

Blood on the Roses



Robert Hays

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ThomasJacobPublishing@gmail.com

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the most beautiful person ever produced by the American South, Mary Corley Hays of Columbia, South Carolina.

One will rarely err if extreme actions be ascribed to vanity, ordinary actions to habit, and mean actions to fear.

–Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

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by

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Chapter 1

The Tennessee Bend Motel squatted on a level ribbon of land carved into the side of a steep Appalachian ridge like a thin slice pared from a luscious apple. All around it, the trees were well into their September colors, leaves on the tall oaks and hickories ranging from muted browns to brilliant reds and oranges mixed with scattered splotches of lingering summer green. There was a busy highway in front, but it was at the bottom of the slope, some hundred yards distant. It carried traffic heading north from Knoxville and south from Kingsport and was an everyday path for the constant comings and goings of locals.

The ample grounds of the Tennessee Bend posed a stark contrast to its surroundings, lacking any sign of formal landscaping. Shortleaf pine and black oak trees appeared to have been planted haphazardly to provide shade for chosen areas of the parking lot, and the only touch of elegance was a rose garden that stretched across the crown of the incline, along the edge of parking spaces adjacent to the front row of motel rooms. The summer roses that welcomed visitors still were vibrant and from inside the lobby, looking down the slope toward the east, the garden made an appealing foreground in a picture-postcard view of Cherokee Lake.

Although only a narrow neck of the lake was visible, the scene was a stunning sample of the region's ubiquitous natural beauty. The Bays Mountains and the foothills of the Great Smokies lay in the distance beyond the lake to the east, while to the west the forested hills rising behind the motel gave way in turn to the razor-spined, peakless pleats of the scenic Clinch Mountains, which stretched northward toward the Cumberlands.

Rachel Feigen was tired when she checked into the Tennessee Bend, after the long drive from Baltimore, and unsure where to begin. She already had a deep emotional attachment to this assignment and had come to face it with a sense of dread. This one did not hold much prospect for a pleasant outcome.

Not that Feigen was accustomed to happy endings. She had just spent a grueling three weeks piecing together a story on the effects of the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, and was left discouraged if not downright despondent by what she'd found. In the several months since the court struck down "separate but equal" as a legal basis for racial segregation in the schools, little had been done to implement the court's decree. This was not what she had hoped to find.

Her disappointment in the outcome of the investigation pleased Bill Skyles, her editor at the Associated Press. Skyles demanded absolute impartiality when his reporters' work went to print, but he wanted them to understand and feel the impact of their stories.

Skyles was sufficiently impressed with Feigen's performance on the story to hand her a new assignment that he called the most important one he had. He said it could be her biggest challenge since joining the AP national reporting team and she had dug into the story just deep enough to see that he was right.

Feigen had barely managed to get three days off. Skyles wanted her to get onto the story immediately. She was eager to tackle this new project, but she had an accumulation of personal

things to attend to and she wanted at least one day when she could sleep in and have nothing to do. Reluctantly, Skyles gave in.

Friday was the first of her precious days of freedom. She slept late, took a long, luxurious shower, and had breakfast at lunchtime. Then she called her father in New York. As usual, Judge Max Feigen skipped the pleasantries and got straight to the point.

“Your series on school integration was very perceptive,” he told her. “I’m proud of you, Rachel. But not surprised. I always knew you’d make a good journalist.”

“I owe it all to you, Daddy. We grew up thinking the *New York Times* was the gospel and journalists were the last best hope for the world—after the law, of course. You never finished your first cup of coffee until you’d read every word of the front section of the *Times*.”

Her father chuckled. “I still do pretty much the same thing, but it takes me quite a while longer. My eyes aren’t as good as they used to be. That’s one of the prices of old age, I’m afraid.”

“You can’t imagine how hard it is for me to associate old age with you,” she told him. “To me, you’re still the stern, uncompromising judge who must have scared the hell out of bad guys when you wore your robes and then turned into a loveable old softy when you got home to Morrie and me.”

