

Some Kind of Kin

By Wilmot B. Irvin

CHAPTER ONE

“**Y**ou got tiny little animals livin’ inside you,” Maurice announced in a kind of serious, adult-sounding voice.

Becky narrowed one eye to a slit like she always did when she wanted Maurice to think she knew he was lying.

“You’re crazy, Maurice,” she declared.

“No, I’m not,” Maurice replied, with a measure of supreme confidence. “My daddy told me. He says we got a bunch of nasty little critters runnin’ around inside us all the time. Why, right now they’re havin’ the time of their lives swimmin’ in your stomach, just like guppies in a fish bowl. And they’re animals, Becky — I swear!”

Becky’s dark brown eyes — both of them — suddenly grew wide and round as saucers.

“Shut up, Maurice! You an’ your daddy make me sick.” And with that pronouncement Becky turned and ran as fast as she could up the back steps and into her house.

“Momma-a-a-a!” was the last word Maurice heard Becky utter that Saturday afternoon.

Maurice’s daddy, Chester L. Gladstone, M.D., was taking a nap when the phone rang in his bedroom a few minutes later.

“Hell-o,” he mumbled in his drawly southern voice that sounded half-asleep.

After only a few seconds of semi-consciousness he came to full attention next to the bed like a dozing second lieutenant surprised by the entrance of his company commander. With the phone gripped tight to his ear, he listened closely while Becky’s mother unleashed a torrent of parental hysteria about what Maurice had chosen to discuss with her daughter.

“Now, Livvy, I’m just as sorry as I can be. You know how boys are. What? Oh, well, I probably did tell him about the bacteria in our bodies, but . . . yes, of course I understand. It won’t happen again, Livvy, I promise.”

Maurice’s daddy set the receiver back on the cradle and scratched his head.

“Mau-ricer!” he hollered, loud enough for the boy to hear him through the open bedroom window.

Maurice had been able to predict the telephone call, and was standing under the window in the backyard eavesdropping on the conversation when the summons came.

“Yes, sir, Daddy,” he answered resignedly. “I’m comin’.” He leaned his bike against the side of the house next to the water spigot and prepared to face the music.

Next door, Becky peered from behind the polyester lace curtain of her upstairs bedroom window and observed Maurice lope up the kitchen steps and into his house. She started counting. The Gladstones’ screen door slammed again when she reached one hundred and fourteen. Maurice reappeared, rubbing his backsides, and limped down the steps into the yard. Then Becky started crying all over again.

A few minutes later Dr. Gladstone emerged, yawning, from his inner sanctum. His wife, the late Edna P. Gladstone, Maurice’s mother, had lost a well-fought battle with uterine cancer when Maurice was just about seven years old. Being an ob-gyn, Chester always wondered what effect her demise might have had on his practice. But that was nearly five years ago, and there were times now when he couldn’t even call to mind a clear picture of what Edna looked like. And so he decided that most folks had probably forgotten all about it.

Anyway, his practice was thriving. He figured his line of work was about as safe a bet as that of an undertaker. Why, just yesterday he spent the evening delivering two healthy babies. Thankfully, the mothers were considerate enough to space them out about three hours apart, and so he was able to keep both balls in the air, so to speak, and watch most of the Braves game, too.

Chester loved baseball. He had been a star pitcher for his high school team, and even played a little when he got to college. But he didn't have enough talent to make it to the pros, and so he decided to go to medical school instead. Nowadays he just tuned in to late night cable and watched the Braves. What the heck, Chester figured. I can do pelvics and deliver babies for forty years and catch a lot of good baseball from the comfort of my armchair. I should be able to make about as much money that way as I would have in ten years as an average ballplayer, and the risk of injury is decidedly lower.

Maurice played little league ball. The kid was big for his age, and could drive that baseball clear over the scoreboard atop the center field wall nearly every game. This gave Chester a large dose of vicarious pleasure. "Chip off the ol' block," or "That boy takes after his daddy sure enough," one of the other dads would inevitably opine. Chester would just shrug and act real self-deprecating. Baseball was a good filial lubricant for Chester and Maurice.

When Maurice hit a home run, Chester always took him for pizza and ice cream after the game, and usually neither one of them would be sad one bit.

"Well, Bub," Chester would say, "you sure knocked the cover off that ball tonight!" Maurice loved it when his father called him Bub. It made him feel more like a pal and less like an only child with a single daddy.

The boy used to keep a picture of himself and his momma next to his bed, but when he reached puberty — which happened not long ago — he slipped the picture into the drawer of his little bedside table and only looked at it when he was sure there was no chance of him being observed. Now it was just he and his daddy.

Livvy and Becky moved into the neighborhood right after Edna died. Livvy's husband Don, a Romeo if ever there was one, couldn't keep his pants zipped, and Livvy finally threw in the towel. The family court judge decided Don could afford a right large alimony, and on advice of counsel Don didn't argue about the liberal property division after Livvy's lawyer sent over a set of rather inculpatory photographs his investigator had taken. And so Livvy and Becky got themselves a new house — a little smaller than what they were used to, but plenty big enough for just the two of them.

Chester and Livvy got along all right. They maintained a safe distance between them, nursing their respective hurts in privacy. But unbeknownst to either of them, each was thoroughly familiar with the intimate details of the other's private life — thanks to Maurice and Becky. No topic was confidential as far as those two kids were concerned. And even though they swore each other to secrecy whenever they shared their parents' real personal stuff, Becky couldn't help but tell her momma, and Maurice his daddy, all about it the moment they got home.

