

# After the Benediction

BOOK ONE OF THE SAINTS OF MERCY

Tammy St. James

Prologue + Chapter One

Adult Black Southern historical family drama. The full novel contains explicit sexual content and themes of infidelity.

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# Prologue

November 29, 1938

Lillian had asked for Elijah twice. The first time, Hattie Coleman had told her he was close by. The second time, she had said, “He hasn’t gone anywhere, child.”

Now Lillian wished she had not asked. There were enough people hearing her make sounds she could not govern. She wanted her husband beside her and wanted him never to see her like this, hair sticking to her face, all her resolve spent before the work was finished.

“Look at me,” Hattie said.

Lillian tried. The woman’s face was steady, unhurried. Beyond her, the other woman moved out of Lillian’s sight with a folded cloth. Something was set down. A board sounded in the next room.

“There you are. Stay with me.”

She was staying. She could think of nowhere else to go.

Between the pains she listened for that board again. Elijah was a large man to be keeping so still. She pictured him with his hands clasped, then unclasped, then clasped again, finding some small task to do badly. Before Hattie had sent him out, he had straightened a chair that was already straight.

The picture nearly made her smile. Then she caught at Hattie's arm.

"I know," Hattie said. "I know."

Lillian wanted her mother.

The want came without warning and without any sense in it. She knew where her mother was. She had known for three years. Yet for a moment she expected Esther to come through the doorway and take charge of the part of this that belonged to her daughter. Not the birth itself. Hattie knew what she was doing. Lillian wanted someone who would hear her frightened voice and remember another voice inside it, a child's voice calling from the next room.

She shut her eyes.

"Don't you go away from me now."

"I'm here," Lillian said, angry enough to say it plainly.

"Yes, you are."

After that she could not have said how much time passed. Hattie spoke; Lillian did what she could. Once the woman helping them said something encouraging, and Lillian wished everybody would stop talking. A moment later the quiet frightened her and she listened desperately for Hattie again.

Then the effort changed. The terrible concentration of it loosened, and there was a thin, indignant sound she had never heard before.

“Your little girl,” Hattie said.

Lillian turned her head toward the sound. She could see movement, a small limb, Hattie’s hands. She tried to raise herself farther than she could manage.

“Let me see her.”

“You will.”

It seemed an unreasonable answer. She had done everything asked of her. Surely she could see her own child.

Then she did, and lost the words she had meant to say.

The baby’s mouth opened again. Her face was crumpled with the force of her objection, her eyes squeezed shut. Lillian had imagined a daughter often enough to be surprised by this particular girl, who seemed to have arrived with an opinion of the house and everyone in it.

“Oh,” Lillian said.

Hattie smiled at last. “There she is.”

When Elijah came in, he stopped just inside the doorway. His eyes went first to Lillian.

“I’m all right,” she told him.

He nodded but did not move.

“You can come closer.”

He approached as though someone might object to the sound of his shoes. Lillian had never seen him uncertain

about how to enter a room. It pleased her, a little, to discover that she could still surprise him.

He looked at their daughter for a long time.

“Well?” Lillian asked.

“She’s little.”

Hattie made a sound that might have been a laugh. Lillian looked up at him.

“What were you expecting?”

“I don’t know.” He bent his head, smiling now. “Not somebody I would be afraid to touch.”

“Then sit down.”

He pulled the chair close. When he took Lillian’s hand, she could feel how carefully he held it. She had gripped Hattie so hard. She had thought there could be no tenderness left anywhere in her body to answer him, but she turned her hand inside his.

“Vivienne,” he said.

Lillian looked at the child. The name no longer belonged to their conversations about what might be. Here was the person who would have to live with it.

“Vivienne,” she repeated.

The baby quieted, then made a small restless movement. Elijah leaned forward to watch. He was still smiling with his mouth half open, and Lillian wanted him to stay

exactly where he was until she had slept.

“Will you sit with us?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“I mean here. Don’t go finding something to do.”

He drew the chair another inch toward the bed.

