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Prelude

“Where the hell is she?” Foster Landeaux demanded, his face red, his irritation obvious.

Mack the bartender shrugged an apology and pointed to the end of the bar where two bar stools stood empty, tipped against the scarred railing.

Foster scowled. His guest was late, which pissed him off but then, she didn’t know him, nor did he know her. He was an officer of the law and always on time, he never waited on anyone – especially a local hooker. He walked the length of the bar, stood the stools upright and shook the rainfall off his blazer, trying to ignore the raucous voices of a dozen G.I.’s attempting to harmonize “Back in the USSR” with an old jukebox. He turned toward the wall to drape his coat over the back of the stool, intentionally displaying his shoulder holstered gun to command respect among the rowdy military crowd.

The Drop Zone Bar was rank with the stench of rotting pine, nicotine, and the sweat of hardened young men ready to go to war. Its plank walls, crudely striped in red, white and blue were plastered with Uncle Sam’s official recruiting posters. Square-jawed soldiers stood next to steely gray tanks and fighter jets, juxtaposed against psychedelic images of Jimi Hendrix, the Statue of Liberty and a giant can of Campbell’s soup. Such were the mixed voices of the Sixties that no one quite understood. The “DZ” was by far the most popular hangout in Leesville, Louisiana, a blip on the road just outside the guarded gates of Fort Polk, a massive army deployment base for Vietnam-bound soldiers. Fort Polk secured southwestern Louisiana like an occupying force.

Foster took a seat at the scarred bar, pulling a starched white handkerchief from his coat pocket to mop the moisture off his face. His nostrils flared at the musky smell that engulfed him. He stifled his attraction to military bases and their bars. Down deep he felt a pang of guilt that he quickly quashed. After all, he was white, the only son of a Louisiana Sherriff who wasn't about to let his kid get drafted. He watched the crowd of young recruits with a stony face. How many would die face down in a rice paddy on foreign soil? Better them than me, he thought.

His “guest” finally made her grand entrance forty minutes late, unrepentant and unhurried. A stunning young mulatto, she walked fearlessly through the open doors into the gawking eyes that devoured her in the crowded saloon. Her tight knit miniskirt and matching jet-black ponytail. A sudden clap of lightning seared her curvaceous profile into the minds of the leering G.I.’s. Even the jukebox fell silent to the clap of high heels on a wood floor. She strode purposely toward the bar, stopping midway to shake off a big black umbrella, snapping its closure and hoisting it over her shoulder in a military stance. Erect, with an ample chest thrust out, she glanced at Mack, who responded with a quick nod as he set two beers in front of Foster to mark the spot. The mulatto strode toward the open bar stool like a racehorse looking for a gate while Mack receded back to the cash register, his services rendered.

She thread a delicate arm with a dangling bracelet around Foster’s shoulder, bracing herself without introduction as she slid smoothly onto the bar stool, tugging her scant hemline down in a show of modesty befitting the intrigue of their encounter. Foster smiled at the smooth southern ease with which she had maneuvered her target, but he was impervious to the bait.

The mulatto laid a gold cigarette case on the bar in front of her and turned to Foster with an alluring smile and a silky voice. “You’ve been stalking me for a week,” she said. She cocked a perfect eyebrow and tilted the pretty head with indifference as she pulled a cigarette from its case. “To what do I owe the pleasure?” she asked, then “And can I expect more?”

“Stalking or pleasure?” he parried.

“Your call,” she replied coolly.

“Good to meet you also,” Foster countered with a curt nod as he sipped his beer. “But stalking sounds a tad conceited, don’t you think?”

“Lots of men stalk me. It’s kind of fun, actually.”

“Well, it’s good to know I’m that memorable,” he responded.

“Give me a break, Whitey” the silky voice took on a sharp, cynical edge. “You’re the only guy in a coat and tie for a hundred miles. That starched shirt looks like your mama just ironed it.” She held her cigarette up expectantly for a light. Foster obliged her with a flicker from his lighter before two willing soldiers stumbled over themselves to do the same.

“You’re either a Fed investigating something on the base or another horny cop looking for a freebie. So, talk fast, Whitey. I got work to do,” she said with a smirk.

“What a shame, I was hoping we could do some business together,” Foster deflected her barrage while he pretended to watch the jukebox crowd, now trying their luck with “Johnny Be Good.”

She blew smoke into the heavy air as she looked over Foster’s short hair and strong frame. He could certainly hold his own against any of the locals. “You got a room?”

Foster closed his eyes and shook his head, dismissing the question with a heavy sigh. “Not that kind of business,” he responded in a harsh voice, visibly exasperated by her youth. “Real business,” he tried again, “for real money,” he emphasized real in a brusque manner to make his point.

The mulatto shot him a disbelieving look and chugged her Dixie, setting her bottle down hard on the bar. Foster watched her intently, looking for a shadow of a past that he had been searching for. He had finally found his target, but she was too cynical to buy his story. He considered his next move and decided to start over.

“Think of me as a talent scout,” he offered. “I came to make you an offer.” His jaw tightened, his lips parting in a rare smile.

“A talent scout with a gun. Good help must be hard to come by.”

“So it is. And I’m looking for very a special talent," he said decisively.

She blew smoke into his face with a tease, the pouty lips intentionally pursed in the air to ignore his response. He couldn’t decide if it was a show of nervousness, arrogance, or ignorance from a siren fifteen years his junior. It didn’t matter. Patience was not one of his virtues. He needed to close the deal.

“And just what kind of offer were you going to make me, Whitey?” she asked, staring at the ceiling, aloof and unconnected.

“Big money, if you can perform,” Foster said in a determined monotone.

“I perform all the time for the right money, but you better tell me why the hell a white boy in mama’s shirt shows up in po-dunk Leesville instead of N’Orleans?”

It was a legitimate question but not one Foster had expected, nor one he would answer. He had counted on the purity of money and a ticket out of this dreary town to gain her attention. For her scant years of experience she was damned savvy. Of course, survival was a great teacher. He took another swig of beer, choosing his next words carefully.

“We don’t compete with the New Orleans mob, and we don’t need them,” he said matter-of-factly.

“So, tell me, where are you from, Whitey?” she asked with renewed curiosity.

“We run a place in Bumkin, out in the middle of nowhere. By choice,” he added with a smirk.

His guest rolled her eyes at the name of the infamous one-stoplight town in south Louisiana. Bumpkin was famous for antique shops and speeding tickets.

Foster continued, unabated, pressing to keep the conversation on track. “I’m looking for new girls who like playing with rich guys.” He motioned toward the military crowd, “Nothing like this dump.”

