

HARMONY

IN
BLACK

AND

WHITE
A NOVEL

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Chapter 1

A New Dawn

Not far from here is the alley. At first I didn't notice the blood dripping down my face into the cold gravel. A tall figure cut out by the streetlight behind him loomed over me. A city detective.

A lot has changed since I stood here four decades ago. Change comes slowly in this Virginia city but it comes just the same. Gleaming then after summer sunrise, the monument consecrated hallowed ground. Graying now in fading light, the statue stands desecrated, just beyond the graffiti covering its base of marble and granite. How fitting that Lee would be the last. Davis, Jackson, and Stuart all gone, pulled down by protesters or hauled away by city crews and cranes. And now rising on Arthur Ashe Boulevard, then simply the Boulevard, the statue *Rumors of War* of an African American in urban attire, astride a horse. Change came slowly to me as well but it came just the same.

* * *

I hadn't been at the paper a year when Farley Pettinger blew his stack. Not at me but might as well have been. Although I was just a rookie reporter, I knew enough to be repulsed by his dump on fairness and decency. Right then, I knew I had to get out of there, fast.

If not for Pettinger's shit show, I'd still be in Banksboro. Instead, I'm looking up at a giant statue of Robert E. Lee. Six stories tall. Spine stiff in the saddle. Unbowed by battlefield loss or courthouse surrender. Reanimated in bronze, commanding the capital city and broad avenue genuflecting to a cause lost long ago but never abandoned or forgotten. The South will rise again, he seems to say, the South will rise again.

As I drove into town twenty minutes ago, dawn cast an orange haze onto low-rise motels, chemical plants, half-spent warehouses, and the monstrous Philip Morris cigarette factory beside the highway.

After quitting my job in Pennsylvania, I shoehorned a few days at the beach in North Carolina with college buddies, staying just long enough to get sunburned.

Driving up from the South, I viewed a picture postcard of downtown Richmond in 1981. As first light touched the skyline, I wondered what my future would hold here. I remembered what the Jefferson Airplane's Grace Slick told the crowd at Woodstock, "It's a new dawn!" On the car stereo-cassette player, Gregg Allman of the Allman Brothers Band sang, "Dreams," a hypnotic waltz, while his brother, Duane, caught updrafts on slide guitar.

From the bridge over the James, an unlucky smokeless redbrick smokestack stood out near the north bank with "Lucky Strike" in faded ghost-white letters. I learned on TV as a kid that, "Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco"—"L.S./M.F.T."—the letters stamped on the bottom of every pack. The stack resembled an early grave marker for the heyday of big tobacco, the golden leaf, which sustained Virginia since colonial times.

Colonial-era tobacco plantations still grace the flatlands along the river zigzagging from here to the Chesapeake Bay, but the plantations are now historic sites and business conference destinations.

I exited Interstate 95 at an ornate old train station. If I stuck my arm out the window, I could have almost touched its clock tower from the elevated roadway. I passed downtown department stores, wig sellers, pawnshops, check cashers, the governor's mansion, and State Capitol.

Now I stand small on Monument Avenue below the commander of the Confederate States Army, erect atop his horse on a stone pedestal. No book-bound description could capture the imposing scale, but I feel it as I look up. Awe must be what onlookers are supposed to feel.

The avenue feels like a grand outdoor museum. It doesn't seem relevant today, more of a relic.

I grew up in Media, Pennsylvania, just below the Main Line railroad that runs from Philadelphia to its prosperous western suburbs. Media is a three-hour drive from Gettysburg, where the Union turned the tide in the Civil War, but a world away from its fixation on the War Between the States. Joseph Sullivan, an ancestor on my father's side, fought in the war for the Union in the Irish Brigade from Illinois. He fled Ireland during the potato famine, certainly not expecting to have to fight for his adopted country. Like Robert E. Lee, he is a part of history now. Although the Lee statue salutes a man long dead and battles waged long ago, the oak-lined cobblestone avenue and its monuments show a reverence for the past—a past Richmonders must still hold dear.

Under my arm is a fat Sunday edition of the *Richmond Messenger*, where I start work tomorrow. A front-page story caught my eye in a nearby paper box, so I fed three quarters into the slot, pulled down the spring door, and grabbed a paper from the top of the stack. The story under the byline of reporter James O'Neill said a murder at a South Richmond housing project called Jefferson Gardens gave Richmond the highest murder rate of any city in the nation. The victim, a bartender, was found slumped over the wheel of his green Pontiac with a bullet in the back of his head. Police think he was robbed and killed during a cocaine deal. A map accompanied the story with a dot for each slaying in the city this year. Several dots surrounded the one for the latest murder. Covering these killings will be part of my beat.

