

# HEED THE APOCALYPSE

A JOE MCGRATH AND SAM RUCKER DETECTIVE NOVEL

Waights Taylor Jr.



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*Heed the Apocalypse* is a work of fiction occurring during the 1963 protest marches led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth in Birmingham, Alabama. Where the fictional characters engage with known historical figures, the engagements and dialogue are fiction. The book's *Postscript* explains in more detail those areas in the story where fiction overtakes fact.

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*In Memoriam*

*Addie Mae Collins, fourteen years old*

*Denise McNair, eleven years old*

*Carole Robertson, fourteen years old*

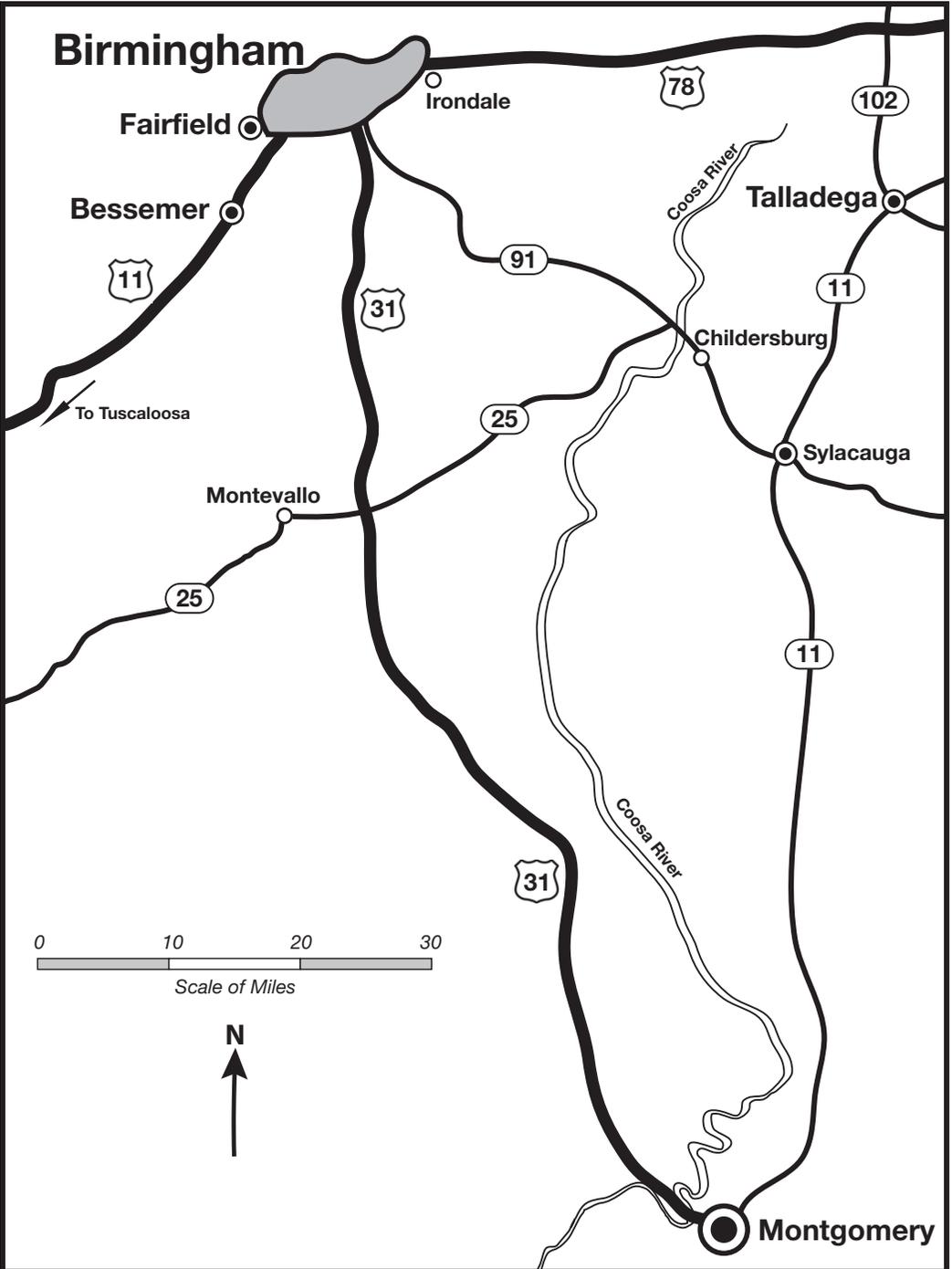
*Cynthia Wesley, fourteen years old*

*Died 10:22 a.m., September 15, 1963*

*These four young girls—competent, polite, smart, achievers—were killed in the flowering of their youth in one of the most heinous acts of the Civil Rights period.*

