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# WAR ROOM

PRAYER IS A POWERFUL WEAPON



A NOVELIZATION BY  
**CHRIS FABRY**

BASED ON THE MOTION PICTURE BY  
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## *Miss Clara*



*She was an old woman* with gray hair and dark skin, and she gave a sigh of relief as she pulled into the cemetery parking lot, as if just being able to apply the brake was an answer to prayer. She shuffled among the tombstones resolutely, nodding in recognition as she passed familiar names. It was becoming difficult to dredge up faces along with the names. Her gait was steady, and each footstep took her closer to her destination, a tombstone that read *Williams*. When she reached it, she stood and let the fresh, earthy smell wash over her. It felt like rain.

“You always loved the rain, didn’t you, Leo?” she said aloud. “Yes, you did. You loved the rain.”

## WAR ROOM

In these sacred moments of Clara Williams's life, she knew she was not talking to her husband. She knew where his soul was, and it was not under the green earth below her. Still, the exercise cleared her mind and connected her with the past in a way nothing else could. She could look at pictures of Leo in his military uniform and a few tattered photographs he had carried with him after he'd come home from Vietnam, and those brought her closer, but there was nothing like the feeling of running her hand across the cut stone and feeling the carved-out name and adjusting the little flag on top of his grave. There always had to be a flag there.

Clara had no concept of military warfare, except for those pictures her husband kept. She couldn't bring herself to watch war movies, especially the documentaries with grainy footage of men in combat. Falling napalm and the recoil of M16s against naked shoulders. She flipped as fast as she could past the PBS station that aired those. It hit too close to the bone.

But Clara did know another conflict. It was waged every day on six billion battlefields of the human heart. She knew enough about warfare to realize that tucked away in some place protected from the onslaught of bullets and bombs, someone had developed a strategy.

She pictured her husband staring at maps and coordinates. Sweaty and tired and scared, he and his men would analyze what the enemy was doing and mobilize resources to push back against their advance. In the years since his

death, she had heard stories of his bravery, his sacrifice for his men.

“We need men with a steel backbone today, Leo,” she said. “Like you. Steel backbone and a heart of gold.”

But Leo’s heart had given out early and left her alone with a ten-year-old son. His death had been sudden. She hadn’t prepared for it. In her thirties she thought she had plenty of time and that life would stretch out forever. But life had not worked that way. Life had its own strategy and time had cut like a river into her heart.

Clara gingerly knelt by the tombstone and pulled at weeds, thinking of a day forty years earlier when she stood at this same spot with her only son.

“I wish you could see Clyde,” she said. “He looks so much like you, Leo. Talks like you. Has some of the same mannerisms. The way he laughs kind of low and easylike. I wish you could see the man he’s become.”

Forty years earlier she had stood here with Clyde, looking at the stones covering the landscape and loved ones. “Why do people have to die, Mama?” he had said.

She had answered him too quickly. She told him death comes to everyone and quoted the verse about it being appointed unto man once to die, and after that the judgment. Then she realized he wasn’t looking for theology, but something else entirely. She knelt at the same spot and told him the truest thing she knew.

“I don’t know why people have to die, Son. I don’t think death was what God wanted. But it sure was part of

somebody's plan. I believe God is big enough and powerful enough to use it. There's more going on here than we can see."

Clyde had just looked at her with tears in his eyes. She'd hugged him and cried with him, and the more questions he asked, the tighter she held on. The words drifted high above the trees and blew with the wind. She could still feel his hug there at the gravestone.

"I never thought of myself growing older," she said to her husband and looked at the wrinkled skin of her weathered hands. "I tried to carry on and just head into life. And now four decades have passed like a strong wind. I've tried to learn the lessons God has taught me."

She pulled herself up and brushed the grass away from her knees. "I'm sorry, Leo. I wish I could go back and try again. I wish I had another chance. But it's okay now. You rest easy. I'll be seeing you soon, I expect."

