

If Not for Grace

a novel

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*In loving memory of my dear grandmother
Grace Lipford Davis
and her son—my father and earthly hero—
Richard Lawson Lipford*

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Thomas, Jr



IT WAS A hot, dusty summer afternoon in the year 1924 in the small mining community called Silver, West Virginia, and they were at it again. No one remembers who swung first; they just remember that someone did because of something someone said. Only fourteen years old and Thomas was already over six feet tall and lean-muscled with well-chiseled features and a sturdy chin. Benjamin, on the other hand, was almost his opposite. Benjamin was almost a foot shorter than Thomas was. His wide face was seemingly overpowered by large cheek bones that forced his eyes into tiny slits. He had short, thick legs, a broad back, and almost no neck at all. Ben was like a bull—stronger than Thomas, without a doubt, hard-headed, and quick-tempered. But Thomas used his charm and bright, yet sometimes devilish grin to get him out of many difficult situations. And he was fast. Thomas didn't just race with the other boys; he darted and leaped with all the grace of a gazelle—long and lean. No one could catch him.

Thomas and Benjamin competed at everything. Every year at the church picnic they participated to see who could eat the most blueberry or apple pie. The boys almost always tied for first place in that competition, and then usually, both got quite sick afterwards.

“I got so sick!” Ben would say.

“Yeah, but I was sicker,” Thomas would reply.

“You wasn’t as sick as me!”

“Yeah, I was...I was sicker!” Thomas would say.

“Na-uh! I was so sick I just about threw up all my guts!”

“Well, while you was just thinkin’ ‘bout throwin’ up your guts, I done already done it! Yep, guts and all...horrible stuff everywhere! All of Silver said they ain’t *never* seen nothing *nowhere* like it!” Thomas grinned and winked while Ben just stood there defeated—less sick than Thomas.

The boys competed to see who the best swimmer was and who could hold his breath the longest. They would sometimes perform the silliest antics to see which one could get a pretty girl to smile first. Once they even had a contest to see who could spit the farthest. Their rag tag friends, cheering and egging both boys on, usually took sides and were divided right down the middle.

Today the two of them were going at each other in a cloud of dust and dirt—a big ball of legs, fists, arms, backs and heads rolling over and over, back and forth.

“C’mon, Thomas, you got him!”

“Hold him now, hold him!”

“Get him, Benji! You can do it!”

“Yeah, show him who’s the boss man now!”

In all the excitement, none of the boys saw her coming. They only saw the dark, calloused hands reaching in and grabbing at the grapplers. “Look at ‘cha! Just look at ‘cha! As big as y’all are actin’ like y’all ain’t got no sense!”

Thomas hung his head but kept his eyes fixed on Ben. Ben stared back, hard and cold. They were dripping with sweat, and the gray, sandy dirt stuck fast to their black skin and wooly hair.

Nettie stood between them heaving, clenching a wad of each boy’s shirt. With her mouth twisted in a disapproving frown, she glared at the boys—first at one, then the other, and back again. The wrinkle in her brow and the tightened muscles in her jaw soon relaxed. She bent over at the waist, still hanging onto the boys, and started trembling and gasping.

“You OK, Momma?” asked Thomas, “Momma!”

But Nettie couldn’t answer him at the moment. She stood and glanced at the two and bent over again—overcome with laughter. Finally, she straightened and pointed up at Thomas. “Your...your hair, your

face.” she managed to say. More laughter came this time from the circle of boys pointing and slapping at their knees and sides.

Thomas looked questioningly with powdered eyelashes at his mother and then at Ben. Ben’s tight, wooly hair was as gray as a puff of smoke. Thomas’s must have been too, because Ben was looking up at it with a big, fat grin on *his* face.

“You look like a scrawny, old, gray ghost,” Benjamin laughed.

“And you look like his much shorter *and weaker* brother,” replied Thomas. They laughed together, harder, as they watched the sweat pouring down each other’s faces in thin, black stripes.

“Hm...hm...hm, you boys is somethin’ else!” Nettie collected herself. “Better get cleaned up, Thomas,” she said, looking down at her own soiled hands. “Looks like I got to do some cleanin’ up, too.” She walked through the huddle of young men, who parted for her like the water did for Moses. “And I got to get dinner on. Thomas did you finish them chores?”

“Yes, Ma’am!”

“You best be gettin’ on home now, too, Benjamin...and the rest of you boys, too,” she yelled, clapping and rubbing the dust from her hands.

“Yes, Ma’am!” They watched her in silence as she walked to her house, climbed the steps, and went inside.

“You had him, Thomas!” one friend blurted as the others joined in.

“You sho’ did!”

“You always is the best!”

