

# **Unfinished Business**

A Novel by Ray Dan Parker

## Disclaimer

With the exception of limited references to historical characters and events included to establish a background for this story, all characters, events, and settings herein are fictional. Any other resemblances to real persons, places, or events are purely coincidental and unintended by the author.

## Dedication

I dedicate this work to the memory of my father and my sister.

## Prologue

*Atlanta, Georgia (April 9, 1968)*

It was only Wednesday. But already it had been a long week. My boss had offered me the opportunity to cover the funeral of Dr. King I'd jumped at it. It was the kind of break for which any young newspaper reporter would gladly give his left nut. After the funeral I'd finished writing my story, coffee cup in hand, in the corner booth of an Atlanta diner.

I called it in to the paper from a nearby pay phone. I felt good about the piece, but it needed a follow-up. There was still something missing. For me the assassination and the ensuing riots had awakened old nightmares, the memories of a boyhood friend and a Saturday night lynching. I thought I'd put them behind me long ago, but I was wrong

After nearly eight hours on the road I still wasn't tired. Maybe it was the three cups of coffee I'd downed at the Huddle House before I left Atlanta. Perhaps it was the leftover adrenalin from the past two days, but I had that feeling I get sometimes when I'm running. It usually creeps into me at about the third mile. It's as if I'm running inside someone else's body. It's the feeling that I could run on and on forever. Unfortunately in another mile or so I snap out of it and realize just how tired I really am.

All week long I'd looked forward to this drive, thinking it might give me a chance to clear my head. Tonight, though, as I watched the road unwind in front of me, like an old black-

and-white newsreel of my life. The scenes played out in my head, the small town setting, my family, now mostly gone, and that night ten years earlier when I lost two of my closest friends.

Normally I wouldn't have returned home this way, but I'd decided at the last moment to go visit my grandmother. Once upon a time this was the most direct route from Atlanta to Tampa, but nowadays the interstate fifty miles east of here hums with traffic, tourists on their way to or returning from the Gold Coast, the Sun Coast, the Palm Coast, any damned coast, but certainly not Monrovia, Florida. Monrovia is in a very different part of the state, one that a tourist seldom sees, unless his car breaks down or he gets pulled over by a cop.

It was late spring. The days and nights had grown warmer. The sky was clear but for a few puffs of white against a star-studded, indigo sky. From Cordele southward I passed cotton, peanut, and soybean fields, peach orchards and pecan groves. The flicker of moonlight through the passing trees and brush created a hypnotic strobe effect. The shadow of my convertible stood out in sharp contrast against the luminescent blur to my left. Beneath the sound of rushing wind I could almost hear the low murmur of voices from the fields, the songs and chants of people now long dead and lying somewhere out there in the ground behind the small churches and homesteads.

On long trips I prefer to drive at night. The air is cooler. There's less traffic and fewer police. Tonight I made pretty good time. I slowed down for the occasional South Georgia town or speed trap, most of which I've come to know pretty well over the years. The road beneath me felt as smooth as a bobsled run. I let down the top on my Mustang and felt the wind in my now shoulder-length hair.

I'd bought the Mustang as a birthday present to myself not long after I started work as a reporter for the Tampa Sentinel. My previous car was the first one I'd ever owned, a two-toned red and white 1956 Chevy Bellaire. It broke down one night on a darkened back street in Ybor City. I walked all the way to downtown Tampa before I found a cab that would take me back to my apartment on Bayshore. When I returned the next day there was nothing left of my car but the body, sitting up on concrete blocks beside the road.

The Mustang had an all-white interior with leather upholstery. I had wrapped the steering wheel and gear shifter in soft leather to enhance the feel of driving on long trips, and to soak up the sweat from my palms from the South Florida heat. The V-8 engine let out a steady

hum from beneath the hood. The bug splats had begun to accumulate on my windshield. I made note that I'd need to wash it as soon as I got to my grandmother's house.

Driving out of Atlanta I'd listened to a local FM radio station, but in South Georgia the only radio I could get were the clear channel AM stations, like WSB in Atlanta and WOWO out of Fort Wayne. There were mostly talk shows. They covered such topics as the war in Vietnam, campus demonstrations, the presidential primaries, and the riots following Dr. King's assassination. I got tired of listening to the inane drivel of the callers and decided to search again for some music. I finally picked up a faint signal high up on the dial. From out of the ether came the voice of Steven Stills and Buffalo Springfield singing "For What it's Worth."

Farther down the highway I passed a vintage Chevy pickup as though it were standing still. The Mustang seemed to drive itself down the narrow two-lane. Somewhere south of Albany, the Cokes and the coffee finally caught up with me. I stopped to pee at a wide spot in the road near the entrance to an unpaved driveway. The straight, flat blacktop stretched into the empty darkness in both directions. In the bright moonlight to my left lay an open field with what looked to be forty or fifty acres of soybeans or peanuts. The tree-lined driveway made a broad curve into the distance, where, under a tall pecan tree, stood an unpainted wooden frame house with a rusted metal roof. Its only light came from a yellow bulb on the front porch. A whippoorwill whistled from somewhere across the field above the cacophony of crickets and cicadas, and an old dog barked at me from the shadows beneath the house.

On the other side of the road, the lights of a large fertilizer plant winked at me above a distant tree line. Its massive, gleaming cylinder seemed totally out of place here in the middle of nowhere. It looked like the vanguard of some alien invasion, of which I was the only witness. For a moment I thought I might pull out my Nikon. I could take a couple of pictures, doctor them up later, and write an accompanying alien abduction story for one of those grocery store tabloids.