She lingered a few moments, the memories flooding back, then took the long walk to the car and heard voices in the distance. A couple argued about thirty yards away. Clara couldn't hear the words, couldn't tell what the argument was about, but she wanted to shake them and point at the stones and tell them they were fighting the wrong battle. Tell them to see the real enemy. And that victories didn't come by accident, they came with strategy and mobilized resources.

The couple got in their car and drove away, and Clara shuffled back to hers and climbed in, suddenly out of

breath. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think this cemetery gets bigger and longer every time I come,” she muttered to herself.

She could hear Leo laugh, that bittersweet echo across the years.



# CHAPTER 1



*Elizabeth Jordan noticed everything wrong* with the house she was selling before she ever knocked on the front door. She saw flaws in the landscaping and cracks in the driveway and a problem with the drainage of the roof near the garage. Just before she knocked three times, she saw chipping paint on a windowsill. This was her job. Presentation was everything. You had only one chance to make a first impression with a potential buyer.

She saw her reflection in a window and straightened her shoulders, tugging on her dark jacket. She had her hair back, which accentuated her strong face. Prominent nose, high forehead, and chocolaty skin. Elizabeth had a lineage

she could trace back over 150 years. She had taken a trip with her husband and infant daughter ten years earlier to a plantation in the Deep South where her great-great-great-grandmother had lived. The little shack had been rebuilt, along with other slave quarters on the property, and the owners had searched the country for any relatives. Just walking inside made her feel like she was touching the heart of her ancestors, and she fought back tears as she imagined their lives. She'd held her daughter close and thanked God for the perseverance of her people, their legacy, and the opportunities she had that they could never imagine.

Elizabeth waited until the door opened, then smiled at the slightly younger woman before her. Melissa Tabor held a box of household items and struggled to maintain the cell phone balanced on her shoulder. Her mouth rounded into an O.

“Mom, I gotta go,” she said into the phone.

Elizabeth smiled, patiently waiting.

Over her shoulder, Melissa said, “Jason and David, get rid of the ball and help me with these boxes!”

Elizabeth wanted to reach out and help her but had to duck as a kickball flew past her head. It bounced harmlessly in the yard behind her and she laughed.

“Oh, I am so sorry,” Melissa said. “You must be Elizabeth Jordan.”

“I am. And you're Melissa?”

The box nearly fell as Melissa shook hands with Elizabeth. “Yes. I'm sorry. We just started packing.”

“No problem. Can I help you with that?”

A man with a briefcase and a work folder slipped past them. “Honey, I gotta be in Knoxville at two. But I finished the closet.” He held up a stuffed bear and dropped it into the box. “That was in the refrigerator.”

He passed Elizabeth on the front step and stopped, pointing at her. “Real estate agent,” he said, sounding proud of himself. Not a name but a title he put on her. She was someone to put in a pigeonhole in his head.

Elizabeth smiled and pointed back. “Software rep.”

“How did you know that?” he said, his eyes wide.

“It’s on that folder you’re holding in your hand.” She was just as good at categorizing and commentating. She had to work at the connecting with others. Especially with her husband.

He looked at the folder and nodded with a knowing chuckle as if impressed by her observational powers. “I would love to stay but I have to leave. My wife can answer everything about the house. We realize it’s a disaster and we’ve agreed to blame it on our kids.” He glanced at Melissa. “So I’ll call you tonight.”

“Love you,” Melissa said, still holding the box.

With that he was gone, down the walk to the car. He passed the kickball and didn’t seem to notice.

“I understand,” Elizabeth said. “My husband does the same thing. Pharmaceuticals.”

“Oh,” Melissa said. “Does he get tired of the travel?”

“He doesn’t seem to. I think he likes being able to drive

and clear his head, you know? Instead of being cooped up in an office all day.”

“While you’re showing houses and dealing with people in big transitions.”

Elizabeth stepped inside and noticed twelve things that would have to change if they were to make a sale. More first impressions. But she wouldn’t list them all at the moment because she also saw something in Melissa’s face that was close to panic.

