

LARGO:
A Modern American Fable

1.

Booker Washington Nelson sat on his patio overlooking the Texas plains where his ranch sprawled—sprawled being a general term since everything in Texas sprawled in one way or another. By comparison to the tiny town of Largo, population 559, it was located square in the center of the Lone Star State, an hour or so north of San Antonio, in the widening gap between Interstates 10 and 35—100 acres of grassland, buttes, rolling hills, and prairie. At this moment in his life, Booker, a city boy from Chicago, was happy to call himself a rancher. Retired. Yes, and engaged in activities not related to cows. But still, as people from the outside would observe, a man on the county tax rolls who owned land. In Texas, this was something a Black man could take pride in: ownership.

Booker breathed in the wide-open spaces. Looking out across his pool and deck, he loved this view. Grass as far as he could see, and a big, blue sky. Most of all, he loved the fact that as a Black man, this was his turf, and he didn't give a fuck what anyone thought about him being one of the few Black residents in the region or one of the largest property owners in the county. Him. A Black man. Perched high in mid-Texas, living quietly and thoughtfully in the heart of White America. When he retired, he pointed his finger at a map of Texas and landed exactly here. He had taken a chance and inquired about land for sale. This is where he ended up. Providence or chance? What did he care? His name was on the deed. He was an officially a rancher in Texas. How cool was that?

Tonight, the view was spectacular. The late August sun was bright orange as it hung over one of the county's high buttes. He had agreed to lease some of his property for grazing. A few cattle munched the abundant grass behind a fence only about a hundred feet from where he sat. The cattle weren't his, but he thought of them as pets. The scene was peaceful. The wind blew steadily in his face. A row of wind generators twirled in the distance. For Booker the city boy, this was heaven.

As much as any Black resident could feel, he was free to do whatever he wanted. This was a fact he did not take for granted. He had grown up with the burden of living in South Chicago,

watching his back, navigating a system that was capricious at best and often dangerous at its worst. And yet, he had survived and thrived—first in the Army, and then as an athlete at Chicago State; later, under the guise of the University of Chicago’s Pritzker School of Medicine, where he had become a surgeon and spent his career working his way up the ladder to become Chief of Surgery at Francis Brooks Medical Center in toney Winnetka, Illinois.

But his big money had come from being a financier in the stock market. Booker had the magic touch, the one most stockbrokers could only dream about. Not quite Warren Buffet, but close. He possessed that astute insight into how stocks worked and what it took to milk them dry and squeeze out every penny in profit. As much as Booker could fix a hernia or repair a torn meniscus, he could earn his money just by doing the right math in the right stocks. A wizard in the operating room. A wizard on Wall Street. He did both with expertise, and it paid off handsomely.

Now that he was retired, it had all come to this moment when he could sit in one of his cushioned Barbuda Double Steamer Sets, stare at a descending sun, and do nothing. Imagine that. A Black man in America who could do nothing if he wanted. Slavery for Booker was in the rearview mirror. So was any connection to servitude. He had crossed those boundaries. Tonight, he had no white master and nothing holding him in chains. While he fulfilled his financial and legislative obligations, the rest of his business belonged to him. It was just him, his house, and the Texas prairie. What a day.

“What’re you doing out here?” A voice behind him. The voice of a fine woman. Sandra Rose. The youngest daughter of the town’s mayor. Recently divorced. Fully willing to engage in whatever Booker desired. Wearing a sari that could be so easily removed. A body vivacious and buxom.

“Jusst sittin’,” said Booker, savoring the words. He pushed up his polarized Ray-Bans and gave her a once-over. His chocolate handsome face and perfect teeth enjoyed what he saw. His six-foot-four frame and lean torso began to stir. Even at 65, he was a showpiece, and she was his prize.

“Well, can I sit with you?” she asked.

“You can.”

Sandra sat in the chair next to him. “Good Lord, Booker. It’s hot out here.”

“I’m Black, dear. This is normal to people like me.”

She eyed him and laughed. “You’re so full of shit.”

“What can I say? I like hot. Speaking of which.” He pulled up his sunglasses and winked.

She smiled back and leaned next to him provocatively. “Thank you.”

“Can’t get much better than this,” he mused. He tweaked his glasses provocatively and grinned.

“Maybe a beach?” she said. “With some breezes, waves, and a Mai Tai?”

“Oh no,” he answered smoothly. “It’s right here. This, my dear, is paradise.”

“You say that like you own the place.” She grinned slyly.

Booker smirked and chuckled.

Like Booker, Sandra gazed at the sunset, a glass of wine perched on her kneecap. “I get that,” she answered quietly.

Booker shook his head. “Nah. No way you can, but I don’t hold it against you.”

“You think I don’t know what it’s like to grow up poor?”

“No. You don’t know what it’s like to grow up Black.”

“Booker. You act like you’re the only one that’s ever been oppressed by the white man.”

“Well.”

“My family’s from Mexico. We are descended from Indians. And we grew up poor. So. Knock it off.”

Booker looked at her with chagrin. “Point taken.”

Sandra looked at him, scrutinizing, trying to get past Booker’s smooth veneer. “You are a mysterious man,” she concluded.

“And yet, I own this place. I’m Black, and I own this place. That’s no mystery. That, my dear, is just bein’ smart. Smarter than the average white dude.”

Sandra laughed. “Touche.”

They sat quietly for several minutes. The sun set behind the butte.

“Why don’t we go in and cuddle?” Sandra suggested.

Booker looked at her and smiled. “Why don’t we?”

“I’ll open another bottle of vino.”

“Make it two.”

She stood up, her long black hair and dark eyes suggesting her ancient Indian history. Booker could read it in her skin tone. She was descended from indigenous nobility. She disappeared into the kitchen.

Booker took one last look at the blue and purple outlines of the sky.

“Damn good day,” he murmured and went inside.

2.

