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Natchez Burning

Written by Greg Iles

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GREG ILES

Natchez Burning

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Prologue

"If a man is forced to choose between the truth and his father, only a fool chooses the truth." A great writer said that, and for a long time I agreed with him. But put into practice, this adage could cloak almost any sin. My mother would agree with it, but I doubt my older sister would, and my fiancée would scoff at the idea. Perhaps we expect too much of our fathers. Nothing frightens me more than the faith in my daughter's eyes. How many men deserve that kind of trust? One by one, the mentors I've most admired eventually revealed chinks in their armor, cracks in their façades, and tired feet of clay—or worse.

But not my father.

A child of the Great Depression, Tom Cage knew hunger. At eighteen, he was drafted and served as a combat medic during the worst fighting in Korea. After surviving that war, he went to medical school, then paid off his loans by serving in the army in West Germany. When he returned home to Mississippi, he practiced family medicine for more than forty years, treating some of the most underprivileged in our community with little thought of financial reward. The *Natchez Examiner* has named him an "Unsung Hero" more times than I can remember. If small towns still have saints, then he is surely one of them.

And yet . . .

As the cynical governor created by my distant relation, Robert Penn Warren, once said: "*Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption and he passeth from the stink of the didie to the stench*

of the shroud. There is always something." My younger self sometimes wondered whether this might be true about my father, but time slowly reassured me that he was the exception to Willie Stark's cynical rule. Like poor Jack Burden, my hopeful heart answered: "*Maybe not on the Judge.*" But Robert Penn Warren had the kind of courage I've only begun to discover: the will to dig to the bottom of the mine, to shine his pitiless light downward, and to stare unflinchingly at what he found there. And what I found by following his example was proof of Willie Stark's eternal rule: *There is always something*.

It's tempting to think that I might never have learned any of this—that my mother, my sister, and I might mercifully have escaped the consequences of acts committed deep in the haze of history (a time before cell phones and digital cameras and reporters who honor no bounds of propriety, when *N-word* meant nothing to anybody and *nigger* was as common in the vernacular as *tractor*)—but to yearn for ignorance is to embrace the wishful thinking of a child. For once the stone hits the surface of the pond, the ripples never really stop. The waves diminish, and all seems to return to its previous state, but that's an illusion. Disturbed fish change their patterns, a snake slides off the muddy bank into the water, a deer bolts into the open to be shot. And the stone remains on the slimy bottom, out of sight but inarguably there, dense and permanent, sediment settling over it, turtles and catfish prodding it, the sun heating it through all the layers of water until that far-off day when, whether lifted by the fingers of a curious boy diving fifty years after it was cast or uncovered by a bone-dumb farmer draining the pond to plant another half acre of cotton, that stone finds its way back up to the light.

And the man who cast it trembles. Or if he is dead, his sons tremble. They tremble by an unwritten law, one that a fellow Mississippian understood long before I was born and casually revealed to a reporter in a French hotel room in 1956, dispensing eternal truths as effortlessly as a man tossing coins to beggars in the road. He said, "*The past is never dead; it's not even past. If it were, there would be no grief or sorrow.*" And ten years before him, my distant relation wrote, "*There is always something*." And six decades after that, I thought: *Please, no, let me remain in my*

carefully constructed cocoon of Not-Knowing. Let me keep my untarnished idol, my humble war hero, the one healer who has not killed, the one husband who has not lied, the one father who has not betrayed the faith of his children. But as I know now, and hate the knowing . . . Willie was right: there *is* always something.

So let us begin in 1964, with three murders. Three stones cast into a pond no one had cared about since the siege of Vicksburg, but which was soon to become the center of the world's attention. A place most people in the United States liked to think was somehow different from the rest of the country, but which was in fact the very incarnation of America's tortured soul.

Mississippi.

PART ONE

1964–1968

At his best, man is the noblest of all animals; separated from law and justice he is the worst.

—Aristotle

ONE

Albert Norris sang a few bars of Howlin' Wolf's "Natchez Burnin'" to cover the sounds of the couple making love in the back of his shop. The front door was locked. It was after seven, the streets deserted. But today had been a bad day. Albert had tried to cancel the rendezvous by switching on the light in the side room where he taught piano during the week—he'd even sent a boy to warn the man to stay away from the shop—but the two lovers had ignored his warnings and come anyway. He'd set up their rendezvous a week ago, by sending out a coded message during his gospel radio show, which was his usual method. But lovers who saw each other only twice a month—if they were lucky—weren't going to be deterred by a warning light in a window, not even if their lives were at risk.