“What kind of ‘rich guys’ go to Bumkin?” she giggled in disbelief while she blew nicotine into the air.

“The kind that don’t want to be found; the kind who go to a place where their friends are in total control and there are no surprises,” he said in a serious tone that got her attention. “Oil men, plantation owners, lovesick insurance salesmen, crooked politicians, you name it. We cater to them all. Don’t you know”, he jested, attempting to lighten the mood, “Bumkin is the best spot top side of God’s green earth?” He chuckled at the Chamber of Commerce slogan. “Actually, it’s kind of true - but only if you know the right people.”

Her eyes narrowed as his message took hold. “And let me guess, they’re all white?”

“Does it matter to you?” he asked.

“Not to a half-breed, Whitey, but you already know that,” she shot back defensively. “But then, I’ve never worked for a bunch of rich white men and their bitches. I don’t know that it would work out.”

“What do you have to lose? Got family here?” Foster asked, knowing well the answer.

“Forget that Whitey, I was dumped on the welfare system in diapers. I’m a disposable girl like all the others you hire, I got nuthin’ here and nuthin’ holding me back. But I sure ain’t lost nuthin’ in Bumkin.”

“Maybe…”, Foster said offhandedly as he pulled a folded piece of paper from his shirt pocket and spread it on the bar in front of her. He tapped it with a manicured forefinger to draw her attention, “…or maybe not,” he said pointedly.

The death certificate for Meadow Williams, born and died September 23, 1947, in Bumkin, Louisiana lay in front of her. She read the paper in disbelief, her mouth open, as she quietly looked at Foster in a state of shock. “I *am* Meadow Williams,” she said with defiance.

"I know," Foster said calmly, finally getting the response he wanted.

“How…?” the young woman’s edgy voice trailed off, replaced by a teenager looking for answers she had never found.

“Join up and find out.” Foster said without sympathy. He would have preferred to keep her in the dark about her past, but he had to capture her attention.

Meadow recovered quickly, “What do I have to do?” she asked.

“Fall in love,” Foster said quickly, prepared for the obvious question.

“There must be more, Whitey, I do that every day,” she challenged him.

“Only one guy, a black man,” he explained, suddenly serious. “I pay his tab for your services. You keep it quiet and gather information while your living expenses are covered. When I get what I want, you get a big bonus. Then you can go wherever you want.”

“What’s a “big” bonus, Whitey?”, her voice was caustic, disbelieving.

“One hundred thousand dollars.”

The mulatto threw her hair back and guzzled her beer. Her amber eyes grew bigger. She bit her lip, eyeing Foster while she weighed her options. He wasn’t worried. Money and history always won the day in Louisiana.

“Why me, Whitey?”

“Because you have a cover story and no history. You have a reason for being there, but you don’t exist on paper. It will make the job easier.”

“I could also disappear and no one would ever know,” her suspicious nature rose to the occasion.

“You’ve got the best insurance there is.”

“Like what?” she asked.

Foster pulled out his wallet and flipped it open on the bar to reveal the gold face of a Deputy Sheriff’s badge from Avignon Parish. “You’re in protective custody,” he quipped. He drained the last swallow of his beer and slid off the bar stool while she inspected the badge. Foster pulled on his blazer and picked up his wallet. He leaned over to plant a kiss on the mulatto’s neck for the benefit of the lingering G.I.’s.

“Let me get this straight, Whitey” Meadow blurted out, ignoring the kiss. “You run a whorehouse out of the Sheriff’s office?”

Foster stepped back to look at her with a laugh and a wicked smile. “Welcome to Louisiana,” he said.

Meadow grabbed his arm impulsively before he could leave. “Can I find my parents?” she asked in a strained voice.

“Not if you stay here,” he replied. The hook was set, it was time to reel her in. Foster plucked five one-hundred dollar bills out of his wallet and placed them on the bar. The mulatto watched with astonishment as he tore bills in half, one at a time. He placed half back in his wallet, then rolled up the other half tightly, placing the roll down the V-neck of Meadows tight sweater, nestled snugly between two perfect hemispheres that shone like beacons in the darkness of the bar. “You get the other half when I pick you up, noon tomorrow,” he stated confidently.

The wide eyes took in Foster’s bravado with a girlish smile. She pulled out the roll of torn cash and looked at him with curiosity, “What’s in it for you?”

“Money, love, and satisfaction.”

“And what if I back out?”

“We both lose. No guts, no glory, Meadow”, Foster responded with finality. He winked at her, fastidiously straightened his tie and walked out, anxious to get to his car through the blustery storm outside, and glad to put the Drop Zone bar into his rear-view mirror.

CHAPTER ONE

Summer's End, 1969

“Dammit!" Sally Callahan yelled to herself as she slammed down the phone. Then she counted backward from ten. It was a habit that had served her well over time.

Outside, young Burton Callahan drifted slowly on an old porch swing, his bare feet hanging over one end, his face buried in a pillow beneath the pages of Plato’s Republic. It was the last book his mother had imposed on him for the summer. He lurched up from the blast of Sally's voice reverberating down the hallway of the Cajun cottage.

“Bam Callahan! Front and center young man!”

Plato fell to the floor with a thud as Bam sat up to get his bearings. He already knew the issue. How had she found out so quickly? His mother’s resources never ceased to amaze him. Careful not to let the screen door slam behind him, Bam walked toward the hum of an electric typewriter that sounded more like a swarm of angry bees. He knew she was still mad about his last car wreck and the bra the mechanic found in the wreckage. Why would a mechanic, of all people, care? It wasn't even his daughter. Still, he didn’t need another “incident.” The last week of summer was alive with bikinis, beer, and rock & roll, and he had locked up a hot date with Angela.

Bam tucked his shirt tail into his Levi’s as he walked toward his mother’s small office. Sally would never accept a plea of ignorance. He would go for denial of responsibility, to be distinguished from denial of the incident itself. He would also call it an “accident” this time. Incidents were bad. He cleared his mind, then stepped unassumingly into her office. The afternoon sun streamed through the sheer curtains, softly illuminating his mother, an elf in a flowered dress, with the ever-present cup of steaming green tea near at hand.

Sally swiveled around, searing him with her most intimidating scowl. “Tell me about it. All of it. Now. ” The anger in her staccato command overrode her southern drawl, which was not easily done.

Bam hated this part. How much did she really know? How pissed off was she, really? “Mom, it wasn’t my fault!” Best to get in the first salvo.

“Who else in Bumkin would blow a hole through the Canton’s garage roof with a chemical reaction?”

“Clay Mansfield,” Bam said it so defiantly he almost believed himself.

