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# SKID

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SKID

# PART ONE

## One

Well, lemme tell you somethin' else. If they want pocket lint, I got lots of it. Yup. This must be a case of mistaken identity, cos, in these clothes, I only *look like* a guy with money. The only thing jinglin' in my pocket right now is a set of keys to our house on Hayne Boulevard. But here I am, Uptown New O'lins, miles from home, after dark, with four thugs tryin' to mug me and throw me into the Mississippi. Now, if you had told me that less than a year after we escaped from that swamp I'd be here runnin' for my life again – well, I woulda called you crazy. But that's the truth. I'm being chased by shadows. They're moving real fast, runnin' close to the ground, no sound coming from their tennis shoes. Meanwhile you should hear my clunky church loafers hittin' Washington Avenue like I'm a tap-dancer late for practice. It's real life that feels like one of those nightmares: you got nowhere to hide, but you can't keep runnin', and there's not a soul around except for the ones that are huntin' ya. You're on your own when you're in trouble, believe that.

Wait. A gate. Hell no – that's the cemetery. *Keep going Skid.* Glancing back I see the chained gates of Lafayette No. 1 disappearing in the dark – and believe me, that graveyard starts lookin' more welcoming than the dead stretch of road in front of me right now. I'm wishing that I had somehow busted those gates open, snuck in there and hidden real quick. Too late now. I dash left, onto a side street – don't know the name of it – you don't care when you're about to die. I have no experience of this part of the city anyway, even with my backing and forthing to Peter

Grant's house and all that. Good thing these dudes don't have a ride, cos they'd have caught me already. My heels are diggin' into the asphalt and sending shocks up my spine. Might as well be wearing a pair of pumps for God's sake. Now there's an old man watering plants behind a cast-iron fence. He doesn't even look up when I blow past his pretty little birthday-cake house in full Sunday best, gasping like a catfish and tearing up the pavement. Prob'ly seen weirder things in his life, living so close to a boneyard, the poor old guy. I'm clocking at least fifteen miles an hour I'm sure, but I slow down to dash left again. Now I know I'm on Sixth Street, cos, right quick, two high beams come on ahead of me, lighting up a street sign. Well, I'm thinkin': *Thank God, this might be my saving grace*. But the vehicle takes off, swings into the left lane and it's heading straight towards me. Dammit. There are more of them and they *do* have a car. Man, I'm done running and I've been out of luck for a long time. So I stand still, dip into my back pocket and hold my hands up as the headlights close in. Maybe I can throw my empty wallet to these hyenas and buy myself some time, even though this ol' thing is not so easy to part with. I'm sentimentally attached to it. Long story.

Thugs on foot to my left, car off to my right. I'm hollerin': "Awright! Awright!" so they don't ride the kerb and run me over.

Then I see another entrance to the cemetery. A back gate, similar to the one I bolted past earlier like a damn fool. So this time I decide to take my chances with the dead. I thought my hair would stand straight up as soon as I leapt into this burial ground, but it feels really peaceful. There are some old trees lined up along the concrete walkway, bowing down to graves on the other side. If the circumstances were different this would be a pleasant walk. Matter of fact the only strange thing I see is that the iron gates aren't just open: they're torn clean off the hinges and lying flat on the ground. As you can imagine, hours ago this place was

crawling with tourists, posing beside burial vaults and smiling. Now there's nothing but Skid Beaumont dodging the blazin' beams of the car that just swung into the gateway behind me, making the graves grow long shadows and the trees look wicked.

I'm duckin' between mausoleums just far apart enough for me to squeeze in, with my chest heaving. *Hold your breath, Skid.* Impossible. Their own lights must have scared them too, cos those bastards they stop the car once they get inside the gate. An old Chevy – I hear the thing throttling. They're so close gas fumes are up my nose and hot headlights bounce off everything. Check the surroundings. I'm like a giant trying to fit into a small city. Four inches from my nose black mould is clinging to whitewash and rain stains are streaking off it all the way down the side of a burial vault. Pieces of marble tumble out the side of a tomb, and some ancient red bricks are peepin' through the cracks. Under every fresh coat there's something crumbling. The whitewash never wins.

Car doors open and close. Tennis shoes crunch dried leaves on the walkway. There's a low rumble. One of them has a pair of those new Rollerblades on. Prob'ly stole it off some dead guy. "Yow, don't move, man."

The voice is above my head. One of the shadows climbed up on the vault behind me and tried to drop in, but the space wouldn't allow him. Right away a metal baseball bat comes down between the burial vaults and cracks open the plaster crust of a tomb right by my ear. Insects scramble out, surprised at the raid on their horrible little house. I take off again, and those punks, all half a dozen of them now, they scurry up behind me like cockroaches.

