

## Trouble

by  
T.K. Thorne

Faye kept her head down, ignoring the trouble that hovered in the sweltering, still air. She sat alone in the dirt and sparse grass of the yard shared by a row of project apartments. On the porch behind her, Gran rocked in her chair, humming to herself, each creak marking time before the trouble came.

Faye stared at the bloodstained peach pit in her hand before setting it on the ground beside her. She recognized the thud of Tic's bare feet on the hard ground, not needing to look up to know that he was coming to tell Gran what the trouble was.

Without speaking, Tic dodged past Faye. His brown legs, webbed with old scratches, flashed by her, and he leaped onto the porch where Gran rocked.

Even from the yard, Faye could hear Tic's gasping. Tic didn't breath right when he was scared, and he was always scared of something. Gran said it was because his daddy died of a cancer. Beneath his left eye, Tic's cheek would be dancing with the twitch that had named him.

Faye shifted her position so she could see the porch and the road at the same time. In the shade under Gran's chair, Yellowdog thumped her plumed tail, but didn't rise like she usually did to greet Tic. She didn't move much since her belly started to swell; she just panted in the August sun's bake.

Sweat trickled down Faye's spine like a spider's crawl. She scratched her stick in the patch of orange dust where the grass refused to root, determined to make a hole deep enough to bury the peach pit and grow a tree.

"He's here, Gran!" The words spilled from Tic's mouth like the rattle of pebbles dropped into a metal bucket. "C.T.'s here. He says this is his turf now, an' he's takin' over."

Gran leaned, spitting into the empty coffee can near her feet. It rang true without her missing a beat of rock. "Ain't," she said.

Faye rubbed her dirt-smudged hand on the shirt Gran had patched. She hated Gran. Gran was the reason Thomas was dead. She dug harder, trying to remember only the sugary taste of the peach Thomas had shared with her just before the black car came.

Way before that, eight years ago, Thomas had found her playing on the bed where her mother sprawled, a homemade pipe in her limp hand. Nobody ever explained, but Faye understood now—crack. She didn't remember a father at all.

Grownups called Thomas "slow." He did simple things that other people wouldn't. She imagined he'd walked into the apartment because the door was

open and he heard her giggling. He liked babies. Thomas had taken her to Gran. Everybody took sick or wounded things to Gran.

From the apartment next to Gran's, Dorothy stepped through her doorway to the edge of her patch of cement porch, bringing Faye's attention back to the trouble-coming now. Dorothy wrapped a red-nailed hand around the metal support pole and leaned on one hip like she did for a gossip. Mostly Dorothy talked about men, but not today. "What you gonna do, Gran? How many you gonna let get killed 'fore you give in?"

Gran rocked two beats before answering. "Many as it takes."

Faye dug harder into the ground. With a sharp *crack*, the stick in her hand broke, splitting open memories she had stuffed away:

*Thomas handed her the peach slice and she bit into it, juice trickling down her chin as a black car with tinted windows drove toward them.*

*She handed the peach back.*

*Black car.*

*A hand appeared at the window.*

*Gunshot slammed her ears.*

*The peach dropped from Thomas' hands. He fell . . . taking all the time in the world to fall. Then, in an instant, slapping the ground, cheek against the sidewalk, arms spread out as if he were hugging the earth.*

Tears dropped into the hole where Faye laid the peach pit.

Thomas had knocked the dents out of the old bike someone had thrown away and taught her and Tic to ride it. Thomas pulled the weeds from Miss Johnson's tomato garden when her back acted up. Thomas brought every wounded pigeon or kid with stomach cramps to Gran to fix.

C.T. killed him to scare Gran. Thomas didn't even know what was going on. He didn't understand about C.T. handing out money to the corner boys to get them to sell crack for him. Didn't know Gran had made the boys give up the money to buy a new basketball goal and shamed them for taking it. He didn't think about things like that. He was just Thomas.

He had sliced off a piece of his peach for her. She didn't know where he had gotten it, but it was like Thomas to share his treasure.

*The peach lay smashed beneath him in a growing stain of blood as the car sped off with a squeal. Thomas stared away into nothing, his eyes cloudy glass marbles that saw something she couldn't see and nothing she could.*

*Not knowing what else to do, Faye plucked the peach pit from under him, and slipped it into her pocket.*

Tic shifted his weight from side to side on Gran's porch in a dance of nerves, as a black car with tinted windows pulled up. "It's him!" he shouted, drawing a ragged breath.

Yellowdog whined and rose, her swollen teats hanging low, to retreat under the porch. She would probably have her pups there.

The driver opened the back door for a smaller man Faye recognized at once—C.T. Dark sunglasses hid his eyes. He moved in tight flicks, like the lizard that sunned on the concrete steps.

