

Praise for *KISS OF SALVATION*

“Homicide detective Joe McGrath is on his way to Sunday morning Mass when he gets a call from headquarters saying the body of a ‘colored’ woman has been found behind a local hotel. Her partially clothed, strangled corpse is posed at an odd angle and her lips are bruised—odd characteristics that make McGrath wary. Police soon learn the woman was a prostitute, and when a second woman is strangled exactly one month later, her body again posed, McGrath fears that the town may have a psychopath on the loose. . . . Case closed? Not when McGrath’s on the case with his new teammate, African-American private eye Sam Rucker. . . . Taylor’s dialogue is terrific . . . This book is a page-turner, and when the investigators finally close in on the killer, it’s impossible to set the novel down.”

—KIRKUS Reviews

“The *Kiss of Salvation* takes us back to the dawn of the Civil Rights movement in 1947 Birmingham, Alabama. It’s a murder mystery, a history, and an in-depth study of evolving times in the American South. Deftly written and immensely readable, Taylor paints a picture of a complex era in American culture. Highly recommended.”

—SHELDON SIEGEL, *New York Times* Best Selling Author
of the Mike Daley/Rosie Fernandez novels

“*Kiss of Salvation* immerses us in the milieu of 1947 Birmingham in such a way that we feel part of the setting, and the mystery that Waights Taylor Jr. unfolds is one that captures the American psyche of that time and place. It is as American a mystery as one can find, and one that reveals the underside of the American experience while introducing two detectives who signify the evolving times prior to the civil rights movement. It is in the best tradition of mysteries by the likes of James Lee Burke and Walter Mosley, who use time and place to tether us to another time and another America we should never forget.”

—JOHN KOETZNER, Library Director, Mendocino College

“In his new, riveting murder mystery *Kiss of Salvation*, Waights Taylor Jr. takes readers back to Alabama in the 1940s, a time not unlike our own. With help from a colorful cast of characters, black and white, rich and poor, he offers a fascinating portrait of the American South on the cusp of the civil rights movement. There’s electrifying suspense every step of the way, a healthy dose of romance and real compassion of the sort one expects from the author of *Our Southern Home*, his exhilarating non-fiction narrative that readers from Alabama to California have embraced with a vengeance.”

—JONAH RASKIN, author of *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg’s Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation* and *Rock ‘n’ Roll Women*

KISS OF SALVATION

A JOE McGRATH AND SAM RUCKER DETECTIVE NOVEL

Waights Taylor Jr.



