

A vintage light blue pickup truck is driving away from the viewer on a dirt road that winds through a rural landscape. The scene is set during sunset or sunrise, with a warm, golden glow over the fields and hills. The sky is a mix of soft orange and pale blue. The truck is a classic model, possibly a Chevrolet or GMC from the 1960s or 70s, with a chrome grille and round headlights. The overall mood is nostalgic and evocative.

'Til I
Want No
More

A Novel

Robin W. Pearson

Praise for Robin W. Pearson

“*Til I Want No More* feels like an extended afternoon at a family reunion barbecue, complete with mouthwatering food, spilled family secrets, and voices of faith that never lose hope. This brilliantly written story reminds us that God is bigger than the struggles that all families face, yet as a woman of color, I love that Robin’s courageous characters look and sound like me.”

BARB ROOSE, speaker and author of *Surrendered: Letting Go and Living like Jesus* and *Joshua: Winning the Worry Battle*

“Robin W. Pearson has done it again—she truly knows how to captivate her readers and have them eagerly turning each page, anticipating what is going to happen next. *Til I Want No More* is no exception. Maxine’s journey of love, longing, and finding her identity and worth is relatable to so many women, all of whom will be able to resonate with the many emotions of this bride-to-be as she seeks to find the joy and sense of belonging she’s been missing.”

ANGELIA WHITE STONE, CEO and editor of *Hope for Women* magazine

“Robin W. Pearson writes strong characters who wrap their arms around you and pull you into the family circle, a hubbub of loyalty, secrets, faith, and yes, forgiveness. Nobody’s perfect—but maybe that’s the best theme woven through this book.”

BETH K. VOGT, award-winning author of the Thatcher Sisters series

“Pour yourself a glass of sweet tea and sit back to enjoy this delightful new story from Robin W. Pearson. Once again her soulful Southern voice brings heart-tugging family relationships into the spotlight with realism and meaningful emotions.”

CARRIE TURANSKY, award-winning author of *No Ocean Too Wide* and *No Journey Too Far*

“Robin W. Pearson has given us another story that sinks deep into the heart of a family. Her Southern touch adds to the charm and authenticity of her characters, while causing the reader to root for their full restoration.”

CHRISTINA SUZANN NELSON, award-winning author of *More Than We Remember*

“Pearson’s excellent debut explores forgiveness and the burden of secrets. . . . Pearson’s saga is enjoyable and uncomfortable, but also funny and persistent in the way that only family can be.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, starred review

“Pearson delivers a poignant debut that explores the faith of one African American family. . . . The writing is strong, and the story is engaging, and readers will be pleased to discover a new voice in Southern inspirational fiction.”

BOOKLIST

“Robin W. Pearson’s debut novel is a contemporary fiction masterpiece. . . . Set in North Carolina, readers will feel the heat, smell the food, and hear the bees buzzing in the

background. . . . Pearson has created a story that makes you feel like you're in the same room as the characters. Do not miss this one."

CHRISTIAN FICTION ADVISOR

"Readers will cry, laugh, sigh wistfully, and even rage a little at this moving story. *A Long Time Comin'* is a wonderful tale of love, family, secrets, relationships, and forgiveness that will teach us all how to live well in the midst of real life."

THE BANNER MAGAZINE

"Robin W. Pearson delivers a fresh new voice for Southern fiction, treating readers to an inspiring journey through the complex matters of the heart."

JULIE CANTRELL, *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author

"My mouth watered at the mustard greens and ham hocks. Feels like home. You'll fall in love with Evelyn and Granny B and a cast of memorable characters so rich you won't want the story to end. We can only hope we'll be reading more from Robin W. Pearson!"

CHRIS FABRY, bestselling author of *Under a Cloudless Sky* and *The Promise of Jesse Woods*

"With a deft hand and an unflinching eye, Pearson tackles the cobwebby corners of her characters' lives and in doing so reveals truths that ultimately help us all to heal . . . even when we've convinced ourselves we don't need to."

SARAH LOUDIN THOMAS, author of *Miracle in a Dry Season*

“Robin W. Pearson’s authentic faith and abundant talent shine through in this wholehearted novel. Bee and Evelyn will stir your heart and stay with you long after the last page of *A Long Time Comin’* is turned.”

MARYBETH MAYHEW WHALEN, author of *Only Ever Her*

“In *A Long Time Comin’* Robin W. Pearson takes readers behind closed doors and into the heart of a family.”

