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A STAINED WHITE RADIANCE

A DAVE ROBICHEAUX NOVEL

CHAPTER 1

I had known the Sonnier family all my life. I had attended Catholic elementary school in New Iberia with three of them, had served with one of them in Vietnam, and for a short time had dated Drew, the youngest child, before I went away to the war. But, as I learned with Drew, the Sonniers belonged to that group of people whom you like from afar, not because of what they are themselves, but because of what they represent, a failure in the way that they're put together, a collapse of some genetic or familial element that should be the glue of humanity.

The background of the Sonnier children was one that you instinctively knew you didn't want to know more about, in the same way that you don't want to hear the story of a desperate and driven soul in an after-hours bar. As a police officer it has been my experience that pedophiles are able to operate and stay functional over long periods of time and victimize scores, even hundreds, of children' because no one wants to believe his or her own intuitions about the symptoms in the perpetrator. We are repelled and sickened by the images that our own minds suggest, and we hope against hope that the problem is in reality simply one of misperception.

Systematic physical cruelty toward children belongs in the same shoebox. Nobody wants to deal with it. I cannot remember one occasion, in my entire life, when I saw one adult interfere in a public place with the mistreatment of a child at the hands of another adult. Prosecutors often wince when they have to take a child abuser to trial, because usually the only witnesses they can

use are children who are terrified at the prospect of testifying against their parents.

And ironically, a successful prosecution means that the victim will become a legal orphan, to be raised by foster parents or in a state institution that is little more than a warehouse for human beings.

As a child I saw the cigarette burns on the arms and legs of the Sonnier children. They were scabbed over and looked like coiled, gray worms. I came to believe that the Sonniers grew up in a furnace rather than a home.

It was a lovely spring day when the dispatcher at the Iberia Parish sheriff's office, where I worked as a plain-clothes detective, called me at home and said that somebody had fired a gun through Weldon Sonnier's dining-room window and I could save time by going out there directly rather than reporting to the office first.

I was at my breakfast table, and through the open window I could smell the damp, fecund odor of the hydrangeas in my flower bed and last night's rainwater dripping out of the pecan and oak trees in the yard. It was truly a fine morning, the early sunlight as soft as smoke in the tree limbs.

"Are you there, Dave?" the dispatcher said.

"Ask the sheriff to send someone else on this one," I said.

"You don't like Weldon?"

"I like Weldon. I just don't like some of the things that probably go on in Weldon's head."

“Okay, I’ll tell the old man.”

“Never mind,” I said. “I’ll head out there in about fifteen minutes. Give me the rest of it.”

“That’s all we got. His wife called it in. He didn’t. Does that sound like Weldon?” He laughed.

People said Weldon had spent over two hundred thousand dollars restoring his antebellum home out in the parish on Bayou Teche. It was built of weathered white-painted brick, with a wide columned porch, a second-floor verandah that around the house, ventilated green winwrapped all the way down shutters, twin brick chimneys at each extreme of the house, and scrolled ironwork that had been taken from historical buildings in the New Orleans French Quarter. The long driveway that led from the road to the house was covered with a canopy of moss-hung live oaks, but Weldon Sonnier was not one to waste land space for the baroque and ornamental. All the property in front of the house, even nere the slave quarters had the area down by the bayou that once stood, had been leased to tenant’s who planted sugar cane on it.

It had always struck me as ironic that Weldon would pay out so much of his oil money in order to live in an antebellum home, whereas in fact he had grown up in an Acadian farmhouse that was over one hundred and fifty years old, a beautiful piece of hand-hewn, notched, and pegged cypress architecture that members of the New Iberia historical preservation society openly wept over when Weldon hired a group of half-drunk black men out of a ramshackled, back road nightclub, gave them crowbars and axes, and calmly smoked a cigar and sipped from a glass of Cold Duck

on top of a fence rail while they ripped the old Sonnier house into a pile of boards he later sold for two hundred dollars to a cabinetmaker.

When I drove my pickup truck down the driveway and parked under a spreading oak by the front porch, two uniformed deputies were waiting for me in their car, their front doors open to let in the breeze that blew across the shaded lawn. The driver, an ex-Houston cop named Garrett, a barrel of a man with a thick blond mustache and a face the color of a fresh sunburn, flipped his cigarette into the rose bed and stood up to meet me. He wore pilot's sunglasses, and a green dragon was tattooed around his right forearm. He was, still new, and I didn't know him well, but I'd heard that he had resigned from the Houston force after he had been suspended during an Internal Affairs investigation.

"What do you have?" I said.

"Not much," he said. "Mr. Sonnier says it was probably an accident. Some kids hunting rabbits or something."

"What does Mrs. Sonnier say?"

"She's eating tranquilizers in the breakfast room."

"What does she say?"

"Nothing, detective."

"Call me Dave. You think it was just some kids?"

"Take a look at the size of the hole in the dining room wall and tell

me.”