MCCAA BOOKS • SANTA ROSA

McCaa Books
1604 Deer Run
Santa Rosa, CA 95405-7535

Copyright © 2014 by Waights Taylor Jr.
All rights reserved

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

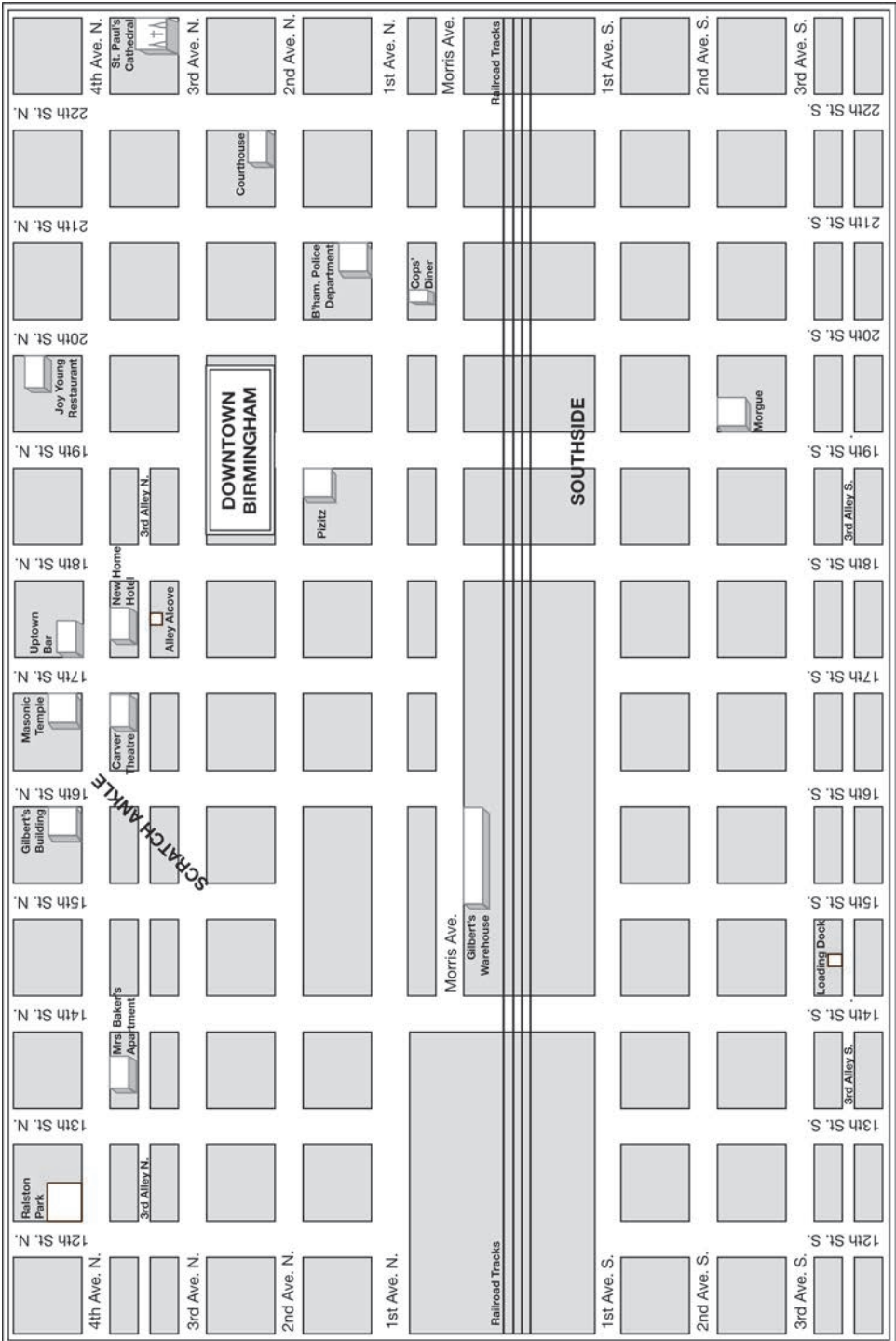
First published in 2014 by McCaa Books, an imprint of McCaa Publications.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CONTROL NUMBER: 2014913617
ISBN 978-0-9960695-1-9

Printed in the United States of America
Set in Minion Pro
Cover design by Suzan Reed
Author's photograph by Star Dewar

www.mccaabooks.com

MAP OF DOWNTOWN AND SOUTHSIDE BIRMINGHAM



CHAPTER 1

THE BEGINNING

SUNDAY—SEPTEMBER 14, 1947

THE WEEKEND HAD BEEN QUIET. Joe McGrath liked it that way as he ate breakfast before going to eight o'clock Mass at St. Paul's Cathedral. He had little interest in religion, yet he occasionally yielded to his childhood habit of attending church as if to hedge his bet with God and the hereafter.

Joe felt haggard after another restless night. He seldom slept well since his wife left him seven months ago. He was cleaning up the breakfast table when the phone rang.

"Joe McGrath here."

"You gotta check somethin' out right away, Joe."

"Can't it wait, Chief? I'm just leaving for Mass." Joe didn't expect to get a sympathetic ear to his tepid spiritual needs. He was one of the few Catholics in the department, and most of the cops and the chief considered Catholics a strange religious sect in this predominately Protestant city.

Chief Watson didn't disappoint him. "Nope. You git over to Third Alley North between Seventeenth and Eighteenth in Scratch Ankle. A colored woman's body was found there early this mornin'. Jerry Howard's there now with three men. Coroner's on the way. I want you to take charge."

"Is that all you know?"

“Goddammit, Professor, it was just reported around six. But you know it’s busy in the colored part of downtown on Saturday night. There’s always lots of partyin’ and drinkin’ going on. Anyways, get your ass over there and try to clean it up quick and neat.”

“What’s the big deal, a homicide?”

“No big deal yet. I don’t know if it was a homicide. I just don’t want no colored woman’s murder or foul play gittin’ the big boys in Birmingham riled up. It’s been pretty quiet in that part of town lately, and I wanna keep it that way. They expect us to keep a lid on anything that might stir up the darkies. Git movin’.”

