

August, 1933

Jacques

It was a hot, still, muggy mid-afternoon when Atticus called me at home, the kind of hot mid-August day in New Orleans that puts you in mind of clams baking on a beach. Atticus was a fairly regular client of mine. Enough of a regular that I wasn't going to give him any grief for calling me during off hours, seeing as his business mostly kept the lights on, in both the office and at home. Worked out for him too, getting to concentrate on the legal aspects of the lawyer trade while I did any legwork that came up. Which usually meant digging up dirt before a business deal went through, tracking down whether a possible heir or two had predeceased his client, finding 'lost' or misplaced items and people, and the occasional bit of divorce work.

"Jacques! Sorry to call you on a Saturday. How are you? Are you in the city?"

"Just passing the time, Atticus, listening to some old Armstrong records. Figured I might be able to catch the Senators-Yankees game on the radio later."

"Any work going on?"

"Not at the moment, I am free if you got something for me."

"How do you feel about getting out of the city for a few days?"

"Business or pleasure, Atticus?" The man would drag out opening negotiations, but he paid well enough for the privilege.

"Oh, definitely business. Normally, I would handle it myself, but what with my wife passing," Atticus' voice still cracked a bit there, after all these months, "with the kids to take care of and all, I will have to contract this one out, if you do not mind."

"Don't mind at all. What did you have for me?"

"Well son, have you turned on the radio lately, heard this new Reverend out in the sticks, Dashiell May? The one out in Orleans parish?"

"Heard the name, although I can't say I've exactly been listening. Afraid they all sound alike to me." I was never sure if Atticus just wouldn't remember or couldn't believe my aversion to preachers.

"Oh yes, I understand – it is a matter of professional practice on my part, not actual attendance. Anyway, it seems there is been a spot of trouble out there. The Reverend's wife, Linda May, has asked me to ahh... proactively look into something gone wrong with his will. You see Rev. May was found shot in his home last night. Buckshot all up and down him."

"Oh my."

"He is not dead yet, but they cannot seem to rouse him. Even risked driving him all the way into the city, to bring him over to the New Orleans hospital. It is not looking good. But as a result, Mrs. May called me this morning, to let me know about the Reverend and asked me to read her the will he filed with me not a few weeks ago. Frankly it did not seem much to me while we were filing things out, but, well, the wording is providing us with some ah... problems. You have some paper and pencil?"

"Yes." I said, grabbing the pad and pen next to phone.

"Okay, write this down precisely, this is the clause that is giving us just fits over here. 'To my first wife, I bequeath all of my land holdings held in the name of the church and myself. To my second wife, I bequeath all livestock and farm equipment from my

various investments in the Orleans Parish area. To my third wife, I bequeath the sum total of my savings and income. All beneficiaries are to distribute money and holdings to the children as they deem fit and necessary.’ “

“Prolific gentleman.”

“Well, you see, Jacques, it’s pretty standard language for a will. But Linda, the Reverend’s, well, possibly soon to be widow, God forbid, seems to have never *heard* of any previous marriages and definitely unaware of any subsequent marriages, if you know what I mean. She also told me that an Ezekiel May has shown up, said he’s claiming to be the Reverend’s son, and was most emphatic that this boy must be a charlatan. This Ezekiel actually came by shortly after I got off the telephone with Mrs. May. He’s claiming to be the Reverend’s son from a previous marriage, back in Missouri, when the Reverend was in his 20s. Mrs. May is claiming she has never heard Dashiell mention this Ezekiel, even in passing, and wants me to investigate this issue proactively, before it all gets tied up in probate court for what could be *decades*.

“Atticus, aren’t you paid by the hour?”

“Out of the estate certainly. As generous as the Reverend has provided for his family, even his estate will not stretch that far and adequately provide for Mrs. Linda May and children. Much less after dividing it up three ways. None of that money would be available for her or the children’s use while this is in court. Plus, this scandal would be all my practice could be associated with. I would much prefer at least a semi-respectable clientele.”

“Alright, fair enough Atticus. This Ezekiel say who the previous wife is? Was?”

“The boy seems to be using the father’s last name, but he is claiming he is the son of a Jennifer Lee May from Missouri. That the two would have filed for divorce in, oh 1910 or so, when the Reverend would have been in his early 20s. I have a call up to Missouri, but you know how it is, being the weekend and all, I’ll be lucky to have confirmation of either the marriage or the divorce inside a week.”

“I’ve seen their files, I hope you’ve got a good friend up in those offices. Ezekiel say how he even know about you, Atticus?”

“Claims he got my name from Mrs. May, when she started screaming that she would set me on him. So Jacques, I truly need you out there – we have got to get a bead on this. Three wives, when I have only the two, and one unconfirmed at that. No idea who shot the man and a police investigation still ongoing. It’s quite troubling.”

“Yes, well, my rates haven’t changed.”

“Quite – I am hoping it will all clear up in a few days, but you will be cleared to keep working on this until we figure it out. Exclusively please.”

“Done and done, Atticus. I’ll head up now, let you know when I find anything.”

Johnny

My head was still poundin' with de high hangover of a good set from de night before. Plus, de truck had needed more coxing than usual this morning. None of which got me out to Orleans Parish and Reverend May's revival anywhere close to when Ah or de other boys Ah was ferrying should have been there to set up. Certainly made de sight of a whole bunch of de local church folk crowding around somebody at a podium while de rest of us hung out under de few trees dotting de field nearby, smoking instead of working, a stranger sight.

Rufus was de first to see us walking up. "What's up, Horn? Youse late."

"Yeah, yeah, new bassist last night kept de set going past closing time. What's going on over there?"

"Well, seems that there's, ah, some trouble with de honkies."

"You know what kind o' trouble?"

"Damn Reverend appears to have gotten his-self shot. Somebody mistook dat boy for a turkey."

Ah'd managed to get a light off of Lonnie by this point, but that near made me swallow my cigarette then and there.

"They breaking out de ropes for us just yet?" Ah muttered, coughing.

"Well, nope, no haven't heard any of 'em talking about de scary negro who must have done dis. Looks we best stay here. Appear as if, you know, we're willing to serve. You don't want to look suspicious when de white boys got de rope around, you know."

"That rope ain't never far from hand, no matter what we do." Ah sighed. "Anybody gone over there, heard what going on? See if we even got a job today?"

"Nah" Rufus drawled, "We'se waiting on you Horn, they talk to you whenever they want us to do something."

"Ah ain't exactly at my best right now, Rufus. Tell you what, you go over there and find out what's going on, Ah'll buy you a drink next time you come by de club."

"Oh, well hell, Ah'll go for a free drink." Rufus walked over, heading straight for de tent ties piled off de side of de podium. As usual, nobody really noticed him, beyond a glance from de speaker. Ah'd gotten that cigarette relit and a quarter gone before he came back over, practically stutterin' in excitement.

"They, they're offering a reward! Out of de church coffers they said, \$200 for *any* man dat can give evidence on who shot Reverend May. And, and he was real careful to say '*any man*'. Looked straight at me when he said it too. I don't know about y'all, I could use \$200."

An excited murmur broke out. Damn if everybody here couldn't use \$200.

"Ah hate Johnny Lee, fuck dat son of a bitch. Ah saw him come out of dat house there, how about you?" Ah looked around, that had come from James off in de middle of de crowd. A few murmurs of agreement started up before Ah managed to break in. James was *real* unpopular.

"Hold on, hold on. No, whoa. If we're gonna frame someone, and Ah'm not saying Ah'm opposed to framing someone, we can't just frame anybody. We have to get our facts straight because if they hit deception, they're gonna be none too pleased. As in, mobs, none too pleased."

“Well, whatcha saying we do then Horn?” Rufus hadn’t been one of the murmurers, but he had looked real contemplative about it.

“You know those white folks don’t pay attention to us while we work, Rufus. Why don’t we all keep our ears open today, while we set up de tent. Just, you know, pay attention. Listen in. Afterwards, we can talk it over and then, you know, if need be... we can cause de facts to match our information.” Ah tried catching everyone’s eye, get a sense of who was gonna go along with that. Christ, if \$200 wasn’t a lot of temptation to throw in front of a man, ‘specially one looking to feed their kids these days, like most of de folks here.

Also finally gave me a chance to really see who wasn’t there, and damn if Louis Finn wasn’t. Decent trombonist, we’d worked a couple funerals in New Orleans together. And unless he’d had de absolute worst luck in timing, something related to this mess must have happened to him last night, else he’d here. He’s regular like that.

Jacques

The drive out of the city didn’t show me anything new - the mosquitos still practiced aerial bombardment techniques on the pedestrians and flies harassed those the mosquitos missed. The surrounding parish alternated between soggy fields and the beginnings of swamp land. An hour out of town, on one of the few fields of truly dry land off the highway, stood the gigantic tent of the Unifying Word Revival church. A tall spindly broadcasting tower made out of a lattice of steel climbed towards the sky behind where the tent was going up, while a wooden stage squatted low in front. An elegant two story house was visible about a mile due west of the tent. I could see several white folks milling about in small clusters in front of the tent while a larger lot of black folks worked on putting it up.

The wealth the church must be pulling in practically floated in the air as I drove past the church and pulled up in front of the Mays’ house, the one off to the west. The house was a wooden, two story job, with a porch as deep and wide as the main house, with iron lattice arches holding up its second floor, built in the old plantation style. Wouldn’t surprise me if it actually was that old.

Mounting the stairs up, I knocked on the front door. The muffled sound of small feet running and excited chatter drifted through the door. I was raising my hand to rap on the door again when it slowly began to open. A small boy of no more than five stood in the doorway, one hand clutching the door knob above his head. His shorts and shirt were wrinkled in that way boys’ clothes do when they spend hours crawling around floors. His feet were bare but the clothes looked of good quality. His straight black hair was neatly trimmed and his face still held the chubbiness of the very young.

“Hello there, little man. Is your mother home?”

He turned back towards the interior without letting go of the doorknob. “Mom-my!” A woman’s voice came back “You can set the pies by the door!”

I peeked inside the doorway - a table under the front window was covered with more pies, cakes, and casseroles than the best stocked bakery would ever hold. Small bites were missing from nearly every pan.

“Ah, no pies ma’am, Mr. Rolands sent me here to help you.”

“Oh my, thank God you’ve come.” A woman, somewhere in her 40s, came through the doorway with two younger girls trailing behind her. She was maternally round, with brown curling hair framing the softness of her face, of average height, and wearing a brown dress underneath a long plain apron, wiping the flour off her hands on its long skirt as she walked in. The girls looked about 8 and 9 years old, brown haired with green eyes and black hair with brown eyes respectively. Mrs. May shooed the girls back into the kitchen and the little boy towards the back of the house before letting me in the door. There were children everywhere, running up and down stairs, playing with blocks on the floor, and generally lost within as much as creating the chaos in the house.

We shook hands hello as I continued, “I’m Jacques LeGrasse, the investigator Mr. Rolands hired to help you sort this issue out with the will. I am very sorry about your husband and truly do hope that he pulls through. Do you have somewhere we can talk?”

Any cheer she’d mustered fell from her face. “Oh, well I’ve been, I’ve been... keeping the children out of the study but... I suppose that’s the only place we’ll get any privacy.”

“Is that where you found him?”

“Yes, I’m, I’m afraid so” She said.

“I am sorry, ma’am, I know this must be extremely difficult for you, which is why I would like to get this resolved as quickly as possible for you. So far, it all sounds more like a bureaucratic problem than anything else.”

We were walking down a pale wooden hallway tastefully decorated with a crucifix, a few family photographs, and several oil paintings.

“Yes, I’m afraid, it’s all nonsense to me, the fact that Dashiell would have another woman, would stoop so low as to divorce, it’s unbelievable.” Looked like Mrs. May was the kind who got low, slow, and furious when angry. “That Ezekiel boy should have done his research before trying this kind of scam. It’s horrible considering where Dashiell is now to even think about a will.”