The white woman had arrived first, rapping lightly at the alley door. Albert had tried to run her off—whites were supposed to use the front—but she'd refused to budge. Terrified that a passerby might see her, Albert had let her in. Mary Shivers was a skinny white schoolteacher with more hormones than sense. Even before he could chastise her, he heard his side door open. Moments later, six-foot-three-inch Willie Hooks barged into the store. The big carpenter stuffed five dollars into Albert's hand, ran to the woman, seized her up in one arm, and carried her to the back of the shop. Albert had followed, desperately trying to explain about the visit he'd gotten from the furious white men that afternoon, but Hooks and the schoolteacher were deaf to all appeals. Three seconds after

the door slammed in his face, Albert heard the sounds of people shedding clothes. A moment later, the woman yelped, and then the springs in the old sofa in the back room went to singing.

"Five minutes!" Albert had shouted through the door. "I'm kicking open this door in five minutes. I ain't dying for you two!"

The couple took no notice.

Albert cursed and walked toward his display window. Third Street looked blessedly empty, but within five seconds Deputy John DeLillo's cruiser rolled into view, moving at walking speed. Acid flooded Albert's stomach. He wondered where the schoolteacher had parked her car. Deputy DeLillo was even bigger than Willie Hooks, and he had a fearsome temper. He'd killed at least four black men Albert knew about, and he'd beaten countless others with rods, phone books, and a leather strap spiked with roofing tacks.

Big John's cruiser stopped in the middle of the street. His big head leaned out of the car to gaze into Albert's shop window. Albert couldn't see the deputy's eyes, thanks to the mirrored sunglasses he wore, but he knew what DeLillo was looking for. Pooky Wilson was the most wanted man in Concordia Parish tonight. Just eighteen, Pooky had gained that dubious distinction by bedding the eighteen-year-old daughter of one of the richest men in the parish. Since he'd worked at Albert's store for nearly a year, Pooky had naturally run to Albert when he learned that the Klan and the police—often one and the same—were combing the parish for him. Knowing that local "justice" for Pooky would mean a tall tree and a short rope, Albert had hidden the boy in the safe box he'd constructed for illegal whiskey, which he sold on a seasonal basis. For the past two hours, Pooky had been sitting cramped in the shell of a Hammond spinet organ in Albert's workshop. Positioned against a wall, the A-105 looked like it weighed five hundred pounds, but the hollow housing could hold a full load of moonshine, and even a man in a pinch. There was a trapdoor beneath it for dumping contraband during emergencies (and a hidey-hole dug in the earth below), but since the music store sat up on blocks, Pooky couldn't use that for escape until after dark.

Albert raised his hand and gave Deputy DeLillo an exaggerated shake of his head, indicating that he'd seen neither hide nor hair of his employee. For a few paralyzed seconds, Albert worried that

DeLillo would come inside to question him again, which would lead to the big deputy kicking open the door that separated him from the loudly copulating couple, and then to death for either DeLillo or Willie Hooks. The violent repercussions of Willie killing the deputy were almost unthinkable. Thankfully, after a few awful seconds, Big John waved his mitt and drove on. An invisible band around Albert's chest loosened, and he remembered to breathe.

He wondered how Pooky was doing. The fool of a boy had been hiding in the Hammond when his girlfriend's father and a Klansman named Frank Knox had burst into the store, cursing Albert for "fomenting miscegenation" and threatening to kill him if he didn't produce Pooky Wilson. Albert had summoned all his courage and lied with the sincerity of Lucifer himself; if he hadn't, both he and Pooky would already be dead.

As the bedsprings sang in the back of the store, Albert prayed as he never had before. He prayed that the Klan hadn't stationed anybody outside to watch his store. He prayed that Willie and the schoolteacher would finish soon, would get away clean, and that darkness would fall. Anything less meant the end for all of them, except maybe the white woman.

The sofa springs groaned at about E above middle C, so Albert tuned his voice to their accompaniment. *"There was two hundred folks a-dancin',"* he belted as he negotiated his way through the pianos in the display room, *"laughin', singin' to beat the band."* He'd already run out of verses, so he'd taken to making up his own, describing the tragic fire that would likely have killed him, had he not been away in the navy. *"Yeah, there was two hundred souls a-dancin', lawd—laughin', singin' to beat the band."* Entering his workshop, he sat beside the Hammond organ, picked up a tonewheel, and pretended to work on it. *"Two hundred souls on fire, locked indoors by the devil's hand."*

After a quick look back at the display window, he tapped on the Hammond and said, "How you doin' in there, Pook?"

