

PART ONE

Chapter One

Thursday Night -- June 11, 1998

First, let me tell you this: I've been a board-certified thoracic surgeon for twenty-seven years, and I can attest to the fact that no matter what the hue of a man's skin, his heart is always, *always* the same color.

I sit uneasily in the high school bleachers waiting for my son to give his valediction address. My heart's swollen with pride, but my mind is troubled by thoughts of an old man with a ruined ear and two dead men's names. Next to me sits my lovely wife. She has a video camera on her shoulder and is peering through the lens at a tall figure seated in the first row of metal folding chairs set up across the gym floor so she doesn't note my agitation. On the other side of her, my daughter Kate, my eldest, murmurs something about how handsome her baby brother looks in his long black gown and cap.

Principal Everett Williams finally concludes his "brief" remarks and introduces my boy. Before he can completely finish Kate shrieks a violent rebel yell and spans her hands together in a rapid tattoo. After some scattered laughter the audience joins her, and my son Robbie, his coffee-with-cream colored face blush-darkened almost violet, makes his hesitant way to the podium. Once he gets there the lights of the gym rapidly fade and single spot illuminates his youthful face. I see how his nervousness falls away, and he grins to himself even in front of all of us. I have no idea what he's about to say. When I asked he said he wanted to surprise me.

"Thank you, one," he points his finger to Kate who is still clapping, "and all. Principal Williams, teachers, parents, family, and friends. It's been a long road to this night for all of us. . . ."

My mind wanders. I'm considering the raw, long healed wound I saw on the side of old guy's head and all the differing, perfectly logical, alternate ways it could have been inflicted. His face was not one I recognized, and his distraught, snowy-haired wife could give me no answers to my insistent questions. *She* seemed vaguely familiar, and I struggle to remember if I've ever met her before. I wonder why he'd demanded me to be his surgeon. I feel a sudden coldness along my spine and a sharp hollow sensation in my stomach as I realize I should have checked to see if his face had been altered. I should have also checked to see if his blood type was tattooed under his armpit.

The infamous Blue Hood Killer, later also known as the Butcher of Birkenau, the only person I would ever consider a human monster, could still be alive, lying in my hospital with the stitches he taught me holding the flesh of his chest together.

The auditorium erupts with laughter. My son must have told a joke. I'll have to watch the video before he has a chance to question me about how I liked it. I focus my attention on what he's saying to keep from thinking further.

"I must admit to you that I was selected to give this speech by only two tiny tenths of a percentage point. If Jennifer Dahl hadn't gotten that horrible toothache

sophomore year just before the trig final she'd be up here instead of me. Mary Perrine and Shane Waldrop are maybe a point behind Jennifer. There are ten students that are within a four points of Mary and Shane. We've all spent many endless hours chained to books when we would've rather have been engaged in other, more interesting pursuits, but what I feel I must point out is that those of us with higher marks have all sometimes just been very lucky. We just happened to remember the items that our teachers chose to put on the tests. Our scores are no clear cut indication of the exact level of effort that any of us expended while attending this school. But I can guarantee no matter how much hard work and time the most studious of us has put in, none of us here tonight would have achieved anything without the constant support of our families and instructors. I'm reminded of the words of Sir Isaac Newton who wrote, "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." I'd like to expand on that thought and guess that if we were to examine those shoulders beneath our feet carefully, we will notice that from them sprout a full feathered pair of shining wings. I stand here tonight to remind you my fellow graduates that twenty or thirty years from now who stood here giving a speech and what he or she said will not matter in the least. From this moment on we all start out even. What will matter is our resolve to pledge ourselves to make as much a difference in the lives of those who will count on us as those who have helped us get to this moment. I ask you my fellow graduates to please join with me in giving thanks to our personal angels for all of their help."

The light swells back to full and the graduating class stands and gives their audience a rousing standing ovation.

My son has a distinct flair for the dramatic. He gets it from his mother.

"Ah, geeze, Daddy, yew didn't." My daughter looks disapprovingly at the large fiberboard tray containing the messy remnants of a pork barbecue sandwich. Two over-crisp French fry ends stick like clipped panther claws in a puddle of catsup. Fragments of pork shoulder are tiny islands in a reddish-brown sea of sauce. There is a sizable empty paper container that used to hold coleslaw. A thick cigar smolders in the ashtray next to two chewed butts. She plucks my glass of bourbon and asks, "An' what num-bah drink would this be?"

"It would be four, I do believe." I pick up my tab and check. "Five. The first one didn't last long."

"Momma's gonna throw a shit fit. Y'all are supposed ta be watching you'self. Yew'd think yew of all people would know better that to pollute yo' body with all this junk."

