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**HOW EARLY RISER OVERTHREW THE CONFEDERACY
AND SAVED PARIS FRANCE**

by Susan Gabriel

CHAPTER ONE

It is 1964 and the last day of 5th grade. To celebrate the end of school, Vel and Paris and I walk the dirt road along the marsh and share a banana Popsicle. Giant oaks tower over us sprinkling a patchwork of sun and shadow at our feet. We lick the last sweet juices of the Popsicle from our fingers and avoid a lone yellow jacket that circles us like we are three petals of a banana flower. Then we take turns jumping from one piece of shade to the next as if the oak's shadows are hopscotch squares.

Toads croak and the cicadas hum along in the heat. It is already blue blazes hot on the coast, as it is every summer. The heat takes on a life of its own, like a fire-breathing dragon shooting flames in our faces. Sweat is plentiful and serves to cool us when the breeze blows.

The air is heavy with the smell of the Charleston Harbor—a cross between smelly feet and a conk shell that sits and rots on your back porch with the animal still inside. Yet it is the smell of home and I love it.

I am lucky enough to have two best friends. The first one, Vel, I've known since our mothers threw us in a wading pool together as toddlers. Vel's full name is Velvet Ogilvie. She shortened it to "Vel" in third grade.

Vel is more of a girl than I am. She wears dresses even when she doesn't have to. She wears ribbons in her hair. And she even squeals sometimes when boys chase her on the playground. These are rituals I have never understood.

Vel constantly reads Nancy Drew books and carries a pad and pen in her purse in case some mystery needs to be solved that requires taking notes. To me, the only mystery here is why she's so obsessed with someone who wears knee socks and dresses.

Paris is my newest best friend, and is named after the capital city of France. His last name is Moses, like the guy in the Bible. They are no relation, as far as he knows.

Paris' mama works at Callie's diner downtown where my daddy takes us for breakfast sometimes and where my mama sells pies. Paris hangs out there a lot and we struck up a conversation one day about the Batman comic he was reading. We started being friends after that. As far as I'm concerned, Batman is much more interesting than Nancy Drew, but I would never tell Vel that.

Paris and his mother moved from Chicago to Charleston six months ago to live with his grandmother, Miss Josie. On the day they moved, Paris abandoned his northern roots and began speaking with a southern accent. When I asked him why he would do such a thing, he just shrugged. But I think it must have something to do with wanting to fit in. Northerners aren't trusted in the South. It doesn't even matter if all Paris' kin is here. Even though the Civil War ended a hundred years ago, it's like it's still going on in Charleston. I think the whole event can be boiled down to one thing: Southerners absolutely hate to be told what to do. Even if some of the things they do aren't right. I guess Paris and I hit it off so well because he knows I'm different.

Paris goes to the colored school across town and has the whitest teeth of any boy I've ever known. Not to mention that he does a southern drawl better than people born and bred here. Better even than that actress in *Gone with the Wind* who played Scarlett O'Hara.

In Chicago, Paris talked really fast. But to speak Southern, he has to slow his words way down, as if each syllable goes out on the front porch and suns itself for a while. You might think that people in the South say only really wise or smart things since the words take such a slow, thoughtful route. But I've heard people say some really dumb things. A lot of them having to do with that stupid war.

A truck guns its engine behind us shaking us out of our reverie. There isn't much traffic on this dirt road but when a car does come by we close ranks on the side to let it pass. A pick-up truck pulls up next to us and slows nearly to a stop. Two young white guys stare out the open windows like they've never seen kids before. The one closest to us is wearing a dirty baseball cap and a white undershirt that's just as dirty.

“What are you looking at?” I ask.

The driver guns the motor again and the other guy sneers at Paris like Paris is an escaped convict or worse. Then he leans out the window and spits a giant hocker right next to Paris’ foot.

“Hey!” I yell. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“That’s what I think of your little friend there,” the spitting guy says to me. Then he turns to Paris again. “You know what you’re doing wrong, don’t you, boy?” He says ‘boy’ like it’s a bad word.

Paris doesn’t answer.

The spitting guy drapes a Confederate flag out his window and shakes it in Paris’ face, as if it’s a weapon. The driver laughs, egging the other guy on.

“Your kind best stay in their place,” the spitting guy says to Paris. “You understand me, boy?”

Both guys laugh and the driver speeds off spraying sand and dirt all over us. The Confederate flag snaps in the wind as he drives away.

Vel grabs her pen and pad and gets the last three digits of his license plate. For several seconds the three of us watch speechless as the pool of spit sinks into the sand by Paris’ foot.

“Are you okay, Paris?” I ask.