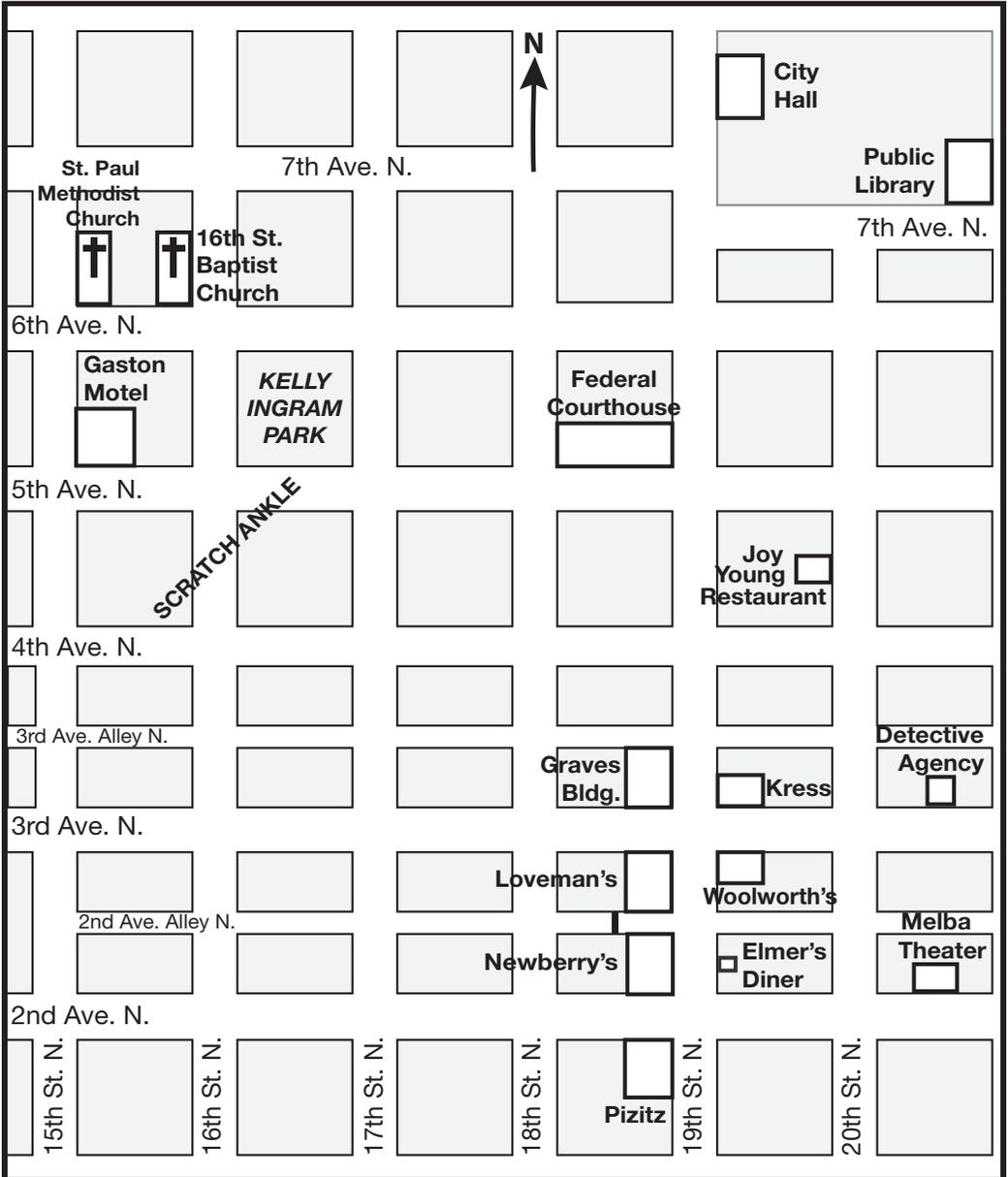
# ALABAMA STATE MAP

(CIRCA 1963)



# DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM MAP

(CIRCA 1963)



# The Warning

*Friday—February 22, 1963*

“LOOKIE, WE DONE FOUND OURSELVES a nigger comin’ outta a white man’s buildin’,” a man said, waving a bat and accompanied by two other men with a bat and a motorcycle chain.

Sam Rucker had just walked toward the parking lot at the end of the alley when he saw the three men step out of an alcove, faces half covered by knit hats with slits for their eyes.

Sam grabbed a nearby metal garbage can lid and charged, flattening the guy in the middle and fending off the one with a chain. The man to his left swung his bat, hitting Sam’s upper arm and knocking him to the ground. He lay, gritting his teeth and clutching his arm, as the three men circled.

JOE MCGRATH LOCKED THE SAFE and turned off the lights in the McGrath-Rucker Detective Agency. He had told Sam to get on home for supper with Yolanda and their two kids. Joe rode the elevator to the first floor, exiting the door to the darkened alley.

He saw Sam on the ground in a puddle of water, surrounded by three men. Joe hurled his briefcase at them, hitting chain-man in the back, knocking him flat, face first. Sam grabbed one of the men by his legs with his good arm and rose, flipping him to the ground.

Joe tackled the last man before he could swing his bat. As he jumped up, Joe pulled off the man's knit hat and pushed him away.

He ran off, yelling over his shoulder, "Git outta here." The others took off.

Sam picked up the lid, preparing to throw it at them, when Joe said, "Let 'em be."

