Chapter Thirty

My client met me in the hallway when I returned from lunch. She appeared agitated. Her husband stood beside her, ramrod straight, chin up, chest out, shoulders back, ready to defend his woman. The only thing missing was a weapon.

"Don't be nervous, Mrs. Williams," I said. "You'll be just fine."

"My stomach is tied up in knots. I didn't realize there'd be so many reporters. What if I mess up?"

"Don't worry. You won't mess up. Think of it this way. You have only a tiny part of this trial. Just tell the court the simple facts. Your testimony will not be in dispute. The trial is not about you. It's about the Bible. All you have to do is sit back and look intelligent and attentive."

"You see, honey?" said her husband. "That's what I told you. You don't have to worry about a thing."

She nodded and gave me a wan smile. "I'm good. I just want to get this behind me. I mean my testimony, not the trial. I'm looking forward to enjoying every moment of it."

We took our seats at the plaintiff's table. The bailiff brought the jury into the courtroom. The judge came in, and we were ready to begin.

"Let us proceed," she said. "Mr. Taylor?"

"The plaintiff calls Lavender Williams."

Lavender took her seat in the witness box.

"Mrs. Williams, what is your occupation?" I said.

"I teach sixth grade at Cushman Middle School in Bedford-Stuyvesant here in Brooklyn. At least, that's what I was doing until I was fired."

"Mrs. Williams, what exactly did you do that brought this on?"

"I taught the children historical material that appears in the Bible."

"Did you bring Bibles into the classroom?"

"No, but I assigned readings in the Bible. I assumed that most children had ready access to a Bible."

"What kind of material did you introduce to your classes?"

"It was historical. The origins of the Israelites. The captivity in Egypt and the Exodus. I should point out that I didn't mention any miracles described in the Bible. Whether you believe those or not is a matter of faith, and I wasn't teaching faith in my classroom. I was teaching ancient history. I taught them about the conquest of Canaan, the establishment of the Kingdom of Israel under King David and King Solomon and the downward spiral until the eventual exile of the Israelites to Babylon."

"And you never mentioned religion?"

"Only in the anthropological sense. I told them that the Israelites are especially important in history because they gave the world monotheism."

"And this does not violate the separation of church and state?"

"Of course not. Religious beliefs and customs are important to the study of different societies. I wasn't telling the children what to believe or not believe. I never promoted religion as a personal faith."

"Why did you think it was important to teach these things to them?"

"Because I wanted them to know the truth."

"And you believe the Bible is historically accurate?"

"Yes."

"Even though it tells miraculous stories?"

"We get a lot of historical information from ancient inscriptions, and most of them feature plenty of gods and miraculous tales. We don't chuck the historical stuff because we don't believe the religious stuff. I always felt the Bible deserved at least the same respect."

I paused a moment to let the jury digest this point.

"Now, Mrs. Williams," I continued, "did you realize that teaching this material could lead to problems for you?"

"Yes, I did."

"So why did you feel it was so important to teach this material? Why risk the wrath of your principal?"

"I felt it was important for the children to know the Bible was a valid historical record. Especially the children in my school in Bedford-Stuyvesant."

"Can you explain, please?"

"Of course. The most stable social force in black society has always been our Christian religion. Jesus gave us comfort when we were slaves, and he continues to give us hope as we struggle for genuine equality in American society. Our faith is important to us. Most of our great leaders are clergymen, from Martin Luther King on down. The children hear all around them that the Bible is a myth, and their faith is shaken. That's a bad thing."

"That's commendable, Ms. Williams, but weren't you crossing the line into the area of religion?"

"No, I wasn't. I never talked to the children about their Christian faith. I never encouraged them to go to church or pray. I just taught them something that is true, something that is important for them to know. I taught them that the Bible is a valid historical record, as valid as anything else from ancient times. This is the opinion of many great scholars and scientists. I don't think the school has the right to dismiss the Bible out of hand as a historical resource and send a message to the children that their religion is nonsense. It violates our freedom of religion and my right of free speech."

"But what if they could prove conclusively that the Bible is a myth?"

"That would be different. But there is no way they could prove that conclusively. On the contrary, according to the scholarly books I've read, the evidence points the other way. The school has no right to suppress that point of view and give the children the impression that only religious fanatics accept the historicity of the Bible."

"I see." I paused again. "Very well, let's move on to the facts of the case. What is your principal's name?"

"Wesley Youngblood."

I pointed to the defense table. "Is that Mr. Youngblood sitting over there?"

"Yes, that's Mr. Youngblood."

"Did you explain your position to your principal clearly and logically, just as you explained it to the jury now?"

"Yes, I did. In much greater detail."

"And what did he say?"

"He wasn't interested. He just wanted me to stop. Period."

"And when you didn't?"

"He fired me."

"Did you have an administrative hearing at the Board of Education?"

"I did."

"Did you explain yourself there?"