The next morning, as they prepared their separate breakfasts, Booker sat at his kitchen table and sipped coffee made from his Breville Barista Touch Espresso Machine. The beans were specially ordered via Atlas Coffee Club—Ethiopian. It was hard to get good coffee out here in the middle of Texas. All the local joints in town just bought Folgers or some other cheap-ass brew. Booker liked his espresso fresh, even exotic.

“Where you headed today?” he asked as Sandra toasted a bagel and shared his coffee.

“I’ve got a real estate deal down in San Antonio,” she said. Sandra, doubling as his real estate agent. “I won’t be back for a few days.”

“Well, that’s sad,” he stated.

She gave him a pouty look. “You’ll miss me?”

Booker chuckled and took a long sip of coffee. “The question is: Will you miss me?”

Sandra gave him a piercing look. “Stay out of trouble. Please.”

Again, Booker chuckled. “Now what possible trouble could I cause in little ol’ Largo?”

“You’re Black, and Largo is racist. You own a large house. And Largo is racist.”

“True.”

“I know you. You like to stir it up.”

“Also true.”

“These guys have guns.”

“So do I. And I know how to use ‘em.”

“That’s my point. What good does it do to shoot up the town where you live?”

“What if they shoot first?”

“Stay home. Stay quiet. Long as you stay home, you’re fine.”

“I’m a free man. I go where I want.”

“Dead men aren’t free.”

Booker paused and pointed a finger at her. “True as well. Smart. Very smart.”

Sandra grabbed her purse, her coffee, and her bagel, and headed for the door.

Booker watched her go, then heard a scream echo through the kitchen. He ran to the door and saw a fat rattler crawling off into the wilderness. An empty Prime box was on his porch step.

“What’s wrong?” he cried out.

“My ex left us a present,” she stuttered.

Booker stared at the box, then at the snake, and put two and two together.

“Reece?”

“Yes.”

“Son of a bitch. You all right?”

“I’m okay. Sort of. Bastard.”

“He didn’t bite you, did he?”

“No, I threw everything straight up, including the snake. He missed.”

Booker grabbed Sandra and held her tight.

“Typical Texas stupidity,” she murmured. She shook her head and checked her watch. “I gotta go. I’m already running late.”

“Call me when you get there.”

“I will. And please. Leave him alone. Just like that rattler, all Reece does when he’s cornered is bite.”

“Somebody needs to remove his fangs.”

“Now, that’s what I’m talking about. Stirring up shit when you don’t need to. Things are good the way they are. Leave him alone.”

“Until he leaves something else dangerous on my porch. You know. Like a hand grenade?”

“I’ll get a restraining order.”

“I know he’s an attorney, but I don’t think he knows the meaning of the word *restraint*.”

“Stop it. Please don’t do anything until I get back. Promise?”

“Promise.”

Sandra darted to her car and peeled out of the driveway. Even before she put the key in the ignition, she was on her phone, presumably giving her ex an earful.

Booker was also busy thinking about how he might respond. What he promised and what he planned were two different things. None of his thoughts were happy.

3.

How did Booker manage to fill up his time? It was a small town. No movie theater or mall. If you wanted serious entertainment, you drove to Austin or San Antonio.

Booker sometimes went horseback riding on his neighbor's farm. Gilbert Lancaster would pair with Booker across the miles of open prairie. As such, they had become good friends.

There was one honky-tonk in town, but Booker had more sophisticated tastes in music. Beer and line dancing were not his thing.

He shared intimate moments with Sandra, but that was mainly in the evening and early hours of the morning.

He had a regular Thursday night poker game with a group of friends in the town next door—St. Francis—a group of army vets, some of them from the Vietnam War.

One of his insatiable habits was reading. He read everything from novels to crackpot magazines. He kept track of Internet chatter and spent copious hours watching various newscasts on the political spectrum, from CNN to One America Network. He ordered stacks of books from Amazon—Stephen King to Jonathan Haidt, David Grann to Isabel Wilkerson. He loved history and fantasy, comedy and philosophy, James Baldwin and Jonathan Stewart. His house was always filled with books scattered from the kitchen to the bedroom.

As for a passion or hobby? Booker collected old vinyls. He had a high-end stereo system he put together from scratch, assembling components and creating a room where sound was at a premium. He collected old funk (Sly and the Family Stone), rock and roll (Jimi Hendrix), classical (Beethoven), classic ragtime (Jelly Roll and Scott Joplin) and New Orleans jazz (Allen Toussaint). He treated his records like they were bankable and meant to be preserved in a museum. And some of them were rare finds that he took great care to protect. First releases, and obscure artists who Booker thought deserved better than their obscurity afforded. Mark Murphy, for instance, whom Sammy Davis Jr. discovered performing in a New York nightclub. A long career. Many albums. Little recognition. Booker had taken it upon himself to collect most, if not all, of his albums. So far, he was halfway there.

But today? What was he doing to pass the time while Sandra was in San Antonio?

He was focused on what he might do to Reece Rose. What were his options? Subtle? Out in the open? One thing that most people in Largo didn't realize was that Booker was a fighter. He had boxed in high school. He had been fighting for his survival most of his life. Booker was someone who, if you were smart, you didn't mess with, and if you weren't smart, he would make you pay.

Today, he gave extensive thought to his response to Reece. A man doesn't threaten another man's woman, even if they were once a couple. The divorce was legal. It was time for Reece to move on. But leaving a snake on Booker's doorstep. You might as well have pointed a gun at his

face. And so, while he did his other menial tasks and went about business as usual, Booker was planning. Gentle or violent? Middle of the night or middle of the afternoon? His options were open. The question was: Would his response cause a reaction bigger than he intended? For Black people, a white response was never proportional to the offense. Which meant if he fought back, he himself had to be smart and prepare for war.

He remembered his promise to Sandra, but there were ways around that. Like good surgery, it just required a little forethought, and one thing Booker was good at was forethought.

