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Little Scarlet

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Extract

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The morning air still smelled of smoke. Wood ash mainly but there was also the acrid stench of burnt plastic and paint. And even though I knew it couldn't be true, I thought I caught a whiff of putrid flesh from under the rubble across the street. The hardware store and Bernard's Stationery Store were both completely gutted. The Gonzalez Market had been looted but only a part of its roof had been scorched. The corner building, however, Lucky Dime Liquors, had been burned to the ground. Manny Massman was down in the rubble with his two sons, kicking the metal fixtures. At one point the middle-aged store owner lowered his head and cried. His sons put their hands on his shoulders.

I understood how he felt. He had everything in that liquor store. His whole life. And now, after a five-day eruption of

rage that had been simmering for centuries, he was penniless and destitute.

In his mind he hadn't done a thing wrong to anyone down in Watts. He had never even thought about calling someone a nigger or boy. But the men and women down around Central and Eighty-sixth Place took everything of Manny's that they could carry, then smashed and burned the rest.

Four young black men passed in front of the liquor lot. One of them shouted something at the white men.

Manny barked back.

The youths stopped.

The Massman sons stepped forward with their chests out and their mouths full of angry sounds.

It's starting all over again, I thought. Maybe we'll be rioting a whole year. Maybe it won't ever end.

The black men crossed the threshold of the Lucky Dime's property line.

Stephen Massman bent down to pick up a piece of metal that had once been attached to their counter.

One of the angry youths shoved Martin.

I held my breath.

"Halt!" a man shouted through a megaphone.

A dozen or more soldiers appeared out of nowhere. A black soldier wearing a helmet and camouflage khakis talked to the black men while four white soldiers stood in an arc in front of the store owners. The rest of the troop stood across the property line cutting off the ravaged lot from the street.

Most of the National Guardsmen brandished rifles. A crowd was gathering. My hands clenched into fists so tight that my right forearm went into a spasm.

While I massaged out the knot of pain, the black soldier, a

sergeant, calmed the four youths. I could hear his voice but my fourth-story window was too far away for me to make out the words.

I turned away from the scene and fell into the plush blue chair that sat at my desk. For the next hour I just sat there, hearing the sounds of people in the street but not daring to look down.

It had been like that for the past five days: me holding myself in check while South Los Angeles went up in the flames of a race riot; while stores were looted and snipers fired and while men, women, and children cried "Burn, baby, burn!" and "Get whitey!" on every corner familiar to me.

I stayed shut up in my home, in peaceful West L.A., not drinking and not going out with a trunk full of Molotov cocktails.

WHEN I FINALLY roused myself the street down below was full of black people, some venturing out of their homes for the first time since the first night of rioting. Most of them looked stunned.

I went to my office door and out into the hall.

There was the smell of smoke in the building too, but not much. Steinman's Shoe Repair was the only store that had been torched. That was on the first night, when the fire trucks still braved the hails of sniper bullets. The flames were put out before they could spread.

I went to the far stairwell from my office and down the three flights to Steinman's side entrance. There was a burnt timber blocking the way. I would have turned around if it weren't for the voices.

"What the hell you mean you don't have my shoes, white man?"

"Everything is burned up," a frail voice replied in a mild German accent.

"That's not my fault, man," the angry voice said. "I give you my shoes, I expect to get them back."

"They are all burned."

"And do you think if this was my store that I could tell you I didn't have nuthin' for ya?" the customer said. "Do you think a black man could just say his store done burned down so he don't have to make good on his responsibilities?"

"I don't have your shoes."

I shoved the timber out of the way, smudging the palms of my hands with sooty charcoal. When I came into the burned-out room, both occupants turned to look at me.

Theodore was a short, powerfully built white man with little hair and big hands. The irate customer was much larger, with a wide chest and a big face that would have been beautiful on a woman.

"Hey, Theodore," I said.

"Wait your turn, man," the Negro customer warned. "I got business to take care of first."

He swiveled his head back to the cobbler and said, "Those shoes costed me thirty-six dollars and if you can't give 'em up right now I want to see some money across this here hand."

I took a quick breath and then another. There was an electric tingle over my right cheekbone and for a moment the room was tinged in red.

"Brother," I said. "You got to go."

"Are you talkin' to me, niggah?"

