
One.

THE MAN WHO HAD COME to New Orleans on the afternoon train from Shreveport walked across the lobby of the Hotel Sanctuaire with a slow gait. He was carrying a heavy burden. From his high-backed chair in the shadowed corner Trevor Lawson smoked a thin black cheroot and watched him with slightly narrowed blue eyes, and he thought *Here is the man who needs me.*

David Kingsley, his name was. Of the Kingsley lumber family in Shreveport. Very wealthy, very powerful in Louisiana politics. But right now, at this moment in the evening of July 15th, 1886, David Kingsley had the slumped shoulders and bleary unfocused eyes of a weak pauper.

Lawson was surprised that the man had come alone. A quick glance around told him that indeed Kingsley—a slim man wearing a black suit, a white shirt with a bow tie and a black derby hat—had entered the red-carpeted lobby in a state of solitary submission to the power that bade him arrive here upon the hour of nine o'clock. It was time for the introduction. Lawson tapped ash from his Marsh-Wheeling cigar into the green glass ashtray on the table beside him and then rose to his full height of three inches over six feet.

“Mr. Kingsley,” said Lawson, in a voice of gray gun-smoke and amber whiskey with a trace of Alabama wilderness, “I am here.”

“Thank God!” the man said, upon seeing what he hoped was a light in the darkness. And Lawson just smiled slightly at this painful statement of thanks, and motioned for Kingsley to take the red-cushioned chair at his side.

In the rainwashed city of New Orleans the gas lamps hissed, the barkeeps offered exotic drinks from potion bottles of many colors, the restaurants served Creole and Cajun fare that put heat into the stomach, blood and loins, sweet ladies paraded and posed before young gentlemen seeking an evening of delight, laughter rose up from shadows and then fell back into darkness again, horse-drawn carriages moved here and there in no particular hurry as if the night had no beginning nor end,

guitar and piano music spilled into the puddled streets from rooms made golden by candlelight, the timeless river washed against the piers and pilings of exquisite decay, and the brick walls that had stood in the reign of the Ibervilles still stood in defiance of sun, wind, the dampness of the swamp and the hands of modern men. It was a magic and mystical city, wild in its freedoms and sacred in its charms. Yet for David Kingsley and the man named Lawson, it was a place for an urgent and hushed conversation, because a young woman's life hung in the balance.

Kingsley removed his derby. His hair was dark brown and going gray on the sides, and gray flecked his mustache. He took his seat, looked nervously around the lobby at the few other people there engaged in quiet talk, and he cleared his throat as if to speak but did not speak. Lawson sat down and waited. He calmly smoked his cheroot. If Lawson had learned anything in the past number of years, it was how to remain still and silent. His blue eyes were intense and clear. His steady gaze conveyed both self-control and the keenest edge of danger. He was lean and rawboned and appeared to be about thirty, but age mattered nothing to him now. He had blonde hair combed back from the high forehead and left shaggy at the neck. He was clean-shaven; one interesting effect of his condition was that he no longer had to shave. Another was that he could throw his Eye into

a human head to read the secrets there, though often they were only shadows of things that used to be, and misshapen moments that lived in the soul like deformed dreams, difficult to decipher.

He wore black trousers, a cream-colored jacket, a pale blue shirt, a darker blue cravat and a waistcoat decorated in a pattern of blue and gray paisleys. On his feet were ordinary black boots, scuffed by hard circumstances. To his left, hanging on a hook beneath a painting of an ivy-covered Vieux Carré wall, was his black felt Stetson hat with a cattleman's crease. It sported a thin band made from rattlesnake scales. This night he wasn't wearing his gunbelt, but close at hand on the left side beneath his jacket was a double-barrelled Remington Model 95 derringer with a mother-of-pearl grip, just in case of particular difficulty.

"Tell me," said Lawson, as he exhaled a plume of smoke. Through the haze his eyes were watchful. He had received a letter from David Kingsley two weeks ago, had digested that as best he could, and sent back his business card. On the plain white card, beneath his name and the address of the Hotel Sanctuaire, was the line *All Matters Handled*. And below that: *I Travel By Night*.

Kingsley nodded. He looked dazed, in need of more than just a listener. "I'd like a whiskey," he managed to say.

Lawson raised his hand to get the attention of Tolliver, one of the Negro waiters who tended to the

lobby. Kingsley ordered a straight shot of whiskey and Lawson asked for his usual drink of rye, simple syrup and orange bitters. Tolliver went off to the bar, and Lawson continued to smoke his cigar and wait for the story.

Kingsley shifted in his chair. There was no need for Lawson to send his Eye out; the man was ready to talk. "As I said in my letter...I received a...certain message after my daughter was taken. Here it is." He reached into his coat and brought out a folded piece of paper, dark-stained and mottled. It appeared to be more lizard skin than paper. Lawson accepted it from Kingsley's hand, opened it, and read what was written there in elegant penmanship:

Your daughter is very beautiful, Mr. Kingsley. Very charming indeed. And worth money to you, I'm sure. She is being well-looked after. To return her to you, I require gold pieces in the amount of six hundred and sixty-six dollars. She is being held in the town of Nocturne, which is reached from the hamlet of St. Benadicta. It will not be on the map. If you try to bring authorities into this matter, I fear your lovely Eva will come to some harm. Therefore my instructions to you are these: Inform only one man of this, and send him to me with the gold. His name is Trevor Lawson and he resides in the Hotel Sanctuaire on Conti Street in New Orleans. He is what you might call an 'adventurer'. Send him to me, Mr. Kingsley, and your daughter shall be released unharmed but perhaps wiser to the ways of the world. I shall expect to welcome Mr. Lawson before July has ended.