As I stood there in the darkness and swatted at mosquitoes I thought about my girlfriend Colleen. We'd met a few months earlier at a cocktail party in Tampa. I called her before I left Atlanta to tell her I was going to take a detour to my hometown to visit my grandmother, and that I wouldn't get back to Tampa for a couple of days. I had a few days of vacation coming, and I wasn't due back at the paper until the following week.

She said she understood, and I assured her I'd be back in Tampa by Monday. Little did I know...

"I could clear up my calendar," she said, "and drive up to Monrovia. You keep talking about your grandma. I'd like to meet her."

"Thanks, but I'm not sure if you're quite ready for Monrovia, Florida. I don't know that you could handle such a rich cultural experience. You'd never be able to go back home to Boston"

"Seriously, it's not that far from here. I could be there in a few hours."

"Monrovia may be in the same state, darling, but it's a world away from Tampa."

"Tom Williams, are you afraid I'm going to meet some of your inbred relatives, or perhaps some of your old girlfriends?"

"Yes."

"Which ones... the relatives or the girlfriends?"

"Is there supposed to be a difference?"

Though we'd only dated for a few months I already knew this was the woman I wanted to be with for the rest of my life. The night before I left for Atlanta, I'd asked her to marry me. She said she'd think about it and get back to me. As I gazed out at all the emptiness around me, I wanted nothing more than to be over on I-75 dead-heading back to Tampa to see her, but there were other things I knew I had to do.

At seventy-eight, my grandmother had become frail. I could hear it in her voice when I spoke to her on the phone. I hadn't seen her since Christmas, and I felt guilty. She was the only family I had left besides my aunt and uncle in Pensacola. I'd thought about calling her from Atlanta to tell her I was coming down, but I was afraid I might change my mind, so I decided to surprise her instead.

The moon was low on the horizon by the time I crossed the state line. In the east the sky had grown pale. I passed a nondescript motel, lit only by a street lamp in the middle of an almost empty parking lot. A few miles farther down, the road made a wide arc to the left. Tucked into the curve was a small juke joint, decorated with strings of Christmas lights. A poorly lit sign read "The Dew Drop Inn." Parked outside were two old cars and a battered pickup.

The landscape materialized before me in the predawn light like a black-and-white photo in a developing tray. Each turn in the road awakened another memory, the occasional cornfield

or cow pasture, the collapsed tobacco barn. A billboard advertised the Cheyenne Barbeque Ranch in Perry where my parents had taken me when I was young. There were Burma Shave signs and ads for alligator farms and other cheesy tourist attractions. The boy on the Coca Cola sign with his swept-back white hair and bottle cap hat smiled back at me through the rusting bullet holes like an old friend who had waited for me all these years. But as I passed him, his smile became a sinister image in my mind, something more akin to a sneer.

I passed the Jefferson County courthouse and the antebellum mansions and fast food restaurants of Monticello. About forty-five minutes south of there, I turned left onto a smaller road. A green and white sign read...

MONROVIA

20 MI.

Most of US 19 was four-lane and in pretty good condition, but this road, known in the area as Tallahassee Highway had become broken and blistered in the relentless Florida sun. Weeds reached upward through the cracks like the fingers of corpses clawing their way out of their graves. The rutted out shoulders had become washboards. The Palmettos and moss-draped pine trees were closing in on both sides of me. In most places the trees stood together so tightly that the rattle snakes, opossums, and armadillos could barely get through. There was a time, not long ago, when all of this had been farmland, but in recent years it had reverted to forests, thanks to timber subsidies, falling crop prices, and rising labor costs.

By the time I reached the Pelahatchie River Bridge I knew that my return to Monrovia was about a lot more than just visiting my grandmother. It came to me like muffled words from another room. I heard it in voices that whispered from the rafters of the old hayloft where I'd played as a child. I needed to know who had murdered Dana Padgett and who had lynched Jimmie Lee Johnson.

There was something else too, something lurking in the deep recesses of my memory like a boogey man in the back of a child's closet. I couldn't quite see it yet, but I knew it was there.

Of one thing I was quite certain. My coming here had been not a last minute whim. It was the culmination of a series of events that stretched back over the past fifteen years to a time very early in my life.

I slowed to a stop and gazed into the languid currents of the dark river beneath the bridge. A short distance away it passed beneath a canopy of overhanging trees and into a tunnel of absolute blackness. Overtaken by a momentary vertigo I had the feeling that I might fall into that tunnel, like falling down a rabbit hole. Unlike Alice, though, I knew exactly what lay at the bottom of this hole, and yet I drove on.

Moments later I passed another green and white sign:

MONROVIA

10 MI.

## **Book One**

# Chapter 1

*Monrovia, FL (August 13, 1945)*

*Pug Donovan – Tampa Sentinel*

*Theirs was a generation suspended in time, but now they are awakening, like Rip Van Winkle, to a world that has changed in so many ways.*

*Three and a half years ago young men and women from across the United States set aside their jobs and families, placed themselves and their health at great risk, and took up the defense of liberty and this great land of ours. Others served at home in factories or on farms producing the weapons and materials needed for the war effort. Today those who, by the grace of God, survived that ordeal are returning to the cities and towns of America, communities like this small tobacco farming hamlet in North Florida.*

*Just as Asia and Europe will never again be the same, neither will America. No one could have made this point more eloquently than Marine Lieutenant Sam Williams, who came home this week to a tumultuous hero's welcome. Standing beside him on a hastily erected bandstand were his lifelong friends and comrades-in-arms, Bill Emmett and George Martin. It seems that the entire town of 5,000 souls turned out to greet them as Monrovia's mayor, Bernard Kelly, proclaimed a special day in their honor.*

Across the sun-drenched courthouse lawn people had gathered for hours in hopes of getting a better view of the bandstand. The farmers, store clerks, teachers, and housewives stood, in some places shoulder-to-shoulder, elsewhere in small knots gossiping among themselves. The temperature was 101 degrees, according to the thermometer at the bank across the street, and sweat stains had begun to spread across their bib overalls, white starched shirts, and flower print dresses. They mopped their brows with handkerchiefs and tried to cool themselves with paper fans provided by the local funeral home.