Then I saw him bite the corner of his lip at the abruptness in his tone. I started toward the front door.

“Dave, wait a minute,” he said, took off his glasses, and pinched the bridge of his nose. “While you were on vacation, the woman called us twice and reported a prowler. We came out and didn’t find anything, so I marked it off. I thought maybe her terminals were a little fried.”

“They are. She’s a pill addict.”

“She said she saw a guy with a scarred face looking through her window. She said it looked like red putty or something. The ground was wet, though, and I didn’t see any footprints. But maybe she did see something. I probably should have checked it out a little better.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll take it from here. Why don’t you guys head up to the cafe for coffee?”

“She’s the sister of that Nazi or Klan politician in New Orleans, isn’t she?”

“You got it. Weldon knows how to pick ‘em.” Then I couldn’t resist. “You know who Weldon’s brother is, don’t you?”

“No.”

“Lyle Sonnier.”

“That TV preacher in Baton Rouge? No kidding? I bet that guy could steal the stink off of shit and not get the smell on his hands.”

“Welcome to south Louisiana, podna.”

Weldon shook hands when he answered the door. His hand was big, square, callused along the heel and the index finger. Even when he grinned, Weldon’s face was bold, the eyes like buckshot, the jaw rectangular and hard. His brown-gray crewcut was shaved close to the scalp above his large ears, and he always seemed to be biting softly on his molars, flexing the lumps of cartilage behind his jawline.

He wore his house slippers, a pair of faded beltless Levi’s, and a paint-stained T-shirt that molded his powerful biceps and flat stomach. He hadn’t shaved and he had a cup of coffee in his hand. He was polite to me-Weldon was always polite-but he kept looking at his watch.

“I can’t tell you anything else, Dave,” he said, as we stood in the doorway of his dining room. “I was standing there in front of the glass doors, looking out at the sunrise over the bayou, and pop, it came right through the glass and hit the wall over yonder.” He grinned.

“It must have scared you,” I said.

“Sure did.”

“Yeah, you look all shaken up, Weldon. Why did your wife call us instead of you?”

“She worries a lot.”

“You don’t?”

“Look, Dave, I saw two black kids earlier. They chased a rabbit out of the cane-brake, then I saw them shooting at some mockingbirds up in a tree on the bayou. I think they live in one of those old nigger shacks down the road. Why don’t you go talk to them?”

He looked at the time on the mahogany grandfather clock at the far end of the dining room, then adjusted the hands on his wristwatch.

“The black kids didn’t have a shotgun, did they?” I asked.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Did they have a.22?”

“I don’t know, Dave.”

“But that’s what they’d probably have if they were shooting rabbits or mockingbirds, wouldn’t they? At least if they didn’t have a shotgun.”

“Maybe.”

I looked at the hole in the pane of glass toward the top of the French door. I pulled my fountain pen, one almost as thick as my little finger, from my pocket and inserted the end in the hole. Then I crossed the dining room and did the same thing with the hole in the wall. There was a stud behind the wall, and the fountain pen went into the hole three inches before it tapped anything solid.

“Do you believe a.22 round did this?” I asked.

“Maybe it ricocheted and toppled,” he answered.

I walked back to the French doors, opened them onto the flagstone patio, and gazed down the sloping blue-green lawn to the bayou. Among the cypresses and oaks on the bank were a dock and a weathered boat shed. Between the mud-bank and the lawn was a low red-brick wall that Weldon had constructed to keep his land from eroding into the Teche.

“I think what you’re doing is dumb, Weldon,” I said, still looking at the brick wall and the trees on the bank silhouetted against the glaze of sunlight on the bayou’s brown surface.

“Excuse me?” he said.

“Who has reason to hurt you?”

“Not a soul.” He smiled. “At least not to my knowledge.”

“I don’t want to be personal, but your brother-in-law is Bobby Earl.”

“Yes?”

“He’s quite a guy. A CBS newsman called him ‘the Robert Redford of racism.”

“Yeah, Bobby liked that one.”

“I heard you pulled Bobby across a table in Copeland’s by his necktie and sawed it off with a steak knife.”

“Actually, it was Mason’s over on Magazine.”

“Oh, I see. How did he like being humiliated in a restaurant full of people?”

“He took it all right. Bobby’s not a bad guy. You just have to define the situation for him once in a while.”

“How about some of his followers-Klansmen, American Nazis, members of the Aryan Nation? You think they’re allright guys, too?”

“I don’t take Bobby seriously.”

“A lot of people do.”

“That’s their problem. Bobby has about six inches of dong and two of brain. If the press left him alone, he’d be selling debit insurance.”

“I’ve heard another story about you, Weldon, maybe a more serious one.”

“Dave, I don’t want to offend you. I’m sorry you had to come out here, I’m sorry my wife is wired all the time and sees rubber faces leering in the window. I appreciate the job you have to do, but I don’t know who put a hole in my glass. That’s the truth, and I have to go to work.”