“Okay, Chief. I’ll get back to you later today.”

“I’ll be back home after church and lunch around one or two. Call me on my car radio if somethin’ comes up before that.”

“Will do. That it?”

“Yep.”

Joe hung up, wanting to say, *Yeah, you go to church and lunch while I do the dirty work*, even though he knew this was what he was paid to do.

Joe left the dishes in the sink and performed a ritual he did each day before going to work. He pulled his gun, a Colt Official Police 38, out of its shoulder holster. He loved the feel and heft of the gun in his hand as the shiny bluish carbon steel gleamed at him. He checked that all six chambers were loaded, placed the gun back in the holster, and strapped it to his left shoulder. Joe pocketed his badge, notepad, and pens to complete the standard toolset of his profession. He stuck a pack of Camels in his shirt pocket and put on his tie, coat, and hat.

He was not a sharp dresser. For work, he bought off-the-rack clothing at Pizitz, the city’s big, low-price department store. He favored dark colored suits—mostly blacks and grays—white shirts, black shoes with white socks, and simple, unpatterned ties that blended into the dark suits. His one concession to fashion was hats, and today he wore one of his favorites, a seal gray Cavanagh fedora.

Before he left, he phoned the desk officer.

“Birmingham Police Department, Sergeant Donaldson speaking.”

“Billy, it’s Joe McGrath. I need some info on a call that came in around six o’clock this morning concerning a body found in an alley over in Scratch Ankle.”

“Hey, Joe. I just came on duty at seven. Lemme check the log. . . . Yep, here it is. The call was logged at five fifty-eight by Dean Alison. The caller reported a body in the alley behind the New Home Hotel on Fourth Avenue North. The caller was the hotel night clerk, Dave Williams. A guy named Eugene Gould found the body. Jerry Howard and his guys were assigned to follow-up.”

“Were Williams and Gould given any instructions?”

“Yep, told to remain in the hotel lobby until the cops arrive.”

“Anything else?”

“Nope.”

“Thanks, Billy. See you later.”

He walked to the curb to get his unmarked police car, although the license plate, an antenna, and a large searchlight mounted on the left front side of the car made the vehicle’s use obvious to most people. The brutal late summer heat wave had finally subsided, making the weather tolerable. It was a clear day, or as clear as Birmingham ever got with the iron and steel furnaces blasting smoke into the air day and night.

CHAPTER 2

THE CRIME SCENE

SUNDAY—SEPTEMBER 14, 1947

IT TOOK JOE EIGHT MINUTES to drive downtown on Twentieth Street South through the viaduct that went under the railroad tracks, the vital industrial arteries separating the city's Southside district from Downtown Birmingham. Joe emerged on Twentieth Street North, the main drag in the white business district.

He turned left at Fourth Avenue North and drove past Eighteenth Street North into Scratch Ankle—the accepted, but unmarked, line of demarcation between the white and colored business districts. Whenever Joe came into Scratch Ankle, he visualized the colored men and boys convicted of petty or trumped up crimes who gave the area its name. Until 1928, the state leased the “convict laborers” to the mines, where they were kept in chains and developed itchy welts and bruises on their ankles.

Approaching Seventeenth Street North, Joe saw the New Home Hotel. The alley was blocked by a police car with red lights flashing. A small crowd, mostly colored, stood observing the scene. He looked for signs of a press presence but saw no recognizable reporters. *Good*, he thought, *maybe we can get this off the streets before they get wind of it.*

Joe parked his car across the street from the alley and wrote the time, seven twenty-one, in his notepad. Although he had an excellent memory, experience had taught him that what seemed an

unimportant item at the time could later become critical to a case. A few words or a time entry in his notepad could prove to be a useful memory reference.

Joe lit his first Camel of the day. *Goddammit, McGrath. You gotta quit.* He had started smoking again after Mary left him.

Before he entered a possible crime scene, he always reviewed the layout of the area to see if anything caught his eye that might prove to be pertinent in an investigation. He checked out the intersection of Fourth and Seventeenth. The Carver Theatre was on the southwest corner, the Masonic Temple on the northwest corner and the Uptown Bar, a well-known hangout for pimps and prostitutes, on the northeast corner.