“That was the happiest time of my life, Rachel, but we have to live in the present. It seems as if I’ve been retired forever. Your mother and I just rattle around in this big old empty house.”

There was a clear note of melancholy in his voice. It had been one of her biggest worries that after all the years during which he had put in endless hours keeping up with the law, insisting there was no margin for error in his determination to hand out justice in his courtroom, her father would find retirement difficult. He had told her once that retirement was nothing less than a fast track to senility and he didn’t look forward to it.

“But now you have time to read all those books you never could get to before,” she said, hoping to give him at least a modest shot of encouragement.

“Yes, of course. And I do more reading than these old eyes are up to. But bring me up to date on you. What kind of story are you off on now? Something in-depth like the school integration story?”

“That’s exactly why I called. Have you heard anything about a missing man from Baltimore named Guy Saillot?”

“I don’t think so. Who is he?”

“Nobody who’s very important, as far as I can tell. But his family is.”

“And so what’s your story?”

“He’s been missing for more than two weeks. He left Baltimore to visit a friend at the University of Tennessee, as I understand it, but he never showed up there. His family is prominent here and the *Sun* has run a couple of stories on it, but the authorities don’t seem to be pushing it very hard. Anyway, my editor is sending me to look for him.”

“His name sounds French.”

“Yes. His father’s a big shot with the Franco-American Transatlantic Company’s Baltimore office.”

“The University of Tennessee, that’s in Knoxville?”

“Yes.”

Now there was concern in his voice. “There’s a lot going on in the South these days, Rachel. This isn’t going to be dangerous, is it?”

“I don’t see how it could be,” she answered, trying her best to sound confident. “But I’ll call you every few days and let you know what’s happening. Okay?”

“You be sure and do that, angel. And please take good care of yourself.”

Feigen felt guilty for not having told her father what she already knew about the Guy Sallot case. But she still held out some slight hope that she was mistaken in her first impressions of Anton Schuler, the FBI agent in charge. There was no way she could have said much without getting into what Schuler had told her, and being as perceptive as he was her father would have picked up on her doubts in an instant.

She also had deliberately avoided mentioning another big thing coming up in her life, one that was much more pleasant. It had been a mantra of the Feigen family for as long as anyone could remember that pride in personal possessions, no matter what they were, was selfish. She would have been embarrassed to let him know that she was as excited as a little girl at a birthday party because she was about to get her first new car.

Feigen had set her heart on one of the new 1955 Chevrolets the instant she saw the line introduced in a *Life* magazine advertisement. Her old Plymouth was just about done for and Skyles had recommended she see Mike Sodeman, a salesman he said wouldn't talk down to her just because she was a woman. Mike turned out to be an agreeable young man and, true to Skyles's promise, he began at the outset to talk about things like horsepower and V-8 engines and transmissions and not about colors and upholstery fabrics. He helped make her purchase easier than she expected and the car would be ready for her to pick up first thing in the morning.

For now, though, she needed to push aside all thoughts of the new car and her father and Feigen family mantras and whatever, and force herself to refocus on the Guy Sallot story. This meant going back over her notes and looking for any detail she might have missed. Agent Anton Schuler had irritated her to the level that she felt lucky to have any information at all.

It had been clear from the minute she walked into his office that Agent Schuler was not especially concerned about finding this particular missing person. "The FBI has a lot of important things to do," he told her flatly, "and I'll give it to you straight. Looking for a queer little Frenchman who probably found a boyfriend and decided to hide out for a while and have fun isn't real high on our list."

His attitude had taken Feigen by surprise. It took her a moment to recover and get back on track with the questions she wanted to ask, now even more important.

"Who was he visiting in Knoxville?"

"We have not released that information," Agent Schuler said matter-of-factly. "It wouldn't do you any good, anyway. He says Frenchie never got there."

"He called him 'Frenchie'?"

"He may have called him 'Darling' for all I know. The point is, we have checked him out and his story holds up. He is not involved."

Feigen's patience was at an end. "If Guy Sallot weren't homosexual, would you just assume he had found a girlfriend and was shackled up somewhere, not worth your time to look for? That's a pathetic way to operate, Mister Schuler. I'd expect more from the FBI."