ANN H. GABHART, bestselling author of *Angel Sister* and *The Refuge*

“Robin W. Pearson’s singular style and fully realized cast of characters ring proudly throughout this novel. Her masterful voice is a welcome addition to the genre of family sagas rooted in hope and faith.”

LIZ JOHNSON, bestselling author of *The Red Door Inn*

“The lyrical weaving of family narratives, past and present, is masterful—certainly to be compared with writers such as Sue Monk Kidd and Barbara Kingsolver. . . . Buy this book. It gripped me . . . from page one.”

JANET HOLM MCHENRY, bestselling author of *PrayerWalk*

“*A Long Time Comin’* is a tender and sweet story of a cantankerous grandmother and her dear family members. . . . Her characters are charming, endearing, and flawed. I hope we have many years to come of reading Pearson’s work.”

KATARA PATTON, author

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'Til I Want No More is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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*“If you don’t allow God to confront your
past, your past one day is going to
confront you. . . . Esau is comin.”*

REVEREND LEE CLAYPOOLE

Chapter One

“YOU KNOW TROUBLE AIN’T CATCHIN’.” Ruby Tagle’s dark eyes flicked in her granddaughter’s direction. “Nobody’s gon’ sneeze and give it to you or your Theodore.”

“Did you hear your grandmother, Maxine?” Vivienne Owens stood on her toes and stretched to retrieve a small jar from the kitchen cabinet. It skittered away to the far end of the shelf.

“Yes, ma’am, I heard Mama Ruby, but I never said I thought trouble was contagious.” Maxine smiled a little as she hopped down from the stool. She reached up and set the glass container on the counter. At five-six, Maxine had her mother by three inches, by her estimation, the only way she outmatched her.

“Yes, Vivienne, the girl never said she thought trouble was contagious.” Roy Tagle opened the pimientos with a *pop!* and handed them to his sister.

Mother arched an eyebrow at her younger brother. “I don’t need none of y’all to tell me what she said. My ears are workin’ just fine. You see, I listen like a mama, not an uncle.” She spooned sweet peppers into the bowl in front of her. “Now, Maxine, you’ve been havin’ these crazy dreams for weeks now, ever since you set that appointment with Theodore’s pastor. You just need to sit down somewhere.”

In other words, calm down.

But Maxine couldn’t calm down. She’d met Theodore in September, right after he’d relocated from New Orleans to Mount Laurel. Only God’s hand could’ve directed him to that North Carolina crossroads of Eastern and Lexington-style barbecue. He proposed on a chilly December night at the end of a cooking class led by Manna, the Tagles’ catering company. As Ruby pulled out the mini chocolate soufflé with a joyful “Voilà!” that sounded more like deep South than South of France, Teddy had dropped to one knee, to no one’s shock but Maxine’s. He’d toasted her with a crystal flute filled with semisweet chocolate topped off with a one-carat diamond. Now, six weeks later, sporting her emerald-cut ring, she was in her mother’s kitchen, dizzy from her whirlwind romance and its effect on her life, a life it had taken her thirteen years to rebuild and only a *yes* to blast to smithereens. Again.

“It’s not that simple, Mother. I can’t just tell my heart to obey and expect it to fall into line.”

“But you can control that mind of yours. Think on the truth, and stop runnin’ around here like Chicken Little. The sky isn’t fallin’ on you just because your friends separated. What happened to them isn’t gonna happen to you and Theodore. Isn’t that right?” Vivienne looked to Mama Ruby

as she stirred the potato salad, using one pink-gloved hand to hold on to the bowl.

Ruby nodded.

“I didn’t say it was, Mother.” To mask the shiver snaking through her, Maxine moved her shoulders to the gospel beat of the Jackson Southernaires, crooning from the Bluetooth speaker. She wished she could blame her chill on the clouds cloaking the pale-blue sky, but she knew it had nothing to do with the twenty-degree temperatures, unusual for North Carolina. The three women had been going back and forth for over an hour, since Maxine had shown up on her mother’s doorstep holding her box of silk chrysanthemums.

“The thought breaks my heart, that Evelyn didn’t talk to me about what she was going through. I thought she was spending the summer helping her grandmother, not running away from her husband.”

Mother’s spoon clanked against the side of the bowl. “Then I take it you’ve told her all about what *you’re* going through.”