Joe then focused his attention to a parking lot on the southeast corner of Fourth and Seventeenth. The chained off lot, about 120 feet deep by 35 feet wide, was in a state of disrepair with numerous weed-filled cracks in the pavement. The one car in the lot appeared to have been there for some time. Adjacent to the lot was the hotel, four stories tall. On the side of the hotel facing the lot, a huge sign had been painted in three lines.

FOR COLORED PEOPLE NEW HOME HOTEL

Joe jotted in his notepad, *Why parking lot not used? Busy corner: hotel, Masonic temple, bar, two theaters.* He knew a second colored theater, the Champion, was a few doors east of the hotel.

Near the alley, a young BPD officer he didn't recognize approached him. "Can I help you?"

Joe pulled out his badge. "Homicide Detective Joe McGrath. I'm here to oversee the investigation."

"Sorry, sir. I'm new with the department. I don't know all the senior officers yet."

"That's okay. You're just doing your job. Where's Jerry Howard?"

"Down the alley on the right with the coroner and the body."

"Thanks uh . . . What's your name?"

"Steve Strickland, sir."

“Steve, keep an eye out for any press. Gimme the high sign if you see anyone who even looks like a reporter,” Joe said.

“Yes sir.”

Joe walked into the alley. Another police car blocked the other end on Eighteenth Street North. The first two buildings to his right, whose fronts would face south on Third Avenue North, had their back areas fenced off. He made a note that, if necessary, he would interview people at the two theaters, the temple, the bar, and the hotel, and have Howard handle the other buildings and businesses near the scene.

The next building faced south on Third Avenue North and was the only building with its back area unfenced. Joe stopped to observe the alcove and the body. The coroner was inspecting the corpse. The woman lay flat on her back with her skirt pulled up over her waist. She had no panties on. Her legs were spread apart in a V, her arms pressing tight against her body. The symmetry of the body position, especially the arms, left the distinct impression that it had been arranged. He could see evidence of trauma around her neck. The ground was devoid of grass and most other vegetation, and the area immediately around her noticeably disturbed, indicating either robust sexual activity or a struggle, or both. Joe scanned the area for panties. None were apparent.

Jerry Howard walked up to Joe. “Hey Joe, I’ve been expecting you.” Jerry was a tall, thin man who always wore a dour expression that belied his good nature.

“Hi Jerry. Sized it up yet?”

“Looks like homicide. It appears she was strangled. Cutter got here about twenty minutes ago with one of his lab guys. He’s doing his thing and taking photos. He said the coroner’s van is on the way.”

“Have you gone over the site carefully?” Joe said.

“We were doing that when Cutter took over.”

“Where are the guys who reported the body?”

“They’re both in the hotel. Ralph Owens is with them to make sure they don’t leave.”

“Where are your other officers?”

“One’s watching each end of the alley.”

“Good. Stick around while I talk with Frank.”

Joe avoided stepping on the dirt around the feet of the body and took several steps to Cutler’s side. Joe knew Cutler would avoid dis-

turbing the crime scene until both he and homicide finished their initial work.

Dr. Frank Cutler was in his mid forties, short, on the heavy side with a round face that, while chubby like a cherub, most people found attractive. “Cutter,” the department’s nickname for Frank, was used only when he was out of earshot. He was outgoing and voluble, a fun guy at a party. Observers were always amazed at his dexterity and precision when performing an autopsy, especially considering his pudgy hands.

Joe stared at the body. “Frank, what do you think we have?”

“Oh, hi Joe. It’s definitely a homicide. Appears she was either raped or had sex with her likely killer. I’m going to move her to the morgue as soon as you give me the clearance to do so. I want to get her on my table for an extensive exam before any semen gets too old.”

“Any idea on time of death?”

“Probably around three this morning. The body temp is ninety-two degrees. The onset of rigor mortis is consistent with my estimate. I’ll finalize the time after my full exam.”

“That neck abrasion looks pretty bad.”

Frank nodded. “I think the killer used a garrote. A quick way to strangle someone. But I gotta examine the neck trauma in the morgue to make sure.”

“Isn’t it strange the body appears so symmetrical?” Joe said.

“Yeah. The murderer probably arranged it right after he killed her. Lividity indicates the body hasn’t been moved. The front of the body is clear. The blood drainage is in the back and buttocks.”

