

## **A Delta Christmas at the Crossroads**

**by**

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I had never received formal training on how to be a man. It was something I had hoped for as a kid though. Instead, my manhood had developed from trial and error on the Greenville streets. I blamed my father because he wasn't there. He should have been that crucial piece of the puzzle that would have allowed me to make a smooth and seamless transition from a gullible, country, black boy to a successful black man.

Despite my disdain for the man, Momma felt it necessary for me to visit him in Clarksdale on my way home. She heard he had had been sick. Death was imminent, so she wanted me to engage him. I knew nothing about him though. I only had a photo of him and knew where I could probably find him.

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It was the day before Christmas, and the temperature was unseasonably warm in Clarksdale. I was thirsty and figured I would stop to get a cold drink. Jenkins Country Store was the first place I noticed.

The sweet aroma of jams and jellies titillated my senses when I strolled inside the store. I walked over and picked up a jar of grape jam. The feel of the glass container, along with the scent of its contents, reminded me so much of my grandmother who used to make her own jellies when I was a kid. Just as I smiled, the jar slipped from my hand and onto the floor.

Before I could clean up the mess, an elderly man approached. "Don't worry about that, son. I'll get that up."

"I am so sorry. I guess my hands were sweaty."

"I understand."

"Again, I'm sorry. I was just coming in to get a cold drink before I go try to find someone."

"Don't let me hold you up then. My name is William Jenkins. And you?"

I shook his hand. "I'm Robert Toliver. It's nice to meet you, Mr. Jenkins."

"You mentioned you were trying to find someone?"

I nodded my head. "It's my father. I doubt you know him. Heck, I don't even know the man. He's been sick. Momma wants me to reach out to him before he dies. I really don't want to do that though."

"I reckon you should pray about it then. I wasn't a good father. It was about two years ago when I got to know my son."

"Really?"

William nodded. "Yep. That was when I went down to the crossroads. There's a pole with three guitars on it. Underneath that thing, I prayed God would allow me and my son to rekindle."

"The crossroads?"

William nodded. "Yeah, the crossroads. Right at the intersection of 61 and 49."

"Why there?"

"That place didn't start out with the best reputation. Over the years, people have gone there to pray. I reckon they wanted to make it positive."

"What was so negative about it?"

William smiled. "You ever heard of the story of Robert Johnson?"

"Who?"

William shook his head. "Robert Johnson was a blues pioneer. Initially, he wasn't that good at playing the guitar. He disappeared from the music scene for a while. He returned to playing in some of these Delta clubs and surprised folks by how well he played."

I shrugged. "Maybe he practiced or something."

William chuckled. "Well, folks say he made a deal with the devil. They say Robert Johnson gave that devil his soul for musical genius on that guitar. Anyway, I believe the whole thing. I also believe God's power has taken over the crossroads. Go try it, son. You have nothing to lose."

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I stood underneath the historic crossroads sign decorated with three giant, blue guitars and Christmas lights. The roadways were busy. I felt like a circus attraction on display for folks to judge.

As the Mississippi night turned frigid, there was a sudden urge to pray. Forgiveness was the theme that came to mind. I didn't know why. No one had done anything to me. I didn't fight it though.

I dropped to my knees and closed my eyes. "Lord, thank You for loving me and for loving those who hurt me. Give me the strength to forgive those who have committed and will commit transgressions against me. God, I don't care that Robert Johnson came to this spot to make a deal with the devil. I am coming here to seek Your guidance on how to deal with my father. Lord, give me the words to say to him if I see him. Amen."

Just as I finished praying, I heard a noise. I opened my eyes and got up. A familiar-looking man stood there. I quickly removed the photo from my pocket, looked at it, and confirmed my suspicion. The man was Albert Hinton, my biological father.

"Are you okay?" he asked me.

The overwhelming encounter could not trigger an immediate response from me. The shock of seeing Albert rocked me to the core. That kind of angst had never consumed me.

Albert smiled and patted my shoulder. "It's okay. This place has a way of shaking you up a little."

I nodded my head. "Yeah, I see that."

"William Jenkins must have told you about this spot."

I nodded my head. "Yep."

Albert smiled. "Yeah, he told me he grew tired of hearing about Robert Johnson and the devil making a deal here. I reckon he wanted to make this a holy place for folks to connect with God. It's the reason I'm here tonight. I was coming to pray, and then I saw you."

"Seeing you heard my prayer, what's bugging you?"

Albert sighed. "Yeah, I hope you can work things out with your father. I know a thing or two about that kind of stuff."

"I see."

"Anyway, I was coming here to ask God to allow me to see my son. I've been sick and don't have a lot of time left. I want to apologize to him before I leave this earth."

Several emotions consumed me. One part of me wanted to tell Albert I was his son. The other wanted to just remain anonymous and keep the candid conversation going. The latter was the more attractive option.

I cleared my throat. “Apologize for what?”

“I don’t even know my son; nothing about him. I left when he was a baby and never looked back. I treated him the way my father treated me and the way his father treated him. I was a selfish coward. There was no reason for me to treat my boy like that. I want to see him so I can apologize.”

Words could not describe how I felt after Albert’s confessions. There was no precedent of how I should have felt either. Confusion was there though, along with sadness. The moment was surreal. During my entire life, I had grown up hating that man. At that moment, the animosity converted to a willingness to get to know him.

I pointed at a building. “Is that barbecue joint over there still open?”

Albert nodded his head. “Yeah, they always open on Christmas Eve. They serve a good holiday feast.”

“Do you want to grab a bite to eat? It’s my treat.”

Albert smiled. “Sounds good! What’s your name? I’m Albert Hinton.”

I looked at him. “I’m Robert Toliver. I’m your son.”

As if he had just received bad news, tears slowly rolled down Albert’s face. His reaction then transformed from sorry to joy. His face then lit up like a Christmas tree.

Albert wiped away the tears and looked up at the crossroads sign. “William Jenkins was right about this place. I hate that he ain’t here to witness this. I didn’t know him long, but he was a decent father once we reconciled. He was a good person.”

His response confused me. “What do you mean?”

“William was my father. We reconciled two years ago. He owned that store around the corner. He had a heart attack in there last week and passed away. He left the store to me. I’m leaving it to you now.”

I scratched my head. “He died last week? Are you serious?”