Maxine swallowed a lump in her throat that felt the size of Pilot Mountain and stepped a little closer to the flames flickering brightly in the fireplace behind her. She fiddled with the ribs of her gray corduroy skirt. “I’m only saying I can imagine what Evelyn went through. Pregnant, her heart in broken pieces. Trying to avoid the whispers, pointing fingers, the dissection of her problems, the gossip from church folk. Did you know she’s having a little girl?”

Though they weren’t blood kin, Maxine and Evelyn Lester had considered each other family since middle school, after Evelyn had shown up at the Tagles’ farm looking to buy butter beans more than half their lifetimes ago. Thing

was, Evelyn's grandmother had dispatched her there with an empty bushel basket but without two nickels to rub together. Ruby simply pointed Evelyn to a spot on the porch beside her own granddaughter, and Maxine and Evelyn bonded as they shelled butter beans for the next few hours. Maxine already called herself "Auntie" to the baby Evelyn carried.

Her mother frowned and shook her head, dislodging a strand from her silver-streaked bun. "Is that what this is about? *Her* baby girl?" She aimed a gloved finger at her daughter. "If so, you need to keep in mind that it didn't have anything to do with you. Baby or no baby. Besides, her marriage is fine now. Just fine. What I'm asking myself is how you two can know so little about each other, considerin' you're best friends and all."

Vivienne returned her attention to the bowl, but Maxine figured her mother's murmuring had little to do with the potato salad.

The chair creaked as Mama Ruby propped an ample hip on the stool Maxine had abandoned. "Goodness gracious, Maxine Amelia, you don't know your end from your beginnin'. You ain't even married yet. You might not think trouble is catchin', but you're already signin' yourself up for divorce care and your weddin' is months away." Her grandma pointed to the wireless speaker. "And, Roy, turn down that music. Cain't even hear my own thoughts let alone help this child here with hers."

Uncle Roy obeyed.

Mother scooped out a teaspoonful of the creamy mixture and turned to Maxine. "Here, taste this for me. What does it need?"

"Mmm. Nothing."

Her mother nodded in response and sprinkled kosher salt

over the bowl and swirled it around with her mixing spoon. She used a fresh spoon to offer Uncle Roy a sample. When he nodded, Mother finished off the potato salad with paprika and covered the sixteen-inch melamine bowl with plastic wrap.

Maxine pursed her lips and stifled a sigh, wondering why her mother made such a show of asking her opinion. “Like I said, it’s just sad. For them, not me. I’m too nervous about starting a marriage to fret over ending one.”

“That’s because you have some sense. Getting married is nothing to sniff at.” Uncle Roy squeezed Maxine’s shoulder. “Viv, I’ll take that to the pantry fridge and start moving the rest to the truck.” He hefted the pumpkin-colored dish to shoulder level and left the room.

Mama Ruby wrapped an arm around Maxine. “First things first, don’t listen to your uncle. He hasn’t met the right woman yet who makes him want to set another place at the table. And next, don’t let your mind play tricks on you, awake or asleep. Their problems are not your problems. Stop thinkin’ of this pastor as a one-man judge and jury. From what I hear, Atwater is good people.”

Her grandma was squishy in all the right places. Accepting the comfort of her embrace and her words, Maxine planted a quick kiss between the wrinkles on her velvety cheek. Then she opened the long, rectangular box on the quartz countertop and lifted out one flower after another, setting the counter ablaze with purple, cranberry, and orange blooms.

But she didn’t miss Mother rolling her eyes heavenward.

Mama Ruby must not have missed it either, for she chuckled and pointed at her daughter. “Amen, Vivienne! This child here needs to look to the hills and trust God’s authority

and care, not just her husband's—" she spared Maxine a side eye—"that is, her *future* husband. Trusting Him has kept me and Lorenzo married. And it keeps Manna in business."

That's easy to say when y'all run your catering business while holding hands. I'm just trying to keep a fiancé. Maxine snipped the stems and leaves and arranged the artificial flowers in the olive cut-glass vase. "All I know is, these seven sessions with the pastor are going to feel like a long, drawn-out game of *Truth or Consequences*."

Mother huffed as she scrubbed her work space. "Maxine, you can't be nobody but yourself. Everybody else is taken. Focus on your Theodore and the life you're planning with him. Guilt is the rust on the sword, let me tell you. It's been thirteen years, and you need to be done with all this."