From down the street came a chorus of cheers and the sounds of a high school marching band. Behind them a convoy of open convertibles ran the gauntlet of townsfolk down the entire length of Broad Street from Turner Chevrolet to the square. High overhead a bi-plane towed a banner reading "Welcome home, returning heroes."

A loud whoop went up as three men in uniform waded through the crowd. Sam Williams smiled and waved as he bounded onto the bunting-draped platform with his wife Jean and their son Tommy. By now the limp had almost gone. The wound above his right knee where a Japanese machine gun bullet had grazed him had completely healed.

One by one, various dignitaries took turns at the podium. They praised and congratulated Sam and his fellow marines. Sam was the last to speak.

He stood six-foot-three, but now weighed less than two hundred pounds. He stooped slightly to speak into the microphone and then tried to raise it. Onlookers covered their ears and laughed as the squeal of feedback reverberated from the storefronts surrounding the square.

Sam wore the same high-and-tight haircut he'd received in boot camp at Parris Island. Through it the sun had already turned his scalp a bright pink.

"Thank you," he said, acknowledging the thunderous applause. "This week the three of us finally returned home to the people we've known and loved all our lives. You can't imagine what it means to us to look out and see all your faces here today. You have been with us in our thoughts and prayers and have sustained us through three and a half years from the swamps of Parris Island to the beaches of Iwo Jima." He paused for a moment and flashed them an embarrassed smile as he fought back the catch in his voice.

"You know, this place looks pretty much the way it did when we shipped out on that December night so long ago... but we all know it's not the same. It never will be. Already this is a very different community from the one we left behind and a very different world."

His voice echoed from the surrounding buildings and seemed to fill all of downtown Monrovia. Above the courthouse an American flag flapped in the breeze as the smile faded from his lips.

“This nation and this town will never again be the same. Over the past three years we have stared into the face of evil and death, not only as individuals, but as a civilization. We’ve witnessed the horrible things that otherwise decent people can do when they forget what it is that separates us from animals. And... if there’s anybody here who thinks these things can only happen in other countries and other towns then you need to think again. We’ve seen what happens when one group of people mistreats another. If we don’t learn from their mistakes, then you can rest assured that we’ll repeat those mistakes ourselves.”

He leaned forward and gazed across the sea of faces. “Nobody is above the laws of our Creator. I don’t care how rich you are. I don’t care what family you come from, what your religion may be... or the color of your skin. No one should ever feel like he’s any less human for any of these reasons, and no community will ever be safe as long as any of its citizens suffers injustice.”

“The three of us made it back here alive and, for the most part, unhurt. We knew a lot of good men, from towns just like this, who did not return. Many of you here today have paid the ultimate price of victory with the loss of your sons, your brothers, your fathers, your husbands. Unless every one of us recommits himself to the freedoms those brave men died for and the extension of those freedoms to everyone in our community, then their sacrifices will have been for nothing.”

“We can never go back to the way things were. We must learn to treat all human beings as equals. We must build a new democracy starting right here in Monrovia, Florida in which everyone’s voice is heard and where everybody’s vote counts. That would be the most fitting monument we could raise to those who’ve made all this possible, and it is to that end that I intend to devote every last ounce of breath I have.”

The crowd stood silent for a moment as Sam, fighting back tears, took his seat. He’d stopped short of calling for racial integration or voting rights, but no one standing there had any doubt that that was where he was going. If this had been anybody else they might have thrown things at him and booed him off the platform, but this was Sam Williams, a genuine war hero. He was one of the finest men they’d ever met, and every one of them knew it.

Instead, there was a scattering of half-hearted applause, and some muttering from the crowd. Most folks figured the heat had gotten to him, or maybe it was the combat fatigue they'd read about in the newspapers. Maybe it was just the strain of coming home to such a tumultuous welcome.

Across the street, apart from the crowd of white citizens, a group of black men and women stood and listened. Most of them said nothing. They were no more certain what to make from Sam's speech than their white neighbors were. They had no reason to trust him or any other white man. Nothing would change in Monrovia, Florida, as far as they were concerned, or anywhere else just because somebody got up and made a nice speech.

The people of Monrovia returned to their homes and soon forgot the things Sam had said. Sam went back to work as a packinghouse manager for his father Clarence. He and Jean bought a small frame house in Warren Heights, one of several new neighborhoods that had sprouted up on the west side of town in what would become known as the post-war boom.

In 1952 Jasper County Sheriff Mark Anderson announced that he would not seek reelection and Sam decided to run for the job. His only opponent was Howard "Cuz" Willingham, a policeman from nearby Mabry. Sam won easily.

He'd promised the voters an end to the bootlegging, gambling, and prostitution that were common knowledge throughout the county, where damned-near everything was illegal. The voters had heard similar pledges over the years from politicians who promptly forgot them as soon as they were in office. They assumed that Sam Williams was no different. They didn't know Sam Williams.

