



White Lightning

Candice Poarch

Clarice Jarrod has the job of dreams and a newly purchased home in Nottoway, Virginia. The setting would be idyllic — if being terrorized hadn't come with the mortgage. Lead to the 35-year old murder of the previous homeowner, secrets won't stay buried. Whoever killed the whisky-still operator now has Clarice in his crosshairs.

Tylan Chance, Nottoway's most eligible yet confirmed bachelor, finds his resolve tested by the pretty school teacher. Burned by a previous marriage, Tylan is cautious of relationships. As he helps Clarice unravel the past and search for the culprit, will the strings holding his heart loosen to form a future?

Prologue

1959

He smoked two cigarettes while Slick fidgeted in the seat beside him and nearly drove him crazy tapping on the dashboard. He shouldn't complain because waiting wasn't his strong suit, either.

"It's hot in here," Slick announced as if he didn't already know.

"What do you want me to do about it? I rolled the windows down." They were hidden on a tree-lined path watching cars trickle by. Impatiently, he stubbed out the

cigarette, lit another one, and waited some more.

He had chosen the fourth Sunday for the robbery since church services at Nottoway Baptist were held only on fourth Sundays. Everyone in the neighborhood attended, leaving no one to witness what they were about to do. Everyone had left except the Fortune family. They were taking longer than usual or maybe, he feared, they weren't going at all. All kinds of scenarios came to mind. The kid could be sick, or the wife. He scratched his head. He needed that money today. Not next week, but today. Right now.

They were going to rob Elonza Fortune, the most unlikely to turn to moonshine. Even he was surprised when word got out about Elonza's illegal whisky still. They weren't exactly friends, but they were acquaintances. When he'd expressed his shock, Elonza had said, *What else is a black man to do? I can't get a bank loan like the white farmers. I have to feed my family and keep a roof over our heads, too.* Even his sister, Drucilla Chance, worked with him, selling shots alongside the best barbecue this side of Virginia.

About five years ago, Elonza and his family had been on the verge of losing everything from years of bad crops, and Drucilla from the death of her husband. Things were tough for women when their husbands, usually the main source of income, died.

He shook his head. Desperation made people do things they wouldn't otherwise do. He should know. Desperation was driving him hard.

Ten minutes later, a 1957 T-Bird passed. Elonza and his family were finally on their way.

"That's it. Everybody's left," Slick said. "We can go to the house now."

He waited until the Ford was out of sight before he started his motor and rolled down the rutted lane.

"Took them long enough," Slick said. "His wife loves to make an entrance. You should see her. Church doors squeak open and she stands there to make sure every eye is on her before she saunters to the front pew to take a seat. Elonza dresses her in the best that money can buy."

"His pockets will be a lot lighter when we're through."

"This should be the easiest money we've ever made," Slick said. "He'll make it back in no time, though. Elonza sells the best tastin' stuff around. He's rolling in dough."

Not in the mood for idle chitchat, he ignored the chatter. His fingers trembled as he raked his hands through his short blond hair and spared a quick peek at Slick. He often wondered about couples who were complete opposites. His flamboyant companion, with his curly, black hair slicked back with pomade, seemed far better suited for Mrs. Fortune than Elonza. She paid special attention to her clothes and hair, while the latest fad didn't faze Elonza.

But then, his companion was broke and Mrs. Fortune loved money.

He eased over the last ditch in the rutted path before pulling onto the blacktop road. Acres and acres of peanuts yet to be harvested stretched across the fields.

"He's got some rich farmland. What I wouldn't do if I had a farm like this," Slick said. "He doesn't even need to run the stills any more. He's got himself and Ms Drucilla out of debt and they've saved a bundle. Ms Drucilla even paid for her kids to go to college."

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He grunted in agreement. “But he said his wife doesn’t want him to give up making moonshine just yet. She’s enjoying the money too much.” Both men chuckled.

“Yeah, she sure is a beauty.”

They didn’t need to hurry. Church services lasted for hours. They’d be long gone by the time the pastor finished.

He parked the car on the road, careful not to leave tire tracks on the sandy path. Not that they had to worry about anything. Elonza couldn’t report the robbery. Moonshine was illegal.