“Do you think he’s trying to leave some kind of message?”

“I don’t know, Joe. That’s your job.”

“We’ll need the body in place for a few minutes to complete a more thorough search.”

“Sure, but tell your guys not to touch the body or her clothing.”

“Okay, Frank. We’ll be through in a few minutes. I don’t think your van is here yet.”

“It should be along any minute.” Removing his gloves, Frank moved away from the body and lit a cigarette.

Joe called to Jerry, motioning for him to come over. “We need to go over this area and the alley as much as possible until Frank’s van arrives. I’m sure you noticed her panties are missing.”

"I'm not blind," Jerry said.

Joe ignored the dig. "I'll do the area around the body, and you cover the alley. Look carefully for garbage cans or other containers where the killer might have dumped the panties. Also, look over the fences of all the businesses and buildings backing the alley. Note if anything looks interesting, and we can return to those spots after Frank removes her body. Remember, don't disturb the dirt area around her feet; we may be able to get a footprint impression. Let's move. We don't have much time."

"Okay," Jerry said, adding under his breath, "Professor."

Joe paid no attention to the insult. He was used to the chief and others making snide comments behind his back about his religion and education. Once he overheard the chief say to a group of cops, "That goddamn papist professor, he thinks he's so fuckin' smart with his college degrees and hi-falutin' talkin'." And occasionally he heard others use the time-worn epithets of "mackerel snapper" and "rosemary rattler."

Joe knelt beside the body to get a good look at the woman. Attractive, her skin color was soft brown, hair cut short, and probably in her twenties or early thirties. She wore a tight fitting, light blue halter-type top, which even now accentuated her breasts. She wasn't wearing a bra. Her dark blue skirt had been pulled up over her waist. Joe's initial thoughts were substantiated by what he saw. The young woman was likely a prostitute, as Scratch Ankle had a large number of colored pimps and prostitutes who worked the bars, nightclubs, and streets.

Joe combed the ground adjacent to the woman's body to no avail. Other than the disturbed dirt around her body, there were no physical objects or anything else of interest. He turned his attention to the remaining grounds in the alcove with the same results. There was one garbage can and a container in the alcove. The panties were in neither, but he knew it was possible there were no panties since some prostitutes didn't wear them to simplify turning tricks. He made a note to have the crime lab guys bring the two containers back to headquarters. He finished writing his note as the coroner's van pulled up to the alcove.

Frank reappeared. "Joe, my van just arrived. You guys through?"

“Just a sec, let me check with Jerry.” Joe looked down the alley and saw Jerry walking back toward him. “Find anything?”

“Nope. We’ll get into the fenced off areas in the alley soon,” Jerry said.

“Okay.”

Joe turned back to Frank. “You can take the body. Give the victim’s clothing to the lab guys. Check ’em with a fine-toothed comb.”

Frank said, “We’ve got it. I’ll have more for you later today.”

“I’ve got to report to the chief this afternoon. Can you have anything for me before then?”

“I’ll try. How do I reach you?”

“Try my home phone first and then my car radio.”

“Okay,” Frank said, then called to the two technicians, “Bag the body and put it in the van.”

“Thanks, Frank.” As Joe left the crime scene, he saw young officer Steve by the yellow tape. “Things okay, Steve?”

“Yes sir.”

“See anyone that looks like the press?”

“No sir.”

“Good. Stay here. Let me know if they show up. I’ll be in the hotel.”

“Yes sir.”

CHAPTER 3

THE INTERVIEWS

SUNDAY—SEPTEMBER 14, 1947

JOE HAD NEVER BEEN IN THE HOTEL LOBBY. He was surprised to see how ornate it was—beautiful oriental carpets, handsome lobby furniture, and an elegant chandelier hung overhead. He approached the clerk behind the check-in counter and held up his police badge. “Are you the guy that called the police about the body in the alley?”

The well-dressed young man said, “No sir, I just came on duty at seven. He’s in a meeting room with another colored man.” He pointed to a door in the rear of the lobby.

“What time did you arrive at the hotel this morning?”

“About six forty-five. The police were already here.”

“How did you get here?”

The clerk’s lips quivered. “I rode a bus from my apartment to downtown and then walked here.”