"You would think," I agree. "I did two angioplasty, one bypass, and a pacemaker insertion only today. And before you remind me, we do have a history of heart disease in our family. Can I buy you a drink? Have you eaten yet?"

She grins and says, "I guess yew couldn't ver' well tell Momma on *me*. I'll have a tom collins and a catfish sandwich -- no fries though, chips." She slumps on the stool beside me and opens her purse and pulls out a cardboard pack of cigarettes. I look from them to her face. She tilts her oval chin to her chest and looks me in the eye, challenging me to berate her. When I don't she tucks her corn rows behind her ear and gives me that "hymph" expression by subtly tugging slightly at both corners of her mouth in a not quite smile and giving me a scant "I-didn't-think-so" backwards nod. She tucks the filter on

the edge of her lip and digs around in her purse for her lighter. I hand her the matches I've been using.

I signal to the bartender, a short efficient looking college kid with thick, round glasses and sandy hair styled with a crisp part like JFK used to. I tell him what Kate would like, and he points at me, slaps the bar, and scurries off to give the order to the kitchen.

It's somewhat after ten; the graduation broke up at seven so I've been here close to three hours. We are in the Black Jewel Bar on the left side of Beale Street when you stand facing the river. It's narrow, dark, and smoky the way bars are supposed to be. Paintings, photos, and posters from seven decades of blues artists line the black painted walls. On the raised stage in the back of the room a youngish white girl with large titties and a tight blue top and even tighter jeans sings passionately and well into her microphone about being a pirate turning forty. Behind her blinks the top of a neon guitar. The pink and blue lights glint off the diamond stud in my daughter's nose.

"How did you know where to find me?" I ask, idly stirring my drink with a finger.

She lights her cigarette and takes a deep, happy drag before answering, "Last year at the Holden's Christmas party I ovaheard Doctor Meyer tell yew that the next time yew got out from un-dah Momma's steady gaze on a Thursday to give that girl on the stage a listen. Yew told him you most certainly would as this place was your old stompin' grounds back in the day. For some ray-son it seemed the only logical place t' look."

I stare at her, "That doesn't make any sense."

"Yeah, but -- ya know -- here we ah." She gestures around us with the glowing tip of her cigarette, making loose smoke trails in the humid air.

The bartender returns, and we watch him mix Kate's drink. He knows how to make a real tom collins, not just one that uses gin and margarita mix.

After she's taken a long swallow Kate starts to relax. For the thousandth time I wonder how despite my New Jersey barbaric yawlp and my wife's clipped Georgia drawl both my kids have still ended up with sliding Tennessee burrs in their speech. Then again, I've heard Chinese children use the same inflections when speaking to their parents in the Mandarin dialect.

I point to the lonely looking ice in my glass to order another. The kid winks at me and tilts the bottle twice and drops a few finger fulls of ice on top of the amber liquid. I don't look at my daughter as I try not to whine, "I don't do this that often. Maybe twice a year. It's not like I'm some sort of lush."

"I know, but Momma's gon' be furious anyway. At about nine-thirty when yew ha'n't shown up she decided to go to bed. She told me to tell yew that whenever yew got yo'self home yew could just tuck yo'self in in the guest room. And they's no way yo' gonna be able to hide that cigar taste outta yo' mouth by mawnin'. They don't make chewing gum *that* strong."

My love for my wife is very near absolute. Her passion is one of the qualities that drew me inexorably to her but, the flips side of it, her almost magnesium-intense flaring temper is truly frightening to behold. "Ya," I agree with a soft spurt of breath. I remember where I got this manner of agreement and also from whom he had in turn acquired it. I took a short pull from my freshened glass. The past is all too much with me tonight. "She could've paged me if she was worried."

“An’ yew coulda called. She thought yew were gonna follow us home after the graduation. Bad enough yew were so late showing up.”

“Something delayed me at the hospital. I was going to go straight home, but then at the last minute I decided to come here.”

On the stage the white girl with the titties launches into a song about the femininity of mandolins. Then she croons a lullaby about a captain and his kid.

“Hey,” Kate says snapping her head towards the stage. “Wa’n’t that the third Jimmy Buffet song in a row?”

I don’t look at her, “Was it? I hadn’t been counting.”

“Now, why would she do that?”

“I have no idea.”

“Don’t Blues singers usually vary their sets?”

“Sometimes they do. Sometimes they don’t.”

Kate smirks at me, “Yew musta paid her!”

“Perhaps. I like to contribute to the arts now and again.”

“But, Daddy, yew only listen to Parrot Head songs when yo’ depressed. Somethin’ must be wrong. Did Jamie’s graduation bother yew that much? Do yew feel like you’re gettin’ old or somethin’?”

“No, not especially. At fifty-six I’d say I’ve only just reached the prime of my life.”

“Then what?”

