

THE REDEMPTION by C.L. Tolbert

EXCERPT

CHAPTER ONE

September 9, 1994
8:05 p.m.

Just before dark on the night of his death, Brother Reginald Antoine stepped out of the cottage where he lived. He slammed the door shut to prevent the soggy heat of the late summer evening from invading the front room. Except for occasional river breezes, the New Orleans climate was swamp-like until late October. His exits had become swift and cat-like to avoid escalating power bills and a strain on the house's only window-unit air conditioner.

He stood on the front porch for a moment, staring at the entrance to the Redemption housing project. All was quiet. No one was in sight.

He was looking forward to the evening. He'd promised to help Alicia Bishop complete forms for a scholarship to Our Lady of Fatima, the top girls' school in the city. He found himself singing under his breath as he locked the front door.

Most of the kids Brother Antoine worked with never finished school, and he was painfully aware that he'd failed far more than he'd helped. But Alicia's story would be different. Her graduation would be her family's first. Clear-headed and determined, much like her Aunt Juanita, the woman who had raised her, she was destined to earn far more than a high school diploma. He believed she was destined for great things.

Brother Antoine surveyed the street familiar to him from childhood. Alicia and her Aunt Juanita lived in an apartment was only a few blocks over, but well within the Redemption housing project. Driving such a short distance would be silly, plus he felt like a little exercise. It was a good evening for a walk, even though no one felt completely safe walking around any neighborhood in the city at night. At least one person had been killed in New Orleans every day that year, so far. Sometimes more. Too many drugs were on the streets. But he didn't worry about any of that.

He tucked the bundle of papers he'd pulled for the meeting under his arm and headed out. When he was a kid he'd found the Redemption overwhelming - so vast it couldn't be taken in, visually, from

his porch or from any single location. A crowded jumble of russet brick, broken down porches, and peeling army-drab paint, it stretched across the lower garden district from Magazine Street to the Mississippi River. When he was about six he tried to count the buildings, but gave up when he got lost. Everything looked the same to him back then. When he returned to live at the mission house he realized he'd been wrong. Each place was unique. Every apartment, every stoop, every front door was distinct, because everything inside was different. Every place had its own family, its own problems, its own joys. Every place had its own family, its own problems, and joys. He didn't realize how much he'd missed it until his return.

He passed the community garden planted around the corner from the mission house with its patches of brave sprouts pushing out of the ground. He was proud of that little spot, and equally excited for the people who were involved, especially those few who returned week after week to dig, and prod, and encourage the seedlings to grow. Some of the plants even promised to bear fruit, which was reason enough to celebrate.

As he walked he could smell urine from the street gutters where drunken men or stoned boys had relieved themselves. A recent rain only added a steamy intensity to the mix, creating a cauldron of odors which would vanish only when the next day's sunlight parched the streets.

The Redemption was teeming with human spirit, poverty, and crime. It was home to many, but with rare exception, no one chose to live there. And everyone who did, even the very young, understood how fragile life could be.

He walked up the steps to Juanita Bishop's apartment and rapped on the front door.

9:00 p.m.

Sam Maureau pulled his car into the Redemption and parked at a curb at the end of Felicity Street. He was alone. Jackson, his partner, couldn't come. But Sam wasn't worried. He checked his watch. He was right on time. Things were under control.

He turned off his lights and, except for the murky glow of the half-obscured moon, was surrounded by a blanket of darkness. It took several seconds for his eyes to adjust, but even after he waited, he still strained to see. Most of the streetlights on that block had been shot out, and several apartment windows had been boarded over. He peered in between the last two buildings on the corner for any sign of movement.

Sam kicked aside a beer can as he stepped out of his car. He didn't expect any trouble that night. Marcus, a dealer who ran the Gangsta B's, the largest gang in the city, had asked for a meeting to discuss 'some business', but they'd never had problems before. Their businesses had always co-existed, side-by-side. Sam had begun selling crack in small quantities ten years earlier, when he was twenty-five, and had remained one of the smaller distributors in the city. He figured that Marcus, who was younger by at least ten years, either wanted to bring him and his territory into the Gangsta B's, or he wanted to buy him out. He didn't see the need to change anything right now, unless the price was right. He was making pretty good money. His clients were happy with him. But he didn't mind talking with Marcus.