“You know, they say that outside of death and divorce, moving is the most stressful change you go through.” She put a hand on the woman’s shoulder. “And this is probably not the first time you’ve moved in the past few years.”

Melissa shook her head. “These are the same boxes we used last time.”

Elizabeth nodded and saw missing paint on a ding in the wall but tried to focus. “You’re going to get through this.”

Right then a boy with spiked blond hair ran down the stairs, followed closely by another waving a tennis racket. Both were about the same age as Elizabeth’s daughter and had enough energy to light a small city for a year. Who needed power plants and windmills when you had adolescent boys?

Melissa sighed. “Are you sure about that?”



Tony Jordan had begun the day in an upscale suites hotel in Raleigh. He was up early, working out in the weight room

alone—he loved the quiet, and most people on the road didn't work out at 5 a.m. Then he showered and dressed and had a bowl of fruit and some juice in the breakfast area. Other travelers hurried through, eating donuts or waffles or sugary cereal. He needed to stay fit and keep the edge so he could stay on his game, and his health was a big part of that. He'd always believed that if you had your health, you had everything.

Tony looked in the mirror as he headed out the door. His close-cropped hair was just the right length. The shirt and tie were crisp and hugged his running-back neck, strong and wide. His mustache was tightly trimmed above his upper lip, a goatee on his chin. He looked good. Confident. To tune up for the meeting later, he flashed a smile and stuck out a hand and said, "Hey, Mr. Barnes."

As an African American, he'd always felt like he was one step behind most of his white coworkers and competitors. Not because he lacked skill or ability or eloquence, but simply because of his skin color. Whether that was reality or not, he couldn't tell. How could he crawl inside the mind of someone meeting him for the first time? But he had felt the questioning looks, the split-second hesitation of someone who shook his hand the first time. He'd even felt it from his bosses at Brightwell, especially Tom Bennett, one of the vice presidents. Tony saw him as part of the old-boy network. Another white guy who knew somebody who knew somebody else and had eased into management, working his way a little too quickly up the ladder. Tony had

tried to impress the man with his sales ability, his easygoing demeanor—the attitude that said, *I got this. Trust me.* But Tom was a hard sell, and Tony couldn't help but wonder if his skin color had something to do with it.

Accepting the reality he perceived, Tony vowed he would simply work harder, push harder, and live up to every expectation. But in the back of his mind he felt this unseen hurdle wasn't fair. Other people with a lighter skin color didn't have to deal with it, so why should he?

The hurdle in front of him today was Holcomb. There was no getting around the difficulty of the sale. But what was an easy sale? Even the quick ones took time and preparation and knowing and seeing. This was his secret—the intangibles. Remembering names. Remembering details about the customer's life. Things like the Ping driver he had in the trunk.

Calvin Barnes was going to salivate when Tony handed him that driver, as well he should. It had set Tony back a few hundred, but it was a small price to pay for the look on his boss's face when he heard Tony had sealed the deal.

The boardroom was tastefully decorated, the smell of leather permeating the hallway as he walked in and put his sample case on the redwood table. Calvin Barnes—who did not like to be called Calvin—would walk through the door and shake Tony's hand, so the driver needed to lean against the chair to Tony's left, out of view. He placed it there, then moved it into the chair and let the grip stick out over the

back. When he heard voices down the hallway, he put the driver back on the floor. He needed to be more subtle.

Mr. Barnes walked in with another man—a familiar face, but for a moment Tony froze, unable to remember the man’s name. He tried to relax, to recall the name using his mnemonic device. He’d pictured the man standing in a huge landfill with a John Deere hat on. Dearing. That was the last name. But he couldn’t remember why he was standing in a land—

“Tony, you remember—”

“Phil Dearing,” Tony said, extending a hand. “Good to see you again.”

The man looked stunned, then smiled as he shook Tony’s hand.

Mr. Barnes threw his head back and laughed. “You just won me twenty bucks. I told you he’d remember, Phil.” His eyes fell on the golf club. “And what have we here?”