"No damn way,” Sally responded angrily. “That football jock can’t spell NFL. Try again,” her voice rose an octave as she got a second wind.

“Nobody was hurt,” Bam tried to deflect the issue.

Her eyes burned through him. "Again, young man. From the top!”

“Damn” was the strongest cuss word his mother ever uttered. She was definitely headed into the stratosphere. Bam thrust his fists into his jeans and submitted to the greater power. “Okay...so we had an old car battery and some acid lying around, and I mentioned that combining the two would produce hydrogen. Clay said I didn’t know what I was talking about, I think he was just showing off for his buddies.” That was simple enough, wasn’t it?

“How many times, Bam? How many times before you learn to walk away from a dare?"

Bam fell quiet. It wasn’t a dare. It was proof. “I told Clay that all he had to do was put a match to the tube to find out, and I was right!” Bam said with a triumphant grin.

Sally shook her head in disbelief. “Why in the world would Clay do such a numbskull thing?” she asked.

“Cause he’s a jock,” Bam answered.

“That is the one thing we agree on so far, young man." Sally rubbed her temples and closed her eyes. "Did it ever, even vaguely, occur to you that setting off an explosion could create problems?..." then a frightening thought swept over her. "Oh my God,— if any of their help had been injured all hell would break loose in this town. You'd be the first Louisiana kid accused of inciting a race riot with a Molotov Cocktail!"

“It wasn’t a Molotov Cocktail, it was a bell jar, and this isn’t Chicago or Boston, Mom,” Bam said seriously. “No one here would ever think of that.”

“Of course!” Sally slapped her head in feigned surprise. “Real riots only get organized in the North, we just lynch people in the Deep South. Don’t kid yourself, young man. Schools are about to integrate and you are setting off an explosion. People are scared Bam, and they do crazy things when they’re scared.”

“Clay won’t say anything, Mom! He peed in his pants when the bell jar blasted off!” Bam couldn’t contain himself and burst into laughter at the memory.

Sally pivoted away from Bam to face the window. The improbable image of a six-foot basketball player peeing down his leg at the site of a rocketing bell jar, whatever the hell that was, blasting through the roof, was a bit too much. She tried to hold onto a serious tone while she quelled an ignoble laugh. Bam sensed he had earned a slight reprieve and seized the moment. "I'm sorry, Mom." It was his last, best ploy, delivered with the innocent look of true contrition.

“You could have killed someone this time, Bam."

"No, ma'am,” he responded. “Clay was the one who lit the fuse.” He said, smiling to himself as he looked down at his boots.

Sally could feel her anger rise at his ambivalence. "You were complicit Bam, no way around it. You will report this entire escapade to Judge Jim immediately, then you will apologize personally to the Cantons. And you better figure out how you’re going to pay for the damages to the Cantons’ roof.”

With a penitent nod, Bam turned and strode back down the hallway. Sally could hear the screen door slam against the house to register his frustration. She watched her fair-haired teen head toward town on foot, with little sign of remorse. She refilled her teacup before returning to her next paper on Southern plantation history. Squirrels played on the mimosa tree outside her window as the last of its summer blossoms floated away on the August heat. The season was changing, as was life in the small town around her.

1967 had already been a year like no other, inside a decade like no other. The growing pace of change in the South was hitting her family in ways she had not anticipated. The unexpected Court order for integration had hit Avignon Parish like a bombshell, then the Ku Klux Klan burned crosses on her front yard like she was personally responsible for it. Now a new whites-only school had been hastily thrown up by the local landed gentry, mostly cotton and cane planters, splitting the parish along racial lines to assert their influence. Public education was falling into chaos.

The aristocracy that controlled the State was pushing back hard to secure their political control with harsh rhetoric that Sally hadn’t heard for decades. Beneath the economic veneer lay hidden fears of embarrassing family genealogies that traced back to the mixed racial coupling of past generations. To make bad matters worse, her scholarly knowledge of local genealogy was in increasing demand to cleanse the histories of powerful families who wanted to hide their ancestral heritage.

Sally was becoming a lightning rod of social conflict caught between two racial factions, not that it was all that unusual for her. Reporting the real facts had always been her job, first as a journalist, then as an academic. But this time it was different. The black population she had long championed was itself getting organized and funded. Both sides wanted to stack the deck of history in their favor to influence The Great Society government largess. Integration was no longer simply about society and skin color; now it was about money. Big, government money. And no one was more credible than a native farm girl; a white, female, academic who literally wrote the book on Louisiana black history. Now, after twenty years of books and editorials, integration had suddenly made Sally politically “correct”. Everyone wanted her to influence their history, not that there was a chance in hell Sally would ever do so.

Sally despised politics, as well as her unexpected role as a local arbiter of the integration order she had fought for. Her new status consumed her time with phone calls from frantic neighbors and friends looking for comfort about their own children growing up in a fractured, diverse world. Not that she minded soothing the fears of locals, or even a good fight for that matter, but she was a scholar, she had books to write. She wasn’t a social worker or a news commentator. Who the hell had time for politicians or demonstrations? Besides, history couldn’t be changed. It was history.

Sally also knew that the pressure was unavoidable in a rural community. She would be asked to deliver validation for everyone, from the local Teachers Union to the Daughters of the Confederacy, and the local synagogue. Better her than some Yankee historian misrepresenting the South, but white politicians were anxious for her to weigh in on their side. They better be careful about what they wish for. Her history had a way of humbling everyone it touched.

The only good news was that a hundred years of racial prejudice, denied by two world wars and a Great Depression, could now bubble to the top of the social consciousness, fueled by a sea of black and white television screens that were sure to force a resolution. It made her shiver. She hadn’t seen this sort of visceral fear since she grew up on a plantation during the Great Depression. It was the same fear and prejudice she had fought against all her life. Integration was going to be a crash course in chaos for public education. It was indeed overdue, but instant integration was also overwhelming. The Federal Judge apparently didn’t understand that a legal brief wasn’t an instruction manual.

Bumkin itself was exuding its own wave of rumors and tension that festered like a big hurricane over the Mississippi Delta. Everyone was hunkered down like they were in a natural disaster, but integration lacked the respect which man gave nature. It was a paranoia fed by riots in faraway cities and redneck violence close to home. A bayou of fear was bleeding onto a sea of white graffiti and coarse epithets on public walls. Bumkin was becoming a powder keg of racial conflict.

All she needed now was for Bam Callahan to light the fuse on another explosive incident. That’s what an over educated kid got you in a boring Southern town. Thank the Good Lord, she had finagled a way to ship him off to college, if he didn’t kill himself first. Now she could get back to work. She had books to write.