Lillian let her eyes close. She could hear Hattie and the other woman moving about the room, could feel Elijah’s thumb resting against her hand. When their daughter stirred again, he said her name softly, trying it for himself.

# Chapter One — The Flesh

John 3:6

Vivienne had reached the church steps before her mother called her back.

“Ruth’s hand.”

“She has two of her own.”

Lillian looked at her.

Vivienne went down a step and held out her hand. Ruth took it without complaint, which made the rebuke harder to resent. Behind them, Josiah was trying to walk without bending one knee. Samuel told him to stop.

“My shoe,” Josiah said.

“Your shoe isn’t on your knee.”

“It travels.”

Ruth laughed. Vivienne felt her mother’s glance pass over all four of them and settle the matter. They went into Greater Mount Mercy in a respectable line.

Inside, people were turning from their greetings toward the front. There were hats Vivienne had not seen before and dresses she recognized from other Easters, changed by a new collar or a different woman wearing them. She loved that first look across the church, before everybody had found a place. For a few minutes the room offered

possibilities. Then her mother put a hand at her back and steered her down the aisle.

An older woman caught Lillian's wrist as they passed.

"Beautiful children, Sister Whitmore."

"Thank you."

Vivienne smiled because she was included, though at eighteen she would have liked the woman to find another word for her. Her mother accepted the compliment for all of them and continued toward the front pew.

Ruth sat beside Lillian. Josiah tried for the end, but Samuel moved him in. Vivienne took the place left for her. From there she could see her father's Bible and the lower half of the pulpit. To look at the congregation she would have to turn her head in a way somebody would notice.

She smoothed her skirt over her knees.

Her father was speaking with a man near the front. He listened with his head inclined, his whole attention apparently given. Vivienne had seen people begin to talk faster under that attention, trying to finish before he had to go; then slow down when they realized he was still listening. It was something he could do without touching them.

He looked toward the pew. Ruth lifted her hand a little. He answered with two fingers and a smile meant for her alone.

Vivienne wished she had not been watching. It was difficult to remain irritated with a man while he was being a good father to somebody else.

The singing began, and the loose talk about them gave way. Her mother opened the hymnal between herself and Ruth. Samuel already knew where to turn. Josiah leaned close to him, still making a little trouble with his shoe, until Samuel pointed to the line.

Vivienne joined in.

She liked singing when nobody was listening especially to her. Her voice could go out among the others and become part of something she did not have to explain. Near the end of the first verse, a woman's voice rose clear from farther back, familiar and full. Vivienne knew it was Evelyn Baptiste without looking.

Her mother sang on. The book rested firmly in her hands.

During prayer, Vivienne bowed her head and tried to do more than arrange her face. She had things to be grateful for. She knew she did. There was Ruth's warm shoulder against her arm when the child leaned across Josiah to see something. There was her mother's voice close by. There were people in this church who had come with troubles they could name, and others who had come because it was the one place all week where they expected to be welcomed.

She asked God to make her less impatient.

Then she added, silently, that she would appreciate something to be patient for.

When she raised her head, her father was watching the congregation. She could not tell whether his eyes had stopped on her. She sat a little straighter anyway.

There were announcements, and the offering passed. Coins shifted against the bottom of the plate. Her mother helped Ruth without drawing attention to it. The service moved through its familiar business, the necessary things adults could turn solemn merely by waiting for quiet before they spoke.

By the time Elijah stood to preach, Vivienne's right foot had begun to ache.

He did not raise his voice at once. He opened his Bible and waited until a cough at the back had finished.

"We have dressed for a resurrection this morning."

A few people answered him.

"And I am glad to see you. Glad to see the children. Glad to see those who have been sick and are able to be with us again." His eyes moved over the room. "But I want us to consider what we expect to take home."

Vivienne glanced at Josiah. Food, his expression said. She turned away before she smiled.

Her father spoke of the body, of hunger and weariness and all the ways a person could become occupied with what he wanted. He read from John. Then he returned to

the promise of Easter, to the difficulty of believing in new life while insisting on every old habit.

“A man can ask the Lord to change him,” he said, “and keep arranging his days so nothing has to change.”

