

Mount Pleasant, South Carolina

The First Monday

Jack Hennessy lifted the cup of hot, steaming coffee to his nose. He inhaled the nutty, slightly smoky aroma of the brew and smiled with pleasure. It reminded him of Costa Rica. It was a place he and the woman he had cherished, his wife, Mary, had visited many times. He had fallen in love with its sunny beaches, its lush rain forests, its mix of Spanish and indigenous influences sprinkled with Jamaican and Asian flavor, and where coffee was king. He had never tasted any better java anywhere. Except, maybe here at Ruby's Diner.

Jack sat in a corner booth with three other men, Billy Miller, Roger Merlin, and Stan Musk. The four friends met for breakfast two or three mornings a week just to chat. Ruby's was a comfortable, old-fashioned kind of diner. It occupied a plot of land shaded by centuries-old Magnolia trees, adorned with beautiful pink, sweet-smelling blossoms, on Rifle Range Road in Mount Pleasant, a suburb of Charleston just across the Cooper River.

Several booths with blue vinyl seats lined two walls, each table outfitted with salt-and-pepper shakers, plastic mustard and ketchup bottles, and napkins holders supporting menus featuring enough dishes to feed a small army.

Six round tables filled the center of the diner. They were quickly filling with breakfast customers. On this early morning, the satisfying meaty essence of frying bacon and sausage mingling with the scent of the fresh coffee wafted through the place.

Hennessy was the relative newcomer to the group of four men, having moved to Mount Pleasant from San Francisco only recently. He was still mourning the loss of his beloved Mary, who had died from breast cancer a year ago. A lonely widower after thirty-five years of marriage, Hennessy moved to Charleston to be closer to his adult daughters and their children. Jennifer was a divorced mother of a six-year-old boy, Ricky. She was also a rising star in the US Department of Justice and was the Assistant US Attorney in Charleston. His youngest daughter, Julie and her husband, lived in Atlanta where they ran a successful baking business. They had a five-year-old girl named Claire. Being near them all was important to Jack, especially with Mary gone. Family was paramount, he had always believed.

"Hey, Jack," Billy said through a mouthful of scrambled eggs. "I see your daughter, Jennifer, is mentioned in the Courier-Post this morning." Billy handed the newspaper to Jack and pointed to the article he had been reading. "Look, there. It says she is heading up a new federal

investigation of organized crime here in the south.”

Jack quickly scanned the article and grinned, handing the newspaper back to Billy.

“Yeah. She was telling me about that the other day.”

“What, exactly, does it mean?” Billy asked.

Jack shook his head.

“I don’t know all the details because, as the Assistant US Attorney here, a lot of what Jennifer does is confidential. But I’m damned proud of her.”

Jack Hennessey rarely used profanity. That fact that he just did indicated how much pride he had for his daughter.

She had always been proud of her father, as well. Jack was a highly decorated San Francisco homicide detective who had retired after forty years on the job. Taking a sip of the full-bodied coffee, he fell into a reverie, thinking about his days as a cop.

He remembered solving some of the biggest murders in the City by the Bay, bringing to justice some of the worst criminals society had to offer. He knew he had built a reputation for solving crimes. He also knew his passion for protecting the innocent ran deep. That had always been his problem. It still was.

Hennessey had handed in his badge and service revolver, exhausted after four decades of trying to live up to the famous police motto, “To Protect and Serve.” But he was the kind cop who dragged into retirement a misplaced feeling of guilt for failing so many victims he couldn’t protect...or serve. It was a burden he carried, unreasonable as it was. He was that kind of man. Jack had to admit, with Mary gone, his loneliness, and his irrational sense of impotence as a lawman, he was borderline depressed.

“Earth to Hennessey. Hello? Is anyone home?”

Stan Musk stared at Jack quizzically. Hennessey snapped out of his daydream.

“Oh, sorry guys. I guess I got a little lost in my thoughts.”

“You think?” Roger joked. “We thought you’d gone into one of those meditative trances of yours, or something.”

“Hey, I keep telling us guys, you should give meditation a try. It’ll do you good. Keep you young. Keep you fit.” Jack glanced at Musk, who was noticeably overweight. “That, and exercise, of course.”

“Don’t start,” Stan grumped.

At seventy-two, Jack was still fit and athletic. His lean, wiry frame supported a five foot-ten-inch, muscular body. He had steely blue eyes, which missed little, a mustache, which had turned grey as had his full head of hair. He kept it trimmed short, like the cop he once was. On the job, Jack had become an expert in the science of martial arts, holding black belts in Taekwondo, Karate and Savate, a French combat sport. He kept up his routines in all three. Hennessey also meditated every day and practiced Kundalini Yoga, which combines spiritual and physical techniques designed to strengthen the physical body and sharpen the mind, and consciousness. None of that, however, seemed to help his feeling of depression. He needed something else.

The four friends chatted as friends do, half-gossip, half-opinion, about everything from the best method for cutting lawns to the latest outrage of the town council.

“Hey, Ruby,” Billy eventually called out to the proprietor of the diner. “What’s it take to get another cuppa coffee around here, anyway?”

Billy Miller was a big, boisterous transplant from New Jersey. His manner was reminiscent of Tony Soprano from the popular TV series about a fictional organized-crime family. He had entered his seventh decade of age and was beginning to show it. His thinning hair and deeply lined face were proof of that. He was not a mean man but liked to feign the persona of a tough guy. Growing up in New Jersey, he sometimes had to be just that. But he liked to believe he had mellowed with age. Billy was also Jack’s neighbor, living down the street from Hennessey.

