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Twanna Underground

by
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Dedication

*To all my students, Past – Present – Future.
To Ramona and her classmates.
And in memory of Malcolm.*

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CHAPTER ONE

Twanna opened her eyes. Blackness greeted her. She could hear them fighting again. She closed her eyes and tried to make the sounds disappear. Humming softly helped. If she could just get her fingers into her ears, maybe she could go back to sleep. Her arms were stiff and she had to wiggle around to get her hands up to her head. She opened her eyes again. She wanted to make sure she was still under the couch. The musty smell of the old sofa filled her nostrils and blackness surrounded her.

Slowly, silently, she turned her head.

Yes, there was a faint light.

It must be morning, she thought.

Was it time to get up for school? What day was it?

Oh yes, Twanna thought, *today's Thursday. School. Warm food. I hope we have turkey and gravy for lunch.*

Twanna inched as quietly as possible from her hiding place.

The voices were coming from down the hall. She knew her mother and stepfather were fighting again. She closed her eyes.

Squeezing them really tight she could see her daddy. His big

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smile, his huge hands and she could almost feel the breeze as he lifted her up into the air, way above his head.

THUNK! Her neck snapped as her brother kicked her in the head.

“Get up, stupid,” he snarled. “Get outa here.”

Twanna scooted the rest of the way out from under the couch and tried to stand up.

The room was spinning and her head pounded. The red that came with the hurt was slowly fading and she could see her brother, Edward, slouched on the couch with a can of beer in his hand and a joint in his mouth.

Fear crept into her heart and set up housekeeping.

Twanna did not say anything. She walked backwards toward the kitchen, her eyes never leaving Ed's face. When she reached the kitchen door, she turned and ran into the room. She opened the refrigerator door and held it very carefully so it wouldn't fall off its hinges. No milk. She slammed the door and pressed against it so it would stay. She turned to the cabinet and pulled the chair over to stand on. She climbed up and opened the door. No cereal. No bread. No breakfast. Nothing to eat. Nothing new.

She smoothed her blouse and tried to get the dust off her slacks. She wished again for jeans. She had a sweater but it was in the bedroom and she didn't want to go down the hall and into the dark noisy bedroom. She could wear these clothes again. She ran water onto her hands and wiped them over her face. No towel. Oh, well.

Carefully unbuttoning her blouse, she turned it around. She carefully buttoned it up the back. There, that was better. Maybe no one would notice it was the same blouse.

Standing in the kitchen doorway, she eyed the front room.

Edward was on the couch. Martin was on the floor by the front

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door, Torrell was in the old chair, snoring, beer drying on his shirt, the can still lying on his chest.

Very, very, quietly, Twanna tip-toed past them all, barely daring to breath. She even willed her heart to beat silently – but terror defied her command and her heart pounded so loudly she was sure everyone would hear it.

As she got to the door of the apartment, she snatched her jacket off the hook, dashed out the door and fled down the stairs, hearing the slam of the door behind her. She slammed out through the entrance door and ran down the street and around the corner. She raced into the church yard and behind

the brick wall of the bell tower. She hugged the wall and panted. She put on her jacket, pulling the hat from the sleeve, and slid down the wall onto the cement. Hugging her knees, she waited. Dreams, ideas, hopes, flitted in and out of her mind. She tried to keep it blank. Seeing her cousin Martin had started that icky feeling in her stomach again. She couldn't stop the thoughts of the hurt he caused her. He put his hands on her body and hurt her. He put ... she squeezed her eyes shut.

"No! No! No!" she silently screamed.

The earth trembled. Twanna's eyes flew open and her face lit up. The bells were ringing! She could hear them. She could feel them. She flung her arms around the brick tower and pressed her face against it. Her whole being was flying with the sounds of the bells.

The bells rang loudly and melodiously into the early morning air. The crispness of fall added to the sounds of the bells.

Twanna listened. She had to listen to begin counting at the right bell sound.

"One, two, three, four," she counted, "five, six, seven, eight," she waited. Silence. Just the echoing sounds of the bells.

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"Eight o'clock. I'm early," she smiled.