CHAPTER TWO

Quinine

Deputy Quincy Tremblay Jackson pumped the brakes on his new Ford sedan, painted with the big, black & white stripes of the Bumkin Police Department. He slowed to a crawl on the muddy back road, then turned onto a thin asphalt strip he occasionally missed in the darkness, stopping on a decrepit cypress trestle bridge to take in one of his favorite scenes. The ivory moon hovered above him like a giant cue ball, its perfect sphere mirrored in the liquid ebony of the stagnant bayou below. The contrast was not lost on Quinine. Everything was black and white in bayou country.

He followed the bayou road until his headlights fell beneath a canopy of large oak trees. Jumbo raindrops bounced off the asphalt like glitter in his headlights. The big car crept slowly beneath long strands of moss, like a scene borrowed from a cheap horror movie. Generations of his ancestors, both black and white, had since drained the waters of Bayou Hauffpower for irrigation. The bayou was an old riverbed for the Mississippi River that fed into the Atchafalaya. Once a navigable waterway, it was now just a trickle of its former self, occupied by alligators and their prey.

Quinine pulled to a stop and opened a pocket-sized bottle with an amber label and scarlet letters: Genuine Quinine Cough Syrup. The elixir calmed his anxiety, which occurred often, especially in the company of women, which did not. His habit got worse after he took on the Bumkin Police Department night shift, eighteen long years ago. Like most cheap miracle remedies, Quinine syrup was little more than flavored alcohol with a strong bite to ensure it would be used sparingly and sold for its mythical medicinal value. Quinine Cough Syrup allowed Avignon’s inhabitants to get through another day of poverty and ignorance, and Southern Evangelicals to justify an occasional nip of alcohol.

The Sherriff allowed Quincy his "cough syrup” so he wouldn’t have to fire him for alcohol abuse on the job. The farce forever changed Quincy Tremblay Jackson into “Quinine” Jackson, but he embraced the job as his destiny on the wrong side of the tracks, and soon became the Sheriff’s most trusted bag man. It was a shotgun marriage of convenience, of course, as Quinine had never known a life of choices.

Quinine lit a match in the darkness and checked his Timex, with five minutes left to kill. He had to be on time for the Saturday night pickup or there would be consequences, even after a decade of faultless service. He drew a deep swig of his addiction, wincing as the sweet red syrup with the kick of rye whisky scorched his throat. Handling cash always made him nervous, and the thought of this tired ritual dominating the remainder of his life was depressing. He found his favorite radio station on the dial to let the Supremes lighten his mood while he waited.

His mind wandered to the metallic vibrations of oil rigs, pounding like a migraine that held the great marsh hostage, pulsing with the ebb and flow of oil that pumped wealth into the pockets of his white cousins. He gritted his teeth with a quick sneer, but he had long since given up his disdain. There was no escape from his cousin’s influence; it surrounded him and everyone else. The oil was black, but the power was all white. The night was his only escape.

Quinine tightened the cap onto his cough syrup and tucked it under the sun visor. He put the car in gear and drove deeper into the Atchafalaya Swamp, following the canal system that had connected bayous with railroads for more than a century. Two miles later, he came upon the abandoned carcass of the Basin Canal Company, a weatherworn tin sign standing like a sentinel at the intersection of nowhere and paradise, tipped toward a flashing pink neon signed that announced “The Spot” in the darkness with an electric buzz. Quinine allowed himself a wry grin. This was the busy intersection everyone looked for, once they admitted what they were looking for.

The Spot was the biggest secret that didn’t exist in Louisiana. Sadly, it wasn’t classy like the old New Orleans bordellos where Quinine worked as a young doorman. It was, rather, the kind of cheap, new, luxury that belonged to the sixties. Modern in looks and garish in colors, it was a “hunting camp” with “social entertainment”, an ambiguous term famously attributed to Huey Long during his reign as the “Kingfish”. Nonetheless, Quinine did not believe The Spot to be without social merit; it was in fact a safe haven for errant husbands, bleary-eyed truckers, and drunk teenage boys. The Spot kept the night safe for white strangers and the backwoods private for everyone else.

Quinine made his way down a final dark tunnel of weeping willow trees. The long fronds swept the rooftop of his car like a thousand delicate ropes that formed a natural camouflage.

The sound of “Good Golly, Miss Molly” soon interrupted the distant thump of oil rigs as Quinine approached the gaudy pink neon sign. He could see a bevy of half-naked girls on the lodge deck, dancing for the pleasure of a rowdy male crowd. The night was still young.

Behind the rollicking deck and a dozen "working" trailers, Quinine counted two Lincoln Town Cars and seven pickups, then he caught the reflection of Foster Landeaux’s unmarked sedan. Unexpected, but not surprising. He was, after all, a member of the "lucky sperm club" of life. Quinine was not.

Foster was born into the police force that Quinine had labored hard to enter. Unpredictable, and unliked, Foster was still the boss’s son. He had escaped the discipline his father was well known for. The Sheriff had always covered his son’s ass, but he still didn’t trust him to deliver the Saturday night cash bag into his personal mail chute. Only Quinine held that “honor”, at half the pay, which still irked Foster. Quinine couldn’t figure Foster out. He was an aggressive officer, always well groomed, who seemed to like the ladies, but he was always alone. Of course, Quinine had no room to talk, but he had an excuse. He was a black lawman.

Quinine caught his breath and refocused on his mission to make the pickup and drop off the money. He flashed his dimmers twice toward Trailer “A” and idled the police car at a safe distance, although the vast majority of the regular patrons knew Quinine by name. The door swung open on time at the stroke of midnight. Elton, the night manager, was right on time.

Quinine blinked his headlights for confirmation when an apparition burst from the trailer, jerking him out of complacence: a long-legged mulatto girl in blue jean shorts and a wet t-shirt splashed through shallow puddles in her bare feet, like a young colt running toward him in the rain. Quinine fumbled to unlock the door as she frantically knocked on the window.

The song of the cicadas and the clatter of raindrops filled the car briefly as she slid inside, giggling like a schoolgirl on a secret rendezvous. Quinine grabbed his gun handle as the waif pulled the door shut. An awkward silence filled the car as she looked at him innocently, squeezing long black strands of hair, wiping away rivulets of water from her lovely face.

Quinine was dumbstruck. He clenched his jaw and watched in silence while she pulled a worn leather money pouch from a plastic bag, immediately handing it to him. Then she fished out a hot wrap of boudin, the Cajun sausage that was a prized snack for common folk.

“Flash your lights quick so Elton knows I gave you the bag!" she squealed anxiously.