“So, just tell me in your own words what happened?”

“Well, I put the children to bed.”

“What time was that?”

“It was around nine. Then I stayed up and spoke with Dashiell. We read a couple of verses and we said our prayers and then I went up to bed. Dashiell usually stays up late Friday to night to prepare his sermon so that he can oversee erection of the tent and preparing the wireless on Saturday.”

“What time did you go to sleep then?” It’d been a while for me, but questioning a witness to a murder was much like riding a bike - difficult to forget how.

“It must have been, oh, 10, 10:30?”

“Alright.”

“In the middle of the night, I was dead asleep, I just heard the most thunderous crash. It was like the Lord was coming in through the roof. And that’s when I found, well, I’ll show you, we haven’t had time to clean it.”

She pushed the door open and waved me through. An ornate grandfather clock ticked softly in the far corner, by a heavy oak desk. A podium with an open Bible stood in front of the desk and next to an equally tall but small, square table, with several papers scattered about it. A comfortable looking rug stretched from the podium, in front

of the row of bookshelves along the far wall, down to the fireplace near the doorway. Two deep reading chairs sat against the wall, near the fireplace. What looked like it was intended to be a coat of arms hung above the fireplace - the one missing shotgun of two rather spoiled the effect. All together, it looked like a comfortable room of quiet opulence. Apart, that was, from the dried pool of blood on the rug in the middle of the room and the sprays of more blood across the Bible, desk and far wall.

"So Reverend May, he wasn't expecting anybody?" I said slowly, as I took in the scene.

"No, no sir."

"Anyone been making any threats? No one's been angry at him in the last few days?"

"No, not at- well that Ezekiel May's threatening my family, he's threatening to take my children's inheritance away." Mrs. May said indignantly as I went over to the fireplace. It was short affair all in brick, cleaned of any ash or soot. The mantle and remaining shotgun were similarly low, an easy grab for anyone even the taller children I'd seen in this house.

"The police take the other one of these, Mrs. May?"

"Yes, yes... they said it was the one that..." She trailed off as I looked back over. She was pressing her lips together and fighting back tears.

"Alright, this Ezekiel May then, he didn't contact you until after the shooting?"

"I'm told he's been around town for a number of weeks now. Trying to see Dashiell. Dashiell's a very busy man in the community. He visits the sick, he assists the poor, we have various charitable functions. He couldn't be bothered to see this, this con man and charlatan. And it appears that the moment, the very moment that Dashiell was shot, he gets this all fired idea that he's Dashiell's son, he is here to enact his inheritance and get what is rightfully his. It's all nonsense."

"I see. So, he would be the only person you could think of?"

"I imagine so." She sounded a lot more confident than that 'imagine' implied.

"Was anything missing?" The books over on the shelves on the far wall were, as expected, mostly theology. There were a few philosophical treatises and American authors mixed in there, including what looked like a Hawthorne, possibly first edition.

"No, no, not at all. We've checked everything, the police have been over with a fine-tooth comb, scaring the children. But this Ezekiel, it's all I can think of, it's just too convenient. He's just an appointment we can't keep on our calendar for a few weeks and then suddenly he's my husband's son, using our last name, it's awful. We have to discredit this fool, so that we can begin the real criminal investigation against him."

"Right. Did you receive any communication from him? Any letters, telegrams, or anything like that?"

"Oh, I don't read such nonsense." She said that with a small hand flutter, brushing away the very idea of such an unfeminine pursuit as business. "If we received anything, it would be in Dashiell's desk. He handles the affairs. All the business matters and the parishioners and so on. I help with the social side of the church community."

I started over towards the desk, asking "Alright if I take those letters? I might need them to confront this Ezekiel."

"Whatever you think is best." She was hanging in the doorway, with a slight tremble in her voice.

“Ma’am, I can look through his desk on my own, no need for you to force yourself to stay here. I’m sure your children could use you back in the kitchen.”

“Yes, yes then, let’s do that...” Mrs. May trailed off and headed back the way we had come.

Once she left, I moved to the pool on the rug and looked up. No stains directly above on the ceiling. But kneeling down and sighting down to the far wall showed sprays of blood climbing at least three-fourths of the way up. Whoever had shot the Reverend was a good deal shorter than him and had shot upwards. Based on those family portraits in the hall though, he was nearly 6 feet tall, so that didn’t rule out too many folks.

A quick glance at the podium and table in front of the desk showed the papers to be notes on and a draft of a sermon. Looked like this week would be on Genesis, Chapter 28.

The calendar on his desk was meticulous. Every soup kitchen appearance, parishioner visit and business appointment penciled in, not a single block of time between 7 in the morning and 8 in the evening unaccounted for. Atticus’s name was in there with the notation ‘will and notary’ - apparently when Atticus had said a few weeks ago, he’d meant two. So a very, very new will; I made a mental note to see if there’d been an older one and what it had said. Another meeting from two weeks before that caught my eye as well. It was unusual in that it was just a name, ‘Becky Sellers’, without any notation, nothing such as ‘sick’ or ‘marital counseling’ or what not.

Digging through the drawers, I found the usual desk detritus and eventually, in the bottom most drawer, shoved carelessly in the back, a pile of letters with the name ‘Ezekiel May’ in the return address. Gathering them all together, they made a sizable stack. More than would be reasonable to sort through here, so I tied them in a bundle to look through tonight at the hotel.

A thorough search of the rest of study showed nothing else of interest to me, so I threaded my way through the mob of children back to the kitchen. I scrawled the hotel I would be at on a card and handed it over to Mrs. May with instructions to leave a message for me, day or night, if she needed anything.

“Please sir, for my children, please find, discredit this man and protect my youngin’s and their future.”

“I’ll see what I can do, ma’am.”

“You sure you won’t stay for supper?”

“I wouldn’t dream of imposing on you at this time, ma’am. I will let you know what I find just as soon as I can.”

Johnny

Between de late start with all de excitement about shot Reverends, not having Louis around, and a couple o’ other folks disappearing after hearing about the Reverend, it was de hottest part of de day by de time de tent was up. Most of us had switched over to setting up de chairs when I noticed Mrs. Carter. Tall and willowy, she was sitting off by de organ. Her black hair hung like a curtain blocking off her face and her shoulders were shaking from trying to hold in de cryin’. De church organist, she was

one of de better folks here, making sure they included us in de potluck leftovers and some of de hand-me-downs made their ways to our kids. I headed over, to examine de tie-downs for de organ, mounted as it still was on a trailer.

“Mrs. Carter.” She jumped as if Ah’d shouted right in her ear instead of whispered while looking at de trailer. “You alright there, Mrs. Carter? There something wrong with de organ?”

Up close, from de side, it looked like she was in de middle of a good bout of hysterics. Tears were streaming down her face.

“Oh ohh, I’m sorry, it’s just ... everything, everything that’s happened. I’m sorry, I really can’t right now.”

“It’ll be alright, Mrs. Carter, de Lord watches over his own.” Unfortunately, that didn’t seem to help much as her sobs started to become audible instead of just wracking.

“Get on away from here boy, my wife is in trouble, can’t you see that?” Ah damn near jumped out of my skin at de sound of Mr. Carter’s voice. A real big, broad man, he’d come up from de mess of parked cars off behind de organ trailer without me hearing him. It wasn’t just him coming up silently that startled me, this was de first time I’d seen him here. He’d only shown up at de church when he picking Mrs. Carter and de organ up after services on Sundays.

“Just trying to help, sir.”

“I can see that boy and it’s appreciated, but there’s not much you can do.” Like most of de folks around here, Mr. Carter was good at de dismissing. “Don’t you have work to do?”

“Yes sir, of course.”

Ah walked off a few paces until Mr. Carter was concentrating on de Missus and ducked behind de trailer, where de radio equipment was laid out on a table. It let me stay in earshot while Ah checked de connections between microphone and transmitter. Or pretend to anyway. Given that Mr. Carter was keeping it to a furious whisper, Ah couldn’t have gone any farther.

“Mary Beth, you have to pull yourself together, this is looking shameful.”

He wasn’t having any more luck getting her calmer than Ah had.

“Mary Beth, God damn it, you are going to ruin everything for us. These church folk are going to natter into the night about this nonsense. You need to go home. The organ will take care of itself.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just, it’s just so hard.” She was matching him in whispering, if not tone - sad and ... grief-stricken, Ah supposed, to his wrath.

“Mary Beth, God damn it, I swear if you ruin this for me, I will destroy you. You have no idea what you are doing, you need to go home, I will handle things.”

Ah kept real still at that one. Mrs. Carter continued crying as she walked off to their truck. Mr. Carter turned and headed towards a cluster of some of the local folk.

Jacques

Some enterprising soul had built a small hotel near the closest cluster of dwellings to the Unifying Word Revival Church. Despite being only three or so years old, it still looked like it had seen better days. Some of the boards on the porch needed replacing or at least a few more nails keeping them down. The humidity was cracking and peeling some of the paint outside. Inside, the rooms, though tidy, were just big enough to put you in mind of a sweatbox even if the windows tried to let in enough air to dispel that. It was basically big enough to drop a small suitcase and collapse on the bed. If the desk chair was pushed all the way under the tiny desk.

I didn't bother with the desk and spread out the letters from Reverend May's on the bed. I spent several sweating minutes getting them arranged by the date this Ezekiel had sent them. It looked like they had started three years ago, about when the Reverend got his radio show going. It all looked fairly civil too by the tone, just a kid trying to reach out to someone who might have answers. Each of the early letters looked like they had gone through at five or six different forwarding addresses before getting to the May's house. Ezekiel had spent a considerable amount of time working his way through the chain of forwarding addresses, even when the whole thing was suddenly rearranged. The letters were getting a good bit more uncivil over time and unraveling of this absurdly long route they took to reach the Reverend. Whatever his reason, Rev. May had been actively trying to avoid or deceive this Ezekiel for years, via the postal system. And he had it set up before Ezekiel ever reached out.

The letters matched up with what Atticus had told me. Ezekiel claimed to be the son of a Jennifer Lee May, nee Weaver, who had returned to her maiden name after the divorce. Supposedly, Jennifer Lee died of typhus about five years ago without telling Ezekiel much about his daddy beyond that he was a preacher named Dashiell May and the two of them had divorced in their 20s, shortly after the wedding - she never explained why. The latter letters, when Ezekiel seemed to have realized that Rev. May was avoiding him, started including how hard it had been for his mother to raise him on her own, how his mother's death had been so hard on him, there had been no relatives who could take him in for any long period of time, how he'd been afraid of starving. How his father not making good meant he'd been living alone and without education. Obviously other than being able to read and write. Reasonably good spelling too. The letters from the past few months had started talking about how Ezekiel would get his, that the Reverend owed him and that there would be a reckoning. They stopped a couple weeks before the Reverend had been shot, but honestly between the bouncing through forwarding addresses and the general state of roads around here, I couldn't tell if the letter or Ezekiel had gotten to town first. Or when either had arrived relative to May changing his will on file with Atticus.

I headed out of that sweatbox and back down to the lobby to find a phone. The hotel telephone was off in another sweltering corner of this heatbox of a hotel but it at least afforded a little privacy in the midst of the open lobby. Luckily for me, and getting out of this heat faster, Atticus picked up quickly.

"Atticus, it's Jacques. Just got back from Mrs. May's and reading a stack of letters from the possible son."

"Anything in that?"

“Other than that this Ezekiel’s been writing to the Reverend for roughly three years and that it looks like the Reverend had a whole system set up to try and avoid Ezekiel in place before the boy ever wrote? Yeah actually, the last few letters got pretty threatening. No mention if the ‘reckoning’ he was swearing to bring down on the Reverend was supposed to be physical or exposing the previous marriage. Has this Ezekiel been in contact with you at all, told you where he’s staying?”

“Oh yes, let me see... ach, he’s in your hotel actually. Room 312.”

“Thanks. When did you talk with him?”