Twanna stayed a little longer in the shadow of the steeple. The feeling the bell sounds gave her were still in her mind.

Nice feeling, she thought, free, flying, wind, clouds, nice.

As she started back out of the churchyard, past the old fountain where nothing but leaves gathered for prayer, she did not see the watching figure step quietly into the shadows.

The closer Twanna got to school, the happier she felt. Mrs. Edwards was her teacher and fifth grade was really fun. She could read very well and Mrs. Edwards had so many books.

"Oh no!" Twanna stopped. "Oh no!" she wailed aloud. "I forgot the book!" She began to cry. Would Mrs. Edwards be angry? Would she be punished? If she had to stay after school she would be very happy. But if Mrs. Edwards didn't let her take any more books she would just die! What could she do? With a mixture of feelings, Twanna cautiously entered the playground. Maybe she shouldn't go in for breakfast. But her

stomach said, "Oh yes you will, child!"

The hot breakfast program let her have a good breakfast every school day.

For free, she thought. Somehow that always surprised her.

Her stomach was making loud noises as she stood in line trying to decide if she wanted orange juice or apple juice. She knew she couldn't have both, so she finally decided on apple juice.

Next she could look at cereal, French toast sticks or pancakes.

She mentally tasted each one. Which one should she choose?

"Hurry up, stupid," said an impatient voice behind her.

Mike, a boy from the sixth grade shoved into her. "Mike! If you bump into anyone again, you will have to get out of line," came the stern voice of Mr. Conley.

Twanna gave him a grateful glance, selected French toast sticks, a packet of maple syrup and chocolate milk. She turned

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to look for a spot to sit among the other students who had come for breakfast. The place was crammed.

Jaylin stood up and yelled, "Twanna! Over here!"

Twanna smiled and made her way between the long tables to where Jaylin was saving her a place.

"Hi!" said Jaylin, taking a spoonful of cereal.

"Hi!" Twanna answered, as she sat down and arranged her food on the table. Twanna moved her silverware around several times before taking a sip of her apple juice. She slowly dribbled syrup onto the French toast sticks, watching the sticky sweet liquid make miniature rivers on the plate. Then she cut off a piece of the French toast and popped it into her mouth. Her taste buds said, "Oh, yes!" She held the piece in her mouth and closed her eyes.

"Boy, does this taste good!" she said.

"Come on, hurry up," Jaylin was saying as she picked up her bowl of cereal to drink the milk. "I want to show you something."

"It'll just have to wait," said Twanna, sticking her nose into the air. "I'm dining!"

Jaylin snorted, then laughed.

“Twanna, you’re a blast!” She got up to take her tray back and said, “When madam is finished will she please meet me at the swings?” She bowed to Twanna, who was also laughing, then sauntered to the front of the cafeteria to throw away her garbage.

“Sure,” Twanna called after her, “but it’ll be awhile.”

“Very good, Twanna,” Miss Hummel said, “I’m so glad to see you chew every bite carefully. I’m glad that you remember we discussed careful chewing helps digestion in Health class last week.”

“Yes, Miss Hummel,” Twanna mumbled. She didn’t care

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about digestion, she just wanted to taste each piece and enjoy it. She hadn’t had anything to eat since lunch the day before.

Most of the students had already cleaned up and were outside by the time Twanna put her tray on the rack. She tossed her napkin in the garbage, with her paper cup and milk carton. She stopped on her way out to go into the restroom.

Twanna hated this restroom. Rows and rows of toilets. Each in a stall, each stall with no door. Some were not flushed and the smell was horrible. She held her breath and ran water over her sticky fingers. No matter how she tried not to, she got sticky fingers whenever she had syrup.

Letting out her breath and tossing a paper towel into the garbage, she pushed through the restroom door and almost collided with Angel, a girl from her class.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Twanna said. “I’m in a hurry to get out of there, it smells.”

“Oh, and I suppose it doesn’t smell like your house?” Angel raised her eyebrows at Twanna, tilting her head back and flipping her long blond hair in the process. She wanted to raise just one eyebrow but although she practiced a lot, she just couldn’t do it yet.