“Jer-my-ah!” In the distance a mother called to her son.

“I’m a comin’ Mama...see ya later, Thomas! See ya’ Benji!” Jeremiah ran off towards his home.

“I told you Thomas could take ole Benny,” another friend said.

“Nah! Ben was just *playin’* with Thomas. Ben’s stronger! He’s like an ox, that’s what Benjamin Willis is...strong as Mr. Fisher’s ox!”

“May-be, but Thomas always outsmarts ‘em. He always has something up his sleeve! Don’t cha, Tom?”

Thomas grinned. Ben did, too. They both loved this part.

“Yeah, sorry, Ben,” Thomas said. “Did I hurt you any? You know, I wouldn’t want to hurt you, ‘specially us being neighbors and all.”

The smile left Ben's face. He was getting mad again. "Ain't no way some tall, skinny nobody is gonna hurt me!"

Both boys stood in the midst of the departing horde. Thomas smiled and licked his lips—while Ben stared evil-eyed.

"*E-phram!* Ephram Holloway, you best git yo' self on home!" another mother called out.

"Commin' Ma! See y'all tomorrow!" Ephram waved and then ran off, turning back from time to time, not wanting to miss a thing.

"Yeah, see ya, Ben... Thomas!"

"Bye, Thomas!"

"We'll see y'all tomorrow after church," yelled the remaining pack of boys as they all darted off in different directions, leaving Ben and Thomas alone.

Ben shifted his weight and lowered his head. Thomas bit on his bottom lip and mouthed, "C'mon you little short runt," grinning his big grin all the while.

Each boy waited for the other to walk away first.

"Thomas!" The door of the house creaked open again. "What did I tell you? Your daddy'll be home soon, and you got chores to do! Don't make me come out there!"

"I did my chores, Ma!"

"Not the new ones—get on in here!"

"Yes, Ma'am, I'm comin'!" yelled Thomas.

"And Ben...you git on home, too!"

Thomas and Ben backed away from each other slowly. Finally, Thomas waved and smiled at his mother, who was now standing on the porch tying on a fresh apron. As he walked toward her, she once again disappeared inside the unpainted, wooden structure they called home.

"Runt!"

"I ain't no runt!" Ben yelled as he turned to leave, too.

"Hey, Ben!"

Benjamin stopped dead in his tracks, balled his hands into fists, and swung around. "Whut?" he yelled back, still sweating, still mad.

"See you at church tomorrow!"

Ben's chest was heaving deep and slow. He spun again and continued walking, refusing to answer. It bothered Ben how Thomas managed to be calm and even happy after these confrontations.

Thomas started up the front steps, then stopped. "Hey, Ben!" he shouted.

"Whut! Whut you want now, Thomas?"

"Tomorrow in church, I'm gonna sing a hymn so s-w-e-e-t even the angels themselves are gonna hafta stop to listen!" Thomas grinned and waited.

Benjamin placed his hands on his hips. Looking at the ground, he kicked at the dirt, and slowly shook his head. Thomas was always like this. He'd get you all worked up and real mad, then he'd say something simple that made the mad just melt away like butter. Ben wanted to stay mad, but couldn't, and he knew that Thomas knew he couldn't stay mad.

He looked again at Thomas, who was standing on his front porch with his back propped comfortably against one of the posts; his arms folded at his chest; and that big, charming, but devilish grin. Finally, Ben took a deep breath then yelled back. "You maybe can sing sweet, Thomas, but you can't sing loud as me! All them angels up in heaven won't be able to hear *you* none—not one bit, 'cause I'm-uh gonna drown *you completely out!*"

Thomas laughed while Ben continued.

"I'm a gonna sing so loud that all they'll be listenin' to up there is me...Benjamin Eu-gene Willis!" Ben laughed heartily.

"Oh yeah? Well, Mista Benjamin Eugene Willis is gonna hafta find out the hard way that he ain't got *nothin'* on Mista Thomas George Ford! Know why?" Thomas asked and then answered. "The Lord himself is gonna hear all that racket comin' out your mouth and declare you mute right there on the spot just to shut your fool self up!" Thomas was beside himself with laughter; even Benjamin laughed hard at this idea.

"Thomas! If you don't get in here right now, you will be seeing all them angels *and* the good Lord face-to-face! Do you think I'm playin', boy?" It was Thomas's mother calling him again, this time from inside.

“We’ll see who can out do who tomorrow, Mista Willis!” yelled Thomas as he hurried inside.

“Yeah, tomorrow, Mista Ford...we’ll see tomorrow!” grinned Ben as he disappeared between the pink and white wild rose bushes that separated his yard from the yard of Thomas, his best friend.