Joe yelled, "Chambliss, I recognize your sorry ass. Taking a break from tossing bombs? Next time you try this shit you won't get up."

Chambliss turned and scowled at Sam and Joe. "Ya gonna be sorry, McGrath. And y'all tell that black son of a bitch King to stay outta Burmin'ham. They's folks be gunnin' for all of ya."

Joe watched to make sure they were gone.

"You okay, Sam?"

Sam winced, holding his arm. "I took a bat to the arm. Sore as hell. You done good for a white boy."

"Whaddaya mean, black boy? I'm only two years younger than you. Think you can drive, old man?"

Sam smiled. "Yeah. And don't forget, I can still whip your ass."

Joe didn't doubt it. Sam was a large, powerful man at six foot four, fifty-five years old with a younger man's build. "The guy who yelled at us is Robert Chambliss."

"Yeah, 'Dynamite Bob'. Thanks for the help."

Joe nodded, smiling sheepishly. "We learned a lesson tonight. Always carry our guns. No more easy Fridays, even when we have nothing scheduled."

"Amen," Sam said, feigning disappointment, "but I'll miss the light load."

"C'mon, old man, it's cold out here and might rain again. You're shivering. I'll follow you home to make sure those cockroaches aren't tailing us."

# The River

*Monday—March 11, 1963*

**Z**EKE PARKED HIS CAR in the Fast Freight trucking company's yard. It looked like a junkyard—a hodgepodge of new and old trucks, axles, engines, tires, and other greasy parts laid everywhere.

"Hey, Zeke, bright and early as usual. Boss Man wants to see you," the foreman called out from the far end of the yard.

Zeke nodded and said, "Okay," figuring he was in for it again. Boss Man was white and treated everyone badly. Not even the white drivers cared for him.