Quinine said nothing. He unzipped the bag to confirm its contents, mentally weighing the cash, then he flashed his lights with hesitation, his normal procedure broken, with Foster’s car nearby. He didn’t believe in coincidence, but he had little choice. His first duty was to protect the cash.

"I told them they should trust me by now,” she complained. “Hell, I’ve been here six months!"

"I'm glad they did," Quinine replied sincerely. He assessed his new passenger in the darkness while he secured the money bag under his car seat

"You in a hurry?" she asked. "I needed a break and Foster said you deserved some company." She rubbed her feet together and took the liberty of turning the blower up to get more heated air. Still shivering, she placed her back against the car door and wiggled cold toes under Quinine’s khakis while she rubbed her arms furiously. Quinine tried not to stare at the wet T-shirt that clung to a bulging chest. She was the picture of young femininity, cuddled against the car door, too close for his comfort. She was a woman in demand, certainly used to being sought after. He knew it, and he knew she knew it. Why would she want his company?

"I’ve got a little time," he finally answered uneasily. "What can I do for you?"

"Nothin’. Just some nice talk for a change."

"That I can do," Quinine nodded. A man scarred by history and occupation, he was still gentle by nature. What's your name?"

"Bambi."

"Right. And I’m Malcolm X. Let’s try your real name” he said sternly. “I got a feeling you already know mine."

She paused. "I got to trust you first." Her accent wasn’t Cajun. He could hear a twang of west Louisiana redneck in her voice. He nodded without comment, found his bottle and tipped it back. It was definitely time to steady his nerves.

“That stuff don’t make you jittery?” she asked.

“No, woman. You make me jittery,” he blurted, then looked away, embarrassed by his own honesty, not knowing what else to say. She looked twenty at best, barely more than a girl, and less than half his age.

She motioned for the bottle and giggled as he passed it over. “All yours,” he said with a smirk. She nabbed a quick, scorching sip and began coughing uncontrollably, beating her chest as tears came to her eyes. “You make this stuff?” she wheezed.

“No, woman,” Quinine patted her ankle for comfort. “It just kills a cold and keeps me alert,” he lied.

"I’m surprised it hasn’t killed you yet,” she groused. “Is that why they call you Quinine?"

He shrugged a silent admission.

"Tell me your real name?" she pressed.

"Have to trust you first," he jabbed back, not quite kidding, just then realizing neither of them claimed a name of their own.

“Well, let’s see if this helps,” she said, handing over a link of boudin and punching in the car lighter. She pulled a marijuana joint out of the bag and held it up enticingly with raised eyebrows.

“I can’t,” Quinine stammered.

She shut him off with a flat palm in his face. “Yeah, yeah, I know, it ain’t legal, like that money I just handed you was,” she scolded his hypocrisy. "Don’t you ever break the rules?" she teased with a come-hither look as she lit the joint.

“I’m a policeman.”

"And I'm cold" she volunteered, pushing her feet underneath him for warmth.

Quinine checked his mirrors, certain no one could see them in the downpour. He eyed the young siren, an impossible dream he could never imagine to land in his car. A fine mulatto was the crème de la crème of the racial hierarchy, mythical bed partners in high demand. White men always wanted darker women. Black men always wanted lighter women. It didn’t matter what women wanted, it was always about what men couldn’t have.

His instincts warned him that she couldn’t be real…but how bad could she be, really? He tried to convince himself that she was sent by the Sherriff in recognition for his years of service. Finally, he shifted against his door and pulled the cinnamon-hued legs into his lap to stroke painted toenails and soft skin.

"How did you end up in the middle of nowhere?” he asked

“Maybe I’m just getting paid while I’m looking for a good man," she suggested with a twinkle in her eye.

Quinine chuckled with an unconvinced look; he'd known too many miserable prostitutes in the course of his duties. “This is a hard row to plow,” he advised in a voice that shed neither shame nor blame about her occupation.

“At least it’s a well-paid row,” she shrugged. "Believe me, my story has no laughs and few choices, it’s nothing anyone wants to hear about, so it really doesn’t matter. How about you?" She offered him the joint, its tip glowing red in a small cloud of sweet-smelling smoke.

Deep down he felt a kernel of honesty emerging from this unlikely conversation of shared misery. He knew it was an illusion, but he welcomed an understanding stranger into his depression. “We share that history," he acknowledged with a nod and a light drag from the weed. “I got nothing to brag about either. Nothing to offer a cute girl like you.”

She tilted her face in a sympathetic manner and shoved his shoulder with her foot. "You want an older woman?" she jibed, wiggling her legs underneath his long torso for more warmth and attention. Quinine felt his inhibitions dissolving from the narcotic rush while he massaged her leg. He rubbed her leg cautiously, waiting for rejection as he rubbed legs still cold from the rain.

"Girl, how long you gonna stay a whore?” he dared ask. It was a shock to him more than her.

“Well, that depends on what I get, and what they take," she responded without hesitation.

Her words shattered Quinine’s sanguine mood with a sobering thought: he could never get more than they took from him. It would always be so. His life had already been bought and sold.

The mulatto pointed in the direction of the stashed moneybag. “And what about you? How long are you going to stay a whore?”

Quinine jolted, his eyes blinking at the accusation. “Maybe forever,” he finally admitted softly, more to himself than to her. He had never considered himself that way. But there it was; glaring evidence of his own prostitution. Nobody had ever stuck that mirror in his face. He had never confronted raw honesty, and he fought back the anger that came with it. Suddenly he felt alone; his honesty was better hidden in the night. “What have they taken from you, girl?” he asked

“My childhood,” she said, averting her eyes. “What did they take from you?”

“My land. Then my life,” he stumbled, barely able to speak the words. His fear had suffocated the truth too long. It was unspeakable, a world he couldn’t discuss.

“How much was it worth?”

“The land or the life?”

"The land," she said caustically. "I already know the value of a black cop’s life."

“More than I would ever want or need...millions,” he admitted, grieving a lost future more than disappointing past.

She fell quiet, letting the puzzle of Quinine’s life fall into place, trying to empathize with his defeat to get more answers. “Why don’t you take it back?”

“Cause dead men don’t need no land,” he said matter-of-factly. “and I want to live,” Quinine said with unexpected conviction.

Until he heard himself say it, he had never been sure that living really mattered. His life was a restricted state of survival that began with sunrise over Bayou Hauffpower and ended with sunset over Bayou Boeuf. But he was here, now, cozying up with a fiery, young woman full of innocent questions, herself just another slave to a common master, searching for freedom and safety.

Pounding rain filled the silence of the big car with a rhythmic ebb and flow from shifting winds. She listened to the radio with her eyes closed as Jimi Hendrix's guitar roiled over the humid air.