They each gathered a flashlight and he got the crowbar before they made their way to the house, thankful the place was secluded. The ground-level cellar was built on a small hill. They walked around back to the entrance. He’d watched Elonza for days under the cover of trees and undergrowth in the thick forest. After each run, Elonza went into the cellar. The money was kept somewhere in there. The place was no more than twelve-feet square. Shouldn’t take too long to find the stash.

He tried the doorknob. As he suspected, it was locked.

He took the crowbar to it. A little struggle was all it took before it gave way.

They entered the dark, windowless room. The only light came from the door. One lone light bulb hung from the ceiling. They wouldn’t need to use their flashlights, after all. Even though time was on their side, they quickly got to work searching for the money just in case it was in the house. They were only halfway through when they heard someone approaching.

“Who’s in there?” It was Elonza.

“He’s supposed to be in church,” Slick whispered.

Both of them turned in shock, but before one of them could extinguish the light, Elonza appeared at the door.

For seconds, Fear held him immobile. He’d been identified, while Slick was wedged behind the door out of sight.

“Why did you break into my place? What the hell are you looking for?” Elonza asked.

His panic increased. Panic that Elonza would spread the word that he was a thief. He couldn’t have that. Hearing a noise behind him, Elonza turned. He raised the crowbar and swung it against the man’s head.

Elonza staggered, blood dripping from his head as he slowly crumpled.

“Are you crazy? Why did you do that?” Slick swore as he caught the injured man just before he hit the floor. Staggering under the weight, he slowly lowered him to the cold, beaten earth. “We weren’t supposed to kill anybody.”

The realization of what he’d done struck him. “I...I can’t afford to get caught.”

“Come on, man. We’ve gotta get outta here.”

In a trance, he stared at the bloody crowbar and at the man who could have been a friend under different circumstances. His hand was wrapped around the crowbar so tight it hurt. And still he couldn’t let it go. His concentration was broken only by Elonza’s moan.

“Where’s the money?” he asked.

The dying man moved his lips to form a gravelly laugh. “They’ll know eventually.” He coughed. “I kept records. I’ve got accounts of everything.” He reached out a weak hand and grabbed the man who held him by the shirt collar.

He hadn't meant to hurt him. They'd respected each other. But self preservation came first. Besides, Elonza shouldn't have been here. He leaned forward. "Where? We'll burn the house to the ground if you don't tell us."

"Not in...the house."

Alarmed, he said, "Drucilla's..."

Elonza shook his head. "Burn it if you must, but your fate is sealed," he said slowly and softly. "There's always a price to pay..." Eyes staring into nothingness, Elonza died in mid-sentence.

Elonza's words ripped right through his heart. For a moment he reeled under the weight of them. But he quickly righted himself, chastising himself for coming unglued over the ramblings of a dying man as if it was a portent for the future. But as he left, he couldn't help the unease that settled over him like arthritis over old bones.

Chapter 1

It was one of those nights, near midnight, when Clarice Jarrod's eyelids were droopy with fatigue as she listened to the muted sounds of the cricket's chirp, the frog's croak, and the wind rustling branches. Though the quiet sounds of the country were soothing, she was a city girl and she just couldn't sleep. She turned over in bed toward the window and let her eyes ease closed. No more than a minute had passed when she sensed a light on her eyelids. Opening them, she gazed into the ghoulish face of a man staring at her through her window, the bright beam from his flashlight pointed into her room.

Clarice stifled a scream and jumped out of bed. Keeping her eyes focused on the man, she backed out the door, turned, and ran downstairs with her heart thumping painfully in her chest. She was halfway down before she realized she'd left her cell phone on the bedside table. In the den she picked up the land line and prayed the man hadn't cut the phone line. When she heard the dial tone she dialed 9-1-1.

"A prowler's at my window. Please send a car," she entreated before the dispatcher could speak.

"Ma'am, what's your name and address?"

"I'm Clarice Jarrod." She rattled off her address. "Please hurry."

The dispatcher asked, "Is the intruder in the house?" Clarice sensed a pause.

"No, he's outside my bedroom window."

"Is he still there?"

"I don't know. I ran downstairs to make this phone call. Please hurry, I'm alone."

The woman paused as if she were talking to someone, presumably over a radio. "A car's on its way," she said to Clarice. "Are your doors locked?"

"Yes...wait a minute." Clarice dropped the phone and ran to the closet where she retrieved a bat she remembered being there when she moved in. Back at the telephone she gripped it and resumed her conversation with the dispatcher, all the while looking around to make sure she was the only one in the room. Clarice was grateful her mother had convinced her to put in a land line when Clarice felt owning a cell made it unnecessary.