Joe smiled at the clerk. “Relax. It’s okay. Did you see anything unusual this morning?”

“No sir, it was really slow, even for a Sunday morning.”

“Has anyone checked out of the hotel since you arrived?”

“No sir.”

“How many guests are still in the hotel?”

“I just checked the register. We have twenty rooms occupied by thirty-five guests. We have seventy-two rooms, but the weekends are slow unless something special’s going on.”

“We’ll want a copy of all the guests’ room numbers, their names, addresses, and phone numbers. I’ll have an officer pick it up soon. I’d also like you to make a drawing showing where all the rooms on each floor are located. I’ll be particularly interested in those guests in the rooms in the back near the alley.”

“Yes sir.”

“If any guests come down to check out while we’re still here, contact an officer. We want to talk with them before they leave.”

“Yes sir.”

Joe crossed the lobby to the meeting room, knocked, and announced himself in a loud voice. “Homicide Detective Joe McGrath.”

The door opened and a cop said, “Hi, Joe. Been waiting for you.”

“Ralph, I didn’t know you worked with Jerry.”

“I don’t usually. I swapped days with a regular on his squad. Come on in. I figured we’d see you here soon.”

Joe looked across the room at the two colored men sitting side-by-side on a sofa. Joe said quietly, “That Williams and Gould over there?”

“Yep. The boy on the left over yonder is the night clerk, Dave Williams. The other one is Eugene Gould, the colored boy who found the body,” Ralph said.

“Let me talk to them alone. Stand guard outside the door and keep everyone out until I finish.”

“Okay, Joe.”

Joe looked at the two men sitting on the sofa. He could tell they were nervous and unsure what to expect.

“Good morning, I’m Detective Joe McGrath with the Birmingham Police Department.” He showed them his badge. “You must be Dave Williams, the hotel night clerk.”

Joe offered the men his right hand. The men looked at each other in confusion. It was rare for a white man to initiate a handshake.

“Yes sir, I’m Dave Williams.” He stood and shook hands with Joe.

“And you’re Eugene Gould, the man who found the body.”

“Yes suh, I did.” He shook Joe’s outstretched hand.

Joe sat down and said, “Sit down guys, I need to ask a few questions. It’s all routine stuff when something like this happens. Eugene, let me start with you. Why were you in the alley this morning?”

Joe guessed Eugene Gould’s age at between fifty and sixty. He was medium height, appeared to be in good condition with a trim

physique, and was dressed in a pair of denim coveralls, standard attire for working class white and colored men. Eugene was pitch black, and the whites of his eyes and ivory white teeth stood out in stark contrast to his dark face.

“Well suh, I works the All Day Diner on Eighteenth. I lives in an apartment on Fifteenth. I works the early shift six days a week. I gets Mondays off. I walks through the alley from my place to the diner.”

“What do you do in the diner, Eugene?”

“Oh, I reckon you might call me the handyman. I bus tables, washes the dishes, fixes little things that gets broke.”

“About what time were you in the alley?”

“A little after five thirty. I leaves my apartment at five thirty to get to work on time. The boss don’t like it when I’m late.”

“So, tell me what happened.”

“I crossed Seventeenth and went back into the alley, and there she was laying flat on the ground.”

“It was still pretty dark, Eugene, and the body’s in an alcove where it must have been even darker.”

“Yes suh, it was dark—jus’ a touch of first light—and I always carry a flashlight. I don’t know why, I reckon jus’ curiosity, but I always looks into that . . . what’d you call it?”

“Alcove.”

“Yes suh, I always looks into that alcove. Maybe it jus’ ’cause all the other buildings have the alley fenced off. Anyways, I always slows down and looks in that alcove expecting to see something, like somebody gonna jump me. Never did see nothin’ until this mornin’.”

“Did you walk into the alcove and take a close look at the body?”

“Yes suh, I did. I turned my flashlight on to get a better look. I could tell it was a woman and things didn’t look too good.”

“What did you see?”

“Well suh, it wasn’t pretty. What I most remembers is her dress being pulled up around her waist and she didn’t have no panties on.”

“Did you touch the body or pick up anything?”

“Oh, no suh. I knowed it was trouble.”

“How did the body appear to you?”

“Suh?”

“How was she lying on the ground?”