Done with all this. Really Maxine didn't think she'd ever be done with "this," the burden she'd been toting around half her life. It had grown heavier since adding the weight of her engagement ring. Sunlight danced through the picture window overlooking the backyard, and she tilted her face toward it, hoping the warmth would seep through her skin and fill the cracks only she knew existed. But still, her finger shook as she twirled a cinnamon ringlet and looped it around an earlobe. Thirteen years had passed, but it felt like yesterday.

"I don't know what you're tuckin' in your heart's back pocket, but I should tell you John and I talked about it." Mother squinted at Maxine before she shrugged as if giving up. She strode from the sun-splashed kitchen, throwing over her shoulder, "I know you're thirty years old, and you don't need his permission, but you have your daddy's blessing, whatever you decide, whenever you decide."

Daddy. Maxine and her stepfather got along like mayonnaise and mustard, but more often than not, Maxine respectfully—and teasingly—called him First John and his namesake, her little brother, Second. Daddy, he wasn't.

“I know who you thinkin' 'bout.” Her grandma's low, soft voice smelled like Brach's cinnamon discs. “But if the Lord hadn't taken Henry in that car accident, he would've agreed with Vivienne.”

Maxine whispered back, “Well, if my real daddy would've been here, we wouldn't even be having this conversation. I wouldn't be in this pickle. You know I love my stepfather, but First John only adopted me to hush Mother's clamoring, not to fulfill some burning need of his—or mine, for that matter. Having his blessing is all well and good, but I've got bigger fish to fry.”

Mama Ruby held up her hands in the universal sign of silent surrender. She walked to the double wall ovens and fiddled with the dials.

Mother clip-clopped back from the storage room in her daisy-covered clogs and set her handful on the counter. She peeled off plastic wrap and aluminum foil, revealing a frozen pound cake. She usually baked three or four at a time and pulled them out to order for Manna's customers. Then she'd add a freshly made glaze.

Maxine scooped up the discarded plastic and dropped it in the trash. She leaned against the counter, twiddling with her flower trimmings. “Evelyn was always so focused on her work—teaching and writing—not on being a mom.”

Mother peeked over her half-moon-shaped glasses as she

set the cake aside and consulted her iPad. “Having a baby doesn’t end the world. It didn’t end mine.”

“Well, it almost ended mine.” Maxine held her mother’s eyes. Neither blinked for a moment, but then Maxine looked away. “And you’re not a seventeen-year-old.”

“You’re not seventeen years old . . . now.” Mother closed her tablet with a decisive click. “Just what *are* you doin’ with those flowers?”

“I ordered these so I could try out colors and arrangements for my wedding bouquets.” Maxine repositioned a blossom. “I have a feeling Teddy wouldn’t take the news that he’s a father quite as well as First John did.”

“Your Theodore isn’t becomin’ a daddy no time soon. So no need to send out birth announcements.” Her grandma opened a bag of dark-brown sugar and spooned some into a small pot bubbling away on the gas cooktop.

Mother opened the refrigerator and drew out a large, glistening ham covered in pineapple slices. She set it down. “I like the purple and cranberry. Are you sure about the orange?”

“You know orange is my favorite color, and it’s perfect for my fall wedding.” Maxine shifted a stem. “And as far as birth announcements go, that’s exactly what I’m doing by sharing information the world doesn’t have the right to know. This is mine. I’m not holding on to this solely for my sake. . . . Excuse me, Mother, what are you doing?”

Her mother plucked two orange mums, leaving only one in the center surrounded by a mixed spray of purple and cranberry, like the setting sun on the horizon. “There. Better. See? Your weddin’ is December 5, which feels more like the

Christmas season than the fall. And the fact is, tellin' Teddy is the right thing to do, something we don't have to tell you."

Mama Ruby's voice carried from the stove. "You ever heard of gettin' a *little* married or bein' a *little bit* pregnant? Well, you can't tell that man a little bit of truth. In my day, we called that a lie. And since I'm standin' on my own two feet, I'd say it's still my day."

"Mama Ruby—" Maxine began.

"*But* there's a proper time and place for it, Maxine. A lesson I learned as a young girl." Mama Ruby never looked away from the syrupy mixture she would pour over the ham when it was ready. "You probably heard this story I'm 'bout to tell you, but I'm gon' say it anyhow. Just like Scripture, the same stories have many applications.

"I remember when my brother planned to leave with Mr. Baker to sign up for the Army. At first, my mama didn't say nuthin', but not too long after he left, she sent me to get him off that bus. She didn't want him to go because she knew if he ever left Spring Hope, he wasn't ever comin' back.