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As the dispatcher continued to talk, Clarice expected to hear glass break or someone to appear out of a dark corner or closet. She wished she'd gone into the den, where she could have locked the door.

It helped that someone knew she was in danger, though she still felt quite alone with no houses within screaming distance. If the man decided to come in, the phone was small consolation and the bat a puny weapon.

Many minutes passed before she heard the wail of sirens. The squeal of tires on pavement was a welcome sound as the car came to a halt. Clarice breathed a sigh of relief and let the dispatcher on the phone know the police had arrived. She hung up and ran to the door to open it. Officers Emmanuel Jones and Gardell Gaines exited the car.

"He was around that side of the house." Clarice pointed them toward left side where her bedroom was located.

The wind had increased, blowing Gardell's blond hair to peaks.

Emmanuel was bald and hatless. She wondered if his shiny, brown scalp would get chilled from the brisk wind.

She continued to peek out of the door and then started to follow them. A vicious gust of wind reminded her she wore pajama bottoms and a T-shirt.

Emmanuel turned back to her. "Keep the doors locked while we look around."

Clarice closed and bolted the door. She ran upstairs to don a robe and slippers before returning to pace impatiently, hoping they would find the man. More than likely the sirens ran him off, but he could be hidden in the thick woods that ran behind the field in back of her house. A shudder shook Clarice. He could hide for ages and come back at his leisure.

Clarice heard the men's voices again. She stood still and listened, but the tones were much too low for her to decipher their words. She hoped they'd found something.

It was another five minutes before Emmanuel knocked on her door. Clarice let him in.

"Ma'am, we didn't see anyone outside. Gardell's still looking around. Can you tell me what happened?"

"I saw someone looking in my bedroom window."

"Where's your bedroom?"

"Upstairs on the second floor."

"Could you show me the room?" he asked with a smidgen of doubt. He scratched his scalp in thought.

Clarice led the way up the stairs. Once in her room, she pointed to the window. Emmanuel walked over to it, unlatched, and opened it. Then he took out his flashlight and focused the beam in every direction through the window. The screen prevented him from leaning out. Finally, Gardell walked toward the window. "This is the window, Gardell," Emmanuel shouted to him. "Do you see any footprints?"

Clarice watched as Gardell carefully approached the window. The beam from his flashlight was directed toward the ground, then almost blinded her as he pointed it up.

"Nothing's here. No ladder marks. No footprints. Nothing. I'm going to take a look around."

"What did the man look like?" Emmanuel asked.

"I don't know. I only saw a silhouette of him."

"What race?"

Clarice shook her head. "It was dark, I only saw a shadow." She had very little to offer.

"I'm going back outside. Lock the door behind me."

Clarice followed him downstairs and locked the door.

The closest house was half a mile away. Who would prey on a woman alone in the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere?

After a while, Emmanuel and Gardell were forced to abandon the search but they checked the entire house to make sure no one was hiding. There was no evidence of a prowler.

"Sorry, but we couldn't find anything inside or out. Could you have just thought you saw something? Maybe your eyes were unfocused."

"A man was at my window. I watched him while I left the room. My eyes weren't playing tricks on me."

"Maybe someone's playing pranks on you."

"If that's the case, somebody has a morbid sense of humor." Clarice shuddered.

"I agree, but it is close to Halloween." Gardell rubbed his hands together. "Pretty brisk out there."

Clarice hadn't thought to offer the men any refreshment. "Ms. Drucilla gave me some of her apple cider. Would you like some heated? It'll only take a minute."

"Wouldn't want to put you to any trouble."

"No trouble." Clarice retrieved the cider from the refrigerator.

"I'll call Tylan to see if he's seen any strangers lurking around," Emmanuel said. "He should still be up. He was at the gas station when we got the call."

Clarice spilled the cider. She hadn't realized the officers had followed her. She was jumpy. With a steadying breath, she warmed the cider in the microwave.

Tylan Chance was Ms. Drucilla's grandson, and the older woman thought he was the "king of the town." Clarice thought he was too full of himself and too fine looking and knew it.