“Oh, I sees what you mean. It was kinda funny. She looked like a doll. Her legs were apart and hers arms were right tight to her side, like somebody just laid her down real gentle like.”

“Did you recognize the woman, Eugene?”

Eugene paused and looked concerned, as if he didn’t want to answer the question. “Yes suh, I did. I thinks I seen her a few times walking the streets at night, if you knows what I mean.”

“I know what you mean. Do you know her name?”

“No suh. I only seen her a few times, and I jus’ looked at her ’cause she real easy on the eyes.”

“Do you know her pimp?”

“No suh, I don’t knows that kinda peoples.”

“Could it be Charlie Bartlett? He goes by Bongo Drum.”

“I heard that name, but I don’t knows him.”

“What did you do next?”

“I first thought I’d jus’ go on my way. Forgit it. Keep my mouth shut. Let someone else take care of it. But she looked so young. I jus’ couldn’t do that. I didn’t wants to go to the diner and tell my boss, so I went to the hotel.”

“How long from the time you first saw the body until you went into the hotel?”

“Oh, not more’n five minutes.”

“Did you see anyone or any cars before you went into the hotel?”

“No suh.”

“So you went into the hotel. What did you do then?”

“I walked right up to this here young man sitting next to me and said, a body of a woman is in the alley behind your hotel.”

“Thanks, Eugene. Let’s pick it up with you, Dave. Why do you work the night shift?”

“I’m paying my way through Miles College. This job pays well, and I can study since it’s usually quiet. I work five nights, Wednesday through Sunday, so I get some catch up time on Mondays and Tuesdays. I just started my senior year.”

Joe figured Dave was in his early twenties. He was well-groomed and dressed, well-spoken, about six feet tall, slim, light brown in color, and, but for a harsh look of determination, had a pleasant face.

“Tell me how you reacted and what you did after Eugene told you about the body?”

“My first reaction was disbelief. I asked Eugene if he was sure. He said he was sure and asked if I wanted to see the body. I said no. I took his word for it,” Dave said.

“Why didn’t you want to see the body to confirm it yourself?”

“I’m not supposed to leave the front desk unless it’s an emergency. I believed Eugene. He seemed honest, and I couldn’t imagine why he would have made it up.”

“And then what?”

“I asked Eugene to tell me what he saw, and he told me the same thing he just told you. I called the police.”

“What time was that?”

“I’m not exactly sure, but I think it was about six o’clock.”

“What did you tell the police?”

“That a man had just come into the New Home Hotel at 1703 Fourth Avenue North and told me there was a woman’s body in the alley behind the hotel. The policeman asked our names, and I gave them to him.”

“What did the police officer tell you to do?”

“To stay put in the hotel lobby. He said some police officers would be over shortly to check the situation out.”

“What time did the police arrive?”

“It was six twenty-two.”

“You sure?”

“Yes sir. I looked at my watch when the officers entered the lobby.”

“Dave, did you see or hear anything unusual during the night?”

“No sir, it was a normal Saturday night with street noise from the theater and bar crowds.”

“No screams? No sounds from the alley?”

“No sir, nothing that I heard. After closing hours, it was quiet the rest of the night.”

“Dave, was anyone else on duty with you last night?”

“No sir. The night maid left at eleven. We don’t have a maid on the overnight shift. I handle her stuff if the need arises.”

“Did any guests check out before the police got here?”

“No sir, we still have twenty rooms occupied unless one checked out since Eugene and I were sent into this room.”

“Did anyone, guests or visitors, come into the hotel after you went on duty and go to any of the rooms in the hotel?”

“Only one registered couple. They returned about eleven thirty, got their key, and went straight to their room.”

“Do you know which room they were in and where they had been?”

“Yes sir, they were in Room 304. They told me they just saw *Kiss of Death* at the Carver Theatre.”

“Is that room located near the back of the hotel?”

“No sir, it overlooks Fourth Avenue.”

“One more question. Why is the parking lot next to the hotel not used?”

Dave looked surprised. “The hotel owns the lot. I’ve been told there were lots of problems controlling illegal parking. The lot was intended for hotel guests only. But people going to the theaters, the bar, and even the temple would park there. I guess the hotel owners just got tired of fighting it and chained it off.”

