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A PRODIGAL

“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country, and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.”

LUKE 15:13-14

They said I was a lost cause. Not even worth praying for.

Coach Dye must have agreed, because one night near the end of my sophomore season at Auburn University, I came back to the dorm late. I guess it was an hour or so after curfew, and I'd had a beer or two. I had just flopped onto the bed in my underwear when a knock came at the door. Nobody but another player living in the Sewell Hall, the athletic dorm, would knock at that time of night.

“Come in,” I said.

The door pushed open, and it was Coach Daniel, the assistant offensive line coach. I hated James Daniel. I thought he was a hatchet man for Coach Pat Dye. He and two other coaches lived in the dorm

and seemed to watch us all the time, just looking for us to get in trouble. I reached down to pick up my pants and stumbled a little standing up.

“Out late,” he said.

“I lost track of the time,” I said without looking up.

“Studying?”

“Yeah, studying.”

He snickered sarcastically. I pulled up my pants and sat back down.

It wasn't the first time Coach Daniel had knocked on my door, and every time it meant trouble—usually stadiums. I'd lost count of the times I had run up and down all forty-six aisles of the lower stands in Jordan-Hare Stadium with a concrete block on my back. If it was raining, I ran coliseums instead—twenty-five at a time. Up and down all the way around the basketball arena was one. Always with the concrete block strapped to my back. It was wrapped in a towel to keep it from ripping my skin. They got me for skipping class, staying out late, fighting Coach Wayne Hall, and fighting another player. Nobody was in better shape than Pat Dye's troublemakers. They said Auburn lacked discipline before he came. Not anymore. We ran until we threw up. Then we got up and ran some more until we passed out.

“Coaches had a meeting today,” Daniel said.

“Yeah?”

“You were on the agenda.”

In an instant I was sober. Me? Why would the whole coaching staff be talking about me? It was either really good or really bad, and since I'd been kicked off the travel squad for the Florida game, I figured it must be really bad. Or was Daniel bluffing? I looked hard, but he didn't blink. Didn't give a clue.

Then he made it quick. “Chette,” he said, “you're a problem. A bad seed. You've been here nearly two seasons, and we've never seen you

smile. Nobody works harder than you in the weight room and on the practice field. Nobody is more committed on the field than you. But then you mess it all up with your attitude. You stay out late, you come home drunk or high, and you're on academic probation. You argue and fight with your coaches and your teammates. We thought dropping you from the travel squad last week would straighten you out, but here you are out late again."

I looked up at him. This was his "one-last-chance" speech, and I wanted to look him in the eye when he said it. He needed to know I was a man, and when I said I would straighten up, he needed to believe it. I believed it myself. I knew what he was saying was true, and I didn't like it. It was time to straighten myself up and show them the real Chette Williams.

My older brother Quency had gotten the one-last-chance speech right before they suspended him from the team for a quarter. I started thinking about what I would do for the next three months and how I would keep Mama from finding out I'd been suspended.

"Chette," Coach Daniel said, "we think it's time for you to move on."

I stared at him and waited for him to finish his sentence with, ". . . for a while." But he just stood there and didn't say anything else—nothing about how long or when I would be back.

Finally I asked, "What do you mean?"

"I mean you're off the team."

Off the team, I thought. *No, that can't be right. This can't be happening. Tell me this isn't happening. Off the team? Are you sure?* My stomach rolled like I was about to get sick, and I lowered my head. "I understand," I said, but I didn't.

I didn't hear much else he said, just pieces of sentences: "I'm sorry, Chette . . . other programs, other schools . . . we can help . . . not a good

fit for you or for us.” He must have known I wasn’t listening, because after a while the room was quiet and he was gone.

I rolled over on the bed and stared at the wall. Other schools? Other programs? What was he talking about? Auburn was *my* school. It was the *only* program.

I pulled the pillow up under my head, and in that instant I knew I was the lost son, the prodigal. Except I had no father to go home to. Calvin Williams Sr. was even more lost than I was. I had hardly spoken to him in nearly two years, since he and Mama divorced. The closest man I had to a father right now was Coach Dye, and he had just kicked me off the team.

Maybe I *was* a lost cause.