I'm tryin' to stay out of the headlights, so I crouch down and crawl into a space among a few smaller box tombs. They can't possibly find me here. And I hope they don't, cos this part of the cemetery is a dead end: up against a wall, one way in and no

way out if they block me. Well, forget hoping – cos the bastards just found me. I'm in the corner with my knees right up under my chin and my head pushing so hard against a marble plaque I can make out the poor soul's name with the back of my scalp.

One of the thugs starts whistlin' and draggin' the metal baseball bat on the concrete like a real jerk who watches too many gangster movies. A leather belt is wrapped around a fist and the buckle is dangling. As they come in close, I grope around and grab a shoe-size piece of marble off the grass and chuck the thing in their direction. *Pow*. Baseball Bat Guy suddenly grabs his face and goes down. But he's not staying there. He sails it back in my direction. I duck, but not quick enough. Instant head throb and a warm trickle is crossing my eyebrow. My eyes slam shut. I'm so mad and scared I swear my bones are rattlin'. Burnt onto the back of my eyelids are the white graves: a photo negative of prob'ly the last thing I'll see.

Now look. I don't know – I must have thought about it, I guess. You know, one o' those crazy thoughts that crosses your mind when you're at the end of your rope? Or one o' those desperate things you do, like promise God a million things if he could help you make it from the bus stop to the bathroom? Yeah. But as those boys come charging in with the baseball bat in the air, I'm fixin' to fling the wallet to them again when the craziest thing pops into my head: *if only my guardian angel would stop makin' herself so scarce – that'd be great right now*.

Well, look. Right away I hear stone crumbling, and one of those tall marble monuments on top of a tomb, it just leans over and comes tumbling down right in the middle of the manhunt. *Brack. Boom*. The thing hits the rounded top of an oven tomb, sends plaster flyin', slides sideways and sets my teeth on edge. *Whoa*. What the hell. Stone splinters off in every direction. Those boys swear under their breath and pull back. Way back. Dust is in the

air. I'm coughing. And that monument, it just settles in and sits there across the concrete path like the finger of God showing those punks the way out of the cemetery. So we're there, staring at each other over the massive piece of marble for a quiet minute before they curse some more and call me a ghost, and I holler back some horrible stuff about their parents. Tennis shoes shuffle out through dead leaves. High beams swing away, the Chevy engine roars off and fades to nothing, and I'm left sitting on a cold gravestone in my best clothes, with a terrible silence hanging between this twelve-foot monument and me. That's when I see that there's a statue attached to the very top of it: a mossy old marble angel. Down on her face, still holding a broken sword. Now I'm scared shitless.

I really should leave, but my knees are not in the mood. I reckon those boys must have got their balls back by now and are prob'ly waiting for me out on Sixth Street, mad as hell. Truth is, I don't blame 'em for hightailing it out of this boneyard. A ton of marble just took a nosedive inches in front of us for no practical reason.

Anyway, I'm finally up off the ground with my bones still shivering, but I'm heading south with my handkerchief over my eye. My head hurts like hell, but I reckon I can find that exit on Washington Avenue and avoid those punks. *Keep off the main walkway. Walk over some low graves if you have to, Skid.* Dead ahead is the iron sign that curves over the front gate with the words reversed in an arch like a bad spell. So I walk in a straight line with a slice of moon left over from last week following me through the trees. It's enough to help me see where I'm goin'.

The whole graveyard is a maze of cages and iron fences, rows and rows of spearheads gettin' red with rust. Someone left a string of party beads and cigarettes as an offering at a grave: prob'ly some poor fool prayin' to fix a mistake made on Mardi Gras night. I'm bobbin' and weavin' and brushin' away low branches

while dead leaves shuffle in front of a breeze. You can smell the wax from the candles. I hold my nose. Then something makes me stop: a stone wall stacked to form an alcove. It's got this little garden, a well-kept lawn, and a tomb sits in the middle of it. No, not just a tomb, a small castle really: a beautiful thing, with shining marble columns and stained-glass windows behind a fancy fleur-de-lis fence. Fresh flowers are on the stone steps. Above it, a magnolia tree is sighin' and weepin' white flowers all over the green. Moonlight breaks through branches and tinsels down the front of the tomb. You can tell that this family didn't have to scrimp on the money to give their loved one a decent resting place. When the shadows move away, I see why:

BENET

I step up and, sure enough, carved into the marble are some names I recognize: "Orville Jacque Benet", "Herbert Francis Benet". Below that, their birthdays and a dash, followed by the date they got swallowed up by that sinkhole in the swamp.