He nods. Then he lowers his head and takes his foot and buries the spit in the sand.

“I got half of his plate number,” Vel says, clutching a copy of her latest Nancy Drew book, as if her mentor would be proud.

“It won’t do any good,” Paris says.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Paris pauses, like he’s not sure we’d understand. “Never mind,” he says and he starts walking again.

I can’t imagine what it’s like to be a colored person and live in the state of South Carolina where every other pick-up truck has a Confederate flag hanging in its back window. It must be like living in *The Twilight Zone*—one of those episodes where a person gets stuck and has to play out the past over and over again.

Paris wants to be an actor someday like Sidney Poitier. When he gets famous he plans to change his last name to France so nobody will ever forget his name. Someday I’ll get to say that I know Paris France—the person, not the country.

“I accidentally ate a moth last night,” Paris says to us, as if intent on forgetting the two guys in the pick-up.

“That’s disgusting,” Vel says. She sticks her nose back into her book as if she’s intent on forgetting, too.

“I swear on a stack of Bibles,” Paris says. He drawls out his story, each phrase going up at the end in a question mark like some southerners do. “You see my mom was cooking hamburgers outside on the grill last night? And she had the porch light on and moths were everywhere?” Paris pauses to take a breath. “And then when I bit into my hamburger, I saw part of a white wing sticking out of the bun. But I had already eaten most of it.” He makes a face like he still tastes it.

Vel and I make similar faces.

We meander toward home like one of the many waterways that weave in and out of the Charleston coastline. But something has changed from when we first started our walk. For one thing, I'm keeping a sharp eye out for rednecks in pick-up trucks. I wonder if this is what Paris' life must be like, always watching out for idiots who don't even think you have a right to walk along a road with two of your friends.

"An alligator ate a dog along this road summer before last," I say to Paris. It is a story Vel has already heard a hundred times.

Paris gasps. This pleases me.

"It was Miss Myrtle Page's white poodle," I say, getting on with my story. "Miss Myrtle Page always wears flowered print dresses with a white belt cinched up on her waist, just under her tiny bosoms the size of two concord grapes."

Paris laughs when I say the word 'bosoms.'

"Miss Myrtle Page is an original member of the Daughters of the Confederacy," I continue. "At least she looks that old, and her hair is the same shade of white as her unfortunate poodle, Chester."

I place my hand over my heart and pause for a minute to honor Chester's memory. Chester—may he rest in peace—was the most obnoxious dog who ever lived. He yapped incessantly at everyone who passed Miss Myrtle's house. Most dogs like me just fine but Chester never warmed to me in all the years I knew him. Nonetheless, I was sorry that Chester met his end that way.

"The only thing left of him was this little cotton ball of fur and a pool of blood the size of a melted cherry Popsicle," I tell Paris.

For a second it looks like Paris might faint. He can play a swooning Southern belle like a star on Broadway. That boy is good. But this time it's for real and I feel bad for telling the story so well.

"Are there really alligators here?" Paris asks. He looks all around like one of those poodle-eating gators might jump right out of the marsh any second and grab him by his scrawny leg.

"Don't worry, Paris. Alligators are common in the marsh but they rarely show themselves," I say, as if I am an expert on reptiles. "This particular gator must have been desperately hungry. Either that or he was tired of Chester's yapping."

Vel rolls her eyes without looking up from the page. Meanwhile, Paris' eyes are as wide as two white jaw-breakers.

"Relax," I say to him. "You're too skinny. Alligators like things with meat on their bones."

I actually don't know this for a fact, but it serves its purpose and Paris' eyes go back to normal size. The truth is stupid rednecks in pick-up trucks are probably more dangerous than any alligator you'd find in the swamp. But I don't tell Paris this.

Vel sighs, her nose still in Nancy Drew. Alligators don't faze Vel on account of they're probably more scared of her than she is of them. Vel has a bit of a mean streak.

"What are we going to do this summer?" Vel asks.

"Beats me," I say back.

Vel's hair is straight and the same color as straw. It's as if someone put a broom on her head and cut off the handle, leaving a space for her face.

Vel motions for me to look at Paris who has moved as far away from the marsh as possible and still walk with us. We trade smiles.

Something about this summer feels different than all the summers that came before. It's like the feeling you get when you know you're about to get sick. But it's not like a feeling of sickness coming on; it's like a feeling of wellness. It's hard to explain, but this summer, in particular, feels full of possibilities. Until I met Paris, I was bored all the time. But now the thought of being bored doesn't even enter my mind. It's like before Paris, Vel and I were a plain old carton of vanilla ice cream and now we're neopolitan.