“This morning, shortly after Mrs. May called me, informing me of the shooting. We met directly before I called you.”

“Ah, understood. So, the Reverend had an appointment marked in his calendar two weeks ago for ‘will and notary’ with you. Was he creating a will for the first time, or was this a revision?”

“No, it was a revision. And before you ask, none of the previous wills left anything to anyone other than the current Mrs. May. She was mentioned by full name, married and maiden, in those.”

“Wills plural?”

“Oh yes, he liked to come in once or twice a year to update the holdings and things that would be passed down. Good customer that way.”

“I’d imagine. No one else mentioned in the previous wills, in any way?”

“Oh no, none. I assumed of course that he had some marital indiscretions in his past, which obviously be worth hiding since that sort of thing tends to send the flock into disarray. But this three wife thing is beyond the pale, I don’t know where to begin! Still waiting on Missouri, but my friend contacted me, he thinks he’ll be able to get something for me tomorrow.”

“Let me know when you hear anything. So the Reverend never mentioned this Ezekiel to you, even if he didn’t put him in the will? Never mentioned that they’d been corresponding for years?”

“Years? Oh lord no, this man came out of the woodwork this morning. He was calling on me, Mrs. May was calling me in hysterics. Ever since the shooting, he has been clamoring for what he feels is his rightful part of the pie. I have to, by law, divulge this to him if its proven that he is a son and he has a very legal claim. If indeed Dashiell was married to this Jennifer Lee, Ezekiel can very well make the claim that she is the first wife and that as executor of her estate, all landholdings of Dashiell May, and let me tell you they are sizable, the church is a considerable power out there, that all will be bequeathed instantly to Ezekiel May as the executor of Jennifer Lee’s estate. He stands to make quite a bit of money off of this *if* he can prove that Jennifer Lee is the first wife.”

Atticus could get going on a topic. Best thing was to just jump to another. “There was a meeting with ‘Becky Sellers’ on the calendar for four weeks ago. That mean anything to you?”

“Oh no, Dashiell never mentioned. Although now that I think back, he did seem very excited when he came to our meeting. He said he was entering a new chapter in his life and he wanted to make sure his whole family was taken care of.”

“Well, isn’t that interesting. He give any indication he was planning to divorce Mrs. Linda May? Marry someone new?”

“Oh no, definitely not,” Atticus sounded a bit indignant, “he most definitely would have come to me for that work. No, said the family was increasing and everyone should be provided for.”

I paused, thinking about that, but nothing slid into place. “Atticus, what is Mrs. May trying to prove, keeping Ezekiel out of the will, wouldn't it just change which portion she's getting?”

“Not sure, Jacques, I always dealt with the Reverend, so I am afraid I do not know her very well. Does not matter for my job though, I just need to identify who the Reverend intended to pass things to.”

“And if they can't be?”

“In that case, it will most likely depend on the judge, Jacques. Probably, the current will will be declared invalid and Mrs. May will inherit everything under the previously filed will or as the closest relative. But I cannot guarantee that, as I said, it will depend on the judge - they could order us to keep searching.”

“Alright.” That made a lot more sense than anything else in this mess had so far. “You heard anything from the police, they get any fingerprints off the shotgun?”

“Oh sure, but you know how long those things take to cross-reference with city's files, much less the State's.”

“True, but they're always nice for confirmation and trials. I'll go talk to this Ezekiel, let you know what I find out there.”

A knock at 312 produced some shuffling and clinking noises before it opened. The man in the doorway was bleary eyed, unshaven, no more than 19 or 20 years old and 5 foot 8 in his stocking feet. Not that he had on more than a pair of boxers, a thin undershirt, and strong waft of booze. Thin and slight, I could believe he had been very underfed for years.

“Ezekiel, Ezekiel May?” I asked.

“Yes, who is it?” There was a hint of a slurring to his words. A couple more drinks would probably tip him into a full on drunk.

“My name's Jacques LeGrass, I'm-”

“Look,” he was practically snarling, “if you're another one of those sons of bitches from the church trying to save my soul, you can just shove it.”

“No, I'm sure your soul's your own business. I'm just trying to find out what's going on here. Tell me, Ezekiel, can I call you Ezekiel?, I've been doing a little reading-”

“How do you know my name?”

“You're quite the letter writer, aren't you?”

“Oh, let me guess, Mr. Investigator, the poor grieving widow, soon to be, has hired you to discredit me as the right Reverend Dashiell May's son. Well, let me tell you, I wish you could make that true, I wish I wasn't that son of a bitch's son. But the God's truth is that I am and that I am owed by that bastard, dead or alive. So you just go ahead and fucking investigate.” He suddenly seemed to deflate. “Might as well come in and ask your questions. I got nothing to hide. Sooner you figure that out, sooner that lawyer will have to get me my share.”

Other than the four empty liquor and beer bottles in his trashcan, 312 looked just like my room. Ezekiel grabbed his glass off the nightstand by the bed, while I settled into the desk chair.

“Why don’t you tell me your story, Ezekiel? You started talking to him three years ago. Looks like, by the forwarding addresses, Dashiell didn’t want to be reached.”

He snorted “No shit,” before taking another sip from his glass.

“Looks like at some point he seemed to change his mind. Two weeks ago he changed his will. Mentioned all his wives. Did you know that he mentions three wives in the will?”

“He does?!”

“Yeah.”

“Well, wouldn’t surprise me, the son of a bitch,” Ezekiel groused.

“You don’t know who this third one could be?”

“No, no I didn’t know there was one between Mom and the current Mrs. May.”

I interjected “Why you assuming there was one between your mother and the current one?”

Ezekiel looked a bit blank “How else he fitting in a third one? Still married to this one. Hell, I didn’t know that he was still alive, how I’m gonna know who he’s married when? Mom told me that he was dead, until she was on her death bed. And then I find out that he just disappeared one day on her. I don’t know anything else about it and I can’t get any information out of him. I gave the son of a bitch the benefit of doubt, you read the letters. But you don’t go through that many fake addresses and trying to run from a man that’s your son unless you have something to hide. It doesn’t surprise me. I should own a post office, as many fucking post masters’ palms I’ve greased to get here. It’s ridiculous what the guy went through to get away from me.”

“Might ridiculous to keep chasing him, maybe?” I said gently.

“What else I got to do? No schoolin’, no trade, no one hiring these days, specially not a skinny bastard like me - everyone wants the big guy who can lift a bale in one hand and horse in the other. He’s my da, whether he stuck around long enough to raise me or not. Has a Christian duty to do right by me, yeah?”

“Alright, you ever meet him?”

Ezekiel snorted. “Never even got close. His cronies would push me away when I came to his fire and brimstone sermons. I couldn’t get close to his house without having one of the sons waiting on the porch for me with a gun, saying to get off the property unless we were there on church business. I never got even near him.”

“It look to you like they knew who you were?”

“I know *he* did. I don’t know about the women or the ushers. Maybe I was just another one, another follower from that radio show trying to get to the *great man*.” He put a solid hit of contempt on those last two. “He has lots of followers from that radio show, they’re gonna run a rerun tonight apparently if you want to hear it. Seems y’all like that down here.”

“Not all of us.”

“Yeah well... You’re one of the good ones then. Want a drink?”

“Yeah, sure.” Ezekiel seemed like the kind of person who wouldn’t trust someone who would drink with him.

He rooted around the nightstand for another glass, then poured a shot of a clear liquid from a large bottle pulled out from under the bed. I took a sociable sip and immediately had to keep from choking on it. If this was the rotgut he was drinking regularly, he might just be drinking himself to death before the will ever made it through

probate. That was some awful moonshine whisky - I had drunk bathtub gin brewed better near a decade ago.

"I'm sure the police have already talked to you, but just entertain me for novelty's sake. Where were you the night the Reverend got shot?" Murdering the Reverend certainly would invalidate any claim he could make on the will, son or not. Might help out Atticus, certainly be what Mrs. May wanted.

That got a soft laugh out of him. "Really, you think I did it?"

"Well, his family certainly wants to. She does play the grieving widow pretty well, but you know how it is down here, what with all our church and all that, we have to lay the blame on someone."

He chuckled softly before saying "Well I'll tell you what, I was in New Orleans the night of the shooting, because I'd had enough of that bastard. I don't remember much what I was doing, I just know I was in the city, down at one of the clubs. If you want confirmation, you can ask the officer that dragged me out of the gutter and into the drunk tank."

"That officer have a name?"

"Uh... Carmodie." Ezekiel paused for another sip from his glass. "He was rocking his beat, you can ask the New Orleans PD, I was in town all night."

"So, when you'd find out he'd been shot?"

"That morning - after I got out of the tank, I went back out there to try and talk to him again. The police were swarming the place and Mrs. May was outside talking with someone not in uniform. So when they asked what I was doing there, I told them the truth, I was the Reverend's son. Mrs. May started screaming at me how I was a liar and a charlatan, and how the family lawyer would make sure I never got anything. The cops dragged her off and another one asked me where I'd been last night. Told him what I told you, then headed out to find a phone and call that lawyer she was screaming about. A ... Rolands, I think."

So far, his story was matching up with the timeline Atticus gave me. "Alright, I figured. Usually in these situations, when one spouse gets killed, you look at the other one first. Anything else you want to add? Like what else you been doing here, just trying to get a hold of him? Any other business?"

"It's a full time job let me tell ya. I ain't got no schooling, I ain't never had nothing handed to me my whole life 'cause I never had no daddy, Mom was scraping by and this is my one chance to get what's owed me and make a life, so I got nothing but time on my hand. That son of a bitch wakes up, I'll start all over again, buckshot or no."

I didn't think this boy would make the most observant of witnesses, but truly, had to try: "Have you learned anything else about Rev. May, any of his other proclivities?"

"Proclivities? He's a son of a bitch!"

He meant it about that lack of education. "Hobbies? Businesses? He has a lot of charities and everything. You've been watching him."

"You should see them pass the hat around on a Sunday. I bet when they get the news that he's in the hospital tomorrow, that he could buy a bank for what they're gonna give him in good Christian charity. I ain't seen none of those people in there with shoes on their feet, all them look half-starved. It's not going back to the congregation, I'll tell you that much. You don't got to be no detective to figure that out."

“Do you know any of the names of the cronies, the ushers? You said the sons, you got any of their names, any of them been giving you a hard time?”

“No, they’re younger than me and they ain’t grown yet. Teenage boys, barely.”

“Alright. What about the church cronies?”

“Deacons. They’re ushering you straight to hell out of the tent.” Didn’t sound like Ezekiel’d ever been interested in getting anyone’s name. Rather focused kid, maybe fixedated.

“Alright, well I’m right down the hall if you think of anything, Ezekiel. I’m just trying to figure this wives thing out, what’s going on. It’ll be no skin off my nose what happens one way or the other, I get paid either way.”

“You go ahead and find out, I’ll get paid either way too.”

I chuckled and saluted with the shot glass of awful ditch whisky. “I’ll drink to that.”

A couple hours after dinner, one made most necessary by that awful booze, I headed back out to the church tent. They were having a candlelight vigil for Reverend May; seemed like the perfect time to hear all the church gossip.

There were a lot of skinny children with pretty vacant eyes and no shoes wandering around. It was pretty easy to pick out the May children, and not just from the nicer clothes. Looking around, I think fully half or more of the folks were there for their first square meal in a while. Most of the folks in line for the potato soup and a lot of folks heading up to the podium were in the overalls without shirts crowd. The testimonials up at the podium centered on a theme of times the Reverend got the demons out or visited Grandma before she died. Lots of prayers for his quick recovery, too.

“Hello there, young man!” An older lady, bent over to no more than two-thirds my height, was at my elbow. “I don’t believe I’ve seen you here before.”

“Good evening ma’am. This is my first time here; I’ve been kinda wandering around, trying to find work. Just back recently. How are you? Holding up alright, with all this to do?” Never hurt to butter up the older church ladies - they almost always knew the local gossip and loved talking about it.