Quinine wondered if she was thinking anything close to what he was thinking, too shy to presume it possible. She sensed his mood and suddenly cupped his chin, pulling his face toward her, inviting his move. Gently, he bent to kiss her, felt her yield with unexpected tenderness, her passion awakening the man he had lost. Suddenly he wanted to devour her, to ease her broken past, to set her free from the captivity they shared.

"I want to know your name," she whispered in the steamy darkness.

"Quincy," he whispered back. “My name is Quincy.”

“Quincy. I like that. That’s a name with history. What’s the rest of it?

"Don't ask. You don’t want to know."

"What happened to trust?"

Trust. It was yet another luxury Quinine had long lost, but perhaps one Quincy could still claim. Quinine was little more than a gritty shadow of Quincy, a stillborn character lost in a story he could never tell. It took a velvet night only a dark swamp could yield and the touch of a strange woman to release the story of Quincy Tremblay Jackson. His was a story painful to admit to a stranger, however willing she was. It seeped out slowly, void of forethought, spilling into the ink of the night without fear of reprisal, gradually turning into a torrent of vindictiveness and despair propelled by decades of suppressed anger which permeated Quincy’s every pore.

The mulatto pulled him close, interrupting his anxiety as he wept. “Take a breather, Quincy,” she whispered, handing him another joint. She spoke his given name respectfully like the white Sheriff who relied on his judgement and the inhabitants of the shanty town he protected. She knew he had value. “Go on,” she urged, listening to his every word.

The drizzle abated, then amplified again as the hours passed. With the weight of history lifted and the mellow fragrance of marijuana surrounding them, the conversation gradually turned to shared stories of lost friends and old lovers, and the abandonments and betrayals that marked their lives.

Quinine fell quiet, ashamed of venting his emotions like a child who had talked too much during class. He watched tiny beads of moisture slowly finding their way down her tussled hair, dripping between the swell of thinly covered breasts. He admired that she listened to him, quietly. She was a hard woman to find.

“Trust me now?” he asked, finally void of things to say. “Tell me your real name.”

She smiled in the darkness, nodding with understanding as she took off her t-shirt and pulled him to her. “My name is Meadow," she whispered in his ear. She had learned as much as she could for tonight. It was time to close the deal. “Let me teach you about trust.”

CHAPTER THREE

Judge Jim

By eleven a.m., young David Tremblay finished his morning drill as Managing Partner in his law firm, “checking the output” of three legal secretaries who actually did all the work before he headed out the door. Judge Jim Keys watched his “Junior” partner step out onto Main Street through the blinds of his office window. Tremblay walked with the manicured look of a busy lawyer headed for court. Judge Jim knew better. He was headed for an early lunch and drinks at the country club, not to be seen again until the following morning. Outside the window, an irksome wooden sign swayed gently over the sidewalk outside the law firm entrance:

Tremblay & Keys

Attorneys-at-Law

It was a lie, of course, bought and paid for by the Tremblay family, like everything else in town. Judge Jim could only take comfort that it was no different than most advertising. There had never been a Tremblay at the helm of Judge Jim’s firm: not at its outset and certainly not now. His titular young partner, who also just happened to be the titular president of Bumkin Bank & Trust and Dynasty Oil, had never produced one damn brief or rendered one damn opinion of any kind. The Judge would never risk letting David write his own legal documents. Hell, he was barely a legitimate lawyer at all; his law degree had been “obtained” from an obscure Northern college following a contribution from the Tremblay Trust, discreetly arranged by Judge Jim.

Thus it had been throughout the entirety of David Tremblay’s misspent youth.

He was smart enough to understand the cost of his mistakes, and selfish enough to avoid responsibility. Any screw-up of importance Judge Jim had quietly swept under the Tremblay family “rug” so it didn’t disrupt the balance of nature in Bumkin or the Tremblay family. Fortunately for all, the family “rug” extended for miles in all directions.

The Judge passed his hand through his shock of silvery, white hair as he considered the issues at hand. To think, he had both covered for the young hell-raiser and mentored him to create an independent life of his own with infinite possibilities, a life that could escape his father’s controlling personality. The world had been his oyster. Then, unexpectedly, at age thirty-five, the kid decided to play Prodigal Son and return home to cash in on his family’s fortune rather than make his own. Now he stood to become the kid’s gopher, his seniority forever overshadowed by the name of the third-generation pretty boy he had created. Insufferable. Unforgivable.

Judge Jim was no longer willing to bear the indignity of it all. But then, he had yet to come up with a plan for the lucrative exit he deserved. Where would he go? For all its petty problems, he would be hard pressed to find a more comfortable position with greater security and clout than Judge of Bumkin and caretaker of the Tremblay fortune.

He rose from his leather club chair and opened his carved walnut wet bar. It was one of those days. He was wealthy and well respected by any reasonable standard, but only within the limits allowed by the Tremblay family. He was not as rich or as powerful as he thought he would be, or should have become, for that matter. It made for one hell of a mid-life crisis. He had all the trappings befitting a southern judge, from Deacon at First Baptist Church to Director of Bumkin Bank & Trust. He had a public service pension courtesy of “the family” and had socked away plenty of money to get his kids through LSU and beyond. It was all very legitimate, for the most part. Contrary to the belief of Yankee lawyers and Hollywood filmmakers, Southern judges didn’t need to be corrupt to get rich. No, that was the job of the Sheriff. Besides, Judge Jim had always preferred women, whisky and power, mostly in that order.

He poured a nip of Southern Comfort to help him analyze his situation, then fell back into his chair and took in his elegant surroundings. It was all quite nice, but it was no longer enough. He wondered when it had become insufficient. It just happened, he surmised; unplanned and unwanted, like so much of life. He knew that David Tremblay would be a continuing problem but in fairness to the kid, he could sell igloos to Eskimos. His genteel mother had spoiled him rotten. She had in fact molded him into a very effective front man for the law firm, knowing no one else would ever employ him. Of course, he admitted to himself, his willingness to “manage” David had translated into growing legal fees for himself from the Tremblay largess.

The kid had natural good looks and a silver tongue that could easily separate little old ladies from their money, all of which had benefitted the bank, the oil company, and ultimately the law firm. David was pleasant, well-spoken, and impeccably dressed—as much the polar opposite of his coarse father “Bubba” as he could possibly make himself. Understandably so, the Judge nodded in his silent thought.