Zeke stood, his hat in hand, at Boss Man's desk. The fat, dirty, sweaty old man gnawed on a stogie.

"You gotta make a long 'un today, Zeke. Gotta tie important runs together. I'm short drivers. Fuckers jus' called in sick. Sick, my ass, probably hung over. You'll go to Huntsville, make a few deliveries, and pick up textiles at three mills. Deliver them to Birmingham, Sylacauga, and Montgomery. You oughtta get back here at seven tomorrow morning."

Zeke knew the only reason Boss Man had hired him was that he couldn't find enough white drivers. He didn't get paid as much as whites, but he didn't dare complain, knowing it could cost him his job.

"Yes, Mistah Boss Man. My run in the city gonna be covered?"

“Yep. You think I ain’t done this before?”

“No, sir. Will the new deliveries and pickups know when I’ll be there?”

“Goddammit, it’s on your bill of ladings. I jus’ finished reorganizin’ the fuckin’ things. Be sure you git a dock guy to sign for receipt. Two of our lame brain drivers been forgittin’. Here,” Boss Man said, handing Zeke the paperwork.

“Yes, sir. I gotta call my wife, Elaine. Then I’ll get goin’.”

“Take short breaks but no messin’ around.” Boss man laughed. “Don’t be a hangdog. You can have a day off when you done.”

ZEKE GOT BACK TO BIRMINGHAM FROM HUNTSVILLE at six in the evening and started deliveries, arriving at Loveman’s, an upscale downtown department store, about half past eight. Zeke knew the loading dock stayed open late. He backed the truck into the alley behind the store to the dock. As he lifted the truck’s tailgate, two colored men walked up.

He recognized one of the men. “Hey, Carl. How’s it hangin’?”

“Up and down, Zeke. Whatcha got for us?”

“Textiles from Huntsville. There’re twenty boxes for Loveman’s, back right side of the truck. Here’s the bill of ladin’. Is Elmer’s Diner still open? I’m starvin’.”

“Better go. Be closin’ soon.”

“What time you knock off?”

“Ten,” Carl said.

“I’ll be right back. That okay?”

“Sure. Man gotta eat.”

Zeke wolfed down a burger, fries, and soda. He paid his bill, stepped onto the sidewalk, and heard some yelling. To his left were four white men harassing a colored man about his age.

“I done told you,” said a white man with a high-pitched voice, “you look at a white woman like that agin, boy, you gonna be dead.”

Zeke froze, not wanting to get involved, when the colored man said, “Mister, I ain’t talked to no white woman.”

Then the colored man ran, glancing at Zeke standing in front of the diner, and darted into the alley behind Loveman’s.

The whites stared at Zeke, and the one with a high-pitched voice hollered, “What you lookin’ at, boy?”

Zeke made eye contact with a scrawny runt with red hair, and said, “Nothin’, sir.” He stepped back into a recessed doorway and heard the same voice say, “C’mon, boys, we’ll wait by the car ’til the darkie come back outta that dead-end alley.” Zeke looked down the street. The men stood around a car, looking the other way. He hustled into the alley.

CARL SIGNED A COPY OF THE BILL OF LADING and asked, “What the hell’s goin’ on out there? Heard someone shoutin’ and then a colored guy ran by, lookin’ like hound dogs were after him. Hell, he scaled the wall by the Alabama Theater like it was a jungle gym. I recognized the guy.”

“I hope he’s all right. Usual shit,” Zeke said. “Four rednecks gave him a hard time for lookin’ at a white woman.”

“Christ, reckon we jus’ gotta keep our heads down all the time.”

“Gotta get goin’.”

Zeke drove his truck back to the street. The men were still there. The redhead runt gave him the finger and motioned his buddies to get in the car.

ZEKE DROVE SOUTH ON HIGHWAY 280 TOWARD SYLACAUGA. It was ten thirty. He had been making deliveries for sixteen hours. Drowsiness overwhelmed him. Opening a window for a blast of fresh air didn’t help. The pine trees on either side of the road appeared to be moving toward him. He had to find a safe place to stop.