Tylan owned the One Stop Gas, Garage and Convenience Center, the only reputable repair shop in Nottoway, Virginia. She'd had a disagreement with him just a week ago for overcharging her for car repairs, but he'd refused to budge. Said the parts were expensive and he'd had no choice. She just knew he could have found some cheaper parts from some other place if he made the effort, and she'd told him so. He responded that was the problem with her car now--inferior parts. Clarice had paid her bill and left in a snit. How such a sweet lady like Ms. Drucilla ended up with a scoundrel of a grandson was beyond Clarice.

"Didn't I hear something about you living in this house a while, Emmanuel?" Officer Gaines asked.

Emmanuel nudged him in the side, and Clarice wondered why.

"My family lived here for a while before I was born."

"And?" Clarice knew there was more.

"Nothing. They just rented for a while and eventually built their own home."

Clearly, he was leaving something out, but she'd lived here for more than two months and she knew that gossip spread fast in small towns. Eventually she'd learn the secret.

"I hope you plan to investigate further and find out who came to my house. I

don't like waking up to someone standing at my window." Clarice shuddered. "Or worse, someone inside with me."

"We'll keep a check on your house 'till morning."

Emmanuel sipped his cider. "You couldn't ask for better neighbors than Ms. Drucilla and Tylan. She's so down to earth. Always ready to pitch in when needed." He straddled a chair.

"Remember the fire in Mrs. Jackson's house?" Gardell asked. "She was the first visitor with food and clothes. Course, she got right hot when Mrs. Bright said it looked like space aliens had a hand in it."

Emmanuel laughed and rubbed his trim stomach.

"Space aliens or not, I like that woman. She bakes the best breads and cakes from scratch. I look forward to my turn over there."

"Your turn?" Clarice asked.

"She calls us about aliens once a month," Gardell added. "Always have cookies and cake ready for the officers. We go there, look around, and visit a while before leaving."

The phone rang and Clarice answered it, wondering who'd call this time of the night. It was the Sheriff, Hadley Gaines. Gardell was his son. "What's going on, Ms. Jarrod?"

"Someone was looking in my bedroom window tonight. Emmanuel and Gardell are still here."

"Let me speak to Gardell."

Clarice handed the phone over.

"Yeah, Dad."

Clarice observed Gardell as he listened intently to his father, who'd been Sheriff of Nottoway for the last fifteen years. His son was likely to follow in his footsteps.

"We didn't find anything. No footprints or ladder prints near the window. We'll look again tomorrow when the light comes up." He listened again. "We should finish up in another fifteen minutes, then we'll head back at the station." Gardell hung up and resumed his place at the table. He leaned back comfortably, as though he planned to stay a while. That was fine with Clarice. She needed a chance to pull her nerves together.

"Can I get you barbecue sandwiches?"

"Is it Ms. Drucilla's recipe?" Gardell asked.

She nodded.

"Yes, Ma'am. That'll be right nice of you. I can't wait for her to barbecue another hog."

Clarice gathered the barbecue from the fridge along with the coleslaw, and bread. She heated the barbecue and buns. On second thought, she decided to make four. Ms. Drucilla had given her enough pints of barbecue and jars of vegetables she'd canned out of her garden that Clarice wouldn't need to buy either for months.

Gardell frowned. "Maybe we should mention this to Ms. Drucilla."

"Naw," Emmanuel said around a laugh. "Nobody goes traipsing by Ms. Drucilla's place at night."

"Yeah." Gardell chuckled. "I guess you're right."

"She's such a sweet lady. No one would want to bother her," Clarice said.

"Un huh." The men chuckled again. Clarice shook her head and went back to fix

the sandwiches.

Forty-five minutes later, after they'd consumed the last of her apple pie, Clarice let the officers out the door and locked it behind them. It was two o'clock and she was too keyed up to sleep and still nervous. What if the man returned and broke a window or door to force his way in? What if he was close by, waiting for the officers to leave? She grabbed the baseball bat she'd left by the door, turned the lights out, and carried it upstairs with her. After double-checking the windows to make sure they were locked, Clarice sat on her bed, too afraid to turn that light out. And she kept glancing toward the window.

She'd been the happiest woman in the world when the Nottoway School Board offered her a contract as a third grade teacher. Teaching had been her lifelong dream. Immediately after signing it, she'd contacted the local real estate office. With only one in the area, it wasn't difficult to find, and it hadn't bothered her that this house was the only one listed. She'd been fortunate to get the house and the ten acres surrounding it at such a reasonable rate, but now she was beginning to wonder if it was such a sweet deal, after all.