Booker engaged in his planning late into the evening. As he smoked a cigar at one a.m. on his patio, as the night wind blew warm and the stars blinked above, Booker's thoughts rose into the universe. Was there a God tuning into his thoughts? If so, the great being in the sky would probably not be pleased. What Booker thought about was definitely sinful. Then again, what did God care about Black people? After all these millenia, you would think there might be some fair retribution and justice. So far, the world turned and Black people still got the shit kicked out of them. Either way, it was left to people like Booker to shift the balance of fairness in his favor. And that was what he was thinking about. A plan was formulating. Booker smiled and fell asleep in his chair.

4.

The crack in Booker's otherwise smooth facade was while he slept. In his dreams. Sometimes, early in the morning, when he woke up, he could feel his heart beating rapidly.

Booker's childhood was difficult. He grew up Black in South Chicago. His mother was a house cleaner at a local hospital. His father worked on and off in construction. His father drank and sometimes drank too much. There were yelling matches and a divorce when he was only ten. He hung out in the hood and grew angry. Much of his anger was aimed at white folks.

In the army, he once beat a fellow soldier for stealing his socks. Though he later apologized, it gave him the reputation of being an angry Black man. One day, his best friend grabbed him by the throat and pinned him against a wall. It took a brave man to do this, since Booker was strong and fierce, but Yowlie Moss, also Black, was his equal. "You can die brave or die angry," Yowlie hissed in his face. "You can be a winner or just blow out your heart to get even. But you can't do both. You got to choose your path, soldier."

Booker took this to heart and decided that smart was his best choice, and that anger was best served by winning. He'd known others in his life who were equal competitors, but no one could outwork him, out hustle him, or out think him. And if you challenged him, as Reece had done, prepare to do battle.

And yet, in his sleeping hours, Booker's dreams were troubled. Like tonight.

He woke up at 4:13 a.m. Too early to go to the Rails Café. Too early to distract himself with television. He went to his living room and turned on one of his favorite Sonny Rollins records: *Saxophone Colossus*. Pianist Tommy Flanagan, bassist Doug Watkins, and drummer Max Roach. Whenever he felt troubled, this album turned him in the right direction. That calypso beat on "St. Thomas" that opened the record, and the drum solo to follow. Then that smooth, smoky transition to "You Don't Know What Love Is."

But the dream wouldn't let him go. Walking out the door to find his car, he searched the streets all around his block. No car. It was dark. Booker had to go somewhere. But he had no wheels. As he hurried up and down his street, he could feel panic set in. What would he do with no car? How would he get home? Then his anger boiled over and woke him up.

As Rollins wailed away, Booker wondered what the dream meant, and that helpless feeling. It shook him to his bones. The one thing that Booker could not tolerate was feeling helpless. Like when his father used to beat his mother with Booker watching. There was nothing he could do to stop the man. But in his muscles and tendons, there was a tightness strong enough to stretch him as if he were on a rack. That's what he felt now. That same tightness. What had Reece unleashed? He wondered what Yowlie would tell him right now, this moment while Booker was contemplating his response? He would not just sit by. To Booker, winning was

always important. What could he do to win this situation? Booker let Sonny guide him through Side One. Then he shut off the lights and went back to bed.

5.

Reece Rose sat in the back corner of Largo's resident bar and nightspot—Shake, Rattle, and Roll, otherwise known as The Pit. It was close to midnight on a weeknight. The place was empty. The band was packing up. Reece nursed a beer and his dark, private thoughts.

Jinny, his waitress for the evening, came over to check on him. "Need anything else?"

"No, dear, thanks. I'm about to head home."

She smiled and left him with his introspection.

Reece, the local attorney for Largo. A man known in the community for his legal defense work and his philandering, both locally and in nearby Llano, the county seat where he often appeared in court. A man prominent in the town's social circle and once the prince to the Mayor's daughter, Sandra. A man who had squandered his high social status in the town's hierarchy. Lots of tongues wagged these days about the rise and fall of Reece Rose. From lion to hyena. From courtier to a lonesome loser in the dregs of The Pit.

Reece, divorced for two years, was still nursing the wound. Though in fact, he had no one else to blame but himself—quarrelsome, unfaithful, and inattentive—yet he still managed to find fault with his ex and anyone who gave her the slightest bit of attention. Lately, that would have been Booker Washington Nelson, whom Reece often referred to as that "damn Negro in residence." It was not enough that he had been abandoned. Now, Sandra was courting herself beneath her station, whiling away her beauty with a darkie who lived way beyond his station..

The bar's owner, Dusty Winfield, came over to sit with him.

"You okay, man?" he asked, concerned and bemused. He considered Reece's daily comings and goings as a great source of entertainment.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Reece countered. Reece, a small man in stature, countered his height limits with a fierce countenance and a razor-sharp tongue.

"Well," said Dusty, ready to provoke and observe. "You're sittin' here near closin' time lookin' like a drowned cat. What's up with that?"

"I'm a busy man," said Reece. "I've got a lot to think about."

"Still chasin' that woman?" Dusty knew this would get him started.

"Chasin' no one," said Reece. "She got that Black fellow. I don't need anything from her. She don't need me. So what? Does it look like I'm chasin' something?"

"Okay," said Dusty.

"Do I look needy?" Reece glowered and dared him to answer.

"You look lost is what you look," said Dusty.

"I know where I'm at."

"That's not what I'm talkin' about."

"And you would know this because . . ."

“I’m just sayin’ . . .”

Reece squared himself against what he thought was criticism.

“All right,” Dusty said with his hands raised. “Just offerin’ an ear is all.”

“I don’t need your ear, either of ‘em. Thank you.”

Dusty took the hint. “Closin’ time, man. Last call.”

Reece nodded. “I did leave ‘em a little housewarming present.”

Dusty stopped and observed. This was what he had come for. The inside scoop. “And?”

“And nothing. Hope they enjoy it.”

“What was it?”

“None of your damn business.” Reece smiled, which Dusty interpreted as a dangerous smile. He did not doubt that Reece was capable of things outside the law, things that might get a lesser human being thrown in jail, but Reece was too wiley for that. That’s what made him so dangerous.

“All right. Good night.” Dusty rose and left, leaving Reece to simmer with both satisfaction and sorrow.