Twanna looked at Angel, then at Marie and Lisa, who were with her. They were trying not to giggle. *Trying* not to giggle. Twanna turned and ran through the double doors to the outside. *Not clean air, but better than the restrooms*, she thought, looking through the crowd of kids for Jaylin. Spotting

her with Marvin and Walter, Twanna headed in her direction.
“What do you have?” she panted.
“Oh, hi, Twanna.” Jaylin acted as if she was seeing her for the first time that morning.
“Hi,” said Walter and Marvin together.
Marvin tossed an old looking tennis ball to Walter.

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“Did you do that arithmetic homework last night?” Walter asked Jaylin, as he caught the ball. Returning the toss to Marvin, he looked at Twanna.
“No!” Twanna gasped, hands flying to her face. “I forgot!” she wailed. Now she was sure Mrs. Edwards would be angry. What could she do?
Jaylin said, “Oh, Twanna, what’s the matter with you? Don’t you remember you gave it to me to keep for you?”
A tidal wave of relief surged through Twanna. Yes! She had finished it before leaving school and had given it to Jaylin to keep for her. Jaylin had a really nice notebook with pockets to keep stuff in. She gave Jaylin a big smile that said thank you.

CHAPTER TWO

The bell rang.

“Ya know, that doesn’t sound like a bell,” stated Marvin.

“It’s just a loud jagged sound that really gets your attention.”

He shoved the tennis ball into his jacket pocket and trotted after Walter to line up.

As Jaylin and Twanna joined the fifth grade line, Twanna whispered, “What did you want to show me?”

Jaylin turned around to say something but saw the monitor looking at her.

“No talking in line, or you’ll get a pink slip!” A pink slip would mean no recess. Jaylin shook her head and turned toward the front of the single file line.

Quiet settled on the playground. Scuffling of feet, some titters, some giggles, a sneeze, then silence. Mr. Conley blew a whistle and the lines started to enter the building. The fourth and fifth grade lines entered through the same blank metal double doors, filed up to the second floor and then split, the fourth grade left and the fifth grade right. Two lines of each grade, about twenty-eight in each line. They split again, one fourth grade line to the room on the left, the other fourth grade line to the room on the right. The fifth grade lines followed the same procedure.

The stairs they climbed were old, made of marble, worn where thousands of feet had marched before. The banisters were of wrought iron, painted a shinny black.

When the children entered their classrooms, the lines broke up and the ones who wore coats, jackets, hats, went into the cloak room. This was a long closet about four feet wide with hooks and shelves on both sides. There was a door at each end leading back into the classroom. The entire cloak room was oak paneling, with storage cabinets way above the students heads. The class room itself, was very large. At one point in it’s many years, desks had been fastened to the floor, in long rows.

They had long since been removed and replaced with desks and chairs that could be moved into different work areas or circles.

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Mrs. Edwards had them grouped into fours. Two desks facing two other desks, making a larger work area, and students facing each other. One wall of the classroom was covered with tall windows, and one wall had a blackboard, which could be moved around to get into cabinets behind it. The teachers desk usually centered in the middle of another wall, was shoved into the corner of the back of the room, and used mainly for “stuff.” Mrs. Edwards didn’t sit down often, and never behind her desk. Sometimes she sat in the rocker which was in the reading area. Twanna loved this room. The sun always came in the windows in the morning. The reading area had a book case with lots of books, two beanbag chairs, rug squares that could be moved around and the rocker.

The rocker was the place Twanna always wanted to be. The best reader, the student with all work turned in, got to sit in the rocker for twenty-five minutes during free reading time. Twanna was usually there, Jaylin got there sometimes and Walter was a contender. Angel wanted to get there but was not always right in her answers and she would tell Mrs. Edwards that she, Angel, was right, Mrs. Edwards was wrong, and Mrs. Edwards should go back to school or something. Angel was not rewarded for that behavior.

Twanna loved to read. She liked to do her work, so she earned rocker time often. Angel would get so angry and whisper that Twanna cheated, or that Twanna was teacher’s pet. She would sometimes pretend that she “let” Twanna win because she didn’t want to sit in the spot where she might get a *disease*.