Rounding a curve in the highway, he saw a gas station, and he parked well clear of the pumps and bright lights, knowing station managers didn’t cotton to folks who hogged the pumps or blocked them, especially coloreds.

He stepped out of the truck as a Chevy sedan sped into the parking lot. It skidded to a stop, splaying gravel every which way. Four white men piled out of the car. Zeke recognized the redhead.

He pointed at Zeke. "That's him. I told y'all he was drivin' the truck," his high-pitched voice piercing the night air. "Thought you was on your way when you run from us into the alley didn't ya?"

"Red, I told ya we shoulda run his truck off the road where it were dark," another man said. "Too much light here."

"Wilbur. I give the orders 'round here," Red said. "Hey, darkie, we don't like unrespectful nigras. I jus' reckon we gotta teach you a lesson. You ready to go to school, boy?"

"No, sir. You got the wrong colored man. My name's Zeke Caldwell, I saw y'all talkin' to that other colored man. When he ran into the alley, y'all saw me and yelled at me."

"Boy, I don't give a goddamn what your name is. I knows you the one what run into the alley and what drove the truck outta it. Don't give us no shit," Red said.

"No, sir, don't mean to. I didn't see where he went."

"Frankie, teach this boy a little respect," Red said.

Frankie slapped Zeke, knocking him to the ground.

"Shut yer fuckin' mouth. Git up boy," Frankie said, grabbing Zeke by the arms and pushing him toward the car. "C'mon now, we goin' for a little ride."

"My truck?" Zeke mumbled, lips trembling.

Frankie laughed, shoving Zeke into the backseat. "Well I don't reckon you gotta worry about it no more." Another big guy got in, squeezing Zeke into the middle. They blindfolded him.

Zeke sensed they were driving north on 280. He sat quietly, hoping the men would only beat him and throw him out of the car.

"You ain't got no brains, boy, talkin' to a white woman. Don't you know bettah?" Red asked.

"Sir, didn't talk to no white woman."

"Frankie and Albert, start the lesson."

The two men punched Zeke in his abdomen.

Zeke doubled over, gasping for air. When he sat up, still breathing hard, Red asked, "Now, don't you know bettah?"

"Sir, I swear I didn't talk to no white woman."

Zeke realized he had said the wrong thing, as he became a punching bag again. The men beat him longer on his abdomen and

head. When they stopped, Zeke fought to catch his breath, clutching his ribs in pain.

“Don’t you croak on us, boy,” Red said.

Zeke couldn’t lift his head as he continued to struggle for air.

“Well, boy?”

“Yes . . . sir . . . I knows . . . better,” Zeke said, thinking he might throw up.

“That’s jus’ jim-dandy. Let’s finish our lesson.”

THE MEN QUIETED DOWN FOR A WHILE. Zeke tried to relax, but fear was his only companion. The car stopped. Jerked from the backseat, held by his arms, and pulled forward, Zeke struggled to keep his balance. He heard the sound of water flowing. A car drove past. Yanked to a stop, turned, and pushed against an impediment, someone ripped off his blindfold.

“Boy, we gonna play a game,” Red said, “called swim, run, or shoot. Whaddaya think? You a good swimmer?”

Zeke rubbed his eyes and recognized the place—the 280 bridge over the Coosa River north of Childersburg.

“Misters, I can’t swim.”

“My goodness. I reckon we gonna play run or shoot. You can run while we think ’bout shoot. Ready?” Red said, pulling a pistol from his jacket.

All Zeke heard was the sound of rushing water. Red fidgeted with his pistol. Zeke had never seen such hatred and realized he had one choice. He jumped off the bridge.

Red couldn’t believe it. “Well, I’ll be goddamned!”

“Maybe he can swim,” Wilbur said.

“Shut the fuck up, stupid. Look and listen.”

The men leaned over the railing and peered at the murky, dark waters. They couldn’t see much but heard thrashing about as the current moved the sound south. Then quiet.