The problem was that the kid had never earned a damn dime of his own. Judge Jim held far higher regard for Bubba Tremblay’s accomplishments and loyalty to money than David Tremblay's education and social manners. Bubba was no rocket scientist, but he knew what he didn’t know, and he hired Judge Jim to cover his uneducated redneck ass on all the rest. With Jim at his side Bubba had held onto the family fortune and even grown it, surviving decades of boom and bust cycles, not to mention untold scores of women.

At the end of the day, Bubba commanded the respect of the community as a successful planter in his own right. In his own weird way Bubba remained personally attached to “his” town and generously supported the community, unlike his effete son. Bubba wasn’t afraid to get his hands dirty.

But, it was a new era, the Judge mused with a melancholy sigh. “Planters” like Bubba were dinosaurs in the New South, no longer revered as powerful figures that once defined the Old South. A "planter" was now just another wisp of history, an arcane word reserved for a particular genre of southern farmer whose heritage was embedded in land that surrounded everyone else. Ironically the Cajun and black communities still accepted the power, privilege, and abuses of the shrinking, white, aristocracy of planters. Theirs was the “old money” that tethered everyone to a treasured past and a security blanket that was now under assault by a federal government.

Jim became part of the myth thirty years prior: flattered to be recruited out of LSU law school and honored by the recommendation of Bubba’s granddaddy, legendary “planter” David Tremblay, Sr, who had established the Tremblay dynasty while he was Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Power shifted with generations, but it was still tied to the land. As a much younger lawyer, he was honored to have the modest name of Keys representing the biggest family fortune in Central Louisiana. He had been an heir apparent, effectively controlling the estate. Now he woke up in midlife as an elected Parish Judge, a lawyer for “the family” and caretaker of an estate filled with the last generation of aristocratic fools that came with it. To think, he could have written his own ticket, played with the big boys in New Orleans. His lot seemed to be a much smaller part of the universe now.

Judge Jim always knew that he faced a tectonic shift when Bubba retired from old age or passed away from hard living, the surer bet. Now he had to manage Bubba and keep David’s nose clean along the way. But working with David wasn’t like working with Bubba. The kid didn’t listen, and never would. His insecurity and glitzy lifestyle didn’t sit well with the local folks either. He sure as hell wasn’t one of them, and it was only a matter of time before they abandoned him. So who was the real front man? Jim sighed at the obvious answer to his own question.

The grandfather clock chimed on the half hour, stirring Judge Jim out of his most private thoughts, reminding him of his appointment with young Bam Callahan. Not the first, and not the last, he would wager. He mentally scrolled back through the call from his old high school sweetheart, Sally, and the script she had handed him, just like the good ol’ days. The arrangement was implicitly made without admission, as only a Southern gentleman such as Judge Jim and a Southern woman such as Sally could make; Sally would continue referring to him as a capable and hardworking public servant in her weekly newspaper column and Judge Jim would scare the hell out of young Bam, once again, without inflicting serious humiliation. They had always worked well together growing up, the curious journalist and the analytical lawyer.

This time around Judge Jim had more than a passing interest in seeing Bam’s rough edges smoothed over in very short order. His daughter’s growing appreciation for young Bam had not gone unnoticed. Angela had inherited her mother’s good looks, and her father’s hormones; he had no doubt that Angela and Bam were a train wreck waiting to happen. They were both smart, hotheaded teenagers with too much time on their hands, not unlike his and Sally’s own youth, he reminisced with a fond grin. What goes around comes around.

“It’s Mr. Callahan, Your Honor,” the secretary announced over the loudspeaker. Judge Jim wiped his shot glass clean with a napkin, set it into a cubbyhole in his roll-top desk, then tossed a stick of gum in his mouth. It was time to scare the hell out of Bam Callahan, for more reasons than Sally needed to know.

Bam entered the Judge’s chambers slowly, taking in the musky, leather-bound books and hand-hewn bookcases that made everything feel so…official. He admired the twelve-foot ceilings with high-beveled transoms, and the leaded-glass window that refracted sunlight across the Judge’s desk. To the right, a panoramic view of Main Street followed Hwy 71 into the horizon, looking like a road to nowhere. It was a scene right out of “Perry Mason”, a drama Bam liked to watch, but not one he wanted to be in.

Bam quietly took his seat in the familiar, red leather chair facing the Judge’s desk. He gripped the lion-claw armrests he figured had been rubbed smooth by prior occupants nervously fearing their own verdicts. He knew the drill. Judge Jim would maintain an intimidating silence, reading his notes and ignoring his prey, gradually lowering his eyeglasses precariously to the tip of his nose before he turned on his quarry in his squeaky chair. The Judge slowly unbuttoned his cuffs and rolled up his sleeves, as if readying for a boxing match, his suspenders tight against a big chest that filled a starched white shirt. A sense of déjà vu rolled over Bam. It was going to be a long talk.

The phone buzzer interrupted the silence just as Bam was about to speak. The Judge held up a single finger motioning Bam to sit and remain silent as he punched the phone.

“Bubba’s on the line, says it’s urgent, I couldn’t get him to hold off,” the secretary apologized. The Judge looked annoyed. Bam thanked the Almighty for the interruption.

“Put him through.” The Judge punched off the speakerphone and swiveled around for privacy, his chair screeching under the weight of its cargo. Not that it mattered; Bam could hear every raspy word shouted by the angry caller, easily recognizable by anyone in town as Bubba Tremblay.

“You get an answer from Quinine?” Bubba barked.

“He doesn’t want to sell,” the Judge responded coolly. “He has no reason to sell.”

“I don’t care,” Bubba roared, causing the Judge’s big shoulders to rise at his impertinence.

“Bubba, why does it matter? Dynasty is already capturing all of the oil.”

“Have you seen the price of Dynasty stock? It’s tripled. Sooner or later that nigger is gonna wake up and cause me problems. If I buy it now, I can sell it back to Dynasty for twice what it’s worth in stock. I need to lock it up.”

“Leave it alone, Bubba,” the Judge pleaded.

Bam could hear the raspy voice turn indignant. “Don’t tell me what to do, counselor. I make my own damn decisios and this here is a business matter--I’ll handle it my way. It don’t appear I can count on my esteemed law firm to get things done like I want anymore.”

The Judge tightened his grip on the receiver for a long moment after Bubba abruptly clicked off the line. He swiveled back around, to scrutinize Bam, who was admiring the grandfather clock, pretending not to be listening to the conversation.

“Ah, Bam. What can I do for you today?” Judge Jim asked, arching his bushy silver eyebrows. He was a gregarious man who genuinely enjoyed meeting people from his community under any number of circumstances and infractions. His meetings rarely involved criminal issues, but justice inevitably had to be delivered for the public welfare, especially in an unsettled era where the patience of the court was regularly challenged, and parents were increasingly hard to find.