Sometimes on a warm spring evening Livvy and Becky would walk down to the ballpark and watch one of Maurice's games. When Chester saw Livvy standing next to the concession stand, or sitting on the bleachers, one of those juicy tidbits of her supposedly secret life would occasionally flash in his mind, and it would make him feel sort of embarrassed and a little cheap, as if he had been caught peeking in her window. But she was always friendly and outgoing towards him, and Chester liked that.

"Hey, Chet!" she would say as he waved to her from his place along the fence behind the batter. "How's the slugger doin' tonight?"

Then he would usually say something like, "Shoot, he let a beauty get by him a minute ago, Livvy. I s'pose he'll hit somethin' before the night's over." That was Chester's code for "He's gotten a couple of base hits already, and I believe he'll knock it over the wall next time up."

Livvy would smile, and sometimes wink, like she knew what Chester meant to say, and then buy herself and Becky a couple of co-colas and a large bag of roasted peanuts.

One night after Maurice drilled one over the scoreboard Chester invited Livvy and Becky to join them at Angelo's for pizza and ice cream. Chester noticed that Maurice was uncharacteristically somber during the outing, even though Becky chattered and effervesced throughout the meal. When they got home Maurice said, "Dad, everybody on the team saw Becky an' her mom get in the car with us. I'll never live this down!" And suddenly Chester remembered what it was like being twelve years old.

"I'm sorry, Bub," he offered apologetically. But Maurice just sighed and climbed the stairs to his room, feeling like an only child with a single dad again. That night he would sneak a peek at the photo.

Chester wiped the yawn from his face and sidled over to where Maurice was kicking dirt under the shade of the giant sycamore tree in the backyard. Becky kept a lookout from behind her synthetic curtain as he put his arm around the boy's shoulder and spoke some words to him. Then the two began to smile, and like old friends reconciling after an extended separation they wandered off in the direction of the ballpark.

Becky wasn't at all sure how she felt about Maurice any more. For years they had been best pals. They hung out together, fished together, even played baseball together. And because she was big for her age, Becky could hold her own even when they wrestled and fought. But something strange was going on inside her now. She was developing an interest in wearing clothes other than blue jeans and even brushed her hair occasionally in the middle of the day. Her momma said she was turning into a lady.

But it seemed to Becky that Maurice just kept on being more and more like Maurice. He didn't seem to notice that she was turning into a lady. And he certainly was not becoming a gentleman. Just last week in biology class she and Maurice were supposed to dissect a fetal pig. When she turned her nose up at the sight of the pickled creature and nearly swooned from the pungent odor of the formaldehyde, he just laughed and said, "Becky, what's the matter with you? How many fish you reckon me an' you've cleaned and fil-layed together? 'Bout a million, I'd say. An' the guts smell worse than this!"

Well, she decided, Maurice can just go on being a nasty old boy the rest of his life if he wants to. Thomas MacMillan seemed to appreciate the changes in her, so maybe he was turning into a gentleman. Shoot, she and Thomas might just leave old Maurice high and dry with nothing to play with but his baseball bat and his fishing rod. But it seemed like every time she contemplated life without Maurice, Becky got a kind of queasy feeling inside, sort of like when Maurice sliced open the underbelly of that fetal pig. And anyway Thomas MacMillan wasn't near as much fun as Maurice, even if he was a little gentleman.

Becky's momma was a bit high-strung, but she loved her daughter and did her best to make up for the absence of Becky's father. There wasn't a Sunday morning that went by when Livvy and Becky weren't in the front pew of the Crossway Christian Church, or a Wednesday night either,

for that matter. Maurice went along with them about half the time, even though Chester never came — he knew better than to place his trust in something his money couldn't buy. But Chester didn't mind Maurice going. It gave Chester a time to catch his breath, so to speak. And it provided him and Maurice a church home, just in case they needed it.

Becky closed her polyester lace curtain and went in the bathroom to wash the salty tear streaks off her cheeks. Then she ran downstairs to the kitchen. Livvy was in the middle of one of her famous coconut cakes.

“Here, girl,” she said to Becky, “stir this frozen coconut into that bowl of Cool Whip and cream cheese.” Livvy watched her daughter out of the corner of her eye while slipping two hot cake pans out of the oven.

“Momma,” Becky said after she finished blending the fluffy white mixture, “let's go watch that stupid Maurice play baseball tomorrow night, okay?”

“Um-hm.” Livvy took her bread knife and sliced each cake into perfect circular halves. “I thought you two were on the outs.”

Becky thought about that for a minute before she answered.

“Is it okay for me to keep on turnin' into a lady and mess aroun' with that dumb ol' Maurice at the same time? I don't think he's even considerin' turnin' into a gentleman, Momma.”

Livvy bit down hard on her bottom lip to keep from laughing. She was perfectly well aware that no great metamorphosis was yet occurring, at least on the outside, in the life of Maurice Gladstone.

“Of course it is, sweetie.” Livvy couldn't resist adding a little of her homespun wisdom to the mix. “Boys are kinda like men, honey. Sometimes they're slow to catch on. But don't you worry about dumb ol' Maurice. Why, once he gets a case of the growin' up fever he's liable to come roarin' by you one day like a freight train.”

“Shoot. That'll be the day, Momma.”

Livvy let go a laugh and Becky joined in as they took turns spreading the snowy frosting over the four spongy layers of yellow cake.

END