“Everyone sit down, please,” said Mrs. Edwards.

The school day had begun.

When Twanna next looked at the clock, above the teachers desk, she was very surprised to see it was almost 12:00.

Already! Twanna thought. Her tummy growled. “I guess so,” she laughed, almost out loud! She put her hand up to her mouth and looked around. *Whew! No one noticed.* She got back

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to work just in case Mrs. Edwards looked in her direction.

“Oh, boys, girls, let’s make a nice straight line for lunch.”

Mrs. Edwards began the noise which consisted of chairs being shoved under desks, books being shoved into desks and bodies moving to the door to be first in line for food.

“I’m passing out the lunch tickets, Mrs. Edwards, or did you forget?” Angel flounced her way toward the teachers desk.

“No, my dear, it seems you have made an error. Bill’s name is on the blackboard for “passer” today. And that wasn’t an appropriate way to remind a teacher of anything. No, just control yourself.”

Angel was scowling and just about ready to turn a really pretty face into a gargoyle look-a-like, when Bill said, “Aw, she can do it, that’s OK.”

The smile Angel gave Bill could have lit up downtown Chicago. Bill blushed. Poor Bill. The entire class had ammunition for the rest of the year. Mrs. Edwards, however, did not let Angel pass out the tickets, and the look she got from Angel was not at all angelic.

Lunch tickets were passed out, by Bill.

The long line of students wound its way down the old marble stairwells, deep into the bowels of the old building. The walls were green – the basement was green, the restrooms were green. Twanna didn’t like this green. *It doesn’t look like the grass or the trees*, she thought. *It looks – pale – sick – just not bright.*

The smell of lunch drifted up the stairs along with the noise. Talking wasn’t permitted, but most of the kids whispered, some rather loudly. The band teacher was always on duty, ready with her whistle at the first hint of “unruly conduct.” Twanna wasn’t sure what “unruly conduct” was but she didn’t want that whistle blown at her, so she kept in line and was quiet.

The food was warm. Twanna was starving.

“Wow! My favorite!” she whispered to Jaylin as they got to

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a spot where they could see what was being served.

They knew the menu said Turkey and gravy on mashed potatoes, but they never believed anything until they both saw it. Mrs. Peters, a big, happy lady, in a white apron and white hat was heaping spoonfuls onto the trays. She winked at Twanna and Twanna gave her a big smile. Twanna’s plate was always

just a little fuller than some of the other girls. The boys always had a big gob of potatoes and a ladle of turkey and gravy “just spillin’ down the sides” as Mrs. Peters would say.

“The Ghost really likes you,” Jaylin whispered to Twanna. She didn’t want Mrs. Peters to hear because she didn’t want to hurt her feelings. They called her the “Ghost” because she was so white. Her hair, her skin, her clothes, even her nylons and shoes were white. The kids liked her, but they called her “The Ghost” anyway.

As they sat across from each other, Twanna said to Jaylin, “How old do you think she is?”

“Older than anyone alive.” Jaylin was putting real butter on her bread.

“No, I mean how old? Does she have kids?” Twanna was shoveling her food in. Jaylin looked at her.

“Twanna! What, you’ve never eaten before?” she said.

“Take your time, savor it.”

Twanna laughed. “Yeah, but I’m really hungry. I haven’t eaten since...” suddenly she stopped and looked at Jaylin, “...breakfast,” she said and laughed.

But Jaylin was looking at her plate. She felt her stomach do a flip-flop and tears started to cloud her vision. She knew Twanna practically lived in the street. She knew that if she had a mother, instead of only a stepfather, she could do something about Twanna, but she couldn’t. She was lucky, wasn’t she, that her stepfather wanted to take care of her but couldn’t afford to “bring in the rest of the needy world,” as he said.

The lunch hour was over. It seemed to go so fast, while the rest of the day moved like thick syrup. A washroom break was allowed and then back to the classroom. Science wasn’t as

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interesting as looking out the window. Twanna knew she would have to read the whole chapter over but somehow she could not get her eyes back to the page.