“Mom asked me, well…” Bam gulped. “Mom suggested...” He stopped and gave up, then spit it out all at once. “Actually, Judge, Mom instructed me to tell you about a problem I had, uh, actually a problem I guess I kind of made at the mayor’s house.”

Judge Jim’s voice deepened. “Yet another problem, young man? When did we last have to visit? What this time?”

“Well, it’s different from the others, Judge,” Bam stammered. “There's no

car wreck, or missing pumpkins.”

-“And I would hope, no misplaced ladies’ apparel?” the Judge said with a stern look. He remembered independently confirming that Angela had truly been at her aunt's that weekend.

“No, sir. That either,” Bam stammered.

The slightest of smiles crossed Judge Jim’s face. He delighted in the range of violations that occurred in the small town over which he presided. It was a true testament to American innovation. “Okay, Bam. Tell me the story. The whole story.”

Bam gradually regained control and recited the story of a chemical experiment gone awry. Judge Jim grunted at the climax, having trained himself never to diminish the seriousness of an infraction. Bam finished the story and hung his head for the expected onslaught.

“Do you realize you could have hurt someone, Bam?”

“No, I don’t think so, Judge, there wasn’t enough hydrogen to really hurt anyone.”

“Except maybe you, and Clay, not to mention the building, and any domestics who happened to be around.”

“Well, yes, sir. Maybe so,” Bam conceded.

“Do you realize you destroyed someone’s property?”

“Yes, sir, I do. But not intentionally.” Bam made a point of his intention.

“Now Bam, if you had been caught vandalizing a house and damaging the property of others, what would you expect that I would do?” the Judge looked piercingly over the rim of his glasses.

“You would make me pay for it,” Bam said glumly.

“You bet your sweet ass I would, son,” the Judge snapped.

“But Judge, it was not deliberate, and I didn’t ignite the hydrogen, I just made it. Actually, I only directed the making of it. It was just science.”

Judge Jim leaned back in his squeaky chair, staring at the ceiling, letting the youngster hang out to dry in silence while he contemplated Bam’s position. A pertinent legal point had been made. Bam had only done what he set forth to do, without intent to damage the people around him. Bam was too smart to strike a match to hydrogen. And he could have reasonably assumed that Clay, being older, should have known better. What was that boy thinking? Nevertheless, it was time for Bam to learn responsibility. The squeaks from his chair subsided until the silence of the office contained only the swishing of the ceiling fan.

“Judge, I really didn’t think Clay was that dumb!” Bam offered for the record.

Judge Jim folded his hands on his desk and squared his shoulders, leaning forward. His stretched suspender straps made him look bigger than he was. “Maybe so, Bam, but you were in charge. You started the process. You knew the risks. But, you do make a point, which is duly noted. And, I understand that it wasn’t your intent to ignite the hydrogen. But that in no way lets you off the hook. It was your experiment that allowed some other numbskull to strike a match. Now Bam, I want you to remember that there will always be an idiot in the crowd who will screw things up, no matter what you do, or how well you plan. Contemplate this lesson for the future because it is sure as hell going to cost you today. I will confer with Sheriff Franklin and let your mother know how the fines will be assessed.” There was unmistakable finality in his voice. Bam knew the session was over. There would be no appeal.

Judge Jim sat back calmly, letting the drama of the moment soak in. The moment after sentencing could inspire a rare epiphany for teenagers. He wanted for this one to be especially intense.

Bam spoke up, “I presume damages to the property will be spread between Clay and me. It would only be fair that way, Judge”.

It was a fair retort, but unexpected. Was the boy growing up, or was this a cagey diversion?”

“That’s fair, Bam, and so it is.” He slapped his hand on his desk like a gavel, ending the session, ready to rise out of his chair.

Bam didn’t budge. “How about I resolve my half of the damages directly with the Cantons?”

“And what about Clay?” the Judge asked.

“That should be between you and Clay, Judge. He screwed up my experiment, so he should pay his share of the damages to the Cantons also.”

Curious, the Judge asked, “How do you figure that would work, Bam?” as he looked over his eyeglasses.

“I think David and I should jointly pay a third, Clay and his buddies should pay the rest. If the insurance pays up, then we should give our share to the science club at school?"

Bam was getting way to familiar with court negotiations, the Judge thought. “I will consider the offer and communicate my decision to your mother. Rest assured that if I find you here again there will be serious consequences,” he said to drive home his point, waving off the incorrigible little shit, his patience at an end.

Bam still didn’t move, slowly lifting his hand to get the Judge’s attention, “Just one other thing, Judge” Bam dared in an apologetic voice. “If I work this out with the Cantons how about we just keep all this between us? I would rather Mom didn’t have to read about it in the newspaper.”

The Judge gave him an angry look, then he let out a boisterous laugh. “Ok Bam, you want to make this “man to man?” We will try it this one time. But it damn well better stick. Settle up with the Cantons and stay out of the newspaper. Now get your ass out of here.”

“Yes, sir.” Bam stood and shook Judge Jim’s hand. He wasn’t sure whether he should thank him for his time or express remorse for past sins. He didn’t really feel grateful, but not wanting to be disingenuous, he decided to head for the door. As he reached for the brass doorknob the Judge’s voice befell him.

“I commend you for your honesty, Bam. Coming forward takes guts and I don’t see any other participants here to fess up. One other issue does come to mind, Bam.”

“Yes, sir?” Bam stood at attention.

The Judge looked down at him over his glasses. “This integration order is going to be rough going for everyone in town and I have little doubt that your mom is going to be in the middle of it. Not everyone on our side of the tracks agrees with her view of integration, as you know. You need to keep your head down and stay out of trouble or there will be hell to pay for both of you.”

“Mom isn’t looking for trouble, Judge,” Bam replied, unsure of the Judge's remark.

“She doesn’t have to, Bam. I’ve known your mother for forty years. Trouble finds her quite naturally, and it doesn’t need any help from you. Smart people always attract conflict, Bam. It’s people who don’t do anything that never have problems.”

“Yes, Sir,” Bam said, ready to agree with anything the Judge said as he fought to understand the weight of the message. Bam thanked him again and pulled the big door shut to leave the chambers.

Judge Jim turned back to look out his window, his thoughts returning to the Tremblay family issues he had to face. Bam had actually been a welcome diversion from far more difficult decisions.

The Judge watched Bam cross Main Street to head home. He was satisfied he had communicated a message that would stick with him after he left Bumkin for greener pastures. The kid was too smart to hang around town - or to return. The Judge took another sip of whisky and wished he would have been as smart.