“That’s the one I was talking about, Mr. Barnes,” Tony said. “I’ll be shocked if it doesn’t add at least thirty yards to every drive. Your job is to make sure they’re straight down the middle.”

Mr. Barnes picked up the driver and held it. He was a scratch golfer who played three times a week and had designs on retiring to Florida. An extra thirty yards on his drives meant Barnes could exploit his short game, which meant that seventy-two for eighteen holes could come down to a seventy. Maybe lower on a good day.

“The weight is just perfect, Tony. And the balance is phenomenal.”

Tony watched him hold the club and was certain he had the sale even before he opened his case. When they’d signed the papers and cared for the legal parts of the transaction, Tony stood. He knew he cut an impressive figure in his suit and tie and athletic build.

“I need to get you back on the course and work on that putting of yours,” Mr. Barnes said.

“Maybe next time I’m through,” Tony said, smiling.

“You don’t mind coming all the way out here—even this early?”

“No, I do not. I enjoy the drive.”

“Well, we’re excited to do business with you, Tony,” Mr. Barnes said. “Tell Coleman I said hello.”

“I’ll do it.”

“Oh, and thanks for the new driver.”

“Hey, you enjoy it, okay?” Tony shook hands with them. “Gentlemen, we’ll be in touch.”

He walked out of the room almost floating. There was no feeling like making a sale. As he neared the elevators, he could hear Calvin Barnes crowing about his new driver and how much he wanted to take the afternoon off and play the back nine at the nearest country club. While he waited, Tony checked his phone for anything he’d missed during the meeting, when he made a point of keeping it in his pocket. This was another thing he always tried to do. Value clients enough to make them the central focus. Never make

your clients feel like there is anyone on the planet more important than them. They are your priority. Every. Time.

A young woman walked down a white staircase before him, carrying a leather folder and smiling. He put his phone away and smiled back.

“I see you made the sale,” she said.

He nodded confidently. “Of course.”

“I’m impressed. Most guys run out with their tail between their legs.”

Tony extended a hand. “I’m Tony Jordan.”

“Veronica Drake,” she said, shaking with him. Her hand was warm and soft. “I work for Mr. Barnes. I’ll be your contact for the purchase.”

She handed him her card and brushed his hand slightly. Nothing overt, but he felt something click with her touch. Veronica was vivacious and slim, and Tony imagined them together at some restaurant talking. Then he imagined them by romantic firelight, Veronica leaning toward him, her lips moist and pleading. All this happened in a second as he stared at her business card.

“Well, Veronica Drake, I guess I’ll be seeing you again when I return in two weeks.”

“I’ll look forward to it,” she said, and the way she smiled made him think she meant it.

She walked away and he turned and watched her a little too intently.

As he waited for the elevator, his phone beeped and he looked at the screen.

Bank Notice: Transfer.

Here he was with the biggest sale in months, something he'd worked on and planned intricately, and right at the apex of his elation at the sale, he'd been given another smackdown by his wife.

"Elizabeth, you're killing me," he whispered.



Elizabeth sat on the white ottoman at the foot of her bed rubbing her feet. The time with Melissa had been good—she'd been able to make a list of all the repairs and staging decisions that had to be done. The two boys hadn't made things easier, but children always had a way of complicating home sales. It was something you just needed to work with and hope you could navigate.

It had been a long day, with another meeting in the afternoon and then getting home before Danielle arrived from her last day of school. By the time she sat down, Elizabeth was exhausted and ready to curl up and sleep, but there was more to be done. There was always more to be done.

"Mom?"

Elizabeth couldn't move. "I'm in here, Danielle."

Her ten-year-old daughter walked in carrying something. She had grown several inches in the last year, her thin, long body sprouting up like a weed. She wore a cute purple headband that highlighted her face. Elizabeth could see her father there—that bright smile, eyes full of life. Except her eyes were a little downcast.

“Here’s my last report card. I still got one C.”

Elizabeth took it and looked it over as Danielle sat and shrugged off her backpack.