“It’s kinda of a long story -- goes back over thirty years -- no -- really almost sixty.”

Kate’s meal arrives, and she spreads tarter sauce liberally on the corn meal crust of her catfish. “The state Momma was in I’m in no hurry to get home; let’s have it,” she says licking her thumb.

“Maybe later. Eat your snack; I’m going to go call your mother.”

“Good idea. He-ah, use my cell phone.” She pulls the case from her voluminous one strap black leather purse.

“It’s too noisy out here. I’ll take this to the restroom.” I say into her ear.

“Hey, Daddy, Doctor Meyer was right; that girl is mighty fine singer.”

“Ya.”

“*Really* good bosom, too.”

I roll my eyes, slide off the bar stool, and carefully lope to the gentleman’s room. The bourbon has made my nose numb and my reflexes sluggish. In the john I look at myself in the mirror. I see a not bad looking middle-aged black man with a neatly trimmed pencil-width mustache and close cropped, thinning hair that’s going white in patches. I smile; still have all my teeth. I do have a little hard pot belly that didn’t used to be there five or so years ago, but other than that I look pretty much as I have since I was a resident surgeon in Baltimore.

I punch my home phone number on the key pad. I notice that the keys are almost impossible to read through the accumulated gray residue of Kate’s hand cream.

Rebecca answers on the third ring.

“Hey,” I say. I listen to her sigh which is jaggedly edged with both relief and ire. “I’ve got a good explanation.”

She doesn't say anything, so I slowly tell her about what happened to me just before graduation, about my terrible suspicions concerning the man to whom I'd given the late afternoon emergency pacemaker insertion.

"Oh, Lord, that *is* an excellent explanation. Are you gonna call *him*? It was part of our deal," my wife asks. The sound of her voice, her silky hill country drawl, still, after so many years, fills me with a warm, primal joy.

"Not yet. I can't really be sure until after I check on a couple things tomorrow morning." Then I confess my evening's sordid itinerary. I leave out Kate's smoking, but tell Becky pretty much everything else.

"I'm going to tell Kate what happened. I think it's time. How would you feel about that?"

She doesn't answer right away. When she's not angry Becky always needs a few moments to think, to weigh her thoughts and emotions before giving them voice. "It's probably a good idea. She's almost engaged to Spence. I don't want to be there when you dredge it all up, but, yeah, she should know. I think the tellin' would make you feel better after what's happened."

"Okay then. I'm sorry I didn't call earlier. I wasn't thinking."

"It's not okay, but I think I can forgive you. Wake me up when you get home. I wanna feel you close."

"So I can never mind about the guest room."

"Yeah, no sense messin' up two beds, least ways while Jamie's still livin' at home."

"I love you, Bet -- Becky." I almost say another name, one I hadn't spoken while awake in thirty years. Becky says she's heard me call it out desperately in my sleep more than a few times over the years.

My wife chuckles throatily. "So you're also thinkin' about *her*, that cruel, idiot white girl who broke your heart. I do so love you too, you perfect fool of a man. Be sure to tell Kate *everythin'*, but hurry on home."

I tuck the phone in the holder and rejoin my daughter. She's flirting with the bartender.

I hand her the phone and say, "Let's take a walk over to Confederate Park. We'll look at the lights of the bridge, and I'll tell you a story."

"Okay. Sounds like a plan." Kate downs the last of her drink.

I give the bartender some twenties and ask him to keep the change. I can tell he'd much rather have Kate's phone number. Apparently Spence Parker's name didn't come up in the conversation.

The singer blows me a kiss as we leave. I take one last peek at her titties.

A little further down on Beale we turn right onto Front Street which is a mostly deserted concrete canyon this time of night. Both of us walk with a fairly swift stride down the wide sidewalks and in no time we come to the upper part of the park on the bluffs overlooking the Wolf and Mississippi Rivers with the dark bulk of Mud Island in between. The tip of the Pyramid Arena and the lighted double-curved span of the Memphis-Arkansas Bridge are on our right. In the distance, down river, the low, flat Hernando De Soto Bridge is on our left. I sit on one of the green painted park benches and rest my feet on the above ground root of a tall poplar. There are a few beer cans in paper bags scattered on the ground, and Kate gathers them up and puts them in a trash

can before joining me. It's a soft late southern evening, a little too warm and humid for my New Jersey blood, but not all that uncomfortable. A young couple strolls through the street light along the promenade of the lower, Jeff Davis Park. Olive colored World War I artillery pieces poke their sealed barrels through a jagged stone wall. The tire on one has rotted away so that it sags in the shape of a tear drop. I've been to this park a dozen times and never noticed it before. At the bottom of the bluffs the Riverside Trolley makes it's last run. The driver rings the tinkling bell as he passes across Jefferson.

