bob slowly turned to the doctor, and when he was face to face with him, he said, “No, sir, I’m seeing only white people.”

“You see me as a white man?” the doctor asked, confused.

“I do,” Bob said, tears running from his eyes. Bob’s sad, helpless look started to concern the doctor.

“Alright, let’s get both of you into a patient room and run some tests.”

Doctor Brown turned to Bill. “I’ll run some tests and see what’s going on.”

“Thanks, Doc,” Bill said. “Could you please call me and let me know what you find? Just in case, God forbid, I run into this again?”

“Absolutely.”

Bill stood there, watching the three men walk through the door to the emergency room, and stood there for a minute after the door closed behind them. He had never experienced anything like this before. It was confusing and scary at the same time.

“You okay, Sheriff?” Judy asked from her desk.

“As okay as I can be right now, Judy,” he smiled and left the hospital.

Driving back through town, Bill noticed a lot of street activity. There were crowds of people gathered in the middle of the road. People were yelling, crying, and laughing.

“It’s here! It’s finally here! Judgement Day is upon us!”

“Praise Jesus!”

“I died and gone to heaven!”

“Now what?” Bill said emphatically.

Everyone acted like they were on drugs or drunk, just wandering around the streets and yelling loudly. Bill stopped his car and stared at all the commotion. It was all around him. He began to feel claustrophobic, like the crowd was sucking the air from his lungs. His palms were sweating on the steering wheel again.

“Come on, really?” Bill screamed out loud, hoping to snap himself out of his panic.

Bill knew he couldn’t handle this chaos alone, so he radioed for help. He asked dispatch for a few deputies to come to the downtown area and help with crowd control. Bill sat in his car, watching everyone. He was confused and shocked by how his quiet town had suddenly erupted into mass confusion. Bill wondered if this had to do with what Franklin and Bob were going through.

Bill zeroed in on the individual behavior while he waited for backup to arrive. The one plus was the absence of any physical violence. Everyone in the crowd was walking around the center of the road and yelling. One man walked up to another man and hugged him. That's about as physical as it got.

When the other deputies arrived, they all looked as shocked as Bill. Finally, one deputy shouted at him, "What are we supposed to do with all these people?"

As the other deputy got out of his car, Bill addressed the two of them.

"Okay, try to calm them down!" Bill shouted. "We can't take everyone to the hospital. We need to get everyone to calm down and stop yelling. We ain't sure what this is yet and where it's heading."

The crowds started gathering together, and it was getting harder for Bill to maintain control of the situation. Cars crashed into parked cars to avoid hitting people running in the streets. Some people were acting scared, while others were laughing. But it seemed to Bill that everyone was confused and in shock. Everyone acted like Bob and Franklin, which was frightening to watch.

Bill kept thinking to himself, *Okay, think. Calm your butt down and figure this out.*

Then, as if a light bulb went off in his head, Bill realized something critical. There were people in the crowd who were acting differently from the others. These people were not hysterical. So, he decided to focus on them first. Off the side of the street, several people stood around and watched the chaos.

Bill walked over to the sidewalk and spoke to a man staring into the crowd. “Sir, what is it? What do you see?” Bill asked.

“Just a crowd of people acting confused, Sheriff. I don’t understand what the fuss is about,” the man answered.

Bill asked the same of the woman who was standing next to the man.

“I’m with him, Sheriff. I have no idea what is going on,” she said.

Bill focused on the relaxed people and separated them from the others. He ordered the two deputies to gather all the calm people, bring them to the sidewalks, and keep them all together away from the chaos. Once the deputies had separated them, the chaotic group was a little more manageable, as Bill had hoped.

Bill made his way through the crowd to his car and got an air horn from the trunk. Bill then returned to the middle of the group, held up the air horn over his head, and discharged it. The air horn was loud and got everyone’s

attention. Those closest to Bill covered their ears and yelled, cursing. Finally, the crowd quieted, and everyone looked at the man holding the air horn. Then, after a few “What the hells,” and worse, Bill started yelling.

“Okay, I need everyone to get off the streets now! Go home or go shopping or whatever, I don’t care. Just get off the streets. I will arrest anyone still on these streets for disorderly conduct, causing a public commotion. My jail isn’t that big, so y’all will get to know each other really well if I lock you up. So get on now.”

As the crowd was dispersing, they were still acting confused and scared. Finally, the Mayor, Rayburn Samuels, came running over to Bill. “My God, Bill, what is going on?”

Bill was directing people off the street. “Mayor, I don’t know. I don’t have a clue. People are acting scared and irrational, saying they see everyone as their own race.”

“Well, we need to figure this out quickly, Sheriff, before the whole town destroys itself,” the mayor shouted as he walked away.

“Yeah, we do,” Bill said as the crowd dispersed.