"We don't need this trouble," Dorothy muttered.

Gran squinted, narrowing watery eyes. "Trouble don't come 'cause you need it."

Two more men exited the car and followed C.T. They didn't give Faye a glance. She was used to that, used to being invisible to grownup eyes. The denim wrapped legs and high-top tennis shoes sauntered by. She wanted to crawl under the porch with Yellowdog, but her body didn't move.

Dorothy stepped back into the shadow of her doorway. Tic flattened against the far wall of the porch, sticking to it like a wad of gum. His cheek jerked on autopilot.

C.T. stopped on the second step. He pulled off the sunglasses, blinking in the summer glare. A whiff of breeze briefly unstuck the shirt from Faye's ribs.

"Afternoon, Gran," C.T. said.

Gran ignored him, rocking and humming to herself. She couldn't walk by herself anymore, but Faye knew she wouldn't show C.T. respect by standing, even if she could.

"Don't know why we can't work something out here," C.T. said, smiling slow and warm.

Gran kept rocking. "Ain't nothin' to work out."

C.T.'s voice hardened. Sunlight glinted off the gold at his neck. "Everybody in this housing project looks up to you, old woman, runs to you with their problems, but all you are is a sick, old woman."

Yellowdog growled from under the porch. Gran was silent.

People were coming out now. Word had spread fast. Faye wasn't surprised. Everyone knew everyone's business here. The world was only six blocks wide.

"How many you gonna let get killed?" C.T.'s question echoed Dorothy's.

Gran squinted into the sun. Lines scored her face like cracked pavement. Gnarled fingers tightened around the worn chair arms, but she answered C.T. same as she had Dorothy. "As many as it takes."

C.T. stiffened, jerking a black gun from his waist. He pointed it at Gran. "Maybe it'll only take one more."

The crowd rippled like a rug shook to air. Faye felt herself dissolving, pulled by invisible threads, a weaving that was all the people she knew. Thomas entwined through it, even though he was dead. Tic and Dorothy were there, everyone, and Gran was the center of it.

C.T. wanted to unravel it all. Then the world would belong to him.

Gran stopped rocking. All of time stopped—all the breathing, all the heartbeats. Faye wasn't aware of standing; barely felt the brush of denim as she wove through the legs between her and the porch.

What was death like? It was not getting to see Yellowdog's puppies. Never tasting another peach. Never seeing the tree grow.

When she reached the rocker, Gran's mouth was a hard line, her eyes harder. Gran wasn't going to give the world away, no matter what. Faye stepped beyond Gran's reach, turning to face C.T. and the tiny hole that had spit death at Thomas. Her mind shut down. Her legs were air. She stood in the tight silence between Gran and the gun.

"No Faye!" Gran called.

Faye didn't move, hoping her legs would keep her upright.

C.T. looked confused, but the dark pit of the gun mouth still stared at her. He didn't care about witnesses. Who would dare talk? He didn't care if he shot a kid. It didn't matter to him.

But Gran mattered to Faye. The weaving mattered.

After a long moment, Tic stirred, easing off the wall. He moved like his bones were wet mud, his cheek fluttering like butterfly wings. He slid in beside her, his skinny arm pressed against her shoulder. Faye looked up at him in surprise.

Then Dorothy stepped across the narrow space separating the porches and stood on Faye's other side, her long, painted nails curling into the palms of her hands.

Behind them, the heartbeat creak of the old wooden rocker started up again.

The crowd began to move, slowly pushing through the denim jackets with the stubborn insistence of weeds growing through pavement cracks. More and more bodies packed onto the porch, squeezing the jackets to the outside.

They were still coming when C.T. got into the black car and drove away.

END

Hope you enjoyed “Trouble.” Below are the prologues for my novel, *Noah’s Wife* and my new non-fiction book about the Birmingham church bombing investigation, *Last Chance for Justice*. More information about the books and my writing can be found at [www.tkthorne.com](http://www.tkthorne.com).

# Noah's Wife

by  
T.K. Thorne

Prologue  
5521 BCE

My name, Na'amah, means pleasant or beautiful. I am not always pleasant, but I am beautiful. Perhaps that is why I am trundled atop this beast like a roll of hides for market and surrounded by grim-faced men.

If my captors had bothered to ask me, I would have told them that their prize is of questionable value because my mind is damaged. But they did not, and I lie draped, belly down, across the back of an aurochs, a large black ox with an eel stripe that runs down his spine and a stench worse than a rutting goat. My mouth is parched and swollen with dried blood, and every step the animal takes sends a jolt of pain into my chest. Snatches of ground appear between the cloven hooves—a succession of earth, grass, and rock obscured by the dark tangle of my hair—all I have to measure the growing distance from the life I have known.