The day after he took office, Sam and his deputies, Bill Watson and Win Stevens conducted a series of raids that closed down stills, gambling halls, and whorehouses throughout the county. Among those arrested were a number of prominent citizens. Convictions were few and the sentences were light, but the sheriff continued his crusade throughout the coming weeks.

Just before dawn on May 2 the criminal elements of Jasper County struck back. Sam awoke from a light sleep as a passing car slowed in front of his home. Instinctively he grabbed Jean, shoved her onto the floor, and rolled on top of her as shotgun blasts shattered both windows of their corner bedroom. In the next room their son lay asleep beneath an open

window. Sam sprinted into the boy's room, grabbed him and pulled him onto the floor as the window above them exploded.

Sam slowly gained control of the pounding in his chest and reached for the lamp on the bedside table. He examined his son. He turned to find Jean lying beside him, her eyes wide with fright. But for a few cuts from the broken glass the three of them were OK, physically at least.

Sam moved Jean and Tommy into a back room, where he told them to stay low and keep the light off. He crawled back into his bedroom in the dark and took down his .45 service automatic from the closet shelf. He shoved in a loaded clip and ran to the opposite end of the house, where a side door led out to the driveway. As he peered around the corner of the house a porch light came on at the home across the street. A neighbor's voice called out in the darkness, "Hey, Sam y'all OK?" There were no cars in sight.

The shooters, whoever they were, had gone, but Sam and Jean weren't taking any chances. The next day Jean took Tommy to stay with her sister Phyllis in Pensacola while Sam repaired the damage to their home.

Sam went back to work, now more determined than ever that he was doing the right thing. His friends asked him why he was so anxious to stop illegal liquor sales in Jasper County. People, after all, had a right to drink if they wanted, and Sam himself wasn't exactly a teetotaler.

"I'm doing what I promised to do when I took this job. I don't have to agree with the law, but I do have to enforce it. One of these days this county is going to legalize alcohol sales. Until then it's up to me and my department to put these bastards out of business, and I intend to do just that."

Sam had little concern for any dangers to himself. The threats to his wife and son were a different matter. For the time being they were safe in Pensacola and their absence gave him more freedom to go after his adversaries. Over the next several nights he and his deputies made more than thirty arrests, with the help of local police. Two weeks later several of Monrovia's less upstanding citizens were behind bars. Sam decided it was time for Jean and Tommy to come home.

"Are you sure we're going to be OK?" she asked him over the phone.

"I'm sure, honey. Besides, we can't run from these people. If we do, they'll win, and my running for sheriff will have been for nothing. Whoever shot at us the other night is probably in a jail cell right now. Win and I are questioning all of them, and we're following up on some tips.

We're gonna find out who did this, and they'd better hope I'm not the one who comes to arrest them."

"Well I just hope you catch them soon, Sam, before they catch you. I can't go on living like this wondering who might shoot at us next, or wondering if you'll be coming home at night."

"We're not going to let up on them. OK?"

Jean and Tom returned from Pensacola on the afternoon of Saturday, May 16. Sam drove down to the train station to meet them. It was a hot, dusty afternoon, and the sky was clear. There was a light breeze out of the southwest. The noisy platform teemed with passengers and the family and friends who had come to meet them or to drop them off. Sam barely noticed them. At long last he heard the engine whistle and the train came around the bend in the track.

As it pulled to a stop it occurred to him that he was standing at the exact same spot where he had kissed Jean goodbye on that night in December, 1941 when he left for Parris Island. She smiled at him through the window as her car glided to a stop. Standing in the aisle beside her Tommy grinned and waved at his father.

The boy jumped from the train the moment the door opened. His feet barely hit the ground. "Daddy!" he screamed. Sam snatched him into the air and smothered him in his arms.

Jean was right behind him. Tears welled in her eyes as he embraced her. "Sam," she murmured in his ear "I still don't know if I can do this."

"Nothing's going to happen to you. I promise." He thought for a moment. "Look, I have an idea. Why don't we stay out at the farm tonight? You and I can drop Tommy off with Mama and Daddy. They can look after him while we drive up to Tallahassee. We can have dinner at the Silver Slipper. It'll be just like old times, when I used to drive up from Gainesville to visit you at school."

She thought about it for a while, and let out a long sigh. "OK."

When they got to the house Jean marveled at Sam's repairs and tried not to think about the nightmare that had awakened them two weeks earlier. "You think you're close to finding out who did this?"

"Yes I do. Win picked up a guy this afternoon. He had a pistol on him and a jug of home-made liquor. It turns out he's a parolee from Raiford, and he's going right back there if he

doesn't cooperate with us. We had a long talk with him. He's too scared to say anything right now, but after a night in jail to think about it, he'll come around."

Jean was still skeptical. She was glad to get away from this house for a while longer. They'd be safer out at the farm where no one expected them to be. She showered quickly, changed her clothes and repacked her overnight bag.

Clarence and Edna met them on the porch of the old farmhouse. Edna, who preferred an early supper, was already cooking. "I'm baking a peach pie for you Tommy."

"Alright!"

Jean held the boy close to her and kissed him on the forehead. They'd need to leave soon to make it to Tallahassee in time for supper. "Now, Tommy, we won't be home until pretty late. I want you in bed by nine o'clock. Do you understand?"

"Nine?"

"Absolutely"

"But Mom, I'm almost eleven."

As he stood in the yellow lamplight of Clarence and Edna's living room, Jean was amazed at how big her son had grown. He was almost as tall as she was. "OK, nine thirty, and I don't want to hear another word about it."

"Come on Jean," said Sam. "We have reservations. We need to leave."