“Oh these are tough times, but we’ll always pull through before.”

“I’ve been looking for a friend of mine, Mrs. Sellers. You haven’t seen her tonight, have you?”

“Oh, Becky? She was here earlier, surprised me.” She had a hint of glee underneath the surprise, like every other little old lady with some particularly juicy bit of gossip they wanted to share that I had ever had the ‘good’ fortune to run into. Good informants, grating on the nerves.

“Why’s that?”

A glint of glee shone in the old lady’s eye. The bit about the twinkle in the eyes of an older lady, lost my belief in that less than a year on the job. I always seemed to run into the gossiping and pot stirring version. “Oh, she’s a bit spotty in her attendance, one of those fly by night Christians, if you know what I mean. No account living in the sw- I mean I shouldn’t speak poorly, you know. She always has the opportunity to bath in the light of the Lord, you know, and that’s all we can provide, is the opportunity, as the good Reverend May would say. But, no, no account living in the woods, her poor daughter has never seen the inside of a school house. Hardly takes her daughter to church except for ...- it’s very sad. You know, I see her maybe twice a month, she’s... very

spotty attendance. But Claudette's a very lovely girl. Although Mrs. Sellers has been, now that you mention it, attending more recently, she's been taking care of herself, it's nice to see that the Reverend has made a difference in her life."

"Oh, the Reverend find her work with one of the charities or something?"

"No, no, I just imagine it's been the grace of the Lord. She would often talk with the Reverend after services and it appears she has seen the way and been taking care of herself."

"But she still isn't bringing young Ms. Sellers to service? That's a shame," I sighed.

"Oh no, Mrs. Seller's been bringing her girl more often as well. Although I haven't seen her here tonight. Rutherford, have you seen the Sellers girl tonight?!"

Rutherford was a portly man, no more than 100 feet away. Yet both of them needed to shout to each other.

"Noooo." Okay, bellow was probably more accurate when it came to Rutherford.

"What?!"

"No, woman!"

My informant turned back to me, "Yes, we haven't seen her tonight."

"I've been away for quite a while, does she talk with anybody else? Anyone who could help me find her?"

"Who?"

"Either Mrs. or young Ms. Sellers."

"Ohhh, I don't know." The church lady clicked her tongue a couple times, then said "Mrs. Sellers has a friend, Mrs. Judith Powell - I think she's over there at the potato soup line. Sadly, Ms. Sellers doesn't seem to have made any friends here."

"Thank you, ma'am. I'll see if Mrs. Powell can direct me to Mrs. Sellers."

The lady my gossipy informant had pointed out was one of the volunteers serving soup. With an air of being worn out from a great loss but starting to recover, she had a smile and quiet word with each of the folks in line. Of average height, with brown eyes and hair, drab shoes, and sturdy dress, she looked half a step up the social ladder from the soup line.

"Hello, Mrs. Powell is it?"

She looked up as I approach behind the table. "Uh, yes. I think we have a little bit left."

"Oh no, ma'am, thank you. Actually, I have been hired by the May's family to look into some matters relating to the shooting. I'm trying to get a sense of everybody who is here, and if there's ... just a lot of unanswered questions. You know Mrs. Becky Sellers, right?"

"Yes, Mrs. Sellers is a childhood friend." Mrs. Powell gave me the once over. "Is Mrs. May okay with this? She's off at the truck, I- I- shouldn't she be here?"

"I've already spoken with her today; I'm trying to bother her as little as possible given the circumstances. I was hired by their attorney, actually."

"Oh, Mr. Mason!" she exclaimed.

Apparently I didn't look quite respectable enough to not be tested. "Has the family hired a second attorney...? I'm here on behalf of Mr. Atticus Rowlands."

“Ah, yes, Mr. Rolands. I *am* sorry for fibbing, we have to do what we can to protect the church and the community. You know, the forces of evil are everywhere and we need to be careful in this delicate time.”

Personally, I blamed those new pulp magazines - everyone's started thinking they can be a detective.

“Newsies troubling you already?”

“A few. You were asking about Mrs. Sellers?”

“Oh yes,” I said, “I am sorry to possibly pry, but do you know what Mrs. Sellers was talking to the Reverend about after the services?”

“You can't think Becky had anything to do with the shooting!”

“Which is why I need to find out why they were talking so often, so I can prove that. I'm afraid policemen are a very suspicious lot.” The better ones anyway, in my experience.

“Well, Mrs. Sellers was very concerned with the Reverend about the state of Ms. Sellers. When we would talk afterwards at the meals, when she would come, she's very prideful it's hard for her to take charity. She was concerned about the state of Ms. Sellers' soul and her future. And she was discussing that with the Reverend. Like I said, she's a very proud woman, so most of the talk was in private. They would either retire to the May household or they would speak after most of the parishioners left.”

“Did the Reverend have a special interest in Ms. Sellers?”

“Yes, she was unschooled, you know Mrs. Sellers did the best she could but ...”

“Did the Reverend do that often, does he try to focus his charity on specific children or is this the only one?”

Mrs. Powell got a bit pensive. “Well now that you mention it, it does seem a little bit strange, the Reverend is all about reaching out to the masses. You know, as with our radio show. Have you heard it before this? The Unifying Word Radio Hour, it's quite wonderful. We do a number of public service works for, you know, the hard times but no, he takes a personal interest in all but mostly his busy schedule demands he concern himself with the larger picture. It was a bit strange to spend so much time.. but her soul must have been very troubled.”

“Of course. Do you know how Mrs. Sellers met the Reverend? They just show up at the services, you told them the good word...?”

“They came, they weren't very religious before the crash, but they came for the food and they stayed for the salvation. Oh, there's Mrs. Sellers coming in now.”

The apparent Mrs. Sellers was coming towards the tent from the impromptu parking lot out in the fields. It looked like she was angling to intercept Mrs. Mays on her way back from one of the trucks of food.

“Thank you ma'am, you've been a great help.” I tossed over my shoulder, heading out towards the car lot.

Becky Sellers, judging by her dress, didn't look like she needed the soup line anymore. Still bedraggled and pretty skinny, especially for her tall frame, but definitely getting enough recently. Certainly enough to buy a new dress and necklace that, while not setting any fashion trends, would not have been out of place down in the city.

One of the deacons stopped her before she even got in earshot of Mrs. May and gently ushered her around the tent. I had to admire his skill, that had been very smooth, a very tasteful intercept and block.

I could hear that they were in a low voiced argument. But completely misjudged how far around the corner they were and accidentally stepped into their line of view as Mrs. Sellers saying "I need to speak with her, you don't understand, there's a -". The deacon obviously saw me and cut their conversation off: "Ma'am it would be best for you to join the rest of the congregation" and ducked right back into the tent. Mrs. Sellers looked like she would have liked to stomp, but settled for stalking back off towards the parking lot, just seeing.

Hurrying to catch up, I called "Excuse me, ma'am. Are you alright?"

She didn't break stride at all. "No, I'm just very torn up about the Reverend."

"I am sorry about that. Are you a friend of his, are you family?"

"We're all friends of him, he's a great man and a great spiritual leader." That was through some rather clenched teeth on her part.

"Ah, I see. I'm sorry to keep bothering you but could you answer a few questions?"

"I'm afraid I don't have the time, I need to get home to my children." We'd made it over to the cars and trucks by now.

"Oh, well, it's alright Becky, I'll try to find you later, ask you then."

She finally stopped dead in her tracks and turned back. "Excuse me, do I *know* you?"

"Mrs. Becky Sellers, I assume."

"Have we met before?"

"No, we haven't. I'm Jacques LeGrasse. I've been hired to look into the shooting. Clear up a few matters. You were married to Reverend May?"

"*Excuse me?*"

For all her outrage at that one, there wasn't any shock. Somehow or other, it wasn't out of left field. Also, it didn't scare her, which if she wasn't tied to the Reverend in some way, it definitely ought to have.

"It didn't work out then, you were divorced from him? Or was it annulled?"

"I- I- I don't know what you're talking about."

I walked closer, angling a bit so she was caught between me and one of the near by cars before slamming my open hand on the window by her. "Look Mrs. Sellers, you're on the Reverend's calendar very shortly before he was shot, a man who was paying a lot of attention to your daughter. So would you just answer my goddamn questions with a straight yes or no before we have to get the police involved here?"

"Oh God, I, um, I, um sir I don't, I think you've mis-, I have to find my, I have to find my child, I have to find, I mean, I mean I get home to my children and I really, I really need to go." She sprinted past me towards a nearby, beat up truck, coated in mud, and scrambled into the driver's side.

I shouted towards her retreating form "You trying to help or to find your child? Or is it children?" She just started the truck.

It was depressing how often intimidating people worked. And now I had to go shadow someone, at night, in the middle of the countryside. Which would be damned impossible without being noticed if there wasn't a full moon out. That just meant I had a chance.

Mrs. Sellers must have been really rattled, because there was absolutely no one else on either the highway or road into the swamp she turned off onto and she really should have been able to spot me.

About twenty minutes down the dense swamp road, she stopped and cut her lights. About 500 feet back, I pulled over, cut my engine, and eased out the door. The swamp canopy coverage was dense enough that, even with the full moon, I really needed that flashlight I kept in the car for these situations. Sticking to the road, I carefully made my way up until it dead ended. The truck I'd followed was out front of an awfully dilapidated shack - everything was listing away from the road towards the swamp waters right behind it. It was just the one truck out front. There weren't any children's toys, or clothes, or any other signs of youngins living there, anywhere I could see. The shack door had slammed shortly before I'd gotten to the end of the road. There was at least one lantern coming on from inside, only one silhouette at the windows, and only one voice going at a continuous low mutter.

Playing the flashlight over the interior of the truck's cab showed a newish looking Bible and several old, crumpled or wrinkled newsletters. Quietly testing the passenger side door showed it was unlocked. I slowly eased it open just in case it would creak. A closer look at the newsletters showed they were all from the Unifying Word Revival Church. A photograph was stuck in the Bible like a bookmark - pulling that out revealed a staged family portrait from a photographer's studio. It showed Mrs. Sellers and an eight year-old girl in what were obviously their Sunday best, even if that best was fairly raggedy. The child was fair haired, short, and sported a very happy grin, while Mrs. Sellers held to an attempt at a dignified neutral expression. Written on the back was 'Becky and Claudette, 1928' meaning this Claudette would be about 13 now.

I froze as a sudden crash came from the house. It sounded like a glass smashing against a wall. The mutter from inside was faster and louder now, but still indistinct. This seemed like a good time to head back out. Mrs. Sellers likely had a shotgun or two, living this far out, and I did not want to test her aim, especially if drunk.

Johnny

De club was swinging with a full crowd and we'd found a good rhythm, keeping de crowd hopping. Ah'd managed to put aside near-dead preachers and just right strange church folks for a couple hours and just flow through de music. Before, that is, Ah spotted Louis Finn at de bar. Shouldn't have been surprised, most of de guys from de city who worked at de Reverend's hung out here. Perks of being de bus to and from there Ah suppose, bringing in more folks for de club. Next break de band took, Ah worked my way up to de bar, right next to Louis.

"Bubba, glass of water please."

"Staying sober tonight Horn?"

"Nah, just flyin' on music."

Louis didn't even turn to look at me. Didn't look like he'd even heard it was me, even though Bubba and Ah had to shout to hear each other. Usually de most open and cheerful person Ah knew, now Louis looked completely withdrawn. Haggard.

"Louis." Nothing. "Louis!"

He startled and it took a second or two for him to come back from wherever he'd gone. "Oh Horn! Sorry, didn't see you dere." Given de slurs on those 's's there and how Louis held his alcohol, he was probably 4 drinks down.

"Funny Louis, Ah didn't see you today either. At de church? You know, where we have our *jobs*? Where de hell were you?"