"Not good. I'm 'bout to pee in my pants, Mr. Albert."

"You got to hold it, boy. And don't even think about lifting that trapdoor. Somebody outside might see your water hit the ground."

"I can't breathe, neither. I don't like small spaces. Can't you let me out for a minute? It feels like a coffin in here."

"There's plenty of air in there. That small space is the only thing that's gonna keep you *out* of a coffin tonight."

Albert heard a ripping sound. Then part of the grille cover beneath the organ's keyboard was pulled back, and an eye appeared in the hole. It looked like the eye of a catfish gasping in the bottom of a boat.

"Quit tearing that cloth!" Albert snapped.

The eye vanished, and two dark fingers took its place. "Hold my hand, Mr. Albert. Just for a minute."

With a lump in his throat, Albert reached out and hooked his forefinger in Pooky's. The boy hung on like Albert was the only thing still tying him to the earth.

"Is there somebody else in the store?" Pooky asked.

"Willie Hooks. He'll be gone soon. Listen, now. When it gets dark, I'm gonna turn on the lights in the display room and start playing piano. That'll draw any eyes watching the place. Once I get goin' good, open that trapdoor and drop down to the hole. If the coast looks clear, make your way two blocks over to Widow Nichols's house. She'll hide you in her attic till tomorrow. When I think the time is right, I'll pick you up in my panel truck and carry you to the train station at Brookhaven. From there, it's the Illinois Central straight up to Chicago. You got that?"

"I guess so. What I'm 'posed to use for money? Man can't ride the train for free."

Albert leaned over and slid five twenty-dollar bills under the bottom of the organ.

"Tuck that in your pants. That foldin' money's gonna get you started in Chi-town."

Pooky whistled in amazement inside the organ box. "Can we really make it, Mr. Albert? Them fellas mean to lynch me for sure."

"We'll make it. But we wouldn't even *be* in this mess if you'd listened to me. I told you that girl was just trying to prove something to her daddy, messing with you."

Pooky whimpered like a frightened dog. "I can't he'p it, Mr. Albert. I love Katy. She loves me, too."

The boy sounded like he was barely holding himself together. Albert shook his head, then got up and returned to the display room, once more belting the blues like a bored man working alone.

He'd met Howlin' Wolf back in '55, at Haney's Big House up the street, back when the Wolf was playing the chitlin circuit. Wolf's keyboard man had been sick, so Haney called Albert down from his store to fill in. Albert had met most of the great ones that way, over the years. They'd all swung through Ferriday at one time or another, since it lay so close to the Mississippi River and Highway 61. Ray Charles, Little Walter, B.B., even Muddy himself. White boys, too. Albert had taught Jerry Lee Lewis more than a few licks on piano. Some of the black acts had tried to lure Albert onto the road with them, but Albert had learned one true thing by watching musicians pass through his store: the road broke a man down fast—especially a black man.

The white woman screamed in the back. Albert prayed nobody was walking through the alley. Willie was working her hard. Mary Shivers had been married five years and had two kids, but that wasn't enough to keep her at home. Two months ago, she'd struck up a conversation with Willie while he was working on a house next door. Next thing you know, Willie was asking Albert to set up a meeting somewhere. That was the way it went, most times. The black half of the couple would ask Albert to set something up. Might be the man, might be the woman. A few times over the years, a particularly bold white woman had set up a rendezvous in the store, whispering over the sheet music for some hymn or other she was buying. Albert had reluctantly accommodated most of them. That was what a businessman did, after all. Filled a need. Supplied a demand. And Lord knew there was demand for a place where black and white could meet away from prying eyes.

Albert had set up a couple of places where couples could meet discreetly, far away from his shop. But if the white half of the couple had a legitimate interest in music—and enough ready cash—he occasionally allowed a hasty rendezvous in the back of the store. He'd got the idea for using his radio show to set up the meetings from his stint in the navy. He'd only been a cook—that's about all they'd let you be in World War II, if you were black—but a white officer had told him how the Brits had used simple codes during music programs to send messages out to French Resistance agents in the field. They'd play a certain song, or quote a piece of poetry, and different groups would know what the signal meant.