That was the last time Tom Williams would see either of his parents. For the rest of his life he'd carry that image of them, standing in the doorway of the dimly lit living room, his mom, with her dark red lipstick, leaning over to kiss him on the forehead, his dad tousling his hair and saying, "Tommy, I want you to be a good boy, now, and mind your grandmamma and granddaddy. OK?"

## Chapter 2

*The state of Florida sits on a massive bed of limestone, the fossilized remains of sea life from ancient times when the entire area was under water. About twenty-five million years ago this land began to rise as the ocean gradually withdrew. Silt and debris deposited by rivers and streams formed the peninsula that now separates the Gulf of Mexico from the Atlantic. Over the years these streams have trickled down through the soft soil, and gradually eroded the limestone base creating dark underground caverns and rivers.*

*Sometimes the land above one of these subterranean tunnels suddenly collapses, leaving a sinkhole. The hole may occur in the middle of a wooded area or a pasture, or it may appear in a less convenient place, like under someone's home or business. Ask any native Floridian, and you're likely to hear at least one sinkhole story.*

About twelve miles west of Monrovia the Pelahatchie River rises from a sinkhole, known as Black Springs due to its dark, bottomless appearance. As it creeps through forests and swamplands the tannin from the cypress trees along its banks gradually darkens the crystal water, until it takes on the color of over-brewed tea. Tallahassee Highway stretches out into a long flat straightaway as it approaches the Pelahatchie Bridge. Thick groves of trees cast deep shadows from either side of the road.

On the night of Saturday, May 16, 1953 a dark blue Chevy pickup sat parked at the end of the bridge. Its engine was running. Its lights were off.

Behind the wheel sat Lester Suggs, a short troll of a man bent forward slightly by a birth defect in his spine. He had a hooked nose with a bend in the middle where someone had punched him when he was a kid. One leg was shorter than the other which caused him to walk with a rolling limp, yet his arms were uncommonly strong. Lester had learned to fight at an early age, out of retaliation for the torment he'd suffered from other kids and from the need to fend off his alcoholic father. His mother had disappeared when he was ten years old leaving him to care for his younger brother, Larry.

Lester was a teenager when he and Larry first stole moonshine from their daddy's still and sold it to neighbors. One night the old man, in a drunken rage, caught the two of them. He would've beaten Larry to death if Lester hadn't knocked him unconscious with a shovel. By the next day he couldn't remember what had happened, and the boys convinced him that another moonshiner down the road was the real thief. A few days later a fisherman found the man floating face-down in a creek. There were never any arrests.

As a grown man Larry was a foot, or more, taller than his older brother, with a barrel chest and a gut that hung out over the top of his pants where his shirt gapped open. He had the mental maturity of an eight-year-old and had finally dropped out of school, a sixth grader at the age of sixteen. For the rest of his life he would work as a stooge for his brother in various criminal enterprises. The two of them had managed to avoid serious incarceration mainly through the corruption and incompetence of the Jasper County Sheriff's Department. All that ended with the election of Sam Williams. During Williams' brief tenure as sheriff the Suggs brothers were each arrested three times.

Lester sat alone behind the wheel of the truck and softly hummed to himself. Shaded from the full moon by an overhanging tree and partially blocked by the bridge, the truck was out of sight of any vehicles approaching from Monrovia.

He stubbed out his Camel cigarette and lit another as he listened to the chorus of crickets and bullfrogs from the riverbank below. From time to time he'd sing a few bars of an old country song whose name he could no longer remember.

Lester was waiting for a pair of headlights that he knew would be the green Dodge driven by Sam Williams. He'd received a call about ten minutes earlier on the pay phone at Herschel's

grocery about a mile down the road and had rushed over to this spot. As he gazed toward town he could just make out the shadow of another truck, parked on the opposite side of the road and screened from the oncoming traffic by a large billboard.

Lester knew that Sam's pretty young wife would be in the car with him. He wondered to himself what it must be like to have a woman like that. The only women he'd ever had were the kind who charged for their services and weren't too particular about their customers. He thought to himself what a terrible waste this would be. There were so many things he could do left alone with someone like Jean Williams. But some things you just can't help. Everything had worked out so well for him for such a long time. There was just no way in hell he'd let one man go and change it all now.

The headlights came into view. Lester revved his engine slightly and waited for the right moment to make his move.

As he approached the bridge, Sam thought about the many fatal accidents he'd seen here. This flat stretch of road was a natural favorite for drag racing teenagers. They were usually drunk and had passengers with them. Sam and his deputies had been out here twice in just the past three months. They'd followed tire tracks off into the woods, only to find a mangled car wrapped around a tree with the remains of its occupants scattered about.

Jean had hardly uttered a word since they left the farm. She stared out the car window and wondered to herself how long she could survive in a town like this, married to a sheriff who seemed intent on pissing off so many ruthless and violent people. Again and again she asked herself why she'd come back, and why she had agreed to this dinner date in Tallahassee.

The lights of the pickup truck suddenly blazed from behind the billboard as Sam passed it. Its tires spun sand and gravel as it accelerated onto the road behind the Dodge. Sam squinted at the bright headlights in his rear-view mirror. It was on his tail in a matter of seconds.

“What the hell!”

His attention drawn momentarily from the road, Sam accelerated to get away from the truck. By the time he saw the second one coming from the other direction it was too late.

The oncoming truck swerved into the lane in front of Sam as he approached the bridge. He turned his wheel quickly toward the shoulder to avoid it. Lester swung sharply away at the last second, and ran off onto the opposite shoulder. At that moment Larry passed Sam and Jean from behind. He clipped the left rear corner of their car with his front bumper and drove them into a tailspin. The Dodge crashed sideways into the bridge abutment. It exploded into flames, flipped into the air, and landed in the river below. As it sank into the Pelahatchie the dark waters slowly extinguished the fire.

