



**THE HEAVEN
& EARTH
GROCERY
STORE**

a novel

**JAMES
McBRIDE**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

WINNER OF THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

ALSO BY JAMES MCBRIDE

The Color of Water

Miracle at St. Anna

Song Yet Sung

The Good Lord Bird

Kill 'Em and Leave

Five-Carat Soul

Deacon King Kong

THE
Heaven
& Earth
GROCERY STORE

James McBride

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To Sy Friend, who taught all of us the meaning of Tikkun Olam

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PART I

Gone



The Hurricane

There was an old Jew who lived at the site of the old synagogue up on Chicken Hill in the town of Pottstown, Pa., and when Pennsylvania State Troopers found the skeleton at the bottom of an old well off Hayes Street, the old Jew's house was the first place they went to. This was in June 1972, the day after a developer tore up the Hayes Street lot to make way for a new townhouse development.

We found a belt buckle and a pendant in the well, the cops said, and some old threads—from a red costume or jacket, that's what the lab shows.

They produced a piece of jewelry, handed it to him, and asked what it was.

A mezuzah, the old man said.

It matches the one on the door, the cops said. Don't these things belong on doors?

The old man shrugged. Jewish life is portable, he said.

The inscription on the back says "Home of the Greatest Dancer in the World." It's in Hebrew. You speak Hebrew?

Do I look like I speak Swahili?

Answer the question. You speak Hebrew or not?

I bang my head against it sometimes.

And you're Malachi the dancer, right? That's what they say around here. They say you're a great dancer.

Used to be. I gave that up forty years ago.

What about the mezuzah? It matches the one here. Wasn't this the Jewish temple?

It was.

Who owns it now?

Who owns everything around here? the old man said. He nodded at the immense gleaming private school seen through the dim window. The Tucker School. It sat proudly atop the hill behind wrought-iron gates, with smooth lawns, tennis courts, and shiny classroom buildings, a monstrous bastion of arrogant elegance, glowing like a phoenix above the ramshackle neighborhood of Chicken Hill.

They been trying to buy me out for thirty years, the old man said.

He grinned at the cops, but he was practically toothless, save for a single yellow tooth that hung like a clump of butter from his top gum, which made him look like an aardvark.

You're a suspect, they said.

Suspect shuspect, he said with a shrug. He was well north of eighty, wearing an old gray vest, a rumpled white shirt holding several old pens in the vest pocket, a wrinkled tallit around his shoulders, and equally rumpled old pants, but when he reached inside his pants pocket, his gnarled hands moved with such deftness and speed that the state troopers, who spent most days ticketing tractor-trailers on nearby Interstate 76 and impressing pretty housewives during traffic stops with their bubble-gum lights and stern lectures about public safety, panicked and stepped back, their hands on their weapons. But the old man produced nothing more than several pens. He offered the cops one.

No thanks, they said.

They milled around for a while longer and eventually left, promising to return after they pulled the skeleton out of the well and studied the potential murder scene some more. They never did, though, because the next day God wrapped His hands around

Chicken Hill and wrung His last bit of justice out of that wretched place. Hurricane Agnes came along and knocked the power out of four counties. The nearby Schuylkill River rose to a height of seven feet. To hear the old black women of Chicken Hill tell it, white folks was jumping off their rooftops in Pottstown like they was on the Titanic. All those fancy homes down there were swept away like dust. That storm killed everything it touched. Drowned every man, woman, and child that come near it; wrecked bridges, knocked down factories, tore up farms; that thing caused millions in damages—millions and millions—that's white-folks language, millions and millions. Well, for us colored folks on the Hill, it was just another day of dodging the white man's evil. As for the old Jew and his kind that was on this hill, they got all their time back from them that stole everything from 'em. And the Jew lady they wronged, Miss Chona, she got her justice, too, for the King of Kings fixed her up for all the good things she done, lifted her up and filled up her dreams in an instant in only the way He can. That evil fool who called hisself Son of Man, he's long gone from this country. And that boy Dodo, the deaf one, he's yet living. They put that whole camp up there in Montgomery County now on account of him, the Jews did. Theater owners they was, God bless 'em. And them cops and big-time muckity mucks that was running behind them Jews for the body they found in that old well, they can't find a spec against 'em now, for God took the whole business—the water well, the reservoir, the dairy, the skeleton, and every itty bitty thing they could'a used against them Jews—and washed it clear into the Manatawny Creek. And from there, every single bit of that who-shot-John nonsense got throwed into the Schuylkill, and from there, it flowed into the Chesapeake Bay down in Maryland, and from there, out to the Atlantic. And that's where the bones of that rotten scoundrel whose name is not worthy to be called by my lips is floating to this day. At the bottom of the ocean, with the fish picking his bones and the devil keeping score.

As for old Malachi, the cops never did find him. They come back for him after the hurricane business died away, but he was long gone. Left a sunflower or two in the yard and that's it. Old Mr. Malachi got off clean. He was the last of 'em. The last of the Jews round here. That fella was a wizard. He was something. He could dance, too . . . Lord . . . That man was magic . . .

Mazel tov, honey.