

A  
PRIVATE  
CATHEDRAL

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*For James Joseph Hogan  
One of the good guys  
who has walked the walk with us  
for over thirty years*

*“Going down in Lou’sana, gonna git me a mojo hand.”*

—Muddy Waters

# Chapter One

**Y**OU KNOW HOW it is when you've kicked around the globe too long and scorched your grits too many times with four fingers of Jack in a mug and a beer back, or with any other kind of flak juice that was handy. And if that wasn't enough, maybe doubling down in the morning with a half-dozen tall glasses of crushed ice and cherries and sliced oranges and vodka to drive the snakes and the spiders back into the basement.

Wow, what a gas. Who thought we'd ever die?

But why get into all that jazz? I'll tell you why. I'm talking about those moments when you strip your gears, whether you're chemically loaded or not, and get lost inside the immensity of creation and see too deeply into our ephemerality and our penchant for greed and war and willingness to destroy the Big Blue Marble, and for a brief moment you scare yourself so badly you wonder why you didn't park your porridge on the ceiling a long time ago.

That kind of moment came to me once when I was standing on a Texas dock in the sunset while the waves rolled below me and thudded as hard as lead against the pilings, an incandescent spray blowing as cool as refrigeration on my clothes and skin, a green-gold light as bright as an acetylene torch in the clouds, the amusement pier ringing with calliope music and the popping of shooting galleries. It was one of the moments when you hang between life and death and ache to hold on to the earth and eternity at the same time, regretting all those days and nights you pitched over the gunwales while you deconstructed your life.

I'm talking about the acknowledgment of mortality, and not the kind that slips up on you in a hospice or on a battlefield filled with

the cawing of carrion birds or by way of a drunk driver bouncing over a curb into a playground. I'm talking about seeing the Seventh Seal at work and a string of medieval serfs and liege lords and virginal maidens wending their way across a hilltop to a valley dark as oil, their silhouettes blowing like pieces of carbon in the wind.

The people who have these moments of metaphysical clarity are what I call members of the Three Percent Club, because in my opinion that's approximately the percentage of people who fry a couple of their lobes and are able to talk about it later. You can pay your dues in lots of ways: on a night trail sprinkled with Chinese toe-poppers and booby-trapped 105 duds; or stacking time on the hard road; or kneeling on a hard floor in a convent with a rosary twisted around your knuckles; or listening to voices in your head that are as loud as megaphones. The surroundings don't matter. You're in a black box for the duration, Jason. You literally sweat blood, bud. To say it's a motherfucker doesn't come close.

After you're through with the long night of the soul, or after it's through with you, you're never the same. Earthly fears disappear like a great weight removed from a scale. You have no inclination to argue or hold grudges; reticence becomes a way of life; it's hard to stay awake during an average conversation.

The downside is you're on your own, the only occupant in a cathedral in which you can hear your heartbeat echoing off the walls.

What does all this have to do with Johnny Shondell? I'll tell you. He was out of another era, even though he was more symbolic of it than part of it, an era we always want to resurrect, whether we admit it or not. Jesus talked about people who are made different in the womb. I'll take that a step further. Maybe some people were never in the womb. They arrive inside a golden bubble and somehow become the icon for the rest of us. At least that's how I thought of Johnny and Isolde. Call it a scam or a sham or the stupidity of the herd, who cares? The only reality you have is the one you believe in. I say eighty-six the rest of it.

Back in that other era, America was still America, for good or bad. Men such as Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower were presi-

dent; we didn't have the daily arrival of the clown car. People can say that's just nostalgia talking. They're wrong. For us in Louisiana it was a time of music and drive-in movies and starry skies and two-lane roads that meandered for miles through meadows and oak trees hung with Spanish moss. If you don't believe me, ask my friend Clete Purcel. He'll tell you all about it. I can almost hear him now: "It was deeply copacetic, noble mon. You can take that to the shack, Jack. I wouldn't give you the slide, Clyde."

BUT LET'S GO back to that summer evening on the dock many years ago. I had an appointment the next day at Huntsville Pen, one I didn't want to think about, so I walked onto the amusement pier and saw Johnny Shondell up on the bandstand, belting it out to a crowd of teenage girls whose faces glowed not only with adoration but with a vulnerability that made you ache to hold and protect them.