Blow up this railroad bridge, or shoot that German officer. Using his Sunday gospel show, Albert had found it easy to send coded messages to the couples waiting to hear their meeting times. And since whites could tune in to his gospel show as easily as blacks, the system was just about perfect. Each person in an illicit couple had a particular song, and each knew the song of his or her partner. As disc jockey of his own show, Albert could say something like "Next Sunday at seven o'clock, I'm gonna be playing a one-two punch with 'Steal Away to Jesus,' by the Mighty Clouds of Joy, followed by 'He Cares for Me,' by the Dixie Hummingbirds. Lord, you can't beat that." And they would know.

Simple.

The rhythm of the sofa springs picked up, then stopped suddenly as Willie cried "Jesus!" with a sinner's fervor. A moment later, the floorboards creaked under Willie's two hundred and thirty pounds. Albert didn't know how that skinny schoolteacher could take what Willie gave her, but that was another thing he'd learned over the years: the size of a woman on the outside didn't mean nothing; it was how much hunger she had on the inside that made her what she was between the sheets. Some of the white women he'd seen come through his store had a desperate hunger that nothing would ever fill.

Albert heard shuffling, then the door opened. Willie Hooks stood there wiping sweat from his forehead with his shirtsleeve. The schoolteacher looked like she'd just run a mile to catch a bus and got run over by it instead. Dazed, she slowly buttoned up her dress with no regard for Albert's presence or what he might see.

"This is the *last* time," Albert said. "For a long time, anyway. And you be damn careful when you go. Big John's cruising around out there, and half the Klan is hunting for Pooky Wilson."

"Big John Law," Hooks said with venom. "What's Pooky done?"

"Don't you worry 'bout that."

"Is that why you sent that little boy to warn me off?" Willie asked, his voice a full octave lower than Albert's. "Why you had that warning light on? 'Cause of Big John?"

"I'll tell you why I sent that boy. Two white men busted up in here today, and one was screaming bloody murder. Screaming 'bout his daughter goin' with a nigger boy."

"What white men?" Willie asked, interested.

"Brody Royal, for one."

Willie blinked in disbelief. "That fine girl he got is doin' Pooky Wilson?"

The schoolteacher elbowed Willie in the ribs.

Hooks didn't flinch. "That skinny little bass player with the crooked back?"

Pooky Wilson had severe scoliosis, but Katy Royal didn't seem to mind. "You forget you ever heard that," Albert said. "You, too," he added, glaring at the white woman, who under any other circumstances could have had him jailed for backtalk.

"I ain't scared of Brody Royal," Willie said. "That rich bastard."

Albert gave Willie a measuring glance. "No? Well, the man with Brody was Frank Knox."

Willie froze.

"You ain't talking so big now, are you?" Albert asked.

"Shit. You let Mr. *Frank's* little girl come up in here to meet somebody?"

Albert stamped his foot in disgust. "I look retarded to you, boy? Frank Knox ain't got no little girl. He was just here to make the point. Now, you get the hell out of my place. You got to find some other place to get your corn ground."

The schoolteacher moaned, sounding more like a feral cat than a human being.

Willie looked at her with frank desire. "Well, if this is the last time for a while . . ."

She opened her mouth and started unbuttoning her dress, but Albert shoved Willie toward the side door. "Get out! And don't come back. Anybody stops you, tell 'em you moved some pianos for me. I'll take care of getting missy out of here."

Hooks laughed and plodded to the side door. "How about a hit of lightnin' for the road, Mr. Albert?"

"I got no whiskey for the likes of you!" He turned back to the woman as Willie cursed and vanished through the door.

The schoolteacher's dress was buttoned now. She looked primly up at him. "You know a lot about a lot of people, don't you?"

"Reckon I would," Albert said, "'cep' I got a bad memory. Real bad. Forget a face soon as I see it."

"That's good," said Mary Shivers. "We'll all live longer that way."

She started to follow Willie through the side door, but Albert blocked her path and motioned for her to leave by the front. "Pick up some music from the rack on your way out. God help you if you can't lie, but I imagine you're pretty good at it."

After a moment's hesitation, Mary Shivers obeyed.

Albert switched on a box fan to drive her smell from the lesson room. He figured darkness would fall in about fifteen minutes. To pass the time, he walked into his office, knelt beside the desk, and pulled up a pine floorboard. The door of a firebox greeted him. Taking out one of several ledgers he kept inside the box, he sat at his rolltop desk and opened the leather-bound volume, revealing perfect columns of blue-inked names and numbers in his own precise hand.