"You heard me," I said in a tone that you can't make up. "I been in the house for some time now, trying not to break out and start doin' wrong. I've been patient and treadin' softly. But

if you say one more word to my friend here I will break you like a matchstick and throw you out in the street."

"I want my shoes," the big beautiful man said with tears in his voice. "He owe it to me. It don't matter what they did."

I heard his cracked tone. I knew that he was just as crazy as I was at that moment. We were both black men filled with a passionate rage that was too big to be held in. I didn't want to fight but I knew that once I started, the only thing that would stop me would be his lifeless throat crushed by my hand.

"Here you are, sir," Theodore said.

He was handing over a ten-dollar bill.

"Your shoes were old, you know," the shoemaker said. "And they both needed soles. It was a good make and I would have bought them for seven dollars. So here's ten."

The burly man stared at the note a moment. Then he looked up at me.

"Forget it," he said.

He turned around so quickly that he lost his balance for a moment and had to reach out for a broken, charred timber for support.

"Ow!" he shouted, probably because of a splinter, but I can't say for sure because he blundered out, tearing the front door off of its last hinge as he went.

There was a sleek antique riding saddle on the floor, under a shattered wooden chair. I moved away the kindling and picked up the saddle. Theodore had received it from his uncle who was a riding master in Munich before World War I. I'd always admired the leatherwork.

Setting the riding gear on a fairly stable part of his ruined worktable, I said, "You didn't have to pay him, Mr. Steinman."

"He was hurting," the small man replied. "He wanted justice."

"That's not your job."

"It is all of our job," he said, staring at me with blue eyes. "You cannot forget that."

"Ezekiel Rawlins?"

It was a question asked in a voice filled with authority. It was a white man's voice. Putting those bits of information together, I knew that I was being addressed by the police.

2

He wore a rumpled green suit and a white shirt that had yellowed from too many launderings. He didn't wear a hat but it was already almost eighty degrees and too hot for the kind of hat that unkempt white man would own. His tie was like a muddy creek bed with a few murky jewels showing through.

"Are you Ezekiel Rawlins?" he asked. "I was up at your office. A man across the hall said you'd gone downstairs."

I waited for him to say more.

"Detective Melvin Suggs," the man said.

He held out a hand.

I looked at it. Not many policemen had offered to shake hands with me. Outstretched hands of the law held wooden batons and pistols, handcuffs and warrants but rarely a welcome and never an offer of equality.

"What is it you want, Detective?"

Melvin Suggs first closed his hand and then opened it to rub his fingertips together. His smile held little friendliness and that was fine by me. I didn't need a friendly white cop right then. Enough of my world had already been turned inside out.

"Are you here about the damage to the building, officer?" Theodore Steinman asked.

I could have told my friend that the policeman hadn't come for our structural troubles. The cop was there for me. He needed me to help him — that's what I thought at the time.

"No sir," Suggs said. "There will be a unit here later in the week to investigate every act of arson and looting. But right now I have to speak to Mr. Rawlins."

"That's too bad," I said, "because right now I have to help my friend clean up what's left of his store."

"This is important," the policeman said, again in that tone of authority.

"People got problems all up and down the street, Officer. Every doorway got some kinda mark on it. People lost their businesses, their jobs. Some little old ladies got to take a bus five miles just to find a store to buy a quarter pound of margarine."

"But only thirty-four people lost their lives," he said.

"Radio said this morning that it was thirty-three dead," I said, feeling the need to contradict him.

"One went unreported," the policeman replied. "It's a special case and we would like you to take a look at it."

"Excuse me, Officer, but you must be mistaking me for some other Ezekiel Rawlins. I'm just a custodian for the board of education, down at Sojourner Truth Junior High School. I don't have any official capacity whatsoever."

"No. I have the right man."

Suggs had brilliant taupe-colored eyes that somehow fit his grubby appearance. He just stood there, staring at me.

For my part I turned to assess the destroyed cobbler's shop. All he had left was the burnt and broken worktable surrounded by a couple hundred pairs of scorched shoes. Why would somebody want to burn shoes? Other than with footwear, the floor was covered with things turned out of Theodore Steinman's drawers, shelves, and filing cabinet. There was a bone-handled pocketknife, a yellow package of Juicy Fruit chewing gum, a fat pink eraser, and maybe a thousand rubber bands. There were index cards marked by the footprints of looters and firemen, and the torn and crumpled leaves of a Bible written in German. Under a broken oak chair I saw a small shattered pane of glass within the loose confines of a splintered wood frame. I knelt down and shook the slivers of glass from a portrait-like photograph of Sylvie — Theodore's muse and wife.