“Dave, you can go home, and Eugene, you can go to work. I’m gonna send an officer to the diner to check out your story. He’ll tell your boss why you were late. Give Officer Owens, who’s outside the door, your addresses and phone numbers. If a newspaper reporter tries to interview you, don’t say anything or as little as possible. We don’t have a good fix on what went on here. That’s all,” Joe said.

After looking at each other again, as if to coordinate their movements, Dave and Eugene stood up. Joe escorted them to the door, and told Owens to get the hotel register information from the front counter clerk and to interview all guests to learn if they had heard or seen anything suspicious.

Joe went back into the room, sat down, and wrote a few comments in his notepad, adding a note to have Howard check out Eugene’s employment at the All Day Diner. He looked up from his notepad just as Steve Strickland rushed into the room. Joe knew what Steve was going to say by the look of excitement on his face.

“Sir, there’s a *Birmingham News* reporter out front. He’s asking all kinds of questions. I told him I’d get you. He’s really pushy.”

“That’s his job, Steve. Show me where he is.”

Once outside, Joe spotted Jack Ritter, the paper’s ace investigative reporter, talking to onlookers at the corner. Jack was medium in stature, a little on the plump side, and had a disarming demeanor that served him well during interviews. He always wore his stained felt hat at a jaunty angle.

“Hey, Jack. Out early on a Sunday morning, aren’t you?” Joe asked.

Turning, Jack smiled and responded, “No earlier than you, Joe. What’s going on here? Your storm troopers’ lips are sealed. Are you going to stonewall me too?”

Joe put on a tough face. “Maybe we’re still perturbed after the last story you wrote about Birmingham’s finest. Let’s move away from this crowd. People have keen ears for tidbits, and then it turns into bigger and bigger stories in the retelling.”

They stepped over the chain into the parking lot, and Jack said, “I just reported what some of your boys in blue did to quell the last disturbance in Scratch Ankle.”

“We haven’t had any real problems here in months. We’d like to keep it that way.”

“Okay. So what can you tell me?”

“Not much. Frank Cutler and his boys just took the body to the morgue. We might have a report in three or four days.”

“Three or four days! What’s taking so long? Frank usually moves much faster.”

“Come on, it’s Sunday. I’m sure Frank wants to go to church and spend the day with his family. I know he’ll get started soon.”

“So,” Jack said in a sarcastic tone, “while we wait for Frank to pray, you gotta give me something.”

“I’ll tell you what little we know. We have a body. It was found in the alley early this morning, a colored female, about thirty years old.”

“Who found her and reported the body?”

“An older colored man found the body, went into the hotel, and the hotel clerk called the police. That’s about all I can say at this time.”

Jack eyed Joe suspiciously. “Do you think it’s a homicide?”

“Don’t know. Won’t know until Frank completes his examination. Don’t make a big deal out of this.”

“I’ll go easy for a few days. Can I depend on you to call me with the results of the autopsy and Frank’s conclusions?”

“Absolutely. I’ll tell you what I can.”

Jack looked skeptical. “Sounds to me like you’re holding back.”

“I’ll be up front with you, Jack.”

“I’ll bet.”

Joe ignored Jack’s sarcasm. “I’ve got to wrap things up here now. Where are you off to?”

“Oh, I’ll mount my white steed and ride around town looking for my next exposé of our city government or police department.”

“Good luck with that.”

“It’s not luck, Joe. In this city, finding interesting things to write about is like picking low hanging fruit off a tree. See you around. If I don’t hear from you in a few days, I’ll be calling.”

“I’m sure you will. See you, Jack.”

After Jack drove off, Joe looked around for Jerry Howard and found him in the alley. He filled Howard in on what little he had learned.

As Joe turned to walk to his car, he looked back. “Jerry, go over to the All Day Diner on Eighteenth. Eugene Gould, the colored guy who found the body, works there. Verify that he does. Tell his boss why Eugene was late. Don’t reveal a lot of details, just make it clear that Eugene was aiding a police investigation. Call me if anything important comes up.”

“Will do, Joe,” Jerry said in a laconic voice that expressed his weariness after a long night.

Joe also felt tired. A new case usually gave him a rush of adrenaline, but not today. Getting into his car, he decided to see if he could find Charlie Bartlett.

Joe knew the chief wanted to keep this low key, but he drove away with an ominous feeling in his stomach.