The two trucks stopped and backed up to the bridge. The one that had impacted Sam's Dodge had a small amount of damage on its right front fender. It would be easy enough to repair, in case anyone came around asking questions, which wasn't likely.

The two men peered over the bridge into the halos of their flashlights. The river, usually shallow at this point, was deep enough from the spring rains to cover all but the passenger side windows of the mangled Dodge.

"Damn!" Larry guffawed, spit flying from his lips. "Looks like we did us a pretty good job!"

"Shut up, Larry! Let's finish this up and get the hell outa here before anybody comes along and sees us!"

Together they pulled the carcass of a large buck from the back of one of the trucks and dragged it to a spot, just off the road, near the point where the car had gone into its skid. They climbed back into their cabs and left.

Twenty minutes later Win Stevens got a phone call at the sheriff's office. He heard the sound of country music in the background and the unintelligible noise of two people arguing. The caller said there'd been an accident on Tallahassee Highway at the Pelahatchie Bridge, and it looked like some folks might have been hurt. She hung up before Win could get her name. The voice was familiar, but he couldn't place it.

Win raced out to the bridge with his lights flashing and an occasional blast from his siren. No matter how many times he'd done this he would never get used to it, the grizzly accident scenes, the wasted human lives, and the dreaded visits to family members in the middle of the night.

When he arrived it took him several minutes to find the point where the car had hit the bridge and gone into the river. He slid down the grassy bank on the soles of his black leather shoes and waded into the swirling water.

He knew immediately whose car it was, but he wouldn't admit it to himself until he looked through the window and saw Jean Williams' body floating only inches away, her face smashed almost beyond recognition. Beneath her he saw part of another body in the muddy water. The right forearm bore a tattoo of the Marine Corps emblem and the words "Semper Fidelis." He choked back his shock and grief as he spent the next several hours getting a tow truck out to hoist the car from the river.

It was just after daybreak when Win knocked on the front door of the old farmhouse. Soaking wet, filthy and exhausted, he stooped slightly as he peered through the rusted screen door. Clarence and Edna, distraught from awakening to find Sam and Jean missing, came out onto the porch so as not to wake their grandson. Win could see in their eyes the dawning realization that something horrible had happened.

He ran his hands through his curly blonde hair. "Clarence, Miss Edna, I'm afraid I've got some bad news." His voice choked so badly he could barely get the words out. "We found Sam and Jean's car lying on its side at the bottom of the river. It looks like they hit a deer and then hit the bridge... I'm afraid they're gone."

Edna collapsed in the doorway. Win helped Clarence carry her back to her bedroom.

By afternoon the Williams home was filled with people. They spoke in hushed tones about how horrible this was, what a shame it was for poor young Tommy to lose both his parents like this, and what a loss it was for the community. The dining room table strained under the weight of fried chicken, crescent rolls, green beans, congealed salads, and a chocolate cake covered with vanilla icing. No one could understand how such an accident could have happened. Sam had always been a safe driver. It had been a clear night with a full moon, and yet none of the people who'd driven out there had seen any sign of the accident.

Clara O'Connor sat on the white picket banister of the front porch and stared down at the peeling paint, her eyes red from crying. She folded and put away her Kleenex for a moment and

fumbled in her pocketbook for a Kent cigarette. Clara taught English at Monrovia High and Jean Williams, a math teacher, had been her best friend.

Win Stevens stood across from her and gazed into the distance. Without looking at her, he pulled a nickel-plated Zippo from his pocket, flipped it open with one hand, and lit the cigarette for her.

“How the hell could this happen, Win?”

“I have no idea, Clara,” he said quietly, “but I sure plan to find out.”

“Do you really believe it was an accident?”

“No, but I can’t prove it wasn’t ... at least not yet.” Again he replayed in his mind the image of the Dodge as the tow truck dragged it from the river. He saw the patch of dark blue paint on the dented left rear panel. Sam was not only a safe driver, but he took good care of his car. If there’d been a scrape somewhere in a parking lot, he’d have done something about it right away. That dent didn’t get there from hitting a deer or from running into a bridge.

In the darkness Win had seen what appeared to be drag marks leading to the deer. The only injuries to the carcass itself were around the head.

Win decided not to mention this to anyone yet. Bill Watson had gone to Tallahassee for the weekend to visit a sick aunt. He’d be back tomorrow.

Clara fixed him in her gaze. “If it wasn’t an accident, then it has to have been one of those moonshiners.”

“The question is ‘Which one?’” For nearly twenty-four hours Win had sweated the parolee he’d arrested on firearms possession. In the end, the trembling man had told Win to send him back to Raiford, if he wanted, but he wasn’t talking to anybody about the shooting at Sam and Jean’s house. Now they were dead and their murderer was on the loose. Win knew the man would never talk.

The funeral took place on the following day. The weather had turned sour. Gray clouds had gathered since early morning and a slow drizzle set in as the mourners arrived at the home of Clarence and Edna Williams. A warm, misty breeze blew in from the west. It came through the open windows and doorway of the dimly lit farmhouse and slowly stirred the lace curtains and the cut flowers perched on the sideboard.

Close friends and immediate neighbors who had come by on the previous day returned now, dressed in black. Crowded into the small living room and dining room, they filled every piece of furniture. They sat on footstools, couches and folding chairs. Latecomers stood in corners or anywhere they could find an empty spot. They made small talk, as though to avoid the real reason they were there and somehow postpone the inevitable. Jean's sister Phyllis had arrived late the night before with her husband Frank. She was in one of the back bedrooms, unable to come out and speak to anyone.