"Oh, oh man, Ah'm, Ah'm, Ah'm sorry." Louis shift in his seat, real uncomfortable like. "Something came up, something came up Horn. It won't happen again. Ah'll be dere next weekend, Ah promise. It's just you know how things can get, you... things just got crazy."

"Come on man, we all had to do more work since you weren't there. And cover for you so you'd still have a job next weekend. What happened?"

"Ah, Ah can't really talk 'bout it Horn. It was a strange night, you know, one of dem nights you just end up somewhere you never wanted to be. It's crazy."

Ah signaled Bubba for another round for Louis. "Here Louis, drink this, steady up. Talk to me. Tell me what happened. We have to help each other out, 'cause sure ain't nobody else going to. But Ah *can't* help if Ah don't know what's going on."

"Oh, thanks Horn, thank you. Ah appreciate it, you've always been good to me Horn, Ah appreciate it. Ah'll be dere next Sunday, Ah promise, Ah'll be dere. So don't you worry none, it's just something come up you gotta roll with it."

"Lou-is..." Ah knew there was more than crossness tinging my voice.

"Well, it was a lady, you know how de ladies are, you gotta, gotta... beckon when they call and whatnot." Apparently he wasn't drunk enough that one more would get him talking. God damn, I hoped scaring him was going to work.

"Louis, either that was de worst lay of de century or you are *lyin'* to me. And Ah am losing all patience. So you either tell me right. now. or Ah am going to de church and making sure you don't have that job no more."

"Oh don't do dat Horn, you've got to trust me. Please don't do dat. It's, it's nothing really. Ah- Ah- ah, just Ah swore to God Ah wouldn't tell."

Oh hell, maybe he was far enough down that he wouldn't remember me lyin' to him later. Or find out. About getting him fired or this one. Ah leaned in real close and whispered damn near in his ear "Louis, there is a *dead* guy out there and they know you weren't at work today."

Louis nearly spilled his glass. "Oh Jesus Christ, he died? Oh God almighty, oh Lord."

"So tell. me. Let me help you, okay? You know Ah don't want to see any of us mixed up in this here pile." He was definitely going to be right pissed later if he remembered me tellin' him. But it seems to be working for now.

"Oh God, okay, we got to go somewhere safe, Ah'm gonna be at de end of a rope on dis shit."

"My car's out back, you can tell me in there. It'll just look like we're heading out for a leak."

"Okay, okay..."

In de minute, two minutes, it took to get him through de crowd and out back, his hands had started shaking and his eyes had gone saucer-plate wide.

The Wages of Sin

“O-o-okay, Ah, Ah, Ah went out to de church early, de gig Ah got got canceled, uh...turns out de guy wasn't dead and dere weren't no funeral to pay for, so Ah went out early. Ah was out dere, Ah stay with Bethany in de quarters at de May's place.”

“Those little places way out back, over de hill? De old slave quarters?” I asked.

“Yeah, she works up at de house, does de washing, rents out one of dose ... Ah'm driving up dere real late, like 1 or 2 and Ah'm passing de May's place, de big house yeah? and Ah just hear an explosion. Ah heard gunfire. And then out de porch runs dis little girl, she can't be more than 13, 14, little white girl just sprinting out of de house just in hysterics, crying, her clothes all torn up, covered in blood, screaming bloody murder, saying dat if she didn't get out of dere, they were gonna kill her and Ah, Ah didn't know what to do, so Ah-Ah-Ah just grabbed her and we ran. Ah didn't do anything to her, youse got to trust me Horn, Ah didn't touch dat girl, Ah did everything Ah could to help her, she said she had to get to de city. Ah dropped her off in de District, Ah haven't seen her since. It's, it's just torn me up something awful, Ah have no idea what's going on.”

“Okay, okay... Oh sweet Jesus...” Ah was more than afraid. Why couldn't he have had de damn sense to drop her off *anywhere* other than our District?

“Ah swear to God Horn, Ah didn't do anything, Ah swear, you got to trust me, Ah didn't touch her!”

“Ah believe you! Really! Just.. oh Christ, where'd you drop her off? Exactly?”

“In front of dat club over on Blenville and she just went through de streets, she said she didn't have no family here.”

“Alright, alright. Come on back inside, let's get another drink, figure this out...” Hell, this point *Ah* needed a stiff drink.

De second we got back in, Bubba motioned for me to get back on stage, it was time for another set. Ah handed off Louis to Bubba, asked him to keep an eye on Louis, let him sleep it off in de back tonight if he needed to. Then Ah had to try an' think while staying on tune - trumpets an' thinkin' 'bout anything else just don't mix too well. Ah wasn't about to ask a whole bunch of folks to start looking for this kid, that'd alert too many folks there was an underage white girl wandering around de jazz district... Which meant Ah was going to have to get Louis to sober up enough to give me a decent description and go look for her myself. It was going to be a long, long night.

Jacques

A slightly scandalized bellhop pounding on my door the next morning informed me there was a phone call from a Mr. Rolands for me in the lobby. Wasn't sure if it was the current hour, the hour I'd gotten in, or my lack of church attendance the bellhop was objecting to. I was more than a bit fuzzy answering Atticus. One of these days, I was going to have to explain how 8am was just an indecently early hour after a bit of late night investigation.

“Jacques, my friend just called from Missouri. It appears that, God help us all, the marriage license from Missouri is legal! He was married to Jennifer Lee Weaver and they did get divorced only a year later. Not only that, she filed against him on grounds of desertion. It is all fine and filed away, almost 20 years ago. So it appears that Ezekiel

has a legitimate claim to the will. This is, this is a train wreck, we are gonna be in court and the papers for years! I do not know if the church will survive their founder being filed against for *desertion*.”

“I suppose that’s two out of three accounted for then.” I said, trying to rub some of the sleep out of my eyes. “I may have a line on the third one. That name I mentioned yesterday, Becky Sellers, would you pull whatever kind of records on her you can? For her daughter, Claudette, too. The Reverend was showing a particular interest in the daughter and Mrs. Sellers, she lives in the middle of the swamp, but she’s wearing a fine dress, with some jewelry above her means, and it seems the Deacons in the church know to keep her away from Mrs. May. So, something was going on between Mrs. Sellers and the Reverend.”

“Alright, I will look into that. Anything else?” I could here scratching in the back ground of Atticus writing something down while he spoke.

“I was planning to run this down today, but Ezekiel May says he has an alibi for the shooting. Claims he was run in by a cop named Carmodie over in New Orleans that night, spent the rest of it locked up in a drunk tank.”

“Stay up there Jacques, I can look into that one. You are going to put me deep in hock for this though, I am going to have to burn a lot of favors to find those records on a Sunday.”

“You tell me if it all can wait until tomorrow or not. I don’t know how fast you want this wrapped up.”

“Oh no, I will do it, I know you are on the level Jacques.”

“Alright, that’s all I have for right now. I talked to Ezekiel, he’s a drunk, so that fits with his alibi, but - it just sounds like he’s trying to get a piece of this. If the alibi checks out, not so much as to commit murder though - not sure I can picture him getting close enough to try either. Other than that though, I don’t know what else to tell you. My theory is that Mrs. Sellers’ is the third wife, or one of them. ‘Cause there’s no way you put this on there unless there were three wives. He never told you who all the wives were? I mean you were there Atticus, you read the will, did you ask him about it?”

Atticus sighed, “I just assumed it was divorces... I do not have to know beforehand, it just has to be identifiable by law - the court just needs to know who he intended. I assumed there would be a marriage license three times in the state of Louisiana. But there is only the one for him.” Atticus sounded real exasperated, like the Reverend had personally hidden his own marriage certificates just to make Atticus’s life more difficult.

“Well, if you have to choose, concentrate on Claudette for me, okay? She seems pretty important to all this if the Reverend was paying her individual attention... or giving her momma money take care of her or something like that. I’ll be heading back to the church today, keep asking around.”

“Let me know when you get something. Thanks, Jacques.”

After a couple more hours of shut eye, I headed back over to the Mays’ house - I wanted another look at the study. Avoiding Mrs. May seemed the best route to not upsetting her and church services sounded like the best time for that. The same small boy from my first visit, very dapper in his Sunday best, opened the door.

“Hello again, little man. Are you the doorman of the house?”

“Hiiii Mr. LeGrasse! My name’s Daniel! What’s a doorman?”

“A doorman is someone in charge of opening the door for visitors and deciding if they can come into the house. May I?”

“Yes! Are you gonna stay for supper with us?”

“I’ll have to ask your momma. She back from church yet?” I asked looking around. There were still a lot of kids throughout the house, more than yesterday I thought. The table of pies was still mostly full, with a couple empty spots where a pie had formerly sat.

“Nope” Daniel chirped.

“How about your brothers and sisters, are they all back?”

“Nope! Ezra and Miriam are still at church, they’re the oldest. And Ruth’s a baby, she’s still there with mommy.”

“Okay... I’ll be in the study if anyone needs me. Or if your mom comes back, tell her I’m there, okay?”

“Okay!” He pelted off after another small child, a four or five years old girl, running after a ball rolling down the hill. The girl had the same snub nose and jawline as Daniel, but wavy brown hair to his black, and the beginnings of lankiness to his stout. I needed to take a better look at all these kids running around, but first things first though, I wanted that second look at the study.

Grabbing a couple of the sturdier looking books off the shelves for extra height, I tried finding somewhere in the room someone of either Ezekiel May’s or Becky Sellers’ height could have stood and produced that blood spray on the far wall. But there wasn’t anywhere in the room someone of either of their heights could have, not right front of him pointing a gun upwards, not backed up against the fireplace, or anywhere between. There wasn’t enough blood on the ceiling for a close shot at their heights and farther back wouldn’t have produced as much of an upward angle as was present. I tried the shorter Mrs. May’s height next. When that didn’t work either, with a sinking feeling, I started trying even lower.

Whoever had shot the Reverend was an adolescent’s height. I really hoped I would not be running in a kid for murder...

Back in the rest of the house, I started peeking into various rooms, trying for a look at all the kids in the house. I found thirteen in the house, none older eleven, many very similar in ages. There was be a strong family resemblance across the entire age range, but those closer or almost the same age looked less alike. How many sets of twins, fraternal ones at that, could one woman have? I found Daniel again, sitting on the floor rolling a ball back and forth with the little girl he’d run off with earlier.

“Hi Daniel, can I take a tour of your house?”

“Yeah! Come see my toys!” The little girl toddled off towards the kitchen while Daniel grabbed my hand. “Let’s go to the study!”

I grabbed his hand pretty quick, steering us towards the stairs up. “Your momma already gave me a tour of the downstairs, would you give me a tour of the upstairs?”

“Okay!”

The upstairs had the same quiet opulence as the study. The hallway was wide, there was a nice rug buried somewhere under the pile of balls, blocks, and pull-toys scattered all over the floor. There were a couple decent oil paintings on the walls, between the doorways on the right side of the hall. The two rooms on the right were

obviously children's room, with toys, books, and slates scattered about the floor, desks, dressers and two beds to each room. The room on the left of the hallway took up that entire side of the house and was pretty obviously where the May adults slept. Took a peek out onto the upstairs porch - didn't look like anyone was sleeping out here regularly, trying to escape the summer heat.

"Well, Daniel are you very good at math?"

"Oh yeah, I count with mommy."

"All right. Now I see 4 beds but there's 16 of you. How many of you sleep in each bed?"

"Two. Why?" Daniel had a lot the innocent sing-song lilt going there. Probably turn into a decent tenor in a decade.

"Well, that leaves 8 more, where do they sleep?"

"It depends."

"It depends on what?"

"Which night it is." He said that like it was the most obvious thing in the world, and didn't I do that too?

"Why does that matter?"

"It's Sunday, I sleep here on Sundays."

"Where do you sleep on other nights?" Five year olds, nothing like questioning them and trying to find the right phrasing for their literal minds.

"It depends on the night!"

"Monday night. Tomorrow."

"Mmmm, here again."