Someone behind Vivienne said amen with feeling.

“He can know the prayer by heart. He can pray it beautifully.”

This brought a murmur, almost a laugh. Elijah allowed it. He knew how long to let the room breathe before he asked something harder of it.

“What will he do when he gets home?”

Vivienne looked down at her hands. There was nothing particularly sinful about them. They had carried dishes and helped Ruth fasten her dress that morning. Yet she had the uncomfortable sense that he was approaching her, that soon he would speak about obedience and young people who confused wanting freedom with deserving it.

Instead he spoke about men.

About a man who could account for his hours to everybody but himself. About anger excused as authority. About a desire a person fed in private, then brought before God as if he had found it on the road and did not know whose it was.

His voice had grown stronger. Vivienne forgot her foot.

She knew that strength. It could fill the house when he was displeased, though he rarely needed to use much of it there. Here it seemed to give people courage to answer. They leaned toward him. Her mother was watching him with the same close attention she gave a difficult piece of work.

"I have to hear this myself," he said.

The room quieted.

"I do not stand above the Word because I stand behind this pulpit."

Vivienne felt a brief, unwilling tenderness for him. He could say something like that in front of everyone. At home, an apology had to find its own way into a conversation, often disguised as an offer to take somebody somewhere.

He ended with the possibility of mercy. Not an easy release from what a person had done, but the possibility of beginning again while there was still someone who needed him to. His voice softened. The congregation followed him down into that quiet as readily as it had followed him upward.

Vivienne wanted, for a moment, to be as sure as he sounded.

After the benediction, people stood and the room came apart into families and greetings. Josiah escaped as far as the aisle before Lillian sent Samuel after him. Ruth needed to show their father something on her sleeve that

had troubled her through the last part of the sermon.

"I can take her," Vivienne said.

Her mother looked relieved. "Stay where I can find you."

They waited near the front while Elijah spoke to a woman who held his hand in both of hers. Ruth leaned against Vivienne's skirt. She had become suddenly tired now that there was no reason to sit still.

"It isn't torn," Vivienne whispered, looking at the sleeve.

"It feels torn."

"Then don't feel it."

Ruth considered this and took her finger away.

Henry Baptiste came up beside them. He greeted Ruth as if her appearance had been the thing he came to church to see, then asked Vivienne whether she was keeping everybody in order.

"They're resisting."

"That sounds familiar."

Evelyn stood just behind him. Her dress lay smoothly at the waist, and she carried her bag as though she had never once needed to put something in it in a hurry. Vivienne wished she could ask how she managed that. Evelyn always seemed to have finished getting ready before anyone could catch her doing it.

"Good morning, Vivienne."

“Good morning, Mrs. Baptiste.”

Elijah turned from the woman beside him. Henry put a hand on his shoulder, and they exchanged a few words. Vivienne missed because Ruth was showing her the sleeve again. When she looked up, Henry had moved aside to greet someone else.

Evelyn was facing her father.

“That was a searching sermon, Reverend,” she said.

Elijah did not answer immediately. His hand was still around the Bible. He looked at Evelyn in a way Vivienne could not fit to the greeting: neither the gracious look he gave a compliment nor the attentive one he offered a question.

“I hope it did some good,” he said.

Evelyn lowered her eyes. A smile began and stopped before it became the smile she had given Vivienne.

Then Henry turned back, and Elijah was asking him something about the week.

It had taken only a moment. Ruth tugged Vivienne toward her father, and he bent to examine the sleeve with an earnestness that would have been ridiculous in anyone else.

“Your sister is right,” he told her. “Nothing torn.”

Vivienne watched Evelyn join her husband.

Perhaps the sermon had upset her. People came away from church upset all the time and called it a blessing. Perhaps her father was tired. He had been speaking to one person or another since they arrived.

“Vivienne?”

Her mother was waiting at the end of the pew.

“Coming.”

She took Ruth’s hand. This time nobody had to remind her. As they went down the aisle, she found herself trying to remember the exact words of an exchange in which, as far as she could tell, nothing had happened.

# Keep reading in Mercy

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