After accepting the job here, I spent a few weekends at the Banksboro Public Library studying up on Richmond and its history. I had been here only once, even though I went to college just down the road. A college town like Charlottesville, where “Mr. Jefferson’s University” sits in the foothills of the Blue Ridge, is nothing like Richmond, steeped in the Old South. From those library books, Richmond’s dark history spilled out. A thriving city on the James River brought low by war. A city where the blood of Confederate soldiers and slaves seeped into the soil as deeply as the roots of the tobacco plant. The Tredegar Iron Works on the north bank of the river forged cannons for Confederate troops and armor plating for ironclad warships. Manchester Docks, on the south bank not far from where I crossed the bridge, was a major port in the trade for slaves who farmed the tobacco and cotton that packed the city’s warehouses and powered the South’s economy. The White House of the Confederacy is a block from where I got off the interstate. On Chimborazo Hill, just east of downtown, one of the largest Confederate hospitals tended to the sick, wounded, and dying. One book showed a little museum there, where a photograph hung of a towering mound of soldiers’ amputated limbs.

I visited a college friend once who grew up here. At his grandparents’ home in the West End, their butler, a thin Black man with close-cropped gray hair, golden-yellow vest, and white gloves, served us soft drinks on a silver tray. He called me sir. We didn’t have help in the Philadelphia suburbs where I grew up and I didn’t know many Black people. My class at Bishop McDonough, an all-boys Catholic high school, had only two Black students. I was passingly friendly but didn’t know them well. The hall in my first-year dorm at the University of Virginia had only one Black student, a shy bespectacled guy who played trombone in the pep band. He didn’t know what to make of the rest of us. He didn’t play on our intramural sports teams, listen

to our music, or attend our parties. We probably should have made an effort to include him, but we were too preoccupied with trying to fit in ourselves.

By the time I leave the Lee monument, the haze has burned off. Soon, the church bells will be ringing. I saw a little place called Joe's Inn a few blocks away that wasn't open yet. I'll hang out nearby at a little triangular park until it opens. After breakfast, I'll move into a rooming house where I'll stay until I earn enough for an apartment. Tomorrow, I'll get a tour of the city from Kyle Morton, who grew up here. Morton calls me "Sully," which I don't like. He knows that but does it to be annoying. I call him "Morty" because I know he doesn't like it, either. After the tour, I'll start my job at the *Messenger* on the night police beat, covering crimes and fires from 5:30 p.m. to 2:30 a.m. After my first two weeks, I'll work Tuesday through Saturday. Parties don't last past 2:30 and the bars are closed by then. But night cops is a good way to break in. I will learn about the city, and the crime and trauma suffered by its poorest residents.

About a year ago, I met the *Messenger's* managing editor, Frederick Sauer, in his newsroom office. I had no relevant experience, just an English degree. He liked UVA grads but didn't have an opening.

"Get some experience, then come back when we have a job available," he told me. "I think you'd be a good fit here."

So, I got a job at the *Banksboro Morning News* in northeastern Pennsylvania and learned the ropes on the police beat. The *Messenger*, a medium-sized morning paper, has more than twice the circulation of the *News* and a much larger staff. I love the newspaper business. You never know what's going to happen when you show up for work. Nothing is more exciting than grabbing your jacket and rushing out to cover a breaking story or hearing the bells ringing on the

teletype machines of the Associated Press or United Press International, urgent alerts that big stories are moving on the wires.

I was fortunate an opening surfaced in Richmond just after the blowup in Banksboro. So, here I am, sitting on a bench in an empty park in the Fan, pondering my past and my future. I had a hard time finding a big-enough parking space at the end of a block so I could pull my 1976 Chevy Monte Carlo straight in. The car is an unattractive dark brown with a tan vinyl roof, but its V-8 engine has good power for hauling the trailer filled with my stuff.

While I make my way to Joe's, the heat begins to filter in. Just a few joggers, cyclists, and dog walkers take advantage of the dissipating morning cool. I feather my hand along the top of black iron railings of the brick homes. Planters of flowers hang from wide covered porches. I glance down to avoid tripping on sidewalk bricks pushed up by the roots of old oaks.

At Joe's, beer taps and multicolored liquor bottles reflect in the mirrored wall behind the bar. I look up at ceiling tiles of pressed tin painted brown over an intricate pattern. Pots and pans bang in the back as cooks make breakfast for customers nursing cups of coffee. I take a seat at the bar.

After breakfast, I drive west on Monument Avenue again. After a few blocks, the neighborhood turns seedy. The two-story rooming house is on the left, near the monument to Matthew Fontaine Maury, an oceanographer who headed coastal defenses for the Confederate Navy. His statue sits below waves teeming with humans and animals, topped by a globe.

I don't take long to unload the boxes, well-used green armchair that belonged to my late grandmother, and extra-long twin mattress and box spring into my unfurnished room. I unpack a few boxes, then go out. At a neighborhood market, I buy a pack of smoked almonds and a Dr Pepper, then call Jenny to let her know I made it.

“Are you okay?” she asks. “You sound funny.”

“Yes, fine. Just tired.”

“I miss you. Can’t wait to see you.”

“Yah, me, too.”