With that, she had stormed out of his office.

It took only a few minutes for her to go over her skimpy notes. Guy Sallot was twenty years old. He was a slight man, barely five feet, four inches tall and weighing only about a hundred and thirty pounds. He had a sallow complexion, green eyes, and black hair. Nothing on what he might have been wearing, nothing about his habits—except his sexuality. The FBI was not even sure how long the young Frenchman had been missing.

Feigen had no intention of working on her free time, and she had two more days off before she left for Tennessee. But she could not get Guy Sallot out of her mind. When she couldn't stand it any longer she picked up the phone and dialed the number of the Sallot home for probably the twentieth time. This time there was an answer.

"This is the Sallot residence. Hello."

Surprised finally to hear someone on the other end of the line, Feigen fumbled for words. “I’m sorry,” she said, “may I ask who I’m speaking with?”

“This is Marie Saillot.”

“Miss Saillot, or missus, my name is Rachel Feigen. I work for the Associated Press and I’m doing a story about Guy. Are you a member of the family?”

There was a lengthy pause. “I’m Guy’s mother,” the woman said then. “How can I help you, Miss Feigen?”

Feigen was nearly breathless with anticipation. “Missus Saillot, would it be possible for me to come and talk with you? Anything you can tell me about Guy might help us find him. Anything at all. I’ve talked with the police and the FBI, and my editor is sending me to Tennessee to see if I can track down something they may be missing. I truly apologize for intruding on your privacy, but you could be very helpful to us if I could have just a few minutes of your time.”

After another pause, but this time a shorter one, Guy Saillot’s mother consented. Could Feigen come by her house tomorrow afternoon? And please don’t bring a photographer.

Feigen skipped dinner and made a list of questions for tomorrow. There was so much she didn’t know. Marie Saillot obviously was her best hope, yet she felt guilty for invading a mother’s private grief. Surely to have a son missing, a son who apparently had never been in the least bit of trouble, would be as difficult as anything a mother could face. The uncertainty must be terrible. On the one hand Feigen was eager to learn more about Guy Saillot, the person, but on the other she dreaded looking into the eyes of Marie.

She hardly slept that night. She had interviewed people faced with tragedy before, and it always left her with a hurt inside that sometimes lasted for days. This one might be the worst.

In the morning she got up early, eager for her meeting with Marie Saillot and mildly excited about picking up her new car. She had a quick breakfast, then got into her old Plymouth for the last time and drove to Coastal Chevrolet, a highly advertised suburban dealership where it looked like there were dozens of new automobiles on a spacious lot bounded by red and white pennants on tall poles. She was determined to keep her composure and act as if this was all routine and not her first time, but this might be difficult.

Mike Sodeman hurried out to meet her, welcomed her with a big smile, and said her car was waiting. They went directly to the gleaming BelAir hardtop faux convertible Mike had ordered for her.

On her first visit to the dealer, Feigen had looked at a car like this except that it was two-toned. It had a cream-colored top and red bottom and she told Mike she wanted one just like it except all cream. She’d paid no attention to the interior. When her car came it was bright red inside and she had been very much put out with herself for such a foolish oversight. But now she liked it. Others might find it gaudy, but she preferred to think of it as a flamboyant expression of her good taste.

Mike handed her the keys. In a final gesture of good salesmanship, he had tuned the car radio to her favorite station and the metallic notes of Perez Prado’s melodic and cheerful instrumental, “Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White,” drifted from the speaker. Feigen managed to stay calm until she drove off the lot, back onto the highway. Then she pumped her fist in the air and shouted, “Yes, Rachel, it’s *yours!*” So much for the Feigen mantra.

When it came time for her to meet Marie Saillot she still was in high spirits, although it was no longer because of the new car. She was at last going to learn more about Guy. Not merely Guy Saillot the missing person, but Guy Saillot the individual human being—this mother’s son. She was barely aware that she was driving a new Chevrolet as she set out for her appointment.