"I did. But it didn't do any good. They gave me an ultimatum. I could have my job back if I promised to stop. Otherwise, I was out."

"So, what did you do?"

"I stood by my principles and refused."

"Thank you, Mrs. Williams. I have no more questions."

The judge glanced over at Calabrese. "Your witness."

"No questions, your honor," said Calabrese, "but I would like to call a rebuttal witness at this time."

"Call your witness," said the judge.

Calabrese stood up. "The defense calls Wesley Youngblood."

The school principal was a tall black man, with high cheekbones and large solemn eyes. He carried himself with exaggerated dignity. He wore a three-button blue suit, a button-down white shirt and a yellow tie.

"Can we have your full name and occupation, sir?" said Calabrese.

"My name is Wesley Youngblood," he said with the slightest touch of a Caribbean accent. "I'm the principal of the Cushman Middle School here in Brooklyn."

"Mr. Youngblood, is Mrs. Lavender Williams in your employ?"

"She was. She taught sixth grade."

"And now she is no longer in your employ?"

"She was fired for teaching the Bible to the children in her class."

"And why didn't you want her to teach them the Bible, Mr. Youngblood?"

"Because it is a violation of the separation of church and state."

"Did you give her ample warning before you fired her?"

"I certainly did."

"Did she try to justify what she was doing?"

"Yes. She said she was teaching history rather than religion."

"And how did you respond to that?"

"I refused to get into a debate with her. I told her the Bible was not an acceptable historical resource for the classroom in a public school."

"And what did she say?"

"She called me a house nigger."

I jumped to my feet. "Objection! Irrelevant and highly prejudicial."

"Sustained," said the judge.

"Thank you, Mr. Youngblood," said Calabrese. "There will be no further questions."

"Do you wish to cross-examine, Mr. Taylor?" asked the judge.

"Yes, your honor, I do." Before getting up, I leaned over and whispered to Lavender, "Was that true?"

She shrugged and gave me a sheepish smile. "Yeah. I don't remember if I called him an Uncle Tom or a house nigger. Either one works."

"I'm not sure if that helps or hurts. Anyway, water under the bridge."

I walked slowly to the lectern.

"Mr. Youngblood, I objected to your telling the jury that Mrs. Williams called you a house nigger, and the judge sustained my objection. But the jury heard you. I might as well ask about that remark. Had she ever made such a remark to you before?"

"No, sir."

"Didn't this indicate that she felt strongly about what she was doing?"

"Objection," said Calabrese. "Calls for a conclusion on the part of the witness."

"Sustained," said the judge.

"Let me rephrase the question," I said. "Did you conclude in your own mind at the time that Ms. Williams felt strongly about this issue?"

"Yes, I did."

"And yet you refused to discuss it with her."

"We did discuss it."

"But didn't you just say that you refused to get into a debate with her?"

"Well, yes. But we did discuss that she should stop doing it."

"I see. By discuss you mean you issued your orders. You didn't really listen, did you? Didn't you think she had a right to be heard?"

Youngblood's eyes narrowed. "I listened to her."

"Yes, we know how you listened." I glanced at the jury. "Let's go on. How long had she been teaching about the Bible in her classroom when you ordered her to stop?"

"I'm not sure. I'd say a few months, maybe close to a year."

"You knew about it for a year and did nothing?"

"Well … I didn't do anything right away."

"Why did you wait so long?"

"It was not on top of my list. The Cushman Middle School is in a disadvantaged neighborhood. We deal with many problems on a daily basis. Other issues took priority. Her classroom was functioning. Other teachers were not doing nearly as well. I let it ride for a while."

"A while being close to a year?"

"I suppose."

"What changed your mind, Mr. Youngblood? Have you solved all your other problems so that this was the only one that remained?"

"I wish that were true," said the principal with a throaty laugh. "I

decided to put a stop to it. There were complaints."

"Complaints? From whom?"

"The American Conference on Educational Standards. They've been in the news lately because of their involvement in the fight against the Intelligent Design initiative. A.C.E.S. sent me a letter of complaint and said they would go to the attorney general's office if I didn't put a stop to it."

"And so, you told Ms. Williams to cease and desist?"

"I did."

"Mr. Youngblood, you've known her for a while, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Has she ever struck you as a religious fanatic?"

"No."

"Thank you. No more questions."

Youngblood vacated the witness box and returned to the gallery. He nodded to Lavender as he neared the plaintiff's table, but it was more an obligatory formality than an expression of friendship. He was clearly upset.

"Sorry for the trouble," Lavender said to him in a loud whisper.

He fixed her with a stern principal stare. "You do what you gotta do."

Lavender looked down at her hands. When she looked up, he was gone.

"The court is adjourned," said the judge. "We will resume Monday morning at ten o'clock. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, please remember my instructions. Get a good rest over the weekend."

She stood up and disappeared into her chambers.