Kate lights another cigarette, and I begin to speak. "The early Spanish explorers used to multiply the size of everything they discovered by ten to encourage others to visit the New World. But when they came to the Mississippi River they didn't dare relate anything except exactly what they found because they didn't think anyone would believe even the simple truth. My story is kinda like that. It began for me in the summer of 1964. I had volunteered for the Mississippi Summer Project, what's now called "Freedom Summer." About a thousand people: students, lawyers, and doctors went to the Magnolia State to try and register Blacks to vote and to teach them leadership skills and self-esteem. I was all of twenty-two and my feet hurt . . ."

Chapter Two

Tuesday Noon -- June 23, 1964

My feet hurt terribly. It's because of the new, stiff steel-toed shoes I was told to buy. Steel toes shoes offer protection when the rednecks stomp on your feet. I feel a warm wet burst of dampness around my toes as another large blister breaks. I wonder if having your toes stomped could hurt worse than worse than the blisters.

It's only the second day of the Mississippi Summer Project. My partner, Terry -- short for Terrance Hastings Biddlebow III -- and I trudge down a long country road looking for the shanty homes of the black folk to try and convince them to register to vote. Yesterday and so far this morning we haven't had much luck. No one seems to be home when we knock.

Terry and I are still trying to make conversation; we haven't gotten to the stage where we can just be together and be quiet. He's a Boston Brahmin who has another year of "Hah-vahd" and I've just graduated from Rutgers. Our conversation of yesterday consisted of his informing me of his illustrious family history which was entwined like creeping ivy with the Kennedys and my feigned awe in murmured replies. I haven't told Terry that I graduated *magna cum laude* and was my class valedictorian. I don't plan to either, just as I won't tell him I've earned a full scholarship to Johns Hopkins Medical School in the fall. Even though my future seems to me as bright as his family's past, if the conversation does come around to me or my lineage I'll have to admit my step-father's a barber -- albeit one with a five chair shop -- and my mother, before she died this past January, ran a lunch counter besides all the odd jobs and clothes washing she did to get extra money to help me attend college. I have the strong impression that Terry is a sniffer and my humble antecedents will give him much reason to sniff for the next eleven or so weeks we are in Kingdom County, Mississippi. He probably assumes something much like the truth but by not speaking it aloud I hope to give him some cause for doubt which should preclude the more pointed sniffing.

Tomorrow, if there is a tomorrow for us, I plan on wearing my Keds. Perhaps that sounds fatalistic but the conversation Terry and I are trying to avoid concerns the three missing guys in Neshoba County. We touched on it briefly yesterday afternoon in between the recitation of the careers of his great uncle Colin Biddlebow and his second cousin Patricia who married one of the Fitzgeralds. Terry had asked me how well I knew the James Chaney fellow. I informed him, perhaps too coldly, that just because I am a Negro doesn't mean I've met every other Negro in the Project. I told him that the only contact I have had with the three is that Andy Goodman cuffed me lightly on the ear last week during the harassment workshop. It was part of the orientation we'd been through at the Western College for Women in Ohio. Andy was playing the ignorant peckerwood and I was the dreaded "outside-agitator-commie-slash-nigger."

Terry frowned at me for pointing out his *faux pas*, apologized lightly, and continued with his narrative.

Last night we learned that Chaney, Goodman, and the third guy, Mickey Shwerner had been arrested prior to their disappearance and were released just after dark. This morning when our project director, Franklin D. R. Toomes, dropped us off at the end of the road he again warned us that if such a thing were to happen to stay in jail even if we had to punch the sheriff in the face in order to do it. "Punch him hard," Frank had said with an odd smile.

Another set of facts I don't plan on telling Terry is that Frank took me aside during orientation and explained to me that Kingdom County, which is in eastern Mississippi up on the Tennessee border, is one of the least dangerous for civil rights workers and that while the sheriff may trouble us some for appearances and his deputy was sort of slow, they'd both most likely make sure nothing bad happened to us. I protested that as someone with medical training I wanted to and should be in the thick of the struggle. I was fully prepared to serve and, if it happened, be wounded or killed in the nonviolent war for freedom being waged this summer. Frank patiently explained that the Movement needed me alive to finish medical school and serve as an example of what black people are capable of. I wondered aloud why Terry was assigned to Kingdom County. Frank said that besides me and another special case he'd been given the dregs to work with. Terry's entrance interview indicated that he was a whiner; no one else wanted to put up with him, but because of the Kennedy connection they didn't want to turn him down. Then I asked if he would tell me about the special case.