"Okay, Tuesday?" Interrogating kids, my least favorite part of the job - wasn't ever sure I had the patience or warmth to do it properly.

"Oh, I go over to my mom's house."

"Your mom's house? Who's your mom?"

"Mom!"

"uh... what's her name?"

"Her name's Mom, silly!"

"Is it the lady in this house?"

"You're very silly. That's Aunt Linda." Daniel was real amused that I did not know this was just how the world worked.

"Oh, okay, well I'm just, I'm just trying to learn. Where does your mother live then?"

"Next door in our house." Daniel ran to the end of the hallway and pointed out the window. "See, that's our house!"

Coming up behind him to the window, I looked down the road. A spell down the road, but the closest house over, was another well built, trim two story building. Couldn't have been built more than 10, 15 years ago. There was a kitchen garden out back, a wide deep porch out front, and an old, beat-up Model T truck pulling into the driveway.

"So, where's your mom right now?"

"She's still at church too. I'm gonna go play now!" Daniel scampered off back down stairs, somehow avoiding every single toy on the rug.

I stared out at the other house for a moment before heading back downstairs myself.

Johnny

It had been a long, fruitless night. Do not ask me how this white girl wasn't stickin' out like a sore thumb down here, but she'd managed it somehow. By de time morning started rolling around, Ah'd headed back to my little place above de club for some shut eye. Wherever this kid was, Ah still had a job taking down de church tent Sunday afternoon. Which Ah was now goin' to be late for, since it was one o'clock in de afternoon by de time Ah got back up and still needed to grab some chow downstairs. This was not working out to be a good weekend in de timeliness department.

Still yawning, de first thing Ah saw as Ah came down de stairs was Bubba scrubbing down de bar. De second thing was a 13 year old white girl, matching Louis' description, sitting on a bar stool, making googly eyes and small talk with Bubba. Fair haired, with brown eyes and a dimple, Ah could tell she was going to be a looker in a couple of years, even in that ill-fitting homespun dress she had on. She was so short her feet didn't touch de floor from de stool.

After a frozen moment at de bottom of de stairs, Ah walked over to de bar, opposite end from de kid. "Hey Bubba, any coffee on?"

Bubba excused himself, walked over, and started furiously whispering. "I don't know if you have noticed but there is a *white girl* in here. Thank God de doors are open because I was sweeping but can you get her ass out of here before we get *killed*?"

"That's why Ah wanted to talk to you. How long she been here? Anyone see her come in?"

"A few minutes, and are we on de end of a rope yet? No? Then no, nobody who'll talk saw her. There, we've talked, get her *out* of here, boy."

I cut a glance over at the kid before telling Bubba, "Head to de back or something, Ah'll take her out de side door."

Bubba headed towards de back, calling back "I'll go grab that coffee then." Once he was out of de room, Ah walked down de bar.

At the end, by the kid, I said "Hi there. Ah'm Johnny."

"Hello, I'm Claudette."

"Hello Claudette, may Ah ask what you're doing here?"

She tried for a coy look which didn't quite suit her yet. "I'm just, you know, I'm just making small talk, can't a girl do that? As I was just telling young Bubba, here, I'm afraid I-I'm a bit out of my element if you hadn't noticed, I'm new to the city and I seem to have lost my purse and until I can find family,... I'm a bit hungry."

Either this kid was oblivious, or real crafty, hoping folks down here would feed her just to get her out of their hair. "Well, how about Ah give you a ride home then?"

"Uh... no, no my, my relations will be coming soon, it's just my stomach is grumbling terribly. Uh, could, could I please get something to eat? Maybe some coffee?"

"Bubba don't serve nothin' here. Ah know someone who's doin' pretty well, she'd be willin' to help you out. It's a bit of a drive tho'. Ah'm sure she'd be able to feed you." Mrs. Carter was de only one Ah could think of Ah could even approach at all with this kid in tow, much less anyone closer.

"Oh yes please," Claudette perked up at the mention of food, "I'm so hungry."

"Alright my car is out de back here. Shall we?"

She hopped down from de stool and followed me out de side door. Ah held de car door open for her and prayed no one was watching this alley. Once de engine was cranked and humming, Ah got a glimpse through de windshield - as short as she was, her face was definitely still visible over de dash. Sliding into de driver's side, Ah asked her to slouch down far enough so that no one would see her and find their nearest local policeman. She looked scared at de mention of police but quickly composed herself as Ah eased de car out of de alley onto de streets.

"So... what brought you to de city?" I asked.

"I'm, ah, visiting my ... aunt. She's in from Alabama, and ah, I'm visiting from relations."

"So you're both from out of town? Your aunt's coming in from out o' town and you're from out o' town and you're visiting each oth'r? With only a homespun dress to see her in?"

Claudette was getting nervous again. "It's a central location. The air out in the swamps doesn't agree with Aunty, she's, she prefers a more urban environment."

"Your aunt...?"

"Aunt... Aunt Bella, Aunty Bella. uh uh... I love her dearly."

Ah paused at that point to navigate a slight hill and turn de truck never took well. Out of de corner of my eye, Ah watched as her shoulders relaxed when Ah didn't follow up on that whopper. Ah gave her another couple of streets.

"Why don't you just tell me de truth? Youse not very good making it up on de fly..." Ah tried to keep it gentle, but it came out a bit sharper than planned. Blame keeping an eye out for de police, Ah sure did.

She sputtered for a second, terrified, before apparently deciding on a good offense as de best defense. "I don't see how it's any of your business, boy!" Ah was surprised it took her this long to go there and just sighed.

"Look, Ah know you were at Revered May's house Friday night." Her eyes started widening. "Please. Please, tell me why Ah shouldn't be talking to de police right now."

"Oh God, oh God, please don't. Please don't. I'll, I'll, I'll do anything." Sobs were starting to muffle her words. "You work for him don't you? You're one of his houseboys. I thought I got away... I thought... Please, I'll do anything, just don't hurt me."

"Ah don't want to, Ah really don't. But Ah also don't want to be on de end of a rope. Look Ah know he's not an angel from on high and Ah'm sure he's got his secrets like de rest of us. Ah may work *at* de church but Ah do not work *for* him. In anyway."

"Oh god, I can't go back there, I just can't go back there... There's nothing left for me there."

"C'mon kid, what happened?" Ah pulled out a mostly clean rag and handed it over to her. She was alternating between sobbing and gulping for air at this point.

"Uh... so... my mom... We've had it pretty hard and uh, it, it, it, we've made it though, every time, and but eventually we, we, we were running short on food this winter and we started going to the revival, they offer us, you know, potato soup and .. uh.. I was so hungry. And we'd go and you know, we found religion and you know, the Lord is my savior" she spat that out "and, and Mom, Mom said that she, she, she found religion too and she was concerned for my soul and uh you know, the Reverend had helped us out so much and he was gonna help us more. And then a, a month ago M-

Mom just started, we had more food than we knew what to do with. More food than I could eat! Mom bought me a new dress. Uh.. she looked real pretty, bought me some jewelry, she bought herself a nice necklace and she said that, that, that the Reverend was going to take care of us and everything was going to be alright. And- and- I couldn't believe her, it'd been too hard for too long, I was out hunting squirrels that very day, I didn't think it was going to last, and we- and then one day she said that the Reverend needed to see me and I was going to be saved. And she, she drove me to the house and, and, she took me into the study and she drove away and, and the Reverend, he said that we were, we were gonna be man and wife! And he started touching me and I couldn't get away from him, he was so strong..."

Son of a bitch, that was not de type of secret Ah'd thought that bastard might be keeping.

"An' you had some shells in your pocket? From de squirrels?" This time I managed to keep it soft. Thank God for everyone out of de city keeping a shotgun in de house.

"Yeah..."

"Good on you." She looked over and just burst into hysterical tears, completely sobbing into de rag. Not havin' a damn clue if'n there was anythin' Ah'd could even say that would help, Ah left her to cry it out. Next Ah glanced over, when de sobbin' had stopped, we were most of de way out o' de city and she was leanin' against de door, fast asleep.

God, that had to have been de worst couple of days.

Jacques

The house Daniel had pointed out was no more than a thousand feet down the road, close enough for walking, but I had a feeling I might want my car quick so I took it down there. The truck that'd pulled into the driveway looked like it'd been new about the same time I'd been born. Obviously cared for and maintained, but definitely losing the battle to remain a car instead of a pile of parts. Several things happened at about halfway between the houses; first, I noticed the driver was a black man and secondly, I heard another truck approaching from the way I'd come down the highway. This one was only a couple years old, being driven fast and angry. I kept the car to a slow Sunday drive out in the country, hoping to see if the new truck would continue by or pull into the driveway. As it passed me, I saw a broad shouldered man at the steering wheel and a boy in the passenger seat. The kid looked about ten years old and had the same straight black hair as Daniel back at the May house.

The new truck peeled into the driveway and skidded to a stop with a jerk. Both the man and boy got out, the man slow and angry, the boy quickly heading towards the house. The adult had the muscles to match his broad shoulders, a broad face to match the muscles, and the rough look of someone angry at the world or maybe himself. I may have been closing rapidly, but he had to have been shouting very loudly for me to have heard him yelling at Ezra to find those robes fast and to remember to put them in the damn car next time like he said he would.

The driver from the first car had startled when the truck doors slammed and was carefully getting out of his truck now. Tall and lanky, with short black hair, he looked half

the other guy's size. Big guy was about halfway to the house before he even noticed Lanky. I wasn't more than 200 ft away by this point and could see him mouth something like 'what the...' I sped up again as the big guy started stalking back to the truck. Lanky had his hands half up, about chest high, in a 'calm down, I'm no threat' kind of pose, but I did not like the look in the big guy's eyes. Even less when he yelled at the lanky guy "The hell you doing at my house, boy?!"

"Ah'm looking for Mrs. Carter, sir, Ah need her help. There was this kid wandering around downtown, in our neighborhood sir, and Ah thought, Ah thought Mrs. Carter could help her out, sir, keep her safe like."

Big guy, must have been Mr. Carter, was about 15 feet from the truck and the lanky guy. He looked into the cab at that point and all of a sudden just hauled off, landing a neat right hook across the lanky guy's chin. Lanky slammed backwards into the door with a loud thud, which was when things started getting confusing.

I pulled in the driveway myself and piled out as fast as I could. A high pitched feminine scream came from the truck cab followed by a door slam as I barreled into Mr. Carter before he could land another one on the lanky guy, who was trying to pull his arms up in time to protect his face. I was yelling at Carter to calm down while trying to yank his arm behind him and up. Sounded like whoever had that feminine scream was running off into the field. Lanky took off running after them, yelling for 'Claudette' to wait.

A couple seconds of confusion ensued before Carter yelled "Alright God damn it, just get off of me. Fine!" I let him go and backed away a couple steps. "Who the hell are you?"

"My name's Jacques, I'm with the Mays' lawyer. Tell me, are you the owner of this house?"

The boy came back out of the house and called "Dave? You alright?"

Carter turned and shouted "Get back in the house! Get back in the house you little bastard!"

Heck of temper on this guy. "That's no way to talk to a child. Are you his father?"

"Fuck." Mr. Carter angrily whispered, looking ready to haul off on me now. "Who the hell are you?!"

"As I said, I'm with the Mays' lawyer."

"Oh son of a bitch, uh..."

I didn't know why asking about paternity would rattle him so much, but that was when I finally got a look at the girl taking off across the field. Damn if she didn't look like Mrs. Sellers and the photo from her truck. "Well, you go on take care of your kid, I'll have some questions for you later" and took off myself into the field.

A couple seconds later, Lanky caught up to the girl and grabbed her by the shoulder. The girl rounded on him furiously. "Oh God why did you take me here?! Why'd you take me *back* to them?!"

"She's de only person I know who could help you! And, and you said your problem was with de Reverend! So... Ah didn't see why there'd be a problem."