Ruby stopped working at the grill where she was cooking up more scrambled eggs, bacon and a “mess o’ grits.” She slowly turned around with hands akimbo on her wide hips and eyed the four men at the table.

Ruby was an imposing African American woman who, at a quick glance, reminded you of the all-time great Gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson. She was wearing a colorful, flowered dress and a starched white apron. Ruby, whip-smart and with quick-wit, appeared to be in her fifties, although she could have been in her seventies. Her wrinkle-free skin was Hershey chocolate, rich with melanin. Her voice could be as powerful as Mahalia’s and as saucy as actress Pearl Bailey’s when she wanted it to be. Ruby’s great-great-grandfather and his parents had been enslaved in the mid-1800s. They had been brought to the new American colony by his white master from Barbados. Ruby, her husband and four children still lived on the land her ancestors acquired after

their emancipation.

After the South surrendered in the Civil War, freed slaves were given assurances they would receive confiscated Confederate farmland to till and support themselves. Those assurances turned out to be mostly empty promises when Washington reneged on the deal. Thus, Ruby's great-grandparents had been more fortunate than most other freedmen in that regard. Their Southern plantation master had held up his end of the bargain and gave them a portion of his land when he realized the war was Civil War was lost.

Ruby did not suffer fools gladly. She focused her gaze on the man who had been so impertinent in his demand for a refill. She shook her head slightly and pointed a spatula at the booth across the room.

"Child, you know exactly what it takes! It takes thirty-seven cents, honey, just like your first cup did. Just like it did last week, and the week before that. Just like it will next week. You show me thirty-seven cents, and I'll show you another cup of coffee!"

With that, Ruby spun around, slapped her spatula on the grill with an attitude that was discernably clear. The unstated message was "I dare ya to say somethin' else," as she furiously continued to scramble the eggs, hiding a grin all the while. The three of the four guys at the table erupted in laughter.

"Boy, she really got you good, Billy," Stan chided.

"Yeah," Roger agreed. "That's a thirty-seven-cent whoopin', for sure!"

Billy's face turned bright red. He fished in his pocket and pulled out two quarters.

"Here," he called out to Ruby, sliding the coins to the edge of the table. "There's fifty cents. Can I now have 'nother cuppa coffee? Pul-lease," emphasizing the last word with an exaggerated, sarcastic two syllables.

Without a word, Ruby laid her spatula aside and poured a twelve-ounce cup of the hot drink. Then she reached into the cash drawer to pull out a dime and three pennies. She walked over to the table where the four men sat. She slapped the coins down on the table and picked up the two quarters.

"When Ruby says the coffee's thirty-seven cents, she means it's thirty-seven cents, Mr. Miller. It ain't no fifty cents. And Ruby ain't no chiseler, neither. This here's your change, mister," she said, in her sassy back-country accent.

Then, she put the big cup of coffee down in front of Billy, pulled herself up as tall as her

five-foot, six-inch frame would allow, pushed her shoulders back and thrust her prominent bosom forward. Looming over Billy, she looked down at him.

“I’m giving you this large cup o’ Joe, honey, because I hear that you like ‘em big and black!”

All the men at the table, including Billy, howled with laughter. Ruby gave them all a big smile and a wink, turned and headed back to the grill, chuckling as she went.

The four men always looked forward to Ruby’s banter. It’s why they liked her so much. Miller, Merlin, and Musk were, like Hennessey all retired, and had been successful in their own careers. Billy Miller had become wealthy in what he said was the shipping business. Roger Merlin was a former attorney and Stan Musk had been an airline pilot. He had picked up Billy’s newspaper and was reading it.

“Hey, did any of you guys hear about this?” he asked “A woman’s body was found on the rocks at Fort Sumter. It says here the woman is still unidentified.”

“Really? At Fort Sumter?” Roger exclaimed. “That’s out there in the harbor! How’d the body get there? “

“It doesn’t say here,” Stan responded. “There aren’t very many details in this story. It just says the woman was African American. Oh wait. It says here a boat was found abandoned and adrift in the middle of the harbor. It might have belonged to the woman.”

“Wow, that’s incredible,” Billy said, as he concentrated on his coffee.

“Could I see that for second, please?” Jack said to Stan, who handed it over. Jack studied the article, scant as it was about the details.

“Didn’t Fort Sumter have something to do with the Civil War?” Stan asked.

“Not just something, Stan.” Roger looked at his friend with scorn. “It’s where the whole thing started. Didn’t they teach you that in school? Confederates opened fire in 1861. It was quite a feat, I guess. I mean, they say those first cannon balls were fired from more than a mile away. The Rebs...that’s what some folks called them...the Rebs forced Northern soldiers out of the fort and held it until the end of the war in 1865 when the North retook Sumter.

“Well, now, aren’t you Mister Know-It-All?” Billy quipped.

“My son had to study it in his American History class, is all,” Roger explained. “He told me all about it. Apparently one of the first things tourists in Charleston do is visit the fort. It’s quite popular.”

As Jack continued to read silently, his cell phone chirped. He absent-mindedly fished it out of his pocket, put it to his ear and said, "Hello?" still absorbing the article.

He heard a man's voice say, "Jack Hennessey? You may not remember me. This is Ben Lafferty, Charlie's son."

Jack didn't answer. He didn't say anything. He just looked up, stared at the middle distance, and felt his blood run cold.