"As much as I hated to, I did as I was told. I didn't even ask my daddy what he thought of the matter 'cause nobody got in her way. Billy and I was thick as thieves, and I knew what that trip meant to him. So I took the long way round gettin' to Mr. Baker's, hopin' that bus would be long gone. I even went by Fulton's and bought myself five cents' worth of candy. But sure 'nough, that bus was still sittin' there when I came walkin' up, lickin' my peppermint stick."

"Couldn't you have told your mother how you felt?" Maxine couldn't imagine her grandma ever holding her tongue, even as a child.

“Child, didn’t nobody care how I felt. It was my job to obey. Young people these days, thinkin’ they got a say in everything . . .” Mama Ruby shook her head.

“Ain’t that the truth.” Laughing, Vivienne took the spoon from Mama Ruby and stirred the glaze.

“Besides, that’s not the point. Follow where I’m leadin’, girl. Now, when I got there, Billy was already on the bus. You should’ve seen his face when he saw me walk up. His eyes just got bigger and bigger, wellin’ up. Mr. Baker must have suspected I’d be comin’ ’cause he opened up those doors straightaway and asked me, ‘You come for Billy?’ Well, I looked from him to my brother, sittin’ in that window, and I couldn’t do it. I just could not break his heart and pull him off that bus in front of all those other boys.”

Maxine stopped spinning the vase. “So what did you do?”

“I put a hand on my hip and said, ‘Mr. Baker, Mama will have your head if somethin’ happens to Billy, so you’d best take care of him.’ He looked like he knew I was up to no good, but he closed them doors and drove away. Billy was still wipin’ his face when he stuck out his hand through the window and waved good-bye. I can still see him grinnin’ as I handed him one of my peppermint sticks.”

“What did you say when you got home, Mama Ruby?”

“At first, I reported I was too late to stop Billy from leavin’. Which was mostly true, if you want to pick through the meat to get to the bone—at least accordin’ to your way of thinkin’. It *was* too late. His heart was long gone, and he needed to follow it. But that wasn’t the whole tale. It wasn’t the truth, and my spirit knew it. Tellin’ that lie ate me up until I confessed it to my daddy. He made me tell the whole

story, and then I got the whuppin' of my *life*. That was okay though. Forgiveness don't always soften the consequences."

"I don't mean any harm, but what does all that have to do with Maxine?" Mother set the spoon in a dish on the counter and lowered the flame.

"Everythang. I could've told Mr. Baker that I was sent there to get my brother, but that wouldn't have been right. It wouldn't have helped nobody to make him get off that bus. My mama had to let go sometime, and Billy did, too." Mama Ruby readjusted the dial on the stove when Mother turned her back and walked back to the island. Her grandma lifted a finger to her lips and shook her head at Maxine.

Maxine waggled her eyebrows and nodded in response as Mama Ruby, the secret sous-chef, continued.

"That truth you've been carryin' around all these years? Of course you're goin' to come clean, just like I did. The same Book that raised me raised you. But *when* to tell it is just as important as what to tell and who to tell. That decision will affect a lot of lives, like the one I had to make. Only God knows the what, when, who, and how, Maxine. Not me. Not your mama. We'll help you deal with the consequences, painful as they may be." Mama Ruby reached into her apron pocket and withdrew a pad of paper and a Sharpie. She marked off an item on her list.

"I just don't know what the right decision is! If I tell Theodore, I have to tell Ce—"

"Hey, y'all! Ooh, pretty . . ."

Mama Ruby's green marker clattered to the floor.

Maxine's whole body froze. She turned incrementally, like the second hand on a clock. It seemed like a full minute

passed before she faced the high-pitched voice coming from the mudroom that connected the kitchen to the storeroom. “Celeste . . . ?”

Uncle Roy grinned over the head of the thirteen-year-old girl clad in a denim miniskirt, pink-and-orange long-sleeved tee, and pink leggings. He pushed the glass-paned wooden door closed as she bounded into the kitchen.

“Oh, Maxine, your flowers came!” Celeste’s low-topped blue Chuck Taylors squeaked happily on the hardwood floor. She leaned over and kissed Mother on the cheek. “Mmm-mwah. It smells good in here, Mama. What’s going on?”

A Note from the Author

ACCORDING TO DOROTHY in *The Wizard of Oz*, “There’s no place like home.” There’s also no place like Mount Laurel in North Carolina. I do hope the Owens family and the other characters who live there have found a warm and comfy place in your heart!