She near blew up at him, screaming "You dumb coon, he's one of them, she's with them, they wanted to make part of their fucked up little family, she's his wife you dumb bastard! How could you bring me back here?!" She was glaring at Lanky, who was standing there in a solid bit of shock.

I skidded to a stop by them at this point. “Claudette, I assume? Are you okay, Miss?”

Lanky guy snapped his gaze over to me and started edging himself between me and the girl, asking “Who are you then, mister?” The girl started backing away too.

“Name’s Jacques, I’m an investigator-”

“You here for the reward?”

“No!, no, no. What reward? Any way, I am here to clear up some matters of the will, I just overheard. Claudette, Claudette Sellers? Miss, are you okay?”

Claudette looked ready to cry. “Who, what’s going on, I don’t even know anymore...”

“Ah, I think I know how you feel... a little bit. Look, um. I have a car, let’s get you out here and somewhere safe. We can talk this out, get you away from all this.”

Claudette hesitated and looked over at Lanky. He shrugged a bit helplessly, saying “Only person Ah could take you to would have put you more danger. ... Ah’m out of... Ah guess you might as well hear him out.”

I looked over at him, “Sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“... Johnny.”

“Johnny could stay with you, since you know him, no reason to trust me yet...”

Claudette took a deep breath, shot a worried glance over at the revival tent off in the distance behind her, and finally nodded.

Walking back to the car, I saw the Carter fellow watching us. Ezra was tugging on his shirt, but Carter was ignoring him. Once we were close enough, I suppose, for him to get a good look at Claudette, his eyes went wide in shock and then he turned and sprinted for his car. Ezra stared dumbfounded as Carter peeled out at high speed, heading back down the highway towards the May house and the revival.

“Johnny, would Carter do anything... rash?”

“He threatened his, uh. He threatened Mrs. Carter de other day.”

I heaved a sigh. “Great, everybody in the car quickly. Let’s go keep Carter from hurting somebody.” As we started running, I yelled to the kid “Ezra, go look after your siblings!” Claudette had hesitated, but she followed. I’d accidentally left the car running and unlocked earlier, trying to keep Carter from taking another swing, so we didn’t lose too much time on him piling in. We gained some on Carter too, when he pulled into the May house, leaned out the window and started yelling something at the house before peeling back out and towards the revival itself.

Down the road, the mess of cars in front of the church tent had cleared out some as folks were leaving. Claudette was tensing up as we approached the tent, although that might have been my driving, considering the low mumble of a prayer coming out of Johnny in the back seat there. The impromptu lot was clear enough that, once Carter parked and started towards the tent, I could swing the car into his path. He slammed into my door at full speed and bounced back, cursing, as I leaned out the window.

“What are you doing Carter? Come on, you don’t want to do this in front of all these people.” Carter just dodged around the hood and continued towards the tent. I cut the engine, spilled out the car, tossed the keys through the back window to Johnny, and took off towards the tent after Carter.

Johnny

Ah was so damned started by that Jacques fellow tossing me his keys, Ah actually caught them. A quick look around showed that, even with that crazy driving in, few o' de church folk were lookin' our way.

"Johnny?" Claudette's voice was real low, scared, and frankly child-like now.

"Uh?"

"Is he crazy?"

"Which one of them?" I asked, distracted by getting out de back door.

Claudette paused long enough to me to get into de driver's seat. "Either, I suppose."

Ah started de car up and began backing it up, to get enough room for de nose to point towards de road. "Probably."

"Are- Are we taking the car? Just... getting out of here? Please?" She was pleading, scared and high voiced.

"No, no, no way. You have no idea how much trouble Ah'd be in for that."

"He gave you the keys..."

"That wouldn't matter one bit, not for me. Ah just think us having de possibility of driving away *real fast* when that detective gets back would be a good thing. Reach back and make sure that door is unlocked for me, would you?"

Claudette turned around and started leaning over de seat, then whipped back around and shrank down in, whispering "Oh God..." Ah turned myself and, through de back window, saw a woman in a neat dress with Claudette's hair walking towards us.

"Your mamma?" Claudette nodded and caught her lower lip between her teeth. She looked ready to cry all over, again. "Stay here then, 'kay?" Ah wait for Claudette's nod before Ah got out and started around de car.

"Claudette, what are you doing? You get, you get out of that car right now. You can't be consorting with those type of people!" She wasn't trying to keep her voice low either.

Ah'd managed to block her from getting up to Claudette's window and, low and furious, spat at her "You stay away from her, Miss. De cops are on their way. I'm sure they will have a lot of questions for you." Looked like this was just my week for lyin' to people, God forgive.

"About a runaway child?" She sounded real dubious about that one. "What would you know about this, boy?"

"Ah might be darker than you, but at least Ah wouldn't sell my child."

"What, what are you, what are you have to say about, you're not even part of this community, get out of here!"

I near spat de words from my teeth. "Ms. Claudette may have done something, but those cops, they are real understanding about that sort of thing when it comes to *old* men trying to take advantage of a *young* white girl. An' Ms. Claudette is ready to *talk*, damn if she don't need somebody to tell, 'bout everything y'all have done to her."

Mrs. Sellers tried reaching past me towards Claudette's window. "Claudette..." De kid looked like she'd had enough of de world for a few days - she pulled her legs up onto de seat, curled up so her head rested on her knees, and stuck her fingers in her ears. There might have been some humming, too.

“You don’t understand, we needed the money so bad, I just, I wanted, he would have kept her safe, I’m sorry...”

“Ah am not de one you need forgiveness from lady.”

Jacques

By the time I’d caught up to Carter, he’d already ducked into the tent and gotten to Mrs. May and Mrs. Carter up in the front of the tent. Mrs. Carter was balancing a kid, no more than a year old, on her hip. Ruth I supposed. Carter was talking with a flurry of hand gestures going as I came in, and both ladies looks horrified. Everything was going low-voiced enough that it didn’t seem to bother or catch the interest of anyone cleaning up the church around them. A couple of deacons near the entrance as I came in saw me and turned to look where I was looking. One of them looked over at me with a ‘what’s all that about?’ cast to his face.

I shrugged a bit. “There’s been ... a development and... Mr. Carter is ah, be careful of him, he’s ... real upset about it. He physically accosted someone a few moments ago. Make sure he isn’t alone with anybody, I’m afraid he might act out.” He was around people and in public, I would just have to trust that he wan’t stupid enough to try something against the women here. I turned to head back out and away from this crazy mess when I heard Carter boom out from behind me.

“There’s a coon out there, done kidnapped Claudette Sellers and this city bastard’s harboring him!”

Oh hell, getting lynched had not been on my schedule for today... One of the deacons by the entrance grabbed my shoulder tight and started to pull back. I moved with the pull and used it to turn back inside.

“And why should we take the word of someone who’s not even married to the woman he lives with?” I shouted. That startled the deacon into letting go.

“No, I’m serious brothers, they’re after our wives, they’re after our children!”

“I can tell you he is a violent man who abandoned a child at his own house. I just saw him tear off leaving this poor child, Ezra, out in the middle of the driveway by himself!”

The church folk left and the deacons were looking back and forth, from each other to Carter to me. And unfortunately, blocking my way out of here.

“They, you should see the way they tore in here, trying to hit me with their damn car! They’re trying to attack us! I wouldn’t be surprised if they’re the ones who went after the Reverend!”

“I was hired by Mr. Rolands, their attorney to look into the shooting and the Reverend’s will. I’ll -”

Mrs. May interrupted me at this point, walking towards me. “Mr. LeGrasse, your services will no longer be needed here, I suggest you leave.”

“Happy to ma’am. Just tell your folks here to let me out, so I can make my report to Mr. Rolands.”

Mrs. May had reached me by now and dropped her voice low. “I don’t think you should do that, Mr. LeGrasse.”

“Well, you just said you’re no longer my employer, so with all due respect, you’re

no longer ordering me around.”

“Well you’re right but well you see, Mr. Rolands is a family friend, I asked him for a man with a certain type of past. I don’t think you would really like to go to the police Mr. LeGrasse, considering the things you’ve done before.”

“Ma’am, I am not ashamed of my past, go ahead, tell everyone or just tell your goons to get out of my way.” Atticus and I, on the other hand, were going to have **words**.

Mrs. May’s eye flashed angry and she spit out at the Deacons “He’s a Godless adulterer, don’t-”

A sharp bark of laughter came from me at that. “You’re the biggest hypocrite I’ve ever met lady.” I pitched my voice for the whole tent to hear. If she wasn’t going to let me out, hell with it, everyone could find out. “The Reverend’s will mentions three wives. If that isn’t enough, these are not wives that he divorced and then married at a later time, they are concurrent! Mrs. Linda May, Mrs. Carter, and the poor child Mr. Carter’s accusing me of kidnapping, Ms. Claudette Sellers. A 13 year old *child*.”

Mrs. May cried “How dare you come into this house of the Lord and profane it with such horrible accusations” while, from the back, came “How can you do this to a poor man laying on his death bed?” from Mrs. Carter. The Deacons started herding me further in.

“The Reverend is there because of his own fault, because of his own sin. How can you call him a man of God with two wives and going after a *child* to be number three?”

The few church folks left when I’d come in were muttering, half angry and half confused. The folks who’d been cleaning up knew a bad scene when they saw one brewing - they’d quietly disappeared when Carter had started yelling at me. But there were still enough folks there that I could be in for a world of hurt and trouble if I didn’t convince them I was telling the truth.

Which wasn’t really helped by Mrs. May crying “This man from New Orleans coming here, tell us how to live our lives, are you going to take that? We’ve been so good to this community!”

“If you and this church are so good for this community, why are so many of the church members still struggling to get by while you live so well?” I turned towards the few folks left in the tent. “Look at them, look at how they dress. You call them part of your community, with their fine houses and fancy dresses, never worrying about where tomorrow’s meal will come from?” That got a bit of murmuring assent. “Any of you actually been in Mrs. May’s house, seen how many kids she’s got running around there? There’s 16 kids and only 4 beds for them. Where you think the rest of them are sleeping?”

Carter, in the back there, looked like a mask had just been stripped off. He was sitting on the edge of the stage, shoulders drooping and silent tears tracking down his face. All the aggression and cursing, it looked like it been a front. Mrs. Carter was fiercely whispering “shut up” to Mrs. May as she started talking about the wives of the ancient people, their dowries, and the sanctity of their marriages in the Old Testament. The church folks still in the tent were a bit agape at Mrs. May’s break down as I quietly said “Listen to her, this is their real self. They’ve been deluding you all this time, they’re not worth your money, your time, or, especially, your respect.” There were quite a few

nods and looks of disgust as the church folk started filing out. Including, finally, the two Deacons blocking my path.

At the entrance, I paused and looked back. From the wisps of smoke, looked like Carter had lit a cigarette, took a few puffs, and then disappeared out a back flap. Mrs. May was sitting in a chair sobbing, and Mrs. Carter was looking around terrified, as she tried to sooth the baby on her hip, which was hiccuping in sympathy terror.

What a mess.

There was a fine tremble in my hands as I walked out of the tent. Been near a decade since that'd been a thing. Lighting up helped settle the tremble. I looked around for the car - Johnny'd pulled it around, hood towards the highway. Smart man in a crisis. He was leaning back on the passenger side door, arms pointedly crossed in a 'I'm not touching *anyone* here' kind of way. I could just make out Claudette through the window behind him and it looked like there was a woman a little off to the side sobbing. I was up close before I recognized Mrs. Sellers.

Johnny tilted his head down towards the sobbing woman. "Claudette's momma."

I nodded. "We met briefly." I knelt down and started lifting her up by the elbows. "Mrs. Sellers? You okay?" Just more sobbing. "Alright, ma'am, let's get you home. Johnny...?" Johnny gave me a look I didn't quite figure out, but opened the back passenger door. "Look, um..., the words gotten out about the Reverend, but your daughter should still get a piece of the will. I think. I'm not a lawyer but you should go back to your house, get some sleep." Still nothing. "Look, let's just drop you off back home. You can start over now, alright?" I loaded her into the car and Johnny closed the door.

