

CHAPTER ONE

Billie Jean Sloane-Taylor

Hamilton, Ohio, August 3, 1933

The quiet peace of the humid August evening was abruptly shattered when Cal stormed into the kitchen. He pulled up short, slammed his fist into the ice-box and roared at his young bride. “You slut! How dare you let Rusty see you like that! You stupid, or something?”

When he puffed out his chest, folded his arms across it and glared at Billie Jean, his hooded brown eyes blazed with anger and his nostrils flared, pulsing to the beat of some hidden rage. Billie Jean couldn’t believe Cal could be so cruel. His drastic mood-swing terrified her. As a tremor shook her slight frame, an odd observation slashed through her mind: *Cal looks madder’n that old bull on Uncle Bob’s farm.*

She flashed back to earlier in the evening when Cal had seemed so happy and carefree. They had enjoyed a peaceful, relaxing supper with his young brother, Rusty, followed by a refreshing run through the lawn sprinkler; it had been a swell day. Then he had driven Rusty to a friend’s house and returned home in a rage.

So what had happened between now and then? Why was Cal being so mean and hurtful? He was like a different man.

When Cal stomped into the house and verbally attacked her, Billie Jean had been cutting into a ripe, juicy watermelon. He startled her so much, she instinctively jumped back, causing the melon to slip off the counter onto the floor where it shattered, sending sticky, mushy blobs of pulp and rind slithering all over the shiny linoleum.

Christmas colors, she fleetingly observed, even as she inhaled the rather sickening sweetness of the juicy, red pulp.

Billie Jean was confused by the changes in her husband since their hasty marriage—petty jealousies, unfair criticism, temper tantrums—but he’d never been this unreasonable. Hurt by Cal’s meanness, she fought back tears, determined to be brave—to not show her fear.

Through sheer willpower, she thought she had succeeded when she clenched her small fists and brought them up before her face, but her body language betrayed her. Billie Jean’s hands trembled and she knew how she must appear to Cal when she glared at him. In the past, he’d told her that her eyes looked like two fiery green marbles when she was angry and she had joined him in laughter when he charmed her into forgiving him.

But his current behavior was no laughing matter; Cal had gone way too far this time. He even had the gall to smirk when he said, “Close your mouth! You look like a moron with your mouth hanging open.”

That remark infuriated Billie Jean even more, but she struggled to control her emotions, deliberately closing her mouth, unclenching her fists and lowering her arms to her sides. She relaxed her jaw and with renewed resolve, tried to still her shaky voice. She wanted to scream at Cal, but reining in her own Irish temper, she chose her words carefully. “I c-can’t believe you think there’s anything wrong with Rusty seeing me in this modest, old-fashioned swimsuit. After all, he’s *your* brother and he...he just came in the kitchen for a soda-pop before going to the movies.”

And why hadn’t Cal objected to the swimsuit this afternoon when they’d had such fun in the sprinkler? Why mention it now?

Moving closer to Cal, Billie Jean placed her rigid hand on his shoulder and forced herself to gaze up into his eyes. “I...I love you, honey, but your hot temper and unreasonable jealousy is destroying our marriage. Darling, we’ve talked about this before and you really do need help. Please go talk to Pastor Young.”

At her open reference to his fiery nature, Cal’s anger exploded. “Dammit, Billie Jean, don’t ever talk *down* to me,” he shouted. He bared his teeth like a rabid animal as he stumbled to the bureau drawer and withdrew a pistol, waving it menacingly. When she saw the gun, Billie Jean ran for the front door, slipping and sliding in the goop on the floor, but just as she grabbed the doorknob, Cal caught her and shoved her aside. She lost her balance and fell. Cal went down with her, rolled on top of her and grasped her arms, attempting to pin her to the floor. Both were breathless from exertion as they struggled around the floor, getting seeds and fruity pulp all over themselves.

Billie Jean broke out in a sweat when she looked into the barrel of the gun. The petite girl—not much over a hundred pounds (sopping wet, as Cal often bragged)—knew she was no match for her big, brawny husband, but she grappled with him...rolling aside a scant second before the gun exploded in a burst of blue smoke and a stifling odor.

Hot, searing pain shot through Billie Jean, but she lurched to her feet and staggered out the door before Cal recovered from the shock of what he had done. Fearing he would bolt after her, she stifled her screams, ran like hell and crawled beneath the evergreen bushes between their apartment and the house next door. She crouched there like a frightened little kitten trapped by an angry, snarling dog.

As Billie Jean hunkered down behind the prickly bushes, shivering in the damp, sticky swimsuit, a police cruiser drove by, but fearing Cal would discover her hiding place, she remained silent. Too terrified to leave her meager shelter, she stared at the cruiser as it rounded the corner, as though she could will it to return.

Too much in shock to feel the pain from the bullet wound, Billie Jean huddled there in the dark for what seemed like an eternity. Squatting in that awkward position cramped her muscles, so she eventually gave up and slumped to the ground. When she rested her head on her arms and sprawled out on the hard, rough earth, she felt something warm, fluid and sticky. She jerked back, swiped her hand across her temple, then drew it away. Her fingertips were coated with blood. She thought she had a head wound, but after gently probing with her fingers, she discovered she’d been shot in the upper arm.

Then, from someplace deep within, Billie Jean’s emotions finally erupted. Forgetting about Cal, she screamed loud enough to wake all the dead at Greenwood Cemetery, then angrily pounded the ground with her one good arm.

As people rushed out of their apartments and surrounding homes, Billie Jean heard the sputtering noises of an old car pattering up the street. She sucked in her breath when Earl and Sally Friedland, the retired couple who lived next door, pulled in their faded blue Oldsmobile. “Oh, thank God!” she cried, lifting her eyes to Heaven. She was so relieved to see them, she mumbled incoherently as she crawled out of the bushes and collapsed at their feet.

Safe! I’m safe! she thought. Earl and Sally would help her. They would take good care of her.

Earl was a kind, caring man...a round, florid man who always wore plaid pants with a pocket-watch dangling over his paunch, wide-brimmed felt hats and carried an umbrella year-round. Even though he was a bit showy and pretentious, he had a heart of gold and to Billie Jean, he looked like a swashbuckling-Errol-Flynn-to-the-rescue as he waddled up the cobblestone path to summon help.

Meanwhile, Billie Jean was left in Sally's capable, yet arthritic, hands. Sally was a comforting sight; in her usual attire—floral house-dress and big straw hat which she wore with rolled-down nylons and sensible black shoes—the woman was every bit as colorful as her husband. Billie Jean felt a fleeting pang of sympathy when Sally groaned as she lowered herself to the ground and cradled her against her motherly bosom. She knew Sally's arthritis was acting up, but her own pain was so severe she couldn't be concerned about anyone else.

Oh, God, it hurt so bad.

Billie Jean burrowed into Sally's body like a frightened child, thriving on the woman's sweet, soothing voice. Temporarily lulled, she moaned as Sally rocked her back and forth, stroking her long copper tresses with a trembling hand while waiting for help to arrive.

But as warm and nurturing as Sally felt, Billie Jean yearned for her own mother and eventually stirred in Sally's compassionate embrace. "Mom! Mom!" she cried. Her silver tears spilled onto the shoulder of Sally's floral dress, then trickled down into her own blood.

And that was how Billie Jean Sloane-Taylor got started on her way back to 1106 Grand Boulevard...the first time.

She was only sixteen years old.