“Oh, baby. You have an A in everything else. One C in math is not that bad. But you get a break for the summer, right?”

Danielle leaned forward and her face betrayed something. She sniffed and then reacted like the room was full of ammonia. “Is that your feet?”

Elizabeth self-consciously pulled her foot away. “I’m sorry, baby. I ran out of foot powder.”

“That smells terrible.”

“I know, Danielle. I just needed to take my shoes off for a minute.”

Her daughter stared at her mother’s feet like they were toxic waste. “That’s, like, awful,” she said, repulsed.

“Well, don’t just sit there looking at them. Why don’t you give me a hand and rub them right there?”

“Ewwwww, no way!”

Elizabeth laughed. “Girl, go set the table for dinner. When your daddy gets home, you can show him your report card, okay?”

Danielle took her report card into the kitchen, and Elizabeth was alone again. The odor hadn’t been a problem until a few years earlier, and the foot powder seemed to take care of it. But maybe she was kidding herself. Maybe the odor was the sign of some deeper problem.

What was she thinking? Some disease? Some problem

with her liver that leaked out the pores of her feet? She had a friend, Missy, who was constantly looking online at various aches and pains and connecting them with her own symptoms. One day she'd be worried about a skin problem and conclude she had melanoma. The next day a headache would be self-diagnosed as a tumor. Elizabeth vowed she would not become a hypochondriac. She just had stinky feet.

She picked up one of her flats and sniffed. There'd been a cheese served at the hotel where she and Tony had honeymooned that smelled just like that. She dropped the shoe. Funny how a smell could trigger her brain to think about something that happened sixteen years earlier.

She ran her hand over the comforter and thought about that first night together. All the anticipation. All the excitement. She hadn't slept in two days and the wedding had been a blur. When her head hit the pillow in the honeymoon suite, she was just gone. Tony had been upset, and what red-blooded American male wouldn't be? But what red-blooded American females needed was a little understanding, a little grace.

She had made up for her honeymoon drowsiness the next day, but it was something they had to talk through. Tony had talked a lot in the year they had dated and been engaged, but not long after the *I dos*, something got his tongue and the river of words slowed to a drip. She wished she could find the valve or tell where to place the plunger to get him unclogged.

They didn't have a bad marriage. It wasn't like those celebrities on TV who went from one relationship to the next or the couple down the street who threw things onto the lawn after every argument. She and Tony had produced a beautiful daughter and they had stable careers. Yes, he was a little aloof and they'd grown apart, but she was sure that drift wouldn't last forever. It couldn't.

Elizabeth put her shoes away, as far back into the closet as she could, then went to the kitchen to start dinner. She filled a pot with water, put it on the stove, and dumped in the spaghetti. The water came to a slow boil, and she stirred the tomato sauce in a pan next to it.

Elizabeth watched the spaghetti, feeling something happening, something boiling inside her. A stirring she couldn't put her finger on. Call it restlessness or longing. Call it fear. Maybe this was all she could hope for. Maybe this was as good as marriage got. Or life, for that matter. Maybe they were destined to go separate ways and occasionally meet in the middle. But she had a nagging feeling that she was missing something. That their marriage could be more than two people with a nice house who rarely spent time together.

Elizabeth was busy with the salad and Danielle was putting napkins next to each plate at the table when the garage door began its hideous sound—a clacking that had gotten louder in the past year. If Elizabeth had been trying to sell their own house, she'd have suggested they get it looked at by her garage door guy. But Tony was content to let it clack and clamor.

Like their marriage.

“I just heard him pull in, Danielle.”

“Will he be mad about my C?” Danielle said. The look in her eyes made Elizabeth wonder. She wanted to march out to the garage and tell Tony to affirm their daughter, say something positive, look at how full the glass was and not see the one little thing that was less than perfect.

“I already told you, baby. Getting a C is not that bad. It’s okay.”

She said it to convince not just Danielle, but also herself. Because she knew her husband wouldn’t feel the same.