Reece had indeed left the snake on Booker’s porch. He hoped by now that one or both of them would be in the hospital. He also knew from the fiery phone call he had received this morning from Sandra that his plan hadn’t worked, and, no surprise, she had pointed the finger straight at him. As if he could hide something like that. Sandra knew him too well, and she’d lashed him with that bullwhip tongue of hers.

“Eat that, you bitch,” he murmured, a thought and meaning known only to himself. And yet, if he had any hope of her returning, the snake had put an end to that. So, here he sat in the middle of the night alone as usual and no closer to his love than he had been the day before. Was he sorry? Hell, no. Again. Was he sorry? Hmm. He would have to think about that. Either way, the damn woman had him by the balls.

“Shit,” he mumbled to himself. Reece stood up from the table, dropped a large tip on the floor, and walked out of the bar. Known only to Dusty, Reece was conjuring some evil plan. But no one, not even Reece, would know the endgame. Not yet. But it was coming.

6.

It was nearing two a.m., the end of Lisa Gonzales' shift as a security guard hired to oversee protection for the Sam Houston Country Club's night detail. She oversaw protection for what might be called the high-end estates of Largo.

Lisa was working her second job and struggling as a single mom to stay afloat. Her day job as a store clerk for Lowe's Market in Llano was not enough to pay her bills: rent for her shitty apartment on the edge of town, groceries for two growing kids, her car payment, plus clothes and school supplies.

Lisa, once a darling of the high school football team, with college potential and a bright future, had wasted her talents on parties, a bad marriage, a conviction for drunk driving, and medical bills for her aging mother. Times were tough. The security job paid spit, but it was the difference in her life between an apartment and living in her car with her kids. Now in her mid-40s, she worked to survive. She drove around late at night, keeping tabs on housing for the town's upper crust and wishing she could have a week to lounge around in their pools. In her dreams, Sam Houston was where she wanted to live, but working security was as close as she would ever get.

She was just about to turn around and head home when she spotted Reece Rose's car moving slowly up the street.

Reece Rose, who married her best friend, Sandra Zambrano. Sandra got the prize Lisa had lusted after. As teenagers, they discussed Reece during many late-night smoke fests. Coming from one of the town's more respectable families, they knew he was headed to law school and would be a prize catch. They had both thrown themselves at him in various intimate ways. In the end, Sandra won.

Lisa parked and watched him drive up to his house—a ranch estate, single-level, white aluminum siding with brown trim, surrounded by cottonwoods and a large lawn. Lisa could only dream about a house like this. Separate bedrooms for her kids, a nice master, plus a patio and pool, and enough space for a dog. Lisa had maneuvered and angled for a chance at a house like this. What had she done wrong? What did Sandra have that she didn't?

And now, having ditched the prize, Sandra had moved on, dating a rich Black guy, in another lovely house. What had she done wrong? Did Lisa just not know how to fuck? It puzzled her.

As Reece got out of his car, he noticed Lisa parked across the street. For a moment, he leaned on the back fender of his vintage dark-blue BMW, like a smaller version of James Dean or Patrick Swayze. He took a moment to light a cigarette and blow smoke into the warm night sky.

Lisa got out of her security vehicle and walked over to join him. He offered her a puff, which she gladly accepted. Handing it back, she started a conversation.

“Out late, huh? Workin’ hard?”

“No,” he mumbled. “I wouldn’t call it that.”

“Comin’ from The Pit?”

Reece gave her a weak grin.

“Well?” she pushed.

Reece shook his head. “What’re you doing out here?”

“Workin’,” she said. “That’s all I ever do. That car over there. That’s my office.”

Reece eyed her for an extended moment. “Kids all right?”

“Kids are fine. It’s me they’re worried about. I’m a little rough around the edges.”

“Why?”

“Don’t ask if you don’t want to know.”

“All right.”

She gave the house a long glance. “Nice house.”

“Inherited. Folks got smart and moved to Florida. Just a stone’s throw from the beach.”

“Still nice.”

“It is. I keep it tiptop. Send the folks pictures to prove I’m a good son. You want to see it?”

The invitation Lisa had been waiting for. “Sure.”

“Wanna drink?”

Another firm offer. Lisa was stoked.

“Your kids okay for the night?”

“Mom’s at home. They’re fine.”

“What about the car?”

“It’s fine. No one’s at the office. I can spare an hour.”

Reece looked at her and smiled. “I married the wrong woman. You know that?”

“I do, you big asshole. What took you so long to decide that?”

“Well, can I make it up to you?”

“You can try. Might take more than an hour.”

Reece finished his cigarette, buried it underneath his heel, and grabbed Lisa’s hand. She followed willingly. For once in her life, she was about to get lucky.

“I want to try out your pool,” she said with sparkle in her voice.

“You need a swimsuit? I still have Sandra’s. She never did come and get her stuff. That’s how mad she was. Mad at me, mainly.”

“That’s all right,” Lisa offered. “We’re the same size. Just went shopping together last week. Even if it doesn’t fit, on a night like tonight, who needs it?” She shot him a ribald grin. “Not bad for women in our forties. No?”

“Nope. Not bad at all,” he replied.

He pointed the door opener toward his garage. “Jump in, I’ll take you for a ride.”

Lisa didn't hesitate. She was due for a good night, a fun night, even if it was a short night. She'd take whatever came.

They drove into the garage. The door slowly shut and sealed them inside Reece's cocoon.

7.

The doorbell rang. Booker jumped at the sound. He was not expecting company. When he opened the door, he got a second surprise: Reece Rose, standing in full professional suit regalia on his doorstep.

“Reece?” said Booker.

“I thought it was time for us to have a chat,” said Reece as he walked past Booker into the living room. He sat on the couch, crossed his knees, and waited for Booker to sit down in his rocking chair. Booker obliged and waited.

“I came to make you an offer,” said Reece.

“For . . .”

“Your property.”

Booker coolly gazed at Reece.