Savta, my grandmother, believes a narrow birth passage pinched my head. A skilled midwife, she convinced the Elders that my disfigurement would right itself, and they allowed me to live. Tubal-Cain, my brother, would prefer it otherwise. He claims I tore our mother from inside and killed her. I did not intend to do such a thing, but if I did it, we are even, since she squeezed my head. Well, perhaps not even, as she is dead, and I am not.

The aurochs stumbles and I grunt from the jerk. The tall man with fiery hair who leads the aurochs looks back at me. My village sees many traders, so the strangeness of these men's dress and speech means they are from a distant land. Where are they taking me?

As much as I hate the days, I dread the nights. The tall man pulls me off when it becomes too dark to travel, and my legs wobble beneath me. It is a chance for food and water, but I am fifteen summers, and I know the intent of men who steal a woman. So far, they have not tried, perhaps because I smell like the aurochs, but when they do, I will fight. I am small, but my teeth are strong and my legs have climbed the hills since I was very young. My hills. How I miss my hills.

To distract me from the aches in my body and my heart, I will put together the words of my story. I remember everything. Memories appear as images in my mind. Each word-sound I hear has its own color and shape and fits together with the others in patterns that I can recall, just as I can name every sheep on my

hillside.

This story will be truth. I speak only truth, unwise as it may be, since lies distress me. And it will be for my own ears, as my words and manner seem odd to other people. I am more comfortable with animals, who do not expect me to be any way than the way I am.

I will start with the day three summers ago when Savta told me I had a secret.

End of Excerpt for *Noah's Wife*.

## **LAST CHANCE FOR JUSTICE**

How Relentless Investigators Uncovered New Evidence Convicting the  
Birmingham Church Bombers

by  
T.K. Thorne

On July 9, 1997, in a room at the sheriff's office in Athens, Texas, waited a man whose name could still evoke an array of emotions: anger, grief, . . . fear. Sergeant Ben Herren felt none of these, but his heart hammered with the familiar mix of anticipation and anxiety he'd experienced often in his career, particularly on a burglary or a domestic violence call, or when poised to kick in a door on a drug raid. You only thought you knew what was on the other side of that door, and once it was opened, it couldn't be closed again.

The man on the other side of this door was Bobby Frank Cherry. In the darkest hours before dawn in September 1963, he and his companions drove down a deserted alley in Birmingham, Alabama, and placed dynamite in some brush beneath the side stairs outside an African American church—a bomb that exploded Sunday morning, killing four young girls and changing the world. The girls were in the church basement in their white dresses, getting ready for Youth Day services when the east wall imploded. A single searing moment erased whatever the future may have held for them.

It happened decades ago, but only one of the four suspects was convicted. For many, the case festered, a wound that persisted because only justice could begin to heal it. In their minds, justice had not been done. And a worse question lingered—had justice ever really been sought?

A different kind of doubt loomed before Herren. He'd flown to Texas from Birmingham to interview this man about a crime that had happened over thirty years earlier. Many witnesses had died or disappeared; physical evidence didn't even exist anymore. The case had already been investigated twice—in the 1960s and 1970s. Why was he here now, in 1997?

In an unprecedented move, the Birmingham Police Department had “loaned” Sergeant Ben Herren to the FBI to take one last shot at the Sixteenth Street case. Herren and his FBI partner, Bill Fleming, spent fifteen months working in secrecy toward this moment, pouring over every piece of the massive collection of accumulated documents—ninety-one volumes on the case alone, not counting the



hundreds of intelligence volumes on the Ku Klux Klan and other groups—literally thousands of pages. They had devoted long hours to discussing strategies for this moment, their best chance at getting evidence they could use.

In planning for the interview, they hoped having a “local boy” show up, in the person of Sergeant Herren, instead of a hated Yankee FBI agent, would encourage Cherry to talk. They also hoped the canker of guilt and the shock of seeing Bob Eddy, the investigator from the 1977 investigation, would shake Cherry enough to rattle out what had never passed his lips: a confession of his participation in the bombing.

Bill Fleming was the Birmingham special agent assigned to the case. Herren was glad not to be in his partner’s position, waiting on an outcome without any power to influence it, but Fleming was interviewing other people, including Cherry’s grandson.

The responsibility for this critical interview was Herren’s. He took a deep breath. Who would have dreamed that the man about to walk through this door was the same short, scrawny twenty-four-year-old who, two decades ago, taped quarters to his legs to make the weight requirement for a Birmingham police officer?

Today, no weight dragged at his legs, but one bore down on his shoulders. If this didn’t work—if they couldn’t get Cherry to confess or give them a good lead—the Sixteenth Street Church bombing case would die a final death.

Those little girls deserved better.

End of Excerpt for *Last Chance for Justice*.