So this is where Backhoe Benet laid his boys to rest. All the way out here, the legendary Broadway and Squash, the baddest bastards in the swamp. The tomb is brand-new too. For a second I miss them, no lie. But then... I get to thinkin' that that little dash between birth and death stands for all the years they did some real jacked-up things to people in the swamp, including us. One little dash full of so much damn trouble from these two hell-raisers. And here they are buried like royalty after all that. Matter of fact somebody even offered coins in front of the tomb, as if these two were dead saints or something. Well, look: I know a guy who could use the bus fare. So I'm just gonna go ahead and collect all the damn quarters I can find on the ground and even stick that one-dollar note in my wallet

real quick. Don't feel bad. Trust me, these dudes don't deserve this money one bit.

Now, I'm trying not to get riled up, but right now I can't help picturing their big ol' fancy mausoleum all busted up. Yes, there I said it. I can't wait for it to crumble into one big mess. Let's see how many tourists ooh and ahh over a heap of marble. Well, right quick the wind comes up and washes through the trees and howls like hell and I start runnin' again, this time from about a dozen security guards. They're rushing through the cemetery with flashlights and nightsticks. Just before I slip under the arch and out onto Washington, I hear them hollerin' into walkie-talkies that *seven* grave-robbers just tore down both gates and busted open a brand-new tomb.



## Two

There should be a law against reelin' in a man with a plate of scrambled eggs and then bushwhackin' him when he's eating. That's what people do to *rats*, right?

Well, the rat-catcher and part-time "Professor" Valerie Beaumont is lecturing again. This time the topic is "Survivin' in the City", otherwise called "Hell No, You Didn't Come in Here with Your Face Bleeding Last Night". I'm in her class of one, sittin' at the tiny round table in our "new" apartment kitchen. Well, ol' VB, she drops the plate in front of me, and goes to sit near the window. She's being real dramatic: opening the blinds, slumpin' down into that old tangerine fake-leather armchair as sunlight stripes the baby-blue walls behind her – the only wall we've painted so far. Coffee and a cigarette. Steam and smoke. She's pissed. Or scared. Prob'ly both. That smoke looks extra thick when the sunlight hits it.

"You think you're a man, huh?" That's how she begins, sounding real tired, even though she just woke up.

The fork hits my teeth, *clang*, like a boxing bell. Then it's the usual list of rules:

*Get familiar with the RTA schedule. (Public Transportation.)*

*Don't hitch any rides. (There are weirdos out there.)*

*Avoid open lots, strangers and unfamiliar streets. (That sums up just about everywhere.)*

*Less TV and VCR. (You're a high-school senior soon.)*

*Try to get home before dark.*

*Lake Pontchartrain is right across the street, but it's not a playground, y'hear me?*

*Oh, and the city is not the swamp. Speak English. (Pay attention to words ending in "ing".)*

The list does not include my latest violation. Over the last few months Frico and I, we've managed to break six of the first seven. So now there's definitely gonna be a new one:

"And don't go roamin' all around Uptown and Downtown like you're a tourist!"

"Great. Thanks, Skid." Frico's voice comes out of the bedroom and around the corner. That last stipulation should definitely mess with the guy's love life, even though Fricozoid hasn't really listened to his mother in years. Maybe she should make a rule about not playing hide-and-seek with muggers in the cemetery. I'm willing to keep that rule after last night.

Anyway, what's really funny is how these days when she starts givin' me the third degree, I actually welcome it. Cos it's like hearing my pops' superstitions coming out of my mother's mouth, I guess. I miss my old man. She has no idea that she's begun to sound like the man she's always criticizin'. The man she's fixin' to bury without finding his bones anywhere.

"You got into a fight last night, Skid?"

"No."

"Boy, you come in here with somethin' that might require stitches and you're tellin' me—"

"I got chased by some guys Uptown."

"What? What guys?"

"I don't know. It was dark."

"And they just chased you for no reason? And did this to you? Or you did somethin' to them first?"

"No, Moms, I swear. Those boys saw me waitin' for a bus and jumped me. They wanted money."

“You don’t *have* any money for them to want.”

“They didn’t know that. And I wasn’t gonna give those punks my wallet.”

“Now you just sound ridiculous. You goin’ to lose your life over an empty wallet, boy?”

“Pops gave me that wallet a long time ago.”

“Yes, *I* remember givin’ that wallet to your father for his birthday or something. He never used it, that man.”

“Seriously? You gave your husband a wallet for his birthday?”