Albert kept a ledger for everything. He had one for sales of musical instruments, another for rentals. He kept a book for instruments he sold on time, marking in the payments and late charges. He kept a black ledger for whiskey sales, and a red ledger for loans he'd made to people he trusted. He'd loaned out a lot of money over the years, much of it to boys he'd trained in his store, boys sent off to cities like Chicago and Los Angeles with a single marketable skill besides digging ditches or picking cotton—tuning pianos. To a man, they had paid him back their stakes, even if it had taken them years to do it. Those boys were Albert's faith in humanity. It comforted him to know that when Pooky Wilson reached Chicago—*if* he did—he'd probably be able to find work as a piano tuner before the hundred-dollar stake Albert had given him ran out.

In the back of his loan ledger, in red, Albert wrote in the sums he'd loaned to folks in trouble, the kind of trouble where he knew he'd never get the money back. Sometimes you had to do that, even if you were a businessman. That was his mama coming out in him. But the ledger Albert worked in now was special. In this volume he kept a record of every rendezvous he'd ever arranged—the names of the people involved, the times and dates they'd met, the money they'd paid him, their song codes for his radio show. Over eighteen years, quite a few pages had accumulated. There

were nearly eighty names in the ledger now. Albert wasn't sure why he kept it. He had no intention of blackmailing anybody, though the ledger would certainly be worth a lot to an unscrupulous man. But a good businessman kept records. It was that simple. You never knew when you might need to refer back to the past.

After writing in the particulars about Willie and the schoolteacher, Albert replaced the ledger in the firebox and covered it with the floorboard. Then he took a quart of corn whiskey from a suitcase, went out to the sales floor, and sat at his favorite piano. He drank in silence until the street went dark outside the display window. Then he got up, switched on the lights, and returned to the piano.

Laying his fingers on the keys, he started with "Blues in the Night," rolling his right hand with a feather-light touch. Then he gently twisted the melody inside out until it became "Blue Skies," despite not having felt smiled upon in quite a while. It was times like this that Albert wished his wife had lived. Lilly would always sit at his side while he played, or on the floor behind him, leaning against his lower back, and sing over the notes he coaxed from whichever piano they had at the time. Sometimes she'd sing the way Billie Holiday sang on the radio, other times she crooned in a language all her own, improvising over whatever Albert did with the keys. Tonight he'd give all the money he had in the bank to have recorded the songs his wife had made up on those nights. But he never did.

And then she died.

Lilly had passed when he was thirty, she twenty-eight. Albert had never remarried. He'd passed the last twenty years with various girls, none more special than the last, and he'd stayed away from white women as much as he could, despite considerable pressure from some of the housewives whose homes he visited to tune their pianos. He always tried to make his calls when the husband was home, and he worked hard to make a good impression. That was how you survived in cotton country. From one corner of the parish to the other, every white man of property knew Albert Norris as a "good nigger."

Albert stopped playing in mid-measure, like a walker in mid-stride, and listened to the suspended chord fade into silence. It

took half a minute, and he knew that a child could probably hear the sound waves decay for another thirty seconds after that, the way he used to when he'd sat on the floor by his mother's old Baldwin. Age took those things from you, though—slow but sure.

In the haunting silence, he heard a muted thump from the workroom. A few seconds later, the sound repeated itself. The trapdoor had closed. Pooky Wilson was slipping out into hostile night, like a thousand black boys before him.

"Godspeed, son," Albert said softly.

He'd drunk more whiskey than usual tonight, hoping to dull the memory of the men who'd visited him that afternoon, not to mention the specter of Big John DeLillo cruising past on the hot asphalt outside. Sometimes reality crowded in so close on you, not even music could block it out. He could almost hear Pooky's pounding heart as the boy tried to cover the two blocks to Widow Nichols's house. Filled with bitterness, Albert got up from the piano bench, wobbled, then marched up to the display window and fiddled with some glittery drums to draw the eyes of any watchers outside. After a couple of minutes of this, he staggered to his bedroom at the back of the shop. He could still smell the white woman's sex on the air, and it made him angry.

"Bitch ought to stay with her own," he muttered. "Nothing but trouble."

His last words were mumbled into his bunched pillow.

The sound of breaking glass dredged Albert from a dreamless sleep. Instinctively, he reached for the .32 pistol he kept on his bedside table, but he'd been too drunk to bring it from the office when he went to bed. Somebody fell over a drum set, and a cymbal crashed to the floor. Then a flashlight beam cut through the short dark hallway that led to the sales floor.

"Who's there?" Albert called. "Pooky? That you?"