The black hearse from Spooner Funeral Home arrived in the front yard. Through the large living room window, Tommy watched as a group of men emerged from the car and slowly climbed the steps to the porch. He recognized Tony Spooner from church in his immaculate black suit, starched white shirt, and silver cuff links. His hair was a gleaming mass of black, swept back from his forehead, with perfectly formed tufts of white at the temples. He looked as though he'd spent the last several hours carefully plastering every hair into place. "Miss Edna," he said in his low, sonorous voice, "we're ready now. If ya'll don't mind, you and Mr. Clarence and Tommy can ride with me right up here behind the hearse."

Slowly the guests filed out of the house and into their cars. One by one, they formed a line and turned on their headlights. The cortege pulled out onto the narrow highway, the hearse with its two matching oak coffins in the lead. Atop of one of the caskets lay an arrangement of spring flowers. An American flag draped the other.

Behind the hearse was a matching black Ford, driven by Spooner. In the rear seat rode Clarence and Edna with Tommy seated between them. His black Sunday suit was nearly an inch too short in the sleeves and pant legs. He had a stunned look of incomprehension and a box of Kleenex tissues in his lap. He hadn't yet grasped the fact that the two long wooden coffins in the car in front of him carried the remains of his parents, or that they were going away forever. Edna clutched him closely to her. She caressed his hair, and hummed an old hymn while Clarence stared at the floorboard, his face expressionless.

From the farmhouse the cars followed Pleasant Springs Road into town. As they wound through the streets past the shops and churches vehicles pulled over to the side of the road out of respect. Citizens both black and white lined the sidewalks on both sides of the street, men with their hats removed and women with tears streaming down their faces. They stared at the long line of cars.

At Broad Street they turned left and made the slight turn onto Mabry Road. A half mile down on the right, they turned into the long sandy drive that led to the New Hope Baptist Church. It was a simple, solid white frame building. It had a plain square steeple topped by a gun metal gray cross. The church stood tall and slender in a clearing at the end of the winding, unpaved road. The pastor, Don Fullerton waited at the top of the steps as the hearse arrived, a large brown Bible clutched in his folded hands. The double doors of the sanctuary stood open behind him. From inside came the strains of a hymn. It was “Nearer My God to Thee.”

Fullerton followed the caskets and the pall bearers down the aisle to the front of the sanctuary. There two low pedestals draped in black awaited them. Clarence, Edna, Tom, Phyllis, and Frank took their places on the front pew. Behind them sat three rows of sheriffs, deputies, and local police from surrounding towns and counties, all decked out in their finest dress uniforms.

Every pew in the small sanctuary was full. The doors at the back remained open for those who stood on the steps gazing in. Across the back of the room stood several latecomers, among them a short, round-shouldered man whom few of the people in the church recognized. Bill Emmett, Win Stevens, and George Martin nodded to him and shook his hand as he entered.

Pug Donovan had been their fraternity brother at the University of Florida. He’d tried to enlist at the same time they did, but none of the services would take him due to his short stature, his flat feet, and his poor eyesight.

He’d majored in English at Florida, so he became a war correspondent in Europe. He’d spent three years dodging enemy fire with nothing for protection but a Colt .45 sidearm his father had given him. His bravery, keen eye for news, and clear writing style had landed him a job at the Tampa Sentinel, where he covered politically important news stories throughout the state of Florida.

“Brothers and sisters in Christ,” the preacher began, “we come together today to say goodbye to two wonderful friends, a son and daughter, a husband and wife, a mother and a father. We cannot possibly know what purpose our Lord had in mind, calling them home at this hour, but we can rest assured in the faith that we shall all be with them, some glorious day, in that blessed land beyond pain and death and sorrow, if we but put our trust in Him. While we mourn their loss today, let us also celebrate their lives. Sam Williams was a hero to his country and to this community and a model for all of us in his Christian faith. Jean Williams, through

her gift of teaching, touched more lives than any of us will ever know... You know, I was talking with Sam just last week, and he said to me, Don..."

The words ran on and on for what seemed like hours to Tommy. He squirmed on the hard wooden bench and stared at the high ceiling of whitewashed tongue and groove planks. He watched a June bug as it crawled across the dais in front of the small pulpit. There were more hymns and prayers and scripture readings. The funeral ended with the singing of "Amazing Grace." Then the pall bearers, all friends of Sam's and Jean's, carried the two caskets out into the small cemetery in front of the church, where two open graves awaited them in the Williams family plot.

Among the pall bearers were Bill Emmett and George Martin. They set the coffins atop metal frames with winches that would lower them into the ground. The skies had finally cleared and the weather had turned hot and steamy. The chirping birds and buzzing insects seemed oblivious to the solemn occasion. Tommy stood for a long while beneath the green tent and stared into the two gaping holes in the sandy clay.

After the funeral several people came back out to the farmhouse for lunch. Hours later Bill Emmett and George Martin were still there in the sparse living room talking to Clarence and Edna. Emmett leaned forward and clasped Edna's hands in his. "I just want you to know," he said, "we'll do whatever we can to take care of your needs. I've set up a trust fund for Tommy at the bank, to help with his education, and several of Sam and Jean's friends have already contributed to it."

"You could help a lot more by telling me how my son and daughter-in-law got killed." It was the first time Clarence Williams had spoken all day.