Frank grinned, "Don't let on that you know, but it's the daughter of some white judge from a small town in Georgia just outside of Atlanta. After the judge couldn't talk her out of coming here a large under the table donation was made to COFO to ensure she'd be posted in a nice safe assignment. A small part of it paid for your fellowship. Some more of it will go to the rent on the Freedom School building where she'll be teaching. It was lucky in a way; otherwise we'd probably have left Kingdom County alone."

Though I didn't ask why Frank was in Kingdom County he told me anyway. "God assigned me to it. I was born there."

Terry stops at a fork in the road and rubs the sweat from his heavily freckled face into his red crewcut. Terry is rather chunky and the perspiration makes his white cotton shirt cling to the bulgy parts. The back of his chinos are damp like he wet himself. "God, it's hot. Let's go right. I see a trailer down that way."

"Frank said to go left when we came to this fork."

Terry speaks to me very . . . slowly . . . in his irritation-lathered Back Bay accent, ticking off his points on his puffy fingers, "Maybe he made a mistake. That road doesn't look as well used. This one's graveled and that one's just got old wagon ruts. We can always do that direction later. We have all summer."

Just as carefully and haltingly I explain, "But after we finish in Juneapple we have to cover the towns of Pecan, Mount Blue, Welty, and Dumas. If we finish in Kingdom early we could move into Alcorn or Ford Counties." I -- it's a miserable expression considering -- *ape* Terry and touch my fingers as I list the towns.

Terry sighs, "Look, B.J., I'm very thirsty. It's almost lunch time. Our canteens are empty. Let's just go to that house and get some water to go with our peanut butter sandwiches. If we don't find any Negroes, we'll come right back and go your way. Does that sound fair?"

I'm somewhat thirsty too so I agree, though I feel I shouldn't. Frank told me to make sure not to let the white boy think he was in charge just because he was teamed with a Negro. I was supposed to crush any indication of it abruptly. The factor that decided it for me is the thought that I could put my feet up. They're throbbing as steadily as twin heart beats inside of my new shoes. We head towards the trailer.

The trailer is very old. Rusty trails leak from the rivets holding the loose outer panels to the frame. The roof sags on the left side. The trailer's color could have been originally pale mint or beige. It's hard to tell. However, the plywood skirt surrounding the bottom is freshly painted forest green and the unfinished four by six pine boards that make up the steps and tiny deck still ooze sap. The windows are very clean. Red and white checkered curtains can be seen through them. At the end of the wide gravel driveway beside the trailer is a plastic pink flamingo. Behind the trailer to the right is the charred shell of a house. The backyard has been recently dug up to change the septic and well pipes from the house to the trailer so I guess that the house burnt not very long ago, many a matter of weeks. Next to the remains of the house is a scorched live oak with a truck tire swing hanging from a thick hemp rope tied to an upper branch. The tire has been melted into the shape of tear drop. The grass has been mowed that morning, and a wicker rake stands beside a fresh pile of trimmed cuttings. Between the house and the trailer is a sizable vegetable garden.

While I'm looking things over Terry has gone up the steps and knocked on the door.

An older Negro woman answers. Terry gives me a smug look. I point his attention back to the woman who's waiting to hear what he wants.

While Terry reads about our mission from the mimeoed form I study the woman. She's short and slender. Her broad face looks made to smile very widely. She's wearing a blue cotton house dress with lilies printed on it and ruffled white lace edged faded pink apron with pockets in the front. Her front is lightly dusted with flour or corn meal. I wonder why she looks familiar. She wears a high chocolate brown wig that must be hot in this weather.

"You feet hurtin' you, boy?" she says to me, interrupting Terry.

"Yes, ma'am," I answer.

"Why don' you two come in and sit a spell. I'll fix you some nice ice tea. Caty'll be home in while and you can have dinner with him."

"But," Terry starts.

"Don' worry; you keep makin' yo' speech whilst I fry Mr. catfish."

We enter the trailer and sit in the wooden booth that serves as a table. As with the outside the place is very old but well kept up. Potatoes and greens are boiling on the stove. In a black cast iron skillet lard bubbles. There are fish tails as wide as my hand sticking out from a rolled up newspaper.

"My name be Gertrude Toomes, though prid' near ever'boday call me 'Aunt G.'"

I realize that Terry had skipped the introduction, the crucial part that was supposed to build trust with our clients. I open my mouth but Terry is already talking, "Mrs. Toomes, I'm Terrance Hastings Biddlebow the third. This is B.J. Phillips."

"What the B.J. stand fo'?" Aunt G. asks.

"I don't know," Terry says turning to me. During the last half week of orientation in which we were divided up by target county, the godawfully long drive down from

Ohio, and the day and half we've been canvassing together, Terry has never thought to ask.

"Bernard James," I say.

Aunt G. smiles, "Nice name. Real southern. You should use it." She pours us tall glasses of ice tea from a pitcher in the refrigerator.