The noises stopped, then continued, and this time he heard muffled voices. Albert got up, fought a wave of dizziness, then hurried into his office. His pistol was right where he'd left it. He picked up the .32 and padded carefully up the hall. He heard a deep gurgling, like someone emptying herbicide from a fifty-five-gallon drum. Then he smelled gasoline.

Panic and foreknowledge swept through him in a paralyzing wave. He wanted to flee, but the store was all he had. He owned the building—a rare feat for a black man in Ferriday, Louisiana—but he had no insurance. He'd put the premium money into new inventory, those electric guitars all the white boys was wanting since the Beatles hit the TV. Albert flung himself up the hall, then stopped when he saw two black silhouettes in the darkness. The shadow men were emptying gasoline over the piano in the display window, and splashing it high on the guitars hanging on the wall.

"What ya'll doin'?" he cried. "Stop that now! Who is that?"

The men kept emptying the cans.

"I'll call the po-lice! I swear I will!"

The men laughed. Albert squinted, and in the faint light bleeding through the window he saw the paleness of their skin. In the shadows to his right, Albert sensed more than saw a third figure, but it looked larger than a man, almost like a Gemini astronaut with air tanks on his back.

"I got a pistol!" Albert cried, ashamed of the fear in his voice. If he fired now, the muzzle flash or the ricocheting bullet was as likely to set off the fumes as a struck match. "Please!" he begged. "Why ya'll want to ruin my store? What I ever done to you fellas?"

A pickup truck passed on the street outside, and in its reflected headlights Albert recognized the faces of the two men in the window. One was Snake Knox, the brother of Frank, the Klansman who'd visited the store that afternoon. The other was Brody Royal. The third man remained in shadow. *Dear Jesus . . .* These were serious men. They made the regular Ku Klux Klan look like circus clowns. Albert had managed to keep off the wrong side of men like this all his life. He'd bowed and scraped when necessary. He'd ignored the flirtations of their women, greased the right palms, and given gifts of service and merchandise. But now . . . now they wanted the life of a boy who was guilty of nothing but being young and ignorant.

"Mr. Brody, you *knows* me," Albert said with absurd reasonableness. "Please, now . . . I done told you this afternoon, I don't know *nothin'* 'bout your daughter getting up to anything." This lie sounded hollow even to him, but the truth would be worse: *Mr. Royal, your little girl's got a willful streak and she'd hump*

that black boy right in front of you if he'd let her. "Please now, Mr. Royal," he pleaded. "Why, I've got your own church organ up in here, fixing it."

"Shut up!" snapped the shadow man. "Tell us where that young buck is right this minute, or you die. Make your choice."

"I don't know!" Albert cried. "I swear! But I do know that boy didn't mean no harm."

Brody Royal dropped his gas can on the floor and walked up to Albert. "Cur dogs don't mean any harm, either, but they'll impregnate your prize bitch if they can get close to her."

"He ain't gonna tell us nothin'," Snake Knox said. "Let's finish the job."

"I thought you were a businessman, Norris," Royal said, his eyes seeming to glow in the pale, angular face. "But I guess in the end, even the best nigra's gonna be a nigger one day a week. Let's go, boys."

Snake picked up the piano bench and tossed it through Albert's plate glass window. The shards tinkled in the street like a shattering dream. Snake leaped through the window after the bench, and Albert saw a man nearly twice his size join him in the street. Brody Royal scrambled out onto the porch, then jumped down to the sidewalk. Instinct told Albert to follow them, but before he could move, the giant figure stepped from the shadows and stared at him with unalloyed hatred. The huge shape was no astronaut; it was Frank Knox, wearing an asbestos suit and some kind of pack on his back.

"You should have talked," he said. "Now you get the Guadalcanal barbecue."

Albert backpedaled in terror, but the roaring jet of flame reached toward him like the finger of Satan, and Knox's eyes flashed with fascination.

The display room exploded into fire.

Facedown in a roaring fog of pain, Albert slowly picked himself up from the floor, then ran blindly from the inferno raging in the front of his store. When he crashed through the back door, arms flailing, he saw that his clothes had already burned away. Like a deer fleeing a forest fire, he bounded toward a bright opening at the end of the alley. There was a service station there—a

white-owned station, but he knew the attendant. Maybe somebody would take him to the hospital.

As Albert windmilled down the alley, a big car pulled across the open space, blocking it. The gumball light on its roof came to life, spilling red glare onto the walls of the buildings. A huge shape rose from beside the car. Big John DeLillo.

"Help me, Mr. John!" Albert screamed, running toward the deputy. "Lord, they done burned me out!"

As he ran, Albert saw that his hands were on fire.