"Can I give you a ride? Or you want to grab your truck?"

"Mister, Ah think Ah step foot on that property again, Ah'm gonna be met with a shotgun."

"Fair enough. You local?"

"Nah, New Orleans."

"Alright, swamp first then."

About halfway to the Sellers' shack, Mrs. Sellers stopped crying and started trying to fix Claudette's mussed hair. Claudette reached around and slapped her mom's hand, then went back to staring fixedly out the window. The rest of the ride there was in an even more awkward silence. At the shack, Mrs. Sellers got out real slow, just staring at her house.

When Claudette didn't move, I quietly said "Claudette, we're here..."

"Please," it was a half swallowed sob. "Please, anywhere but here."

"You... you got any relatives? Grandparents? Aunt?"

Claudette shook her head, wrapped her arms around her legs, and just buried her face in there.

Johnny caught my eye in the rear view mirror. "Mrs. Sellers de one who drove her to his house."

I'm not sure what the strangled sound coming out of my throat was supposed to have been, but it didn't much matter. I turned the car around and headed back out to the highway.

Mrs. Sellers never stopped staring at her house that I saw. Never turned to watch my car. Claudette never looked back either.

Twenty minutes from the city, Claudette uncurled enough to lean against the door and fall asleep. I pulled off to the side of the road, got out of the car, and leaned back against the door, thinking. After a moment, Johnny followed suit.

"She did that on de way out too, sir."

"You know how long she's been up?"

"Couple days, Ah think."

"No wonder then." I pulled out another cigarette, lit up and took a deep drag before continuing. "I just don't know where to take her." I offered the pack of cigs to Johnny.

"De police wouldn't be a help?" he asked, declining the pack.

"They'd have to take her to some sort of institution for runaways, or 'immoral women', or some shit like that." I half snarled, dropping the pack back in a pocket. "Those places are awful, death traps really; she might be better off in the swamp with her momma than there."

The lazy song of birds hung in the air for a while, before Johnny asked "Can't look after her youself?"

"No... my home-life's not exactly stable, wouldn't be able to keep a steady eye out for her... Or food on the table, maybe."

"Has to be better than those asylums o' her momma."

I took a couple another drags, trying to think of something. "How much you think you need to replace your truck?"

I got a bit of 'you crazy?' look at the sudden change of topic. "Maybe 50 Ah suppose, sir. Used any rate."

"Alright, come on, I know where I'm taking her."

It was later afternoon by the time I pulled up to Atticus' home. He had a pipe and paper in hand when he opened the door.

"Jacques! Was not expecting you today. I am afraid I have not gotten a hold of that Officer Carmodie for you yet."

"That's alright, Atticus, don't need to talk to him anymore."

"Oh?"

"I..." I took a deep breath; this could get dicy, depending on if the Mays had anything on Atticus. "Well, I know who shot Reverend May, it wasn't Ezekiel May. I've figured out who the Reverend was referring to as 'his three wives'."

"Excellent! Where do I find the third marriage license then?"

"You don't. He wasn't referring to divorces, Atticus, he's referring to *current*, as in concurrent wives."

Atticus's response would generally be considered unprintable. Even for a Tijuana Bible.

"On a more personal note, seems like Mrs. May got a good look at some of your confidential files. Seemed to think she could blackmail me into not telling you about her husband for some reason. And she damn near got me lynched down there, they are crazy out there in the countryside."

Atticus looked pissed and scared, like a man staring down the destruction of a life time's reputation. "I am so sorry Jacque. I will have to see about adding a bit, well big bit, of a danger fee. How *is* Francis doing by the way?"

"Thanks, Atticus. Away from that abusive bastard of a husband and making a new life up North, last I heard. We dropped out of letter writing about a year back. Look, last thing, there's this girl here, Claudette. She's who the Reverend was referring to as the new chapter in his life - the third wife. Seems to me she could make a claim to be one of the heirs, yes? So, she's probably going to need a lawyer, someone to look after her, make sure she gets a good education and all that. A guardian. You can help take care of that right?"

"Oh certainly, we want to help the victims out. I had no idea it was happening this way, Jacques. You have to know that if I knew what was going on out here-"

"Of course, Atticus, of course." I waved to Johnny to bring Claudette up.

"Who is that fellow?"

"An associate of mine - it'll be in the expenses. We both owe him for breaking this open so quick Atticus. Give you a chance to get some distance from the Mays."

"Alright, Jacques, you know your business best. I just have never seen you work with anyone before." Atticus squinted a bit as Claudette rounded the car and asked "Jacques, how *old* is she?"

"Thirteen at most. You will help her through speaking with the cops, yes?"

"Of course. Good God." Atticus looked damn near poleaxed, but pulled it together by the time Johnny got Claudette to the porch. Introductions were made around and Claudette ushered inside for dinner, a bath and bed. She looked to be perking up when Atticus introduced his daughter, Sarah, while the door was closing.

"There any decent bars near where I'm dropping you off? I am in need of a very stiff drink. I'm buying. Well, actually, Atticus is going to be paying for this. It is definitely going on his bill."

I collected my second 'are you crazy?' look from Johnny in as many hours.

"Yah..., Ah'm sure Bubba be willing' to sell you somethin'."

Johnny

Jacques hadn't even blinked at finding himself in a jazz club. Bubba had raised an eyebrow when Jacques walked in, but hadn't said anything. Partially, Ah suppose, since de club was empty and mostly because he had actual bills in his wallet instead of trying to pull together a pile of change. Two beers and a shot of whisky made their way to and most of the way into us before either of us spoke.

"That was the craziest thing this I have ever worked, I just thought this was going to be a simple 'find out how many times this guy got divorced' but no! He has to be a crazy polygamist, going after little girls ... Hellfire and damnation." Jacque was leaning on de bar, pinching de bridge o' his nose. "How'd you end up dealing with this mess anyway."

"De church folk were offerin' 200 hundred dollars for knowin' who shot the Reverend."

"Two hundred. Good grief. Don't think they'll be willing to pay out though, after word gets out."

"No shit. Sir." Bubba raised an eyebrow at me when Jacques didn't react to me cursing at him; Ah shrugged - Ah didn't know what his deal was anymore than Bubba did. "What Ah don't get is why that Carter fellow would hang around like that."

Jacques lay off the nose pinching to pull out a pack of cigarettes again, paused, and shoved them back in his back pocket. "I don't know, seen some odd families in the city on patrol. Suppose hanging around pretending to be someone's husband is better than starving, maybe. Or a wife and pack of kids running around's real good camouflage for folks who aren't otherwise interested, I guess. Not like any of the kids running around resembled him all that much. You pieced most of this together, otherwise, huh?"

"Mostly just luck, sir. Ah ran into that girl here. Right here actually. Before that tho' there was some noticing some people weren't at work."

"Have any thoughts on what you might do now? I think I could use some help. It's a bit irregular, but the pay's usually okay."

"What did you do to get fired, boy?" Bubba rumbled.

Jacque turned from me towards Bubba. "I wouldn't get on his case about that one - it's more like that church out there is going to implode in a couple of days. Once word about its Reverend gets out."

Bubba looked over at Jacques. "He died then?"

"Not yet. But let's just say that it's getting out that he had a different definition of marriage than most. The State of Louisiana among others."

Bubba's eyebrows started competing with his hairline for getting farther back on his head as he gave me a sideways look.

"Long story, Bubba. And not one Ah'd like to relive just yet." Ah swiveled de stool towards Jacques. "Before Ah say yes or no, tell me, why're you ... why you sitting here in a jazz bar, in de middle of de negro district, drinking wi' me?"

"Well for one, beer's good. Two, good music's good music - I like jazz. Three, why wouldn't I? You seem like a decent fellow to drink with. Quick thinking too, getting that car turned around."

"Mister, if anyone else, anyone at all, ever told me a white guy said that to them, Ah'd think they were lying. If Ah wasn't sitting here, having this conversation, Ah'd say this sort of thing only happened in dose crazy magazine stories about de future. So what's your story?"

Jacques suddenly got real interested in de depths of his beer and started shifting his weight off his right hip in de seat, though it didn't looked like he knew he was. Bubba looked at Jacques a moment, then grabbed another shot glass and some higher shelf liquor than before. "Great War, son? You don' look old enough to have been ov'r dere." He pour another finger of whisky in Jacques's glass and one for himself.

Jacques switched his stare over to de whisky. "I wasn't - lied about my age and joined the Expeditionary Forces. Probably the stupidest thing I've ever done. Hopefully the stupidest thing I ever *will* do." He started rolling de glass back and forth between de fingers on his right hand, before looking me straight in de eyes. "Let's just say I have some folks I need to live up to and that I'll have to be a **lot** drunker before I'll start on any of the details."

"What division, son?" Bubba asked. "371st for me."

Jacques rested his gaze up at Bubba for a moment. "Marne?"

"Yep."

"Yeah, me as well... Well, to surviving."

"Hell of a lot better dan not." Bubba responded as they clinked glasses, and downed each of their shots in one go. Bubba finished up by turning to me, rumbling "Door's open for him any time," and wandered off towards de back o' de club.

"That work for you, Johnny?"

Ah managed to haul my saggin' jaw up, before turning back from watching Bubba head off. "Guess you might as well call me Horn then, Boss."

Jacques grinned and actually stuck his hand out for me to shake. "Welcome to LeGrasse Investigations, Horn. Suppose we better discuss wages then."

"Goddamn son of a bitch!"

Ah hung up my hat on de office coat rack, dropped my trumpet case and started towards de back. "That ain't no way to talk about someone's momma!"

Jacques looked up from his paper. "Morning, Horn. The Reverend Dashiell May woke up yesterday. Full recovery. He's quoted here thanking the Lord and the strength of his family for his 'miraculous' recovery."

I snickered a bit. "Which one he talkin' 'bout?"

Jacque's lips twitched into something like a smirk as he read further. "Looks like the reporter got him going on that line, got some good quotes, before asking him that herself. Then dropping that there were several gentlemen of the police force waiting outside to arrest him for polygamy, attempted rape, and fraud. Oh and that his own lawyer is cooperating fully with the prosecution. And representing his intended victim."

"Doesn't sound like there's a downside there, Boss."

Jacques looked up over the paper. "The will's invalid, what with him not dying and all. Which means, post trial, the State is gonna end of seizing all the Reverend's properties. The prosecutor's office is going to *love* us, for bring in all that money. But Claudette's not getting anything, Ezekiel's not getting anything, and both Mrs. May and Mrs. Carter'll be destitute."

"Boss, weren't they trying to get you lynched, last time you saw them?"

Jacques sighed. "Well, yeah, I don't care about them particularly, just feeling a bit sorry for their mess of kids. They didn't ask to get pulled into this mess. Plus since Becky can't corroborate Claudette's story--"

"Wait, what happened to Mrs. Sellers?"

"Swallowed her shotgun. Police found her the day after we dropped her off, when they went out there to question her."

"... Well, damn."

"Yeah, so the State is going to have to put Claudette on the stand, where the Reverend's lawyers will try and tear her apart. They'll have to if they're gonna get May out of the rape charge."

"Guess that's gonna be a right mess. Don't think there's anything we're gonna be able to do about that..." I said.

"No, not really, except wait and see how Claudette holds up."

Not well as it turned out – de day after de May trial wrapped up (guilty on all counts), Claudette disappeared. As Jacques had predicted, de May lawyers had gone pretty rough on her, on de stand. Not that I'd been allowed in court to see. Atticus and his kids seemed quite distraught 'bout her disappearing. Atticus confided to Jacques that he'd been plannin' on asking her if she'd like to be adopted, before putting down somethin' for us to go look for her.

Jacques and Ah are keeping an eye out, but neither of us have high hopes.

At least she hasn't turned up in de morgue yet.