"My mother and father were both from Mississippi," I admit.

"Really? Whereabouts?"

"She never did say exactly. Somewhere's in Jordan County. I didn't think to ask while she was living. Before I saw the project flyer this April I hadn't ever expected to come here. She left the state after my father was killed, a couple of months before I was born."

"Was he lynched?" Terry asks.

"No. He got caught while cleaning a gin. It took his arm off, and he bled to death."

Terry snorts. "Is that a funny way of saying he drank too much? I never heard of having to 'clean' gin before. It usually looks pretty clear in a glass."

"I think the boy means a cotton gin, Mr. Biddlebow," Aunt G. says.

"Imagine large rotating drums with lots of nails coming out of them," I tell Terry.

"Um, sorry. I didn't know," Terry stammers. Having to admit he's wrong must not be a normal thing for him. He's not very good at it.

"You boys like catfish?" Aunt G. asks. "People tell me I do a good job of it."

"I haven't had it before," Terry answers. I hadn't either and said so.

"You be in for a treat then," Aunt G. giggles. "I think I have some chinaberry pie left from suppah last night too."

"Say, Mrs. Toomes, are you any relation to Franklin Toomes?" Terry asks. I hadn't made the connection. I think of Frank as "Frank." I realize that when they talk Frank and Terry call each other "Toomes" and "Biddlebow."

Aunt G. nods happily, "Yes, he be my nephew. How do you-all know Frankie?"

"He's our summer project director, Mrs. Toomes," Terry says. "He seems to be doing a good job."

"I thought I done tol' you to call me Aunt G. I ain't no Mrs. Toomes."

"But using courtesy titles for Negroes enhances their self-esteem," Terry quotes.

Yes, he actually said that. I wished for a second that someone would show up and disappear both Terry and me, I'm so embarrassed. Just that instant I see a police cruiser pull into the driveway.

I grab Terry's arm, "Terry, look. It's a cop. We don't want to get this woman in to any trouble. We're going to leave now, Aunt G. Pretend you're throwing us out."

She shoves me down in the bench. She's plenty strong for a small woman. "Don't be foolish. That just Sheriff Caty home for his noon vittles."

The sheriff pulls his uniform top out of his belt, takes it off, and lays it on the rail of the small deck. He lights an unfiltered cigarette, sits on the stoop in his tank top, and stares at the charred house. I relax. He's not even wearing a gun.

Aunt G. pours the sheriff an ice tea, opens the screen door, sets the sweating glass beside him, and says, "Sugah, we gots company for din-nah. Why don'cha be a deah an' get some ripe to-mate-ahs outta the gah-den fo' me?"

The sheriff mumbles something.

Aunt G. opens the newspapers and grasps a catfish in her callused hands. She cleanly slices the head off. Then she swiftly dresses the belly cavity. She tucks the head and purple and yellow intestines into an empty coffee can in the fridge. "Fo' soup," she explains when she sees the question on my face. She daubs the fish in buttermilk then dredges it in herbed flour and corn meal. She sets the fish in the smoking lard. A sizzle and rush of fragrance fill the close air.

"You in luck today. Yes, you is. My neighbor Harold Mun-roe caught a big mess of catfish early, early this mawnin'. Caty told me to lay in extra food case he had to jail some of them Yankee outside aggie-tatahs ever'bodies all hepped up about."

Terry who started to look a little queasy when Aunt G. cleaned the first catfish turns a tad green when she attacks the second. After six years of nights, weekends, and summers working in a hot dog factory I'm unfazed.

Aunt G. frowns. She stands on her tippy toes and calls, "Caty, deah?" He is either ignoring her or doesn't hear.

She rinses her hands, checks the fish that's in the fat, and turns the gas knob down a bit. She shuffles out to the deck and squeezes his shoulder. The cop looks back at her. Under his bushy dark brows, his eyes are red and desperate. The skin on his protruding cheek bones looks damp and raw. Salty tears cling to his day old beard. The cigarette is almost burnt down to fingers. The long, curling ash hangs in the hot air. He is a tall, medium built man in his early thirties. His coal black hair is cropped close on the sides with a large pomaded curl in front.

The cop whispers; his piney woods accent is softer than hers, but it's there, "What's up, Aunt G.?" He looks like he's ashamed that she caught him grieving but very tired of holding it in. He appears grateful to her for a slight moment but quickly looks away. "Did-ja wan' somethin'?"

Aunt G. pats his arm, "I'd like a couple of them garden to-mat-ahs, Sugah, if you please."

The sheriff slides off the step but in doing so knocks over the ice tea with his hand. He looks at the spreading liquid in bewilderment. Aunt G. stoops to collect the glass and spoon and kicks the ice off the deck.