“Don’t try changin’ the subject, Skid. Wait – what’s wrong with giving your father a wallet for his birthday?”

“Nothing, really. But would you like it if he gave you a bunch of pots and pans for your birthday?”

“Hell no, are you crazy? I’d think he was givin’ me a hint or something.”

“Exactly.”

Pause. Smoke fillin’ the silence.

“Anyway, enough about the damn wallet. That story about the cut on your face doesn’t add up.”

I smirk. She throws me a real nasty pair of eyes as usual.

“Skid, it’s a sad day when your mother really wants to believe what you’re sayin’ and she just can’t.”

“You never believe anything I say anyhow, so...”

The ash is longer than the rest of the cigarette. It curls over and falls off. Her hand quivers a bit. The other one brushes at her lap. Deep breath. Fear smells stronger than tobacco right now.

“Terence, these are different days. Look outside. See those power lines? We’re in the city now: it’s all steel and stone and solid reality. Your father isn’t around any more, and this place can be scarier than where we lived for twenny years. Don’t forget how we ran from that murderer James Jackson to get here. Well, there’s are dozens more like him out here.”

Right. First of all, there's *nowhere* on this planet scarier than the south-east Louisiana swamp where my family lived for twenty years. That hole is the exact spot on this earth where the Devil fell foot first, I swear. You could have lost your life *and* your soul in there. Second, there's no gangster to be compared with Crazy James "Couyon" Jackson. And third, to hear her tell it, before she got to America that San Tainos Caribbean island was no damn picnic neither. Matter of fact, any minute now there'll be some serious quote coming out of her mouth courtesy of ol' San Tai.

"*Trouble never sets like rain*, Terence. You're never gonna see it comin'. And that ol' devil, he don't need no help raisin' chaos! So look here boy. I left the best parts of my days down in that swamp hole, dreamin' my life away with your father. All I want to do now is preserve a little piece of myself and make the most of movin' to where we could get an actual postal address."

I feel bad now, cos I really didn't mean to scare her. She has both hands massagin' her temples: migraine. And even though she's rantin' and that cigarette butt between her fingers makes it look like she's fuming real slow out of one ear, I know she's not really angry. When Valerie Beaumont is angry, it doesn't come out in an American accent. Anyway, I hear Frico getting off the bed in the room. He comes to the bedroom door and quietly pushes it shut. Just before it clicks, you can hear the headphones of a CD player cracklin' around his ears. Good. That's right. Turn up that music, Fricozoid. Cos as soon as Valerie Beaumont calms down and I pick my teeth, I got me a solo mission that works very nicely if you can't hear a damn thing.

## Three

It's been a while, but we're still not back to normal after that night when we ran from "Couyon" Jackson's gang and got into this apartment. Some boxes are still stacked in the corner of the kitchen. The old KeroGas stove and my father's workbench are taking up space under the staircase out front. There's lots of swamp junk to throw out, but since my elder brothers Doug and Tony don't live with us any more, things like that take longer than usual. To be honest we haven't even given the prison-grey carpet a professional cleaning. So I guess we're still breathing carpet-freshener and the smell of who last lived here.

And whoever used to live here *really* liked sausages. The stench of it sticks to the rafters, just like the cheesy bunny-rabbit wallpaper behind the fridge and those greasy fingerprints on the kitchen cupboard. At least that's better than the smell of rat that was present when we first got here. The whole place squeaked even after we oiled the hinges on the cupboard, if you know what I mean. You'd walk into the kitchen and shadows would still be retreating into corners long after you turned the lights on. So Moms went out and spent a fortune on glue traps.

Then there's that ugly water stain in her bedroom ceiling. It's the last thing she sees every night before she goes to bed: deep brown like old blood. She says it looks like "a drop of swamp". Outside, along the corridor, you can see silverfish camping out in their dirty little sleeping bags. That's the official nuisance of the South, I swear. Soon they'll wriggle out and eat through books and boxes like we brought them lunch. Some nights you wake up,

and when the streetlight hits the trees just so, you swear you're still in the swamp. You reach out and touch the wood and they turn into concrete walls again.

The good news is everything can be fixed – everything except maybe the tiles along the corridor outside. Those tiles are *terrazzo*, for godssake: little black-and-white specks of every stone known to man frozen in a square. It's the kind of thing that would drive a cat crazy. I mean, if you spill something, it's hard to tell if you really cleaned up.