"Clarence!" Edna gave her guests a look of embarrassment. "You'll have to excuse us, Bill. This all happened so quickly and we're still in shock. We haven't had much time to think about the future, especially Tommy's future. We appreciate your kind offer and all the things you did to help us with the funeral expenses. Sam and Jean were truly blessed to have had friends like you and George."

Martin shifted uncomfortably in his chair and glanced down at his shoes for a moment. "It was the only thing we could do, under the circumstances, Miss Edna," he added. "We're going to miss Sam and Jean very much. They were such good friends."

Bill Watson had returned from Tallahassee as soon as he got the news of Sam's death. He arrived just in time for the funeral and sat with Win in the pew directly behind the family. Instead of waiting by the graveside after the service with the others, the two men excused themselves and left immediately. On their way out to Tallahassee Highway Win recapped for Watson the events from two nights earlier.

He explained that there were several things wrong in what he saw when he arrived at the bridge. The phone caller had told him there was an accident and people were hurt, but Win had almost driven past it before he'd noticed the ruts on the soft shoulder and the damaged concrete abutment. "Who the hell would have known there was an accident there if they just happened to drive by it in the dark? Besides, I know I recognized that woman's voice. I just can't place it."

"It wasn't until after I got out of my car that I saw the dead deer and the Dodge down there in the river. My first thought was that the car had hit the deer and swerved into the bridge." He gestured and pointed at the bridge as he waded through the wet grass. "I wasn't studying things all that carefully at first. I just wanted to get down there to the car and see who was inside."

Though the car was now gone Win could still picture it in his mind. Again he saw the mangled bodies of his friends as he and the ambulance attendants removed them from the scorched and shattered vehicle.

Later, as he'd stood by the road and waited for the tow truck, he'd begun to piece it all together. Sam and Jean might have run into the deer. With all the damage to the front of their car, who could tell, but why didn't the skid marks start back before the point where they hit the deer? Why did the drag marks that led to the deer run perpendicular to the path of the car? If the deer had gone up under the car then the carcass would have been closer to the bridge. If the car had knocked him out of the way then there wouldn't have been any drag marks. By now he could only describe the marks to Watson, since the rain had washed them away.

The only blood Win had seen on the deer was on its head and he didn't get a good look at it. Someone had removed the carcass afterward and he'd never again have a chance to examine it.

And then there was the matter of the blue paint on the left rear quarter panel.

“Alright let’s bring in everybody we know who might have wanted Sam dead. If we can shake up some folks, then maybe we can find somebody who remembers what really happened. I want you to go to every body shop in the county and ask if they’ve seen a dark blue vehicle with a damaged front.”

For the moment, at least, Win was the acting sheriff. He deputized George Martin, who spent the night at the county jail, while Win and Bill Watson rounded up one bootlegger after another, among them Lester and Larry Suggs.

## Chapter 3

All of this was to no avail. Stevens and Watson never finished their investigation. A few weeks after the funeral they were no longer deputies for Jasper County.

As in most parts of the South, politicians in this county, once elected, usually stay in office until they either die or retire, and very few of them retire. One such politician was Superior Court Judge Cephas T. Adams. Cephas was past sixty and approaching senility, but the people of Jasper County re-elected him every four years, due in no small part to the fact that he always ran unopposed. This distinguished gentleman, as the highest ranking official in the county, had the solemn duty of choosing an interim successor to Sam Williams until the county could hold a special election.

Adams, in his typical Solomon-like fashion, decided that Howard “Cuz” Willingham should have the job, even though the man had never served in a sheriff’s office. After all, Willingham had received the second highest vote count in the last sheriff’s election.

Willingham’s first decision as sheriff was to sack Win Stevens, allegedly for drinking on the job. As a teenager Win had not only sold liquor, but had developed a taste for it as well. Sheriff Anderson had tolerated Win’s occasional binges, but when Sam Williams became sheriff, he’d given Win an ultimatum. He either cleaned up his act or he lost his job. With Sam now gone Win was back on the bottle.

Bill Watson, fed up with both his job and the people of Jasper County, quit and returned to Tallahassee, where he later served as police chief. Willingham replaced the deputies with his two nephews from Mabry. Neither of them had ever served in uniform. The full extent of their previous job experience had been hustling pool at a local bar and grill.

When the day of the special election for sheriff arrived, the voters, all white and mostly male, anointed the unopposed Willingham, who faithfully swore that he'd continue the tradition of honesty and courage exemplified by his predecessor. The people of Jasper County knew better. Everything would be "business as usual." The moonshine stills flowed once again, and the whorehouses and gambling joints were back in operation.

Though both of them, by now, were in their sixties, Clarence and Edna did what they had to do, and they did it well. They brought Tommy out to the farm to live with them, and they sold the small house in Warren Heights. They put the money from the sale of the house into a savings account for Tommy's education.

Clarence and Edna had seen good times and bad. They'd survived two world wars and the Great Depression. Despite their success with their farm, they led frugal lives. To look at them no one would have guessed that they'd built a modest estate, consisting of farmland and stock, all of which would one day go to their only grandchild.

In 1921, on the advice of Bill Emmett's father Thad, Clarence had invested the princely sum of five thousand dollars in a fledgling Atlanta company known as Coca Cola. Throughout the Depression, even when they could've used the money to buy clothes and supplies for the farm, Clarence and Edna held onto that stock, knowing that someday prosperity would return and their investment might actually be worth something.

All of this I managed to piece together from what I remember of my parents, and what I gleaned from others, especially from my grandmother and my aunt. But it wasn't until April, 1968, when I returned to Monrovia on that long trip back from Atlanta to Tampa, that I began to uncover the details of my parents' deaths.