"That's okay. I get it. Just head on into the gah-den."

Aunt G. seems worried. She starts to hum, picks the shirt off of the rail, and comes back into the trailer. She turns the cooking fish over and takes the shirt into the bedroom where an ironing board is set up. She touches up the wrinkles on the uniform blouse and puts it on a wire hanger. She then forks the catfish out of the lard, lays it on a grocery bag to drain, and lays the fish's twin in the pan.

Terry and I watch the cop wandering around the vegetable garden like he forgot what he's doing there. He walks past rows of corn and snap beans around a pea fence to staked tomato, pepper, and cucumber plants. He's lit another cigarette and squints one eye to keep the smoke out of it. He pulls his handkerchief from his back pocket and wipes his face. Then he sort of snaps to and plucks two ripe tomatoes and cups them in his left hand. He looks again in the direction of the charcoal ruin of the house. He takes a drag from the cigarette. He's staring under the melted tire swing. His hands begin to shake, and he has tough time getting the cigarette back on his lip. That's when I notice the bright yellow of a discarded Tonka truck at the base of the tree.

Suddenly, something else grabs the sheriff's attention; he becomes instantly alert. I get up and walk to the screen door. Terry follows me. In the distance, down the long yellow-red clay road I can see a cloud of dust coming closer and closer. I wonder if it's Frank coming to pick us up early and if he'll turn left at the fork. I'd hate for him not to find us. It's six or more miles back to where we're staying -- assuming we're not going to disappear. A very fine, large black car surges ahead of the dust. It's not Frank's beat up yellow Dodge, that's for sure.

The sheriff tosses his cigarette into the ashes of the house and walks to the front of the trailer just as the car barrels into his driveway, smashing into the pink flamingo, sending it flying several yards on to the lawn.

"It's a Rolls Royce Phantom IV!" Terry hisses into my ear. "There are only nineteen of them in the whole world. They're only sold to royal families or other heads of state. That baby can crawl slower than a man can walk for parades or go over one hundred miles per hour. Under that long hood it's got a 5675 cc B-80 engine with eight in-line cylinders, in a cast iron block with an aluminum alloy head, overhead inlet and side exhaust. The car is a four speed with a single dry plate clutch and hydraulic front and servo-assisted rear drum brakes. It looks like laundaulette coach work -- that's when there's a partition between the driver and the passenger, only used for limousine service. What . . . A . . . Beauty."

I'm amazed. Terry admitted that at Harvard he was carrying a "Gentleman's C." which meant as long as he shows up for every class he passes otherwise he'd flunked out freshman year. "How do you know all that?" I ask.

"My uncle Lesley owns a Silver Wraith. The Phantom IV is a lengthened and strengthened version of it. He took me with him when he picked it up and the dealer let me have some of the literature. I adore classic cars."

"I like the way the fender over the rear wheel is a short wave like a sideways comma and the front is a nice long sideways half question mark. I especially like the spare on the side in front of the running board. The lamp head lights are nice too."

Terry looks at me like it's my head that's ailing instead of my poor feet. For a change I wanted to keep up my end of the conversation. I guess I shouldn't have bothered.

"Did you notice that it's got Quebec tags," I ask.

"You're right. That's very peculiar," Terry marvels.

The front driver's side door opens and a huge figure disembarks. The very wide, very tall man is dressed despite the heat in a dark greenish-gray long trench coat and a gray snap-brimmed hat. He's a Negro so dark that, as my mother would say, he could leave finger prints on coal. He has a pink raised scar on his left cheek. He is in his late thirties. Mumbling to himself he rushes over to the flamingo. He picks it up and examines it. One leg is badly bent but the plastic shell is unharmed. The dark man reaches deep into the coat and pulls out a really weird looking wrench that reminds me of a drawing compass attached to needle nose pliers that have the pinchers perpendicular to the handle. He straightens the metal leg, walks back to the end of the driveway, and pushes the flamingo back into the yellow-red clay. Then he pats it with an ebony hand and replaces the tool in his coat.

The sheriff, while trying to peek into the smoked back windows to see who the passenger might be, watches all of this from the corner of his eye with steadily mounting anger. In a raspy voice he hollars, "Whatcha doin', Boy?"

The big man looks for a boy behind him. Seeing none, he softly replies in a shy but extremely deep voice with a mild French accent, "Excuse me, but perhaps you are talking to me?"

The sheriff walks close to the man and glares at him. The sheriff is tall but the top of his head only just comes to the black man's nose. "Yeah, Boy, you. What're you doing to my flamingo?"

The dark man is *very* apologetic, "I, uh, hit him. My driver was . . . killed last month. I haven't found a replacement yet. I am not a very good with my motor car. She confuses me." He pauses and looks down at the flamingo. "I think I fixed him, your flamingo that is. If he's not to your satisfaction I would be glad to purchase another for you." The dark man smiles.