“I’m willing to pay full market value for everything—house, property, the whole lock, stock, and barrel.”

“Why would I do that?” Booker asked.

“So that I don’t make your life a living hell.” Reece smiled.

“And how would you do that?” Booker asked.

“Bury you in lawsuits.”

“Lawsuits? For what?”

“I’m a lawyer, my friend. It’s what I do.”

“You’re threatening me with litigation?”

“I am indeed.”

“Well, that’s flimsy. You know you’ll lose.”

“I don’t need to win. I just need to drive you crazy. And. Defending yourself. That could be very expensive. I know you have dough, but for how long? I don’t need to get paid. I’m my own legal rep. But I can sure bleed you, now, can’t I?”

Booker gave Reece a dagger stare. “Why? Because of Sandra?”

“Partly. And partly because I don’t like you. I don’t like a black dude coming into our town and trying to weasel his way into our social circles. We’re a white town. We like it that way. You’re an outlier. We want you to leave.”

“We, meaning . . .”

“Me, in particular. It’s time for you to go.”

Booker nodded his head. “All right. You’ve laid it down. It’s mano y mano. But I don’t scare that easy.”

“I don’t give a shit if you’re scared,” Reece shot back. “I just want you to leave, and I’m willing to force you into bankruptcy if necessary to get you out of town.”

Booker rocked slowly in his chair.

Reece continued. “You know, a hundred years ago, you couldn’t have purchased this property. Have you read your deed?”

“No.”

“I have. I did my homework. This is an old property. Look in the weeds, man. You’ll find it, a prohibition against selling this property to anyone of color—Black, Mexican, Asian, but particularly Black. That was the law.”

“Law no longer.”

“Yeah, but you get the drift. Black people are not welcome here in Largo. So. I ask you. Why are you here?”

“Well, the place seemed friendly enough to me when I moved here. I haven’t heard any complaints.”

“Well, consider me the first, and maybe the loudest. Let me be clear. I want you to leave town. Period. And I’m willing to do what it takes to drive you out. A snake. A lawsuit. Buying your house. Whatever it takes. I’m a lawyer. I have connections and resources. You should take this seriously.”

Booker gave this some timely thought. “Do what you do, man. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I’ll pay you for your troubles. Don’t think I won’t be fair.”

“Your money’s no good here.”

Reece sat for a moment and gazed out the living room window. “If it were me, I’d take the hint, the money, and leave. The hell I’m about to bring ain’t worth the trouble. You can get even richer and go somewhere that welcomes your kind.”

“Well, hell, then,” Booker countered. “I’ll buy *your* house, and *you* can leave town.”

“Unlike you,” said Reece. “This is my home. You, on the other hand, don’t belong here or anywhere else in America.”

“You can’t blame me for that,” said Booker. “The fact I’m here is your fault.”

“I can’t, now, can I? But. I can sure work hard to make you leave.”

“As I said . . .”

Reece shook his head. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Duly noted,” Booker replied.

Reece stood up. Booker rose, towered over the man, and looked him in the eye. Neither flinched.

Reece walked around Booker, opened the door, and headed straight for his car. In thirty seconds, he was gunning down Booker’s driveway.

“Well, shit,” Booker murmured as he realized what was about to come down the pike. In the back of his mind, old ghosts from his ancestor’s past. His family. His uncles. His great-great-grandfather, Thomas Nelson. There were others he was told about. Some who died in the fields.

Some who fled injustice. Their ghosts danced around him in his living room. He wondered what, beyond the money, this was going to cost him.

8.

Sandra left San Antonio in her pink Cadillac Escalade on a Friday afternoon, hoping to beat rush hour traffic. On Interstate 10 west, she tuned to *104.5 Latino Hits* to listen to some Spanish-language music and prep for a quiet weekend with Booker. As the Latin beat filled the car, Sandra bopped her head, pounded the steering wheel, and sang to herself.

Speaking of Booker, she was puzzled. She had talked to him Tuesday night, and that was the last she had heard. Now his phone went directly to voice mail, and he was not responding to emails. It was like he had unexpectedly left town or just vanished. What the hell? She felt disrespected and would not hesitate to let him know when she got into town.

The sun beat hard on her eyes. She pulled out her sunglasses and headed for Exit 505, the off ramp to Fredericksburg and Highway 16 through Llano. Another 15 minutes beyond that was home. Once she hit 16, she would put the pedal to the metal, maybe cut off 10 minutes or so with her speed. Her anticipation built as the miles passed. A martini, a swim, and then, who knows? Booker, hot on her mind. On her speaker phone, she dialed Lisa, hoping for a girls' night out sometime soon. Lisa picked up on the first ring.

"Yo, Coolie," she shouted. Coolie, Sandra's high school nickname from one of her favorite rap artists, Coolio.

"Yo, Ice." Again. Ice-T. They were both enormous fans of gangsta rap.

"Headed home?"

"Yeah, finally. Sista date next week?"

"Hmm. I'll have to check my schedule, since I'm so bi-zee."

"Workin'?"

"Always. Dolla these days just ain't big enough."

"Well, we gotta hang."

Lisa's voice turned playful. "I got hot news."

"Boyfriend?"

Lisa turned coy. "Mayyyybe."

"I know him?"

"Oh, you do. Definitely."

Sandra's voice grew impatient. "Well. Dish, sista."

"Oh, not yet. Still in the works. Give it a little time."

"Booty call?"

"Mmmm, mayyyybe."

Sandra squealed. "Who, now? Come on. I'm your confidant."

"No. Not yet. We meet, I'll tell. I'll know if it's temp or hot."

“Well, make sure you fuck his brains out, cause most men, that’s all they care about. You fuck, they bark like a dog. Titties and ass, but keep him in line. The cow’s milk ain’t free.”

“I know that,” said Lisa, “only too well.”

“Well, gotta go. We’ll dish later.”

“All right. Be safe.”

“You, too.”

Sandra made good time until she hit the outskirts of Llano. Then she slowed down and kept an eye out for cops. They knew her car and wouldn’t mind pulling in a Latina, if just for entertainment. Tits and ass. That was high on their list as well.