Johnny's parents had been killed in an airplane accident when he was very young, and he had been raised by his uncle Mark. I had watched him grow up around New Iberia the way you watch kids grow up in a small town: You see them at a church service, playing a pinball machine in a café, smacking a baseball, quarterbacking at the state finals, rocking at the senior hop, boxing in the Golden Gloves, or boosting cars or getting involved in cruel and hateful behavior such as nigger-knocking and the abuse of the poorest of the poor. Johnny didn't fit in a category. His musical talent was one step short of cosmic, and the first time you heard him play and sing, you knew he'd hooked on to the tail of a comet and would defy both mortality and improbability. Yeah, that's right, in his journey across the heavens he'd sprinkle the rest of us with stardust, even if he was a member of the Shondell family, millionaire liars and bums that they were.

You bet, the Shondells had money, tons of it, but like most wealthy people in our Caribbean culture, they made it off the backs of others and had family secrets that involved miscegenation and

exploitation of the out-of-wedlock children they sired. Don't be shocked. In Louisiana we don't have Confederates in the attic. We have them everywhere, including the basement and the outbuildings, the cistern and sometimes couched in the forks of our emblematic live oaks.

Johnny wore white slacks and a maroon silk shirt that puffed with wind. His physique was as lithe as a whip, his black hair combed in ducktails, thick and glistening; the stars were white and cold overhead, as though the backdrop had been created for that particular moment, one that was Homeric, as foolish as that sounds. Hey, even the waves had turned wine-dark under the moon, as though I were watching either the beginning or the end of an era.

"I know you," a voice said behind me.

I turned around. The girl who had spoken couldn't have been over seventeen. Her hair was whitish-blond, her skin the color of chalk, her cheeks pink like a doll's. A tattoo of roses and orchids dripped off her left shoulder (this was at a time when nice girls in New Iberia were not allowed to leave home with bare arms). "You don't remember me?"

"I'm sorry, I don't have my glasses," I lied.

"I'm Isolde Balangie. You know my family."

*Oh, yes*, I thought.

"You're a police officer," she said. "You used to come in my father's restaurant in the French Quarter. But you're from New Iberia. That's where my family is from, too. After Italy, I mean."

"I *used* to be a police officer."

"You're not one anymore?"

"Sometimes I am."

She had hazel eyes that went away from you in a sleepy fashion, then came back as though she were waking from a dream. "What does 'sometimes' mean?"

"I was fired from NOPD. Getting fired is my *modus operandi*."

"Fired for what?"

"I was a drunk."

"You're not now, are you?"

"A drunk is a drunk." I tried to smile.



Her gaze remained fixed on Johnny Shondell, her lips parting, and I knew she was no longer listening to me. I also knew my problems weren't worth talking about and were part of the chemically induced narcissism that every boozier carries with him like a sacred flame.

"It was nice seeing you, Miss Isolde," I said.

"You believe in kismet?"

"Where'd you hear of kismet?"

"At the movies. Do you believe in it?"

"I think it's Arabic for 'God's will.' I'm no expert about things like that."

"My family has hated the Shondells for four hundred years."

"That's a little unusual."

Her face sharpened. "They burned my ancestor."

"Pardon?"

"At the stake. In chains. They put nails through his mouth so he couldn't talk. Then they made him suffer as much as they could."

I stared at her.

"You don't believe me?" she said.

"Sure."

"That's why I think the Shondells should be killed."

"Killed?"

"Or blown up or something."

"So why are you here watching Johnny?"

"He's delivering me to his uncle Mark."

I didn't want to hear any more. The Balangie family was trouble, their ways arcane and, some said, incestuous. "Take care of yourself, kid."

"That's all you have to say?"

"Yeah," I replied.

"Then fuck you."

There is no human being who can become angrier than an injured teenage girl. I winked at her and walked away. That night I slept with the windows open in a salt-eaten, wood-framed 1940s motel room. I heard the waves pounding on the beach, devouring the sand, as though the tide were sliding backward in mockery of itself.