“Guess Zeke can’t swim. Can darkies float?” Red wondered out loud.

The men laughed as they walked off the bridge.

## “The Wild Man from Birmingham”

*Tuesday—March 12, 1963*

JOE ARRIVED AT THE AGENCY LATE. He had taken his son, Peter, to school and then assisted his wife, Diane, with a car problem.

“Well, goddamn, I finally get some help,” Barbara said. “Dave’s doing some interviews. He said he’d be back about three. Haven’t heard from Sam. Maybe he busted his good arm.”

“Pleasant thought, sarcastic one.”

“Got another pleasantry for you. I updated the financial records. Things are getting tight. You oughtta take a look at them.”

“Okay, but I need to make some phone calls and read Dave’s interview notes. He’s getting way ahead of me.”

Joe made his calls and then read Dave’s notes while he ate the ham and cheese sandwich he’d bought in the building’s deli.

“Hey, Barbara,” Joe called out, “Bring the financial statements, and we’ll go over them.”

Barbara handed him the report. “Read ’em and weep, boss.”

Joe scanned the pages. “Damn, we’ve got to get a grip on this.”

“Yep, two to three month’s reserves. You guys ain’t the best money managers, but you always pull a few friggin’ fish outta the pond. We’ll live to see another goddamn day,” Barbara said.

“You bet,” Joe said, looking none too happy. “Need three more copies. We’ll discuss it at this afternoon’s four o’clock meeting. Bring my magic wand to the meeting.”

“Sure, want the rainbow fairy dust too? You need to sprinkle it on everyone.”

Joe laughed. “Get outta here.”

Returning to the finances, he was so intent on the figures he didn’t hear Sam walk in.

“Afternoon, Joe. You busy or daydreaming?”

“I wish it was the latter. No sling? Arm must feel better.”

“Yeah. I went to see the doc today. He said it looks good, but I’m not ready for Cassius Clay. Joe, last night I got a call from Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth. He wants to talk to us.”

“I thought he moved to Cincinnati.”

“He did. He’s in Birmingham to help with Doctor King’s upcoming protests.”

“After all the harassment Shuttlesworth’s been through, I’m surprised he’d come back.”

“You don’t understand,” Sam said, sounding annoyed. “He doesn’t have a fearful bone in his body. He’d do anything to bring about change.”

“Yep, we’ve discussed it over the years. Hell, you don’t live too far from his church and house. The Klan bombed both of them.”

“Fred’s not called ‘the Wild Man from Birmingham’ for nothing. In 1956, he founded the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Some call it ACMHR. It’s a mouthful, but Fred never takes time to fiddle with details. He’s all action and has been arrested, beaten, and tortured. No one’s killed him, at least not yet.”

“Do you know him? I’ve only seen his picture in the paper,” Joe said.

“I used to see him now and then.”

“When does he want to meet?”

“Two thirty today at Bethel Baptist Church. That’s his old church. The new minister let’s Fred use his office. I’ll call and confirm.”

Joe glanced at his watch. “That’ll work. I reviewed the financial accounts with Barbara. Things are tight.”

“It’s not the first time.”

Joe nodded. ‘We’ll review it at our meeting this afternoon. You gonna call Shuttlesworth?’

‘I’ll do it right now.’

Sam made the call, hung up, and said, ‘Fred’ll be there. We gotta get goin’.’

‘Barbara,’ Joe called out, ‘Sam and I should be back by four. You and Dave wait if we’re late. The meeting’s important.’

JOE SAW REVEREND SHUTTLESWORTH waiting for them on the church’s steps. Joe knew he was in his early forties, but this was his first close-up look at the man—average height, slim, ramrod posture, and chiseled facial features highlighted with a pencil mustache.

‘Hey, Sam. Glad to meet you, Detective McGrath,’ Shuttlesworth said, extending his hand.

‘My pleasure. Call me Joe,’ he said, taking the reverend’s hand.

‘In that case, I’m Fred.’

Sam laughed. ‘Well, since you two are almost kissin’ cousins, what do you want, Fred?’