—

Sandra was surprised when she drove up to the house. There were no lights on, no cars in the driveway, and it looked deserted.

She went through the security protocol and unlocked the front door. Dark. Quiet. No one.

“Book?” she called out. No answer. She was alone in the house. Turning on the lights, she walked through end-to-end looking for signs of Booker. There were none. The house was clean. The bed was made. If he had left, he had done a thorough job of covering his tracks.

“Well, damn,” Sandra murmured. So much for a sweet welcome home party.

She heard a car pull up and felt relief. “Must be my guy,” she said happily and hurried to the front door.

But it was not Booker. It was a Sheriff’s car, and when she saw it, her heart dropped.

“Oh, Jesus,” she whispered.

It was a deputy sheriff, part of their county law enforcement headquartered in Llano.

The deputy walked up and took off his Smoky hat.

“Ma’am,” he said politely. “I’m looking for Booker Nelson.”

Sandra was perplexed. “He’s not here. I just got home. There’s no one here but me.”

“Do you know when he’ll be home?”

Sandra clutched her sleeves. “I don’t even know where he’s at.”

“And who are you?” The deputy didn’t smile and barely blinked.

“I’m Sandra Rose. I live here with him. We live together.”

The deputy flinched. “That’s the ex of Reece Rose?”

“Yes.”

“Well. We have a dilemma. Seems Mr. Nelson and Mr. Rose are both missing, and we think that’s not a coincidence.”

“Meaning?”

“They’re both missing.”

“I get that. The point is, why are they connected?”

“That’s what we’re trying to determine, ma’am.”

Sandra let out a sigh. “Well, I can’t help you on either end. Booker’s not here, and I don’t keep track of Reece.”

“You mind if I come in and have a look around?”

Sandra, no stranger to law enforcement history in this county, scoffed. “Hell, no. I’m telling you flat out. He’s not here. If you think something’s fishy about that, get a warrant, and I’ll let you in. Otherwise, we’re done here. Good night, deputy.”

No friend to law enforcement, she slammed the door in his face, and she was sure that after this, they wouldn’t look kindly at her as well.

Sandra sat down in the living room on the couch she and Parker had picked out from Ethan Allen in San Antonio: Calista Curved Three-Piece Sectional, plush, in a solid hunter grey. She planted her legs underneath her and threw her arms across the top.

Two men missing. Both were attached to her. One of them was out of touch. One of them had triggered a search. She tried to make the connection between them. All she knew was that Booker was here, Reece had planted the rattlesnake, and now they were both gone.

So much for a quiet weekend. She rose and went to the kitchen to pour herself a glass of wine. Then she went out to the patio, sat in the matching chaise lounge chair, lit a cigarette, and stared up into the warm, Texas sky.

9.

“Sandra!” a voice whispered.

Sandra sat up and saw Booker sitting next to her bedside.

“Booker?” she gasped.

“Shhh,” he said in a low voice.

Sandra sat on the edge of the mattress. “What are you doing?”

“Hiding, obviously,” he answered. “In my own house, no less.”

“Why?”

“Well, for one thing, all hell’s about to break loose. For another, I’m trying to get you out of here before the ball drops.”

Sandra cocked her head and stared at Booker like a child trying to understand the ending of a story.

“Your ex has been busy—with more than rattlesnakes.”

“Reece?”

“None other. To his credit, he did warn me. To my credit, I took him serious.”

“And?”

“My good buddy, Yowlie Moss, from the Army, is a private security expert and something of an amateur hacker. He’s in town keeping watch. My sister, Beanie, in Chicago, handles all my finances. So, together, we’ve been busy the last few days moving things around and getting ready for Reece. He’s got an order signed by a judge to seize my house. The same goes for my bank account. Now. He can have the house. But he won’t find my money. And that, my dear, will save my ass in the long run. In the meantime, I need to get you out of here. You can’t be seen with me, or they’ll go after you as well, and you don’t want to be involved in this mess. You don’t have a dog in this fight. This is between me and him.”

Sandra took some time to let this sink in. “Damn, he’s . . .”

“Turns out he doesn’t like Black people. Did you know that?”

“No surprise there. He doesn’t like Mexicans either.”

“Well, I guess that means we should get moving. You got any valuables in the house?”

“Some jewelry is about it.”

“I got a suitcase out on the floor. Pack and scram. Yowlie’s keeping watch. I don’t think they’ll be here till dawn or so, but try to hurry, just in case.”

“And what do you plan to do?”

“Hit him where it hurts.”

Sandra waited.

“I told you, Yowlie’s a hacker, A good one, as it turns out. I’m going to hit him in the wallet and then go after his law license. Tit for tat, you might say. Yowlie’s been digging. If he’s got

secrets, we'll find them. It'll take ol' Reece a while to recover. In the meantime, I guess it's time to move on, maybe to a friendlier place."

"Oh, Booker, I'm so sorry."

"Darling, this is an old story. My people have been dealing with this for four hundred years. It's still ongoing. We just have to find a way to survive. And I promise, I'm going to win this."

Sandra reached for his hand.

"Get moving," he said as he squeezed her fingers.

In ten minutes, she was done, dressed, and out the door.

Booker stood solitary in his front doorway, a sense of longing dogging him. He was fond of this place. It had been a good home. Now, it was time to leave. Who knew if he'd ever return?

Booker crept to his car and drove down his driveway. He said goodbye to the grazing cattle and fled north on Highway 16 into San Saba County.

10.

At 7:00 a.m. sharp, a group of law enforcement agents drove up to Booker's house. Reece was the lead driver. He was going to take great pleasure in this.

When he walked up to the front door, a handwritten sign was posted: *Feel free to come on in. Help yourself to breakfast.* Reece pushed gently on the door, and it squeaked open. He walked into the kitchen and saw a continental spread laid out across the dining room table: bananas, pastries, watermelon slices, and fresh-squeezed orange juice—as if someone had been expecting them.