Now, you know that my brother Frico can fix all the oldness with a pencil and paper. If y'all never heard, he's a hoodoo *sketcher*, a boy conjurer who can fix things with folk-magic drawings. But he's lazy. Apart from that, he's caught up with reading about this fancy art school in New York City. And that's one reason why Moms is crunching numbers like hell. Yeah, that bastard got a full scholarship, but she's still gonna have some expenses. It's a good thing she's finally opened her food business with Mrs Thorpe, a church sister of hers. A food cart really, but it's got ambition. Plus, like I said, she's planning Alrick Beaumont's memorial service, so all her time is taken up with a calculator and phone calls.

Yeah, we have a telephone now. Doug came and took the CB radio we used in the swamp. He said it's the Nineties now, and nobody uses Citizens' Band any more, but he wants it, cos a CB radio's a damn cool souvenir. I don't blame him: I loved that thing. And for the life of me I can't get used to a phone ringing off the hook every coupla minutes. It's frickin' *nuts*. I can deal with police sirens replacing swamp crickets at night and that neighbour we have who plays music all day and night – but, man, that – goddamn – phone! The only contraption I hate more than a ringin' telephone is a clock. All clocks do is hang around and point out the fact that you're late. Anyway, I tell

Valerie Beaumont I'm going to sort the boxes under the sink so we can throw out more stuff.

"It's about time, Skid," she says. And there's an Alrick Beaumont déjà-vu moment brought to you by Moms again. But I can't get distracted by thinkin' about Pops right now, cos like I said, I got things to do. Lemme break it down.

See, there's this old Frico Beaumont diary I found packed deep down in a box one morning after we moved into the city. He started it around 1981 and has been writing in it every now and then for years. I didn't get to read much when I found it. He was rambling on and on about being in love and all that. Anyway, as usual, his spelling and his grammar were all over the goddamn place. Maan, you should see it. It's hilarious. I reckon I'm gonna have some fun goin' through that whole diary with a nice red marker. It's my duty *to mankind*. Yep. I'm fixin' to do all the grammatical corrections cover to cover, then I'll pack it right back into the box. Imagine his face when he finds it a few years from now. *Ooowee*.

Well, I'm in luck. I was thinkin' I was gonna have to rummage around a bit. But in the second box of about seven, my hand hits the artsy-fartsy brass crest on the front of a hardcover book. See, my silly bro thinks the best place to hide anything from ol' Skid is in plain sight. Well, not today, man.

I'm sneaking out back when, without lookin' up, Valerie Beaumont asks me if I'm done with all the boxes already. I tell her I'm goin' to change the Band-Aid over my eye. She waves me away like she knows I'm up to no good, but she can't be bothered. I'm sixteen: gimme a break, Moms.

Now I got to find me a spot to look into Frico's diary. So I tuck it into my T-shirt before standing on the banister of the main stairs and hoisting myself onto the roof. This is actually the roof of someone *else's* apartment, so you have to take light steps to avoid somebody runnin' out onto a balcony to cuss at ya

in a strange language. Up here reminds me of our tamarind-tree lookout spot in the swamp. Not as high, but at least you can see the shape of the complex.

It's a tight little space, these apartments – shaped like a short, fat crucifix. On the horizontal part of the cross you have all the units, one to fifteen, in a quadrangle, facing each other around a red-brick courtyard. A sugar-maple tree pushes up from a dirt square that's dead centre in the middle of the courtyard. It's a giant. Someone parked a beat-up ol' Toyota Tercel under it a long time ago. Now, after months of rain, dead leaves and bird droppings, you can hardly see anything inside that sorry car.

Then there's the vertical part of the cross: a red-brick walkway that runs from the abandoned backyard of the apartment complex, straight across the quadrangle and down into the road in front of the lake. There are no real security guards here, just a gate guy slash handyman. Most of the time this guy is sleeping. And he's not even here on weekends. He told us everybody calls him "Larry Lou". I'm sure every apartment complex in the world has some guy named Larry. But *our* Larry is the one known for havin' morning breath all day long. He's an OK guy, but job-wise Larry is as "faux" as the French fixtures around this place, like those hollow aluminium fleur-de-lis fences pretending to be cast iron.

Anyway, I'm sitting in the shade of the maple tree that comes all the way up and hangs over part of the roof, with my red marker, ready to read, but the sun is splintering off the lake across the street and hittin' me in the eyes. I turn south, but the tiny cars silently crawlin' over the I-10 Highway are just as distracting. Far west, Downtown New O'lins keeps rising full steam under clouds piled high and cranes paused halfway to heaven. Hayne Boulevard is one long road into the city. Follow the poles and power lines trailin' off into the haze and you'll hit the highway. Over the Connection Bridge my elder brothers have a place like