She'd thought this would be the perfect small town to settle in. The people seemed friendly. She'd only been here two and a half months, not long enough to make enemies.

It had taken forever to get her degree because she went to work immediately out of high school. She'd taken night classes for years, but had finally saved up enough money to work part-time and attend school full-time to finish her last year. She even managed to put aside enough for the down payment on the house. She was twenty-eight, older than most teachers when they started, but she was pursuing the career of her dreams.

Now, if only her ten year-old car would hold up one more year, she'd be okay. Clarice was getting sleepy. She turned out the light.

Groggily, Tylan Chance reached over to shut off the alarm clock. He couldn't have slept four hours already. It felt as if he'd just closed his eyes. The alarm kept ringing and he reached over to take another stab at the snooze button before he realized the noise came from the telephone, not the clock.

He answered it.

"Tylan, it's Emmanuel. Hate to wake you, but have you seen anyone unusual around lately?"

Puzzled, Tylan sat up in bed. "No, why?"

"Around midnight we got a call from Ms. Jarrod. Seems she saw a man at her bedroom window."

"On the second floor?"

"That's just it. We didn't find ladder prints anywhere around her house. We checked all over and came up with zilch."

"You must have missed something. There had to be something there if she saw someone at her upstairs window."

"Occasionally we get strange phone calls. Mostly from lonely people. You don't think she has a problem, do you?"

Tylan smiled. He thought the woman had a huge problem. Every time she

brought her car in for repairs, she argued about his high prices, but that wasn't strange. "I've never heard anything negative about her. Parents swear she's a fantastic teacher," he improvised. "So I guess she's okay."

"I know she takes her car to your place for repairs. You've had more contact with her than anyone else."

"You see her at church."

"Everyone there thinks highly of her." Emmanuel sighed. "Once my mom hears about this, she's going to start those ghost stories again. She swore she saw ghosts when she and dad lived there."

"Do you think your mom's talked to her about that already?"

"I don't think so, and I'm reluctant to bring it up. She'd spread it all around town. Besides, Dad'll kill me. He didn't get a decent night's sleep or a meal the whole two months they were at the house. Mom left and went to Grandma's the minute Dad left for work, and she didn't come back until he got home in the evening. In the end, she packed her bags and refused to live there at all. Dad had to find another place, fast."

Tylan chuckled. "Everyone knows your mom's superstitious. Your dad never saw any ghosts."

"Didn't do any good."

"Well, I'll keep a lookout."

"Just thought I'd warn you, since you sold her the house."

"Thanks." Tylan hung up the phone and stretched out on the bed. That's all he needed. This old business about the house being haunted. Of course, only one person had ever seen the so-called "ghosts." Mrs. Gladys Jones. But she was enough. You didn't need television or radio for news when Mrs. Jones had a story. With a telephone, she'd spread the information quicker than any radio wave. He could imagine her sitting at her phone dialing number after number, spreading her gossip.

Today he'd worked a double shift when one of his night cashiers didn't show up. He needed to sleep fast, but he couldn't.

Clarice Jarrod. He remembered the day he met her as if it were yesterday. She wasn't slim, but a woman with perfect curves in all the right places. She wore a pair of jeans as if they were made for her figure alone. And with her commanding air and the proud tilt of her chin to match with the rich ebony of her skin, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. He had thought, for a brief moment there must have been royalty in her ancestry some hundreds of years ago, because its seed had surely traveled down through the centuries to this one woman. He'd been stunned until he was elbowed in the side by his garage manager.

She'd expected him to keep the garage open because her car had broken down and was packed to the gills with her belongings. She was moving into town. He'd ended up getting one of his men to unpack her car and take her home in his red pickup truck. He'd had the car fixed the very next day. Every time she called asking for a tow or limped her smoking car into his garage, she acted as though he should stop everything else, and see to her needs first.

As a business owner, Tylan treated each customer specially. Customer satisfaction kept them loyal. He didn't need her haughty attitude.

He remembered thinking he'd like to know her better, but he wouldn't allow himself to pursue it. He knew there could never be anything between them, because a

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woman like her would never give someone like him the time of day. He no longer had the time to work on cars very often, since he spent most of his time in management and had even hired a garage manager, but he enjoyed working with cars when he could. It was still in his blood.