Driving up here from the beach, I became more excited the closer I got—but also more anxious. I was closing in on my new hometown, but also closing the distance to Jenny. After a long-distance relationship this past year, I can sense her expectation that our relationship will draw nearer, too. Jenny is excited about spending the long Labor Day weekend together.

Jenny Powell has curly strawberry-blonde hair, a gorgeous smile, and green eyes. Everyone loves her. Why don’t I?

I call my dad. He should be back from Sunday mass by now. I won’t be going to church today. We don’t discuss church anymore. He knows I don’t go but pretends not to.

“Hi, Dad, it’s Jack. Just wanted to let you know I made it to Richmond.”

“Hello, Jack, thanks for calling. How was the trip?”

“Very smooth. I left the beach early, so I beat the traffic and got into town just as the sun was coming up. I already moved into my temporary place.”

“That’s great, Jack. Exciting time for you. I hope you’ll like living in Richmond. It’s a charming city. Part of the Old South down there, you know. Very different from what you’re used to.”

“Yes, I already checked out Monument Avenue and the huge Civil War statues. I’ve never seen anything like them.”

“Your mother and I stayed in the city a few times years ago. Richmond is like a step back in time. Well, I’m just back from mass. Supposed to play nine holes later.”

“Sounds like fun, Dad.”

“Should be. The weather is great.”

“Yah, here, too.”

“Say, Jack, now that you’re in town, you should give my old law school roommate a call, C. Stewart Carrington. He goes by Stew. He’s a defense lawyer there. I told him you took a job with the paper, and he said you should get in touch with him when you get settled so he can take you to lunch. He’s a native Richmonder and he knows everyone in town. He’d be a good person for you to meet.”

He tells me Carrington’s office number.

“Okay, sure, Dad, I’ll give him a call. Did I meet Mr. Carrington at Mom’s funeral?”

“No, he couldn’t make it, but he sent a big flower arrangement. When you talk to him, tell him I said hello. Keep me posted on how everything is going, Jack. Always great to hear from you.”

“Will do, Dad. Talk to you again soon.”

“Love you, son.”

“I love you, too, Dad.”

I wish I could tell my mom I had arrived in my new home city, but I can’t. A heavy smoker, she died from lung cancer earlier this year. I miss her every day. I know my dad does, too. It’s good

he's getting out of the house to play golf today, not sitting around thinking about Mom. The pain will probably ease as time passes but it's not easing yet.

I turn in early but have a hard time falling asleep. I am too excited about tomorrow. I think about the quirks and characters of the news business. Each edition of the paper is a true miracle. Reporters gather information about everything deemed newsworthy, then after the writing, editing, fact-checking, headline-writing, photo-taking, graphics-making, and other tasks, the final product rolls through production and off the presses, landing on subscribers' doorsteps and driveways by dawn, seven days a week. As the saying goes, newspaper people do it "right, tight, and tonight."

The amount of news in the paper depends on the amount of advertising. The *New York Times* says it contains "All the News That's Fit to Print." Less heralded publications contain all the news—called the news hole—that will fit around the available advertising. A pressman at the *News* used to say its motto should be, "All the News There's Room to Fit."

Being a reporter is a great job, but journalism is a means to an end for me. I want to write a book someday, and journalism is perfect training. I get to write almost every day. A lot of people get sidetracked in life, I think. They pursue their dreams but lose sight of them as time passes. They go horizontal on life's path instead of vertical. They become preoccupied with the seen world, what is in front of them every day, and how best to deal with it. They forget the unseen world, their hopes and dreams, which are every bit as real. They get wrapped up in day-to-day pursuits and keep going sideways their whole lives. After a while, their dreams are gone. If they think about the old dreams at all, they rationalize that those goals were unrealistic. Sooner or later, they had to get real. That's the kind of thinking that keeps people going horizontal. Their means to an end replaces the end.

I had a friend in high school whose dad was a real estate developer. They had a lot of money. I remember a sign over their kitchen sink that said, “He Who Dies with the Most Toys Wins.” Maybe my friend’s dad always thought more possessions would make him a winner. Or maybe he wanted to be something else as a young man, but was afraid of ending up broke, a loser. He mistook volume for value.

My mom didn’t want me to be a journalist. She worried I wouldn’t be able to make a good enough living. I should be a lawyer like my dad. My dad was happy for me to work in the news business. “I wanted to be a writer, too, when I was young,” he told me. “Your grandparents wanted me to be a lawyer. Like a good boy, that’s what I did. I told myself I could still write someday, but I never did. It’s your life, Jack. You do what you think is best for *you*.”

After hearing that, my mom realized her dreams for me were just that, her dreams, not mine. “Well, it’s settled then. I guess it’s either laugh or cry.” Her wan smile brightened, and she squeezed my shoulder. “I want what’s best for you, too, Jack.”

So, here I am, with a new job writing for a newspaper for a living. I wish my mom were here to see me moving up. Someday, I’ll write about something important. Someday, I think, as my mind slips between thoughts into sleep.