His posse spread out across the house and found it empty. Booker's computer, phone, and laptop were also missing, and access to the Internet had been cut off.

"What's left?" Reece asked.

Stu Lance, his fellow attorney and asset manager, mumbled, "Clothes, television, stereo. Books, too. He's an avid reader."

"His office?"

"Cleaned out. Desk empty. No personal records. Even his checkbook is missing."

"How'd he know we were coming?"

Stu shrugged. "Far as I can tell, someone tipped him off."

"Son of a bitch," Reece cursed. "Have you seized his bank accounts?"

"Yeah, but . . ." Stu stopped mid-sentence.

"What?"

"There's \$.50 in the checking account. Savings is empty."

"What else? Investments? Stocks?"

"That's all we could find."

"What?"

"We're searching," Stu responded. "But that's all we could find . . . so far."

"Man's got to have cash stashed somewhere. I mean. Look at this house."

Stu nodded. "As I said, we're searching."

Reece stood upright, closed his eyes, and growled, "He knew."

"Sure seems that way."

"You think he's got someone on the inside?"

"Might want to let us have a look at your computer. Check your office for cameras. Sure seems like they had prior knowledge." Stu gazed uncomfortably at Reece.

"You think he hacked me? He had access to my email?"

Stu did not answer.

Reece turned and walked out the front door.

Stu helped himself to a banana and a glass of orange juice. Several deputies also gathered around the table for breakfast.

Reece wasted no time. He took one of his computer specialists to his office and gave him his laptop.

“See what you can find,” he barked.

After the assistant left, he sat in his chair, twirled slowly, and gazed at the ceiling. “How’d he know?”

All while Booker and Yowlie watched him from a remote computer at their cabin in San Saba County.

“Good job, Yowlie,” Booker said.

“I am the best,” Yowlie crowed.

11.

Despite Reece's best attempts to corner Booker, all his efforts were futile. In fact, Reece himself began to face his own legal troubles, and he suspected that Booker was hounding him in the background. His computer had indeed been hacked, and a small camera had been located in his office. It only made Reece more paranoid as his troubles mounted.

First, Sandra's divorce attorney sent a notice about a small issue that had ballooned. Reece had been hiding money from Sandra, and her attorney demanded that he pay what he owed plus damages.

Second, and more important, the NAACP out of San Antonio had filed a complaint with the State Bar of Texas that Reece had been threatening Black citizens around the central Texas region with legal lawsuits if they didn't sell their property and leave Texas. The case with Booker was their prime example, and they had somehow attained documents that corroborated their complaint. The State Bar of Texas was investigating the matter.

Last, and most galling, Booker's house had been seized and auctioned off. Reece had planned on snatching it up, but his ex-wife outbid him and now owned the deed. She lived there as the rightful owner. Reece wondered, in his paranoid state, if Booker occasionally managed to sneak in and spend a few days. It wouldn't surprise him.

Several months had passed. No sign of Booker. No further legal challenges had been filed by Reece. No money had been located. Whatever he'd hid, he done a hell of a job. And Reece couldn't help but feel that he'd been left holding the bag.

It was a public embarrassment. He spent less time at the Pit and more time at home, drowning his sorrows with booze. His case load fell off, which meant that his money problems were also starting to grow.

Sitting on his porch, staring at an Autumn sky, he wondered what the future held. He wondered if he would ever be rid of Booker Washington Nelson. Being in the dark by himself can make a man introspective and willing to take risks.

Such as call to Lisa at one a.m.

"Hello," the voice answered.

"Working tonight?" he asked.

"Yeah. Why?"

"Time on my hands if you're willing."

"What am I, your fuck buddy?"

Reece took in a sharp breath.

"You haven't called me in weeks."

"I... I've been kind of busy."

"Too busy to call?"

Reece was annoyed. "I have a job. It takes time."

"So do I. It also takes time."

Reece felt his head shoot with pain. He took a pause and refocused. "Look. I'm making you an offer. You interested?"

"No," Lisa said flatly. "I also made you an offer. Are you interested?"

His own shallowness confronted him. That's what happens when you sit outside in the dark. You start to think about these things.

"Well. Yes or no?"

"I already told you. No."

Reece paused and felt some wind blow past his face, as if her refusal was causing his own weather system to collapse.

"I heard Sandra got the house," she added. "The one you tried to steal."

"That house was legally seized," said Reece defensively.

"Seized. Stolen. Seems the same to me," said Lisa.

"Oh, now you're a lawyer?"

"I'm smart enough to know when someone's lying."

"When did I ever lie to you?"

"The night you fucked me. That fuck was a lie. I believed it at first, but Sandra helped me figure it out. She's smarter than you, by the way. And. She's *not* a liar."

"Okay. Going. Going. Gone. Bitch!" Reece hung up, felt one instant of satisfaction, and then immediately plunged into despair.

"She's got your number, brother," said a voice in the darkness. It was Booker.

Reece jumped up from his chair and stumbled over a table. He fell flat on his back. "What are you doing here, you bastard?"

"Saying goodbye."

"What?"

"Figured our business was done. Didn't want you to think I had forgotten you."

Reece rolled over and reached for his phone.

"Come on now," said Booker. "This is man to man. We don't need anyone else involved in this. It's our business. You started it. I finished it. Now we're done. The good news is, you're still alive, and so am I. I'm moving on. You get to do the same. What's the problem?"

"I'm not done with you," said Reece. "Not by a long shot."

"Well, I don't know what else you can do. You took my house. Isn't that enough? A white man steals a Black man's property. Isn't that pretty much the end of the story?"

"No. Where'd you hide your money?"

Reece laughed. "You're a greedy bastard."

"I can take you to court."

“You have to catch me first.”

“I will, you know. I’ve got people who can track you down.”

“Good Lord, you’re hopeless. A smart man would realize when the gig is up and call it. When I played basketball, the game ended when the clock ran out. It was all about the score. So, Reece Rose, in our game, the clock is done. So tell me. What’s the score?”