"Oh my," the shoemaker said when I handed him the scraped and punctured picture.

He cradled it in both hands as if holding a baby.

"Mr. Rawlins," Detective Suggs said.

I had forgotten he was there.

"What?"

"Go, Ezekiel," Theodore Steinman said. "He needs you."

"I can't leave you here like this, Theodore. Suppose somebody else comes for his shoes like that guy?"

"I will talk to him."

I already knew that Theodore had blue eyes. I had been bringing my shoes to the man for nearly twenty years. I see things, things that other people overlook. That's why the sign on my office door reads EASY RAWLINS — RESEARCH AND DELIVERY. But

there was something about the quality in Theodore's eyes that I had never seen before. It was as if the violence of the past few days had given me the power to look deeper, or maybe it was that the people around me had changed — Theodore and his angry customer and maybe even Melvin Suggs, the cop that approached me with his hand proffered in greeting.

DETECTIVE SUGGS AND I left through the now doorless doorway of the shoe shop. That took us out onto Central. There were dozens of people wandering the street. This was unusual because in L.A. even poor people got around by car. But in the aftermath of the riots, the smoke in the air brought people out by foot to investigate the aftermath of a race war.

Suggs drove a Rambler Marlin. It was roomy and equipped with seat belts.

"I never use the damn things," the cop told me. "It's my ex. She says I can't take the kids unless I have 'em."

We had been driving for quite some time when I asked, "So what do you want from me, Officer?"

"I got a case that needs solving outside of the public eye."

"You?"

"The LAPD," he said. "Chief Parker, Mayor Yorty."

Suggs didn't look at me while he talked. He didn't seem like the kind of driver who needed to keep his eyes on the road, so I guessed he was a little embarrassed by needing my help. This was both a good and a bad thing. If you were a black man in L.A. at that time (or at any time) it always helped to have a leg up on the authorities. But you didn't want to have it too far up; because the higher you get, the further you have to fall.

"What case?" I asked.

"You'll see when we get there."

"No I will not."

"What?"

"Either you tell me where we're going and what it is you plan to get me involved in or when you stop this car I will go find a bus to take me home."

Suggs took a sideways glance in my direction. He muttered something that sounded like "funny papers cabbage head."

We were on the southern end of La Cienega Boulevard by then.

He pulled to the curb, yanked on the parking brake lever, and turned toward me. It was then I noticed that the man had no smell. No kind of body odor or cologne. He was a self-contained unit, with no scent or any kind of style — the perfect package for a hunter.

"You ever hear of a woman named Nola Payne?" he asked.

I had not and shook my head to say so.

"What about her?" I asked.

"She's victim number thirty-four."

"And what does that have to do with me?"

"The circumstances around her death are a little confusing and possibly a problem if they make it to the press before we have a handle on the case."

"You not tellin' me anything, man."

"I don't want to tell you about how we found her until you get where we're going, Rawlins. But I can tell you that we need your help because a white policeman looking into anything down in Watts right now will only draw attention to something we need kept quiet."

"And why would I want to help you?" I asked, unable to resist kicking the man when he was down.

"What does that sign on your office door mean?" he asked in way of reply.

"It means what it says."

"No," Suggs said. "It means that you're down there playing like you're a private detective when you don't have a license. That could pull down jail time if somebody wanted to prosecute. I'm sure if I went around and talked to a few of your clients I could build a pretty good case."

I wasn't so sure. Most of the work I'd done wasn't anything to get me in trouble. I never misrepresented myself as a private detective. And Suggs was more right than he knew about white cops in black L.A. — no one would talk to them after the riots, or before.

But I said, "All right, Officer. I'll go where you're taking me. But I'll tell you this right now. If I don't like the way things smell I'm walkin' away."

Suggs nodded, released the brake, and cruised out into the boulevard. His easy manner accepting my conditions made me think that this simple ride in a policeman's car was going to take me down a much longer journey than I had planned on when I rolled out of bed that morning.