Sam patted his jacket pocket. The gun was still there. It never hurt to be careful. He locked his car, checking to make certain nothing was in the back seat. Marcus had asked him to meet around the corner.

Sam made his way across the grassy common area, dodging the few mud puddles he could see reflected in the wan moonlight, to an old iron bench across from Marcus's grandmother's apartment where they had met once before. He sat down to wait. The bench hadn't quite cooled from the daytime heat. The faint breeze from the river ruffled what scant remnants remained of his once luxurious surfer-boy hair and sent greasy paper bags, discarded whiskey bottles, and random debris scurrying across the sidewalk. He absent-mindedly patted his bald spot to make certain it was covered.

He couldn't see them, but their chatter floated over to his bench. Even though the words were indecipherable, Sam heard three distinct voices. Then he heard Marcus speak.

"Go get Louis."

Out of habit, Sam felt his jacket pocket again, reassuring himself that his piece was still there. Marcus and one other young man came into view. Sam nodded as they approached.

Marcus was a commanding presence. Tall, and athletic, intricate tattoos of black ink wove across his dark skin, tracing his biceps, and emphasizing his ropy, muscular arms and powerful shoulders. His long hair, pulled back into a pony-tail, flowed down his back. No one questioned his authority.

"We're gonna wait a minute for Louis," Marcus pulled out a cigarette from his back pocket and lit it, blowing billowy clouds into the night air.

"Yeah, sure. But what's this all about?" Marcus ignored Sam's question and pulled hungrily on his cigarette, blowing smoke rings, refusing to make eye contact with Sam.

Several minutes later a tall young man and a boy who couldn't have been over sixteen joined them.

“You and your people gotta go. You’re right in the middle of my territory. I’m claiming it, and I’m taking it – now. Ain’t nothing you can do about it.” Marcus threw down his cigarette and stomped it into the grass.

Sam stood up to face Marcus. “Fuck you, Marcus. You don’t need my three blocks. I’ve had it for years, and its outside your territory anyway. You can’t just take it.” Sam clenched the fist of his left hand and shoved his right hand in his jacket pocket where the gun was hidden.

“That’s where you’re wrong, mother fucker.” Marcus grabbed another cigarette and rammed it three times against the pack. “I got business coming to me from uptown all the time now. It’s time for you to give it up.” Marcus nodded to the three boys, who formed a circle around Sam and Marcus.

“No way, bro?!” Sam’s hand instinctively tightened around the gun.

Surrounded by the group of young men, Sam saw an opening, turned, and simultaneously pulled the gun from his jacket. As he stepped toward his escape, he saw something moving along the sidewalk next to the street. It appeared to be a man dressed in dark clothes, but it was impossible to be certain. Sam heard one shot, and felt it whizz by him. The distant figure dropped. Sam twisted around, and aimed his weapon toward the sound of the gun fire. Then he heard another shot.

Feeling something hot in his chest, he crumbled to the ground. The last thing he saw was the young kid, the one they called Louis, running toward the river.

Brother Antoine said good night to Alicia on the front porch of her aunt’s apartment and started his walk back home. He was feeling good, lighthearted. He and Alicia had completed her application and she had nearly finished her essay. He was certain she was a shoo-in for the scholarship. He’d only traveled a few feet down the sidewalk when he saw a group of men and a few boys gathered together in the grassy area next to one of the buildings. The cloud-covered moon offered enough reflection to allow him to make out the scant silhouette of the tallest member of the group. There was no doubt. His swagger and perpetual cigarette were unmistakable. Marcus Bishop. They had to be up to no good.

Brother Antoine followed the curve of the sidewalk, which brought him a little closer to the group. He noticed there was movement, perhaps a scuffle. He heard a shot, then felt a searing pain in his chest. He placed his hand on his shirt where he felt dampness, and, struggling to breathe, fell to the ground. He grabbed the scapular around his neck, praying, as he lay there, someone would come administer the last rites.