The sheriff's face dissolves from wrath to utter shock as he realizes, "There's nobody in the back seat? That's *your* car!"

The dark man wipes a bug from the silver raven hood ornament and replies, "Ya."

The sheriff shifts from foot to foot. He examines the leather upholstery and speaks to the dark man from the corner of his mouth. "So, where did you get it? Steal it? Win it off a white man in a rigged poker game?" The sheriff runs his finger along the steering wheel. I can tell he'd really like to sit in the driver's seat, maybe as much as Terry who's panting low in my ear that the wheel is carved mahogany.

The dark man doesn't seem to get upset over these insults, "It was a gift from Queen Elizabeth in return for a small service I performed for her mother. I have the papers if you require them."

The sheriff walks around to the back of the car shaking his head. "Queen Elizabeth. *Right*. Uh-huh. Yeah, lemme see them papers."

The dark man reaches into the coat again, and the sheriff tenses. He fingers the air on the side of his belt. He eyes the door and frowns when he sees Terry and I standing in it. The dark man opens a leather portfolio and passes vellum documents to the sheriff.

The sheriff studies the forms. The dark man waits patiently until the sheriff finishes. He holds out the ebony hand to shake.

The sheriff ignores the hand and grunts, "I guess they look all official. Doesn't seem right though, a niggah owning a car as pretty as this one. What-cha doin' here, Boy."

"My name is Robert Anthony. I am seeking Sheriff Decatur Fairchild. A man in town told me he lived on this road. Do you know where I can find him?"

"I'm Sheriff Fairchild. What's your bid-ness with me?"

"I am a consulting detective. To that end I engage a clipping service that searches newspapers for accounts of certain strange events, inexplicable deaths, odd sightings, things of this nature. I have read of your difficulties. I wish to be of help in catching the fiend or fiends responsible, if I may."

Sheriff Fairchild is nonplused, "Help me. How?"

Mr. Anthony motions in the air with his hands while he speaks, "If I am right, there is a man in your town that I have pursued before. I could be of great aid in capturing him."

The sheriff looks like Mr. Anthony spat on him, "I don't know what you-all are talking about. And if I did things ain't so bad that I need the help of a niggah. Get back in your fancy car and fly the hell out of my county. Best keep goin' until you're outta Mississippi while you're at it."

It's Mr. Anthony's turn to be shocked and perplexed, "You refuse my help because of my race? But I know how this evil man thinks. We . . ."

The sheriff was on his way back to the trailer to see what we're doing in his home. He spins around. His face is a grimace. "*We* ain't doin' nothin', Boy. You get gone or I'll jail your black ass right this minute."

Mr. Anthony, flustered in his disbelief, stammers and stutters hurriedly, his foreign accent getting much thicker, "Listen to me: zee next victim will die in water. It will again seem like an accident but if you examine zee body closely *some-sing* will seem not quite right. It will be someone related to a person in your municipal government. Not very high up. Definitely not zee mayor. A clerk. That level. Most likely a female. In less than two days. I got here as soon as I figured it out. I wish I could have come sooner."

The sheriff lets out a tortured, snarling yell and heaves a tomato smack into Mr. Anthony's face. It hits his forehead with full force and splatters. Pulp, pips, and juice run down his wide nose and lips.

The sheriff growls, "I said leave, Niggah. I don't like repeating myself."

Mr. Anthony breaths in slowly. Despite the tomato and the insults he has kept his dignity and has regained his calm. He seems very apologetic that he must continue. He whispers, but even his whisper has power, "I understand. The second and third victims were mother and son. They were related to the head police official. They were shot and burnt to death. It is very sad. I am sorry, Monsieur Sheriff, *bon jour et bon chance*. I will be in town until the end of the week if you change your mind." Mr. Anthony gets in his car and jerkingly drives away.

The sheriff looks at the other tomato in his hand. He looks back at the departing car. He frowns, gulps air. From the way he holds his shoulders I can tell he's in lots of pain. He crushes the tomato and heaves the skin and seeds at the ground.

Aunt G. edges past us and goes to him. She takes him in her arms and coos, "Po' Caty, fo' a long time you needed someone to get really mad at. But why didn' you listen to him? He sounded like he knew what he was talkin' about."

"The whole town thinks I'm worthless these days. If I start listenin' to niggahs they'll fire me and get someone else. That's just the way things are. 'Sides how could he know any of that stuff?"

"Well, let's have dinnah. I made catfish, fresh caught this mawnin', an' we gots company."

"Aunt G., I'd rather not have tomatoes today."

She walks him back to the trailer. "That'd be just fine, Sugah."