“Twanna ... Twanna ... Twanna!” Mrs. Edwards was calling her name.

Oh, no! Twanna thought, *I don’t know the answer ... I don’t even know the question ... I’m dead!*

“Twanna, I want you to stay back for a few minutes while the others go to the gym. Now, don’t worry. It’s nothing to look like that about!” Mrs. Edwards patted Twanna on the shoulder.

“What’s it about?” Jaylin mouthed in her direction.

Twanna shrugged her shoulders and tried to swallow the lump in her throat. But her tummy was jumping and lunch felt like a rock.

She stayed in her seat while the other students got in line.

Angel could be heard whispering, “Now she’s gonna get it! I’ll bet she got caught stealing!” The class just looked at Angel and Walter had to hold Jaylin because Jaylin was “gonna settle that girl right now!”

They left the room and it was silent. Mrs. Edwards came over to Twanna’s desk. She pulled Walter’s chair over and sat down.

“Twanna, I know life isn’t easy for you. I just want to tell you if you need anyone to talk to, or you need something, let me know. If I can’t help you, I will find someone who can.”

Folded arms, head on arms, tears not staying in eyes but dropping onto the desk, Twanna said nothing.

“Mrs. Peters has been concerned about you for a long time, and we were talking the other day. She has some grandchildren about your size, and she...er,” Mrs. Edwards hesitated, “she brought some clothes which will fit you. None of the other kids know about this,” she hurried to explain, “but they are nice. Won’t you come into the cloak room with me and see them? Please?”

Twanna jerked her head up. “Clothes?” she said. “Wow!” She scrambled out of her seat, brushed at her face, then pulled

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her already dirty blouse up to wipe her eyes.

“Oh, no! Twanna, use a tissue, please,” sighed Mrs. Edwards.

In the cloak room, Mrs. Edwards pulled out two bags of clothes. Dresses, slacks, sweaters and sweatshirts. Even a jacket – a nice warm winter one.

“Purple!” Twanna exclaimed. She loved bright colors.

“But these look new,” she said, “are you sure they are for me?”

“They sure do look new! And yes, I’m sure they are for you.”

Mrs. Edwards was having as much fun looking at the new clothes as Twanna was. “Oh, what a pretty dress,” she’d say, or, “What a nice color this is for you.”

The light slowly died from Twanna’s face. She couldn’t take these home. Her mother would find out and take them away – or something. She just couldn’t.

Mrs. Edwards saw the change come over Twanna.

“Thinking about home?” she asked quietly.

Twanna nodded.

“I’ve got an idea,” Mrs. Edwards said, leaning close to Twanna. “We need to work this out but why don’t we leave these here and you can change when you get to school. We have a shower you can use – and Home Ec has a washer and dryer. We’ll work out something. Okay? Now, cheer up and go to gym.” Mrs. Edwards briskly began to pick up the clothes. She walked over to her teachers closet and began hanging things up. Twanna joined dodge ball just in time to get hit in the head by a ball kicked by Walter. Jaylin was the first one at her side – it actually knocked her down.

“I wasn’t aiming at you!” Walter was hanging his head – wagging it from side to side. “I’m just no good. I’m just a fool. I wasn’t aimin’ at you. I was aimin’ at Angel. Honest! I wouldn’t hit you, Twanna. Honest.”

“I know, Walter. It’s okay. I’ll be okay. Just leave me alone.”

“Next time aim at Twanna, maybe you’ll hit Angel,” Jaylin snapped at Walter.

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“Don’t, Jaylin, he feels bad enough.” Twanna knew how it felt to do something stupid.

Miss Hummel was slapping an ice bag on Twanna’s head.

Gee, Twanna thought, if I didn’t need one before, I need one now. That hurt! And it’s on the other side. Aloud she said, “Thank-you, Miss Hummel.”

(This is the end of Chapter Two. If you want to read more about Twanna, Jaylin and their adventures go to

www.publishamerica.com and search for Twanna Underground)

It is also available at www.amazon.com and www.barnesandnoble.com