“I’m telling you. It’s not over.”

“Score. Please?”

Reece reached under the patio table where he had been holding his drink. “I got a gun, man. So, I pull the trigger. Then, what’s the score?”

“I die happy. You go to jail for life. Times have changed. You can’t just murder us anymore. Courts have recognized our existence. You shoot me, I’m gone bye-bye and no sorrow. Either way, I win fair and square. You. You’re just a killer that hates Black people. You gotta live with that, and in this town, everyone’s watching. They know the difference between winning and cheating.”

“Shut up. You’re just going to die, and no one gives a shit.”

Booker looked at him dubiously. “No one?”

“No-body.”

A gloved hand grabbed Reece from behind, yanked the gun from his hand, and threw him on the patio deck.

“Meet my good friend, Yowlie,” said Booker. “He cares.”

Yowlie held the gun to Reece’s temple. Reece cringed.

“There’s the difference between you and me,” said Booker. “You don’t want to die. I don’t care if I do. I just want to die happy.”

Reece slowly sat up.

“Time to say goodbye,” said Booker. “Where should I go that would give a brother a break? You know. Just lets me live in peace?”

“Africa,” said Reece.

“Maybe, but I kind of like it here in Texas.”

“No room for you here, brother,” Reece spat.

“Apparently not. Not for you either. Trouble’s coming. Better get ready.”

“I’ll survive,” said Reece with bravado.

“So will I. We could have survived together. There’s room out here for both of us. A racist and a brother. On this big plain, there’s plenty of room to breathe.”

“Fuck you,” said Reece with double contempt.

“Any other parting words?” Booker offered.

“None,” said Reece.

“Okay. Then.” He nodded at Yowlie. Yowlie put the pistol to Reece’s right foot and pulled the trigger.

“Here’s your phone,” said Booker. “Call 911. Hope that weapon’s legal.”

In a moment, they were both gone.

Reece lay in agony. He tried to dial the number, but his hands shook from pain and fear. Finally, he managed to get through. He was barely conscious.

“I’ve been shot,” he said to dispatch. He gave her the address, and then he tried to explain how he had been shot by an intruder with his own gun. The more he talked, the more he sank into confusion. The more he realized how badly he had damaged himself. The more he realized the score. For the first time, he admitted to himself. Booker had won.

12.

At his beach house in Barbados, Booker sipped a cocktail and watched the waves lazily roll in. Sandra was right. This view was better than his ranch, though he did miss the rugged beauty of Texas. In particular, he missed the cows grazing. There was something enduring and relaxing about cattle. They seemed always to be at peace with themselves.

Booker had found a lovely little hut on the island and settled in for the long haul. Here, he was among his brethren. They spoke English and treated him as an equal—maybe a little more, since he was a successful Black man living among his kin. The idea of respect seemed to be important here.

Sandra had come to visit. She seemed happy here. Booker considered this her beach. *Sands of Sandra*, he had nicknamed his place.

“How you doing, dear?” he called out.

“Fine,” she said. “I’m just fixing us some beverages.” She came out in a cute bikini with a wraparound towel around her waist and handed Booker a martini. Sandra was an excellent barkeep, and her recipes could have made her a rich woman. Booker smiled and gladly accepted. She sat down in an adjoining lounge chair.

“What’s the news?” he asked.

“I’m assuming you want to know about Reece.”

“Well, that and other things. I try not to dwell on the bad stuff. I mean, look at us. This, I admit, is paradise. What do we have to complain about?”

“I tried to tell you.”

“You did. Why didn’t I listen?”

“Cause you’re a man. Your ears don’t work properly.”

“Good thing I have you.”

“Consider yourself lucky.” She grinned and sipped her rum and Coke. “The old house is fine. It misses your jazz.”

“Stereo still works?”

“I guess. I don’t use it out of respect. It’s yours. I don’t let anybody else mess with it.”

“Well, thank you.”

“Reece left town.”

“What?”

“Just up and disappeared one day. Haven’t seen him since.”

“Is he alive?”

“Who knows?”

“Well, hell, I hope I didn’t upset him too much.”

Sandra threw back her head and laughed. “Like you care, you bastard.”

Booker pouted. "I'm hurt."

"Shut the fuck up." She was still grinning.

"Foot heal up okay?"

"Oh, that's another story. No, it did not. That's going to take some time, and maybe a couple of surgeries. You guys really did a number on him."

"Sorry."

Sandra gazed across the water. There were clouds in the distance. "I hear a storm is coming."

"Big one?"

"Hurricane force."

"Damn. And I was just starting to relax."

Sandra gave him an eye. "You know. That laid-back attitude is going to get you killed."

Booker raised his sunglasses and stared back. "If I die, I die happy."

"I don't want you to die. That's my point."

"What should I do about it?"

"Listen to me more often."

Booker smiled, reached over, and kissed her on the cheek. "Promise."

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

"Then, it's time to find shelter on the island."

"A brother just can't catch a break, now can he?"

"Sister's here, too, you know. We're in this together."

Booker sat back and gazed longingly at Sandra. "That's true, now ain't it?"

Sandra nodded, continued to gaze at him, and sipped her drink.

Again, Booker could swear that she had royal blood. And he loved her for it. He had landed a princess. Booker—a Black guy from South Chicago. This was his woman.

"When this storm is over . . ."

"Yeah?"

"You and me."

"Yeah?"

"A wedding chapel somewhere near the beach."

"Yeah?" She cocked her head oh so sweetly and smiled.

"I even have a ring." He handed a box to her. She opened it and gasped. "It's beautiful."

Booker grinned ear-to-ear. "So are you."

He reached over and kissed her. "Why don't we celebrate?"

"Booker, are you listening to me? There's a hurricane approaching?"

Booker stood up and pulled her to him. "Storm, swarm. It's you and me, baby. This is our moment."

He pulled her through the kitchen and into the bedroom. She did not resist.

The hurricane slowly approached—the weather in Booker’s life constantly changing. Once again, he was impervious and happily in peril.