‘C’mon in the church. We’ll use the minister’s office.’

‘Thought you’d given up on us for greener pastures,’ Sam said.

‘You know it ain’t greener anywhere for us black folks. But I couldn’t say no to my hometown.’

Joe followed Fred, studying his fast, purposeful pace, and realized this man was all business.

‘Straight to the point,’ Fred said, sitting behind the desk in the office. ‘I’m sure you’ve heard of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, or SCLC. I asked them, no I cajoled them, to come to Birmingham and join the ACMHR in protest marches. SCLC was hesitant. They didn’t want another Albany, Georgia, where the police chief snookered them at every turn until they left town empty handed. Anyway, our protests will be led by me and Reverends Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph Abernathy from Atlanta.’

‘Fred, you ain’t getting much white press at either end of the day,’ Sam said. ‘The morning *Birmingham Post-Herald* and the evening *Birmingham News* are basically ignoring you.’

Fred laughed. “We’ll see about that once we get started. I told Martin and Ralph about you two. We want your support and help.”

Joe leaned forward. “What kind, Fred?”

“Aha, the white man cuts to the chase. Lemme tell you something before I answer your question. Martin’s the peacemaker with his nice guy attitude and Gandhian nonviolent approach. He’s never met a white man he won’t try to work with. I’m the troublemaker. I’ll push and scream to get what I want. Never met a white man I trust. Can I trust you?”

Taken aback, Joe said, “You can trust me to listen. . . . If I agree to help, you can trust me to honor my commitment. . . . If I decide not to help, you can trust that I will support your cause.”

“Hmmm, you’re precise. When the protest starts—we call it Project Confrontation, Project C—Martin insists on nonviolence. He doesn’t want bodyguards hovering around us. I get it, but I’m not a fool. We want you to watch our backs. You willing?”

It was quiet for a moment before Sam spoke. “Yeah, but we have limited resources. We’re not a big agency. Joe, what do you think?”

“We need to talk. Fred, can we get back to you soon?”

“Well, I’ll be damned. The white man’s not sure. How unusual. Okay, but I need an answer by tomorrow. We wanted to start Project C last Thursday, but put it off because of the upcoming mayoral runoff election on April second.” Fred laughed. “Hell, the white folks couldn’t decide on a mayor in the March fifth election, but maybe they’ll choose someone with the guts to fire Big Bob Watson.”

Sam stood. “You’ll hear from us tomorrow. Let’s go, Joe.”

Joe played along, surprised at Sam’s abrupt decision. “Sure. Thanks, Fred.”

“DON’T YOU TRUST FRED?” SAM ASKED as he drove back to the agency.

“It’s the first time I’ve met him. I guess I don’t know if I trust him,” Joe said. “He sure doesn’t trust me. We gotta slowdown and think this through. Do you realize what this might do to our

business? It might come to an end. Our run-in with Chambliss and friends is nothing compared to what could happen.”

“If it was only me,” Sam said, “I’d say yes in a flash. Hell, I’d march with them. I know we can’t react to what we fear might come. After all we’ve been through the last fifteen years, I can’t imagine anything pulling us apart.”

Joe stared out the window, and then turned to Sam, trying to frame his response. “Even if we lost our business? We’re not awash in cash right now.”

“How serious is it?”

“Two months cash-on-hand. We have a few cases cookin’ but we need more. Do you think Shuttlesworth and King will pay us anything?”

“I doubt it, but doesn’t hurt to ask,” Sam said.

“Meeting payroll’s the big problem.”

“You and I can forego our salaries if needed. Both our wives own successful businesses.”

Joe couldn’t help but laugh. “You’re damn right. Maybe we should work for them?”

“Now you’re talkin’. But the question is Shuttlesworth.”

“Yeah. I know it’s important. But we need to ask Fred to be specific on the type of coverage and how much he wants. ‘Can you help us?’ is not too helpful.” Joe laughed at his choice of words.

Sam chuckled. “I’ll call him tomorrow.”