

Chapter 1

Ralph used people skillfully, but felt no compelling need for friends. Only when he wanted something from someone did he trouble himself with simple politeness. What drove Ralph to the exclusion of everything else was an overpowering necessity to be rich, a need that was in absolute control of Ralph's very soul that first morning in Lake Charles as he drove south, deep into the marsh toward the Gulf of Mexico. As the shell surface of the road crunched beneath his tires and the engine hummed, Ralph was engrossed, pondering Ortiz' suggestion that the Louisiana coast offered exceptional opportunities for independent bootleggers.

Ralph parked the new Ford and walked out along the docks of the tiny fishing village of Cameron. He was laughably out of place in his dapper, well-tailored suit, sunlight gleaming off his new car at the head of the piers. He spoke cheerfully to all the shrimpers repairing their nets and passing gossip from boat to boat. Ralph's need to be rich drove him into a parody of cordiality. Never would the young racketeer have considered that he was acting. Neither would Ralph have believed that his manners and mannerisms were just like his father's.

About halfway into the row of shrimp boats, Ralph followed his greeting to one of the boatmen with a question.

"I don't suppose there's anyone around who'd like to charter his boat for some deep sea fishing today?" he called.

Ralph walked past three more boats before he heard someone from the deck of a small bay shrimper reply.

"Hundred dollars," the voice offered in a rich Cajun accent.

"What was that?" Ralph inquired.

"I'll take you fishing for a hundred dollars," the shrimper explained.

Ralph scanned the dark skinned man perhaps forty years old, missing three upper teeth on the right side and four teeth from the bottom left row.

He smiled broadly as Ralph sized him up. Ralph maintained his air of friendliness when he replied.

"I'm not from around here, but that seems a little steep," Ralph suggested.

"I know where the big fish are," the Cajun challenged confidently.

"How about fifty?" Ralph parried.

"Seventy-five," the shrimper countered.

Ralph peeled some bills and stepped onto the deck of the *Sonya Marie*. The Cajun accepted the money, folded it and put it in his pocket.

"Broussard," the captain called out.

"Emile Broussard," the Cajun added, extending his hand to greet Ralph.

"Ralph Oakley," Ralph reciprocated, thrusting his hand forward to meet Emile's and a second later remembering to smile.

Emile motioned to a pile of shrimp nets on the deck.

"Have a seat," he invited laughing.

"Anywhere you like and I'll get us underway."

Seconds after Emile turned from Ralph, the lines were loosed; the two cylinder gasoline engine burped to life and began bumping and shaking the boat. Emile engaged the prop and edged the throttle up. The *Sonya Marie* began pushing through the heavy bayou water and into the channel. Emile gave a blast on the horn for good measure.

Once he had the *Sonya Marie* headed toward the gulf, Emile turned to Ralph.

"Not that it matters but where you from?" the shrimper quizzed.

"Telegraph," Ralph said, remembering just before he spoke to keep the tone in his voice friendly.

The answer surprised Ralph. It was true of course, but it was an answer he never gave. Ralph's usual reply was St. Louis which sounded more important. Or sometimes he simply said Texas.

"Where's that?" Emile asked.

"Out west of San Antonio," Ralph replied, still wondering why he had spoken aloud the name of the place that so disturbed and discouraged him.

Telegraph wasn't important. It was where weak people like his father, Walter, lived.

Ralph needed to be someplace powerful. Then he laughed inside his head. Powerful?

Ralph thought about where he was at the moment, some no place on the Texas-Louisiana border. Ralph was just beginning to enjoy the irony, a rare if not unique experience for him, when he heard Emile's voice again.

"How come you come all this way to go fishing without a fishing pole?" the keen-witted Cajun challenged.

Ralph smiled, then laughed aloud and good-naturedly.

"Ol' Emile, he guesses maybe you want to find some special kind of fish, huh? Maybe you want to find where to meet some of those fish that have been coming over here from Cuba?" Emile teased.

"I guess maybe Ol' Emile's pretty smart for a Frenchman," Ralph suggested with a chuckle.

"And I guess maybe you meant to say coonass, huh, Mr. Oakley?" Emile jibed.

"Well if I had, I wouldn't have meant anything by it. I wouldn't want to insult you in any way," Ralph articulated cautiously and with a wisp of apology.

Ralph needed Emile's help and he worked hard to keep his impatience to the shrimper's questions under control.

The tour lasted twelve hours. Emile showed Ralph hundreds of inlets, small islands and coves. The Louisiana coast had an endless supply of places to hide. There was no way to secure it against smugglers.

Emile talked and asked questions the entire time the pair of conspirators was on the water. Ralph quickly learned that he did not have to answer Emile's questions or participate in the conversation. For Emile, talking was as involuntary as breathing.

When Ralph did not respond to his questions, Emile made up his own answers. Sometimes they were right and sometimes not. It really didn't matter to Emile. His mouth was like an open faucet draining thoughts from his hyperactive brain. Ralph would not have been surprised to learn that Emile talked in his sleep.

Ordinarily, Ralph would have been irritated far past the point of unbearable distraction by behavior like Emile's, but Ralph recognized that this illiterate Cajun fisherman had talents that would help make Ralph rich.

It was after ten o'clock that night when Emile backed the *Sonya Marie* into her slip. Ralph wished to demonstrate that he was grateful for the shrimper's help. Before he stepped

from the boat, Ralph handed Emile another one-hundred-fifty dollars.

"I'll see you in a few days," Ralph informed his newfound accomplice.

"I'll be right here," Emile pledged.

Ralph was tempted to drive all the way to New Orleans that night, but he decided to return to the tourist court in Lake Charles, instead. He slept and was off to New Orleans just after sunup.

When he returned from New Orleans two afternoons later, Emile was waiting for him. Ralph had forgotten all about being nice to Emile. He hurried aboard the shrimp boat and spoke matter-of-factly, but not rudely to Emile.

"Let's get going or we're going to be late," Ralph announced.

"Good afternoon to you, too," Emile said cheerfully as he prepared to get under way.

"Late for what?" the Cajun asked.

"We need to meet someone," Ralph said with growing impatience, pulling a cigar from his jacket.

Emile's smile disappeared.

"This someone wouldn't have a boat load of liquor, would they?" Emile asked.

"Well of course they do," Ralph grumped.

"You don't think I gave you all that money for a boat ride, do you?"

"You're not putting any liquor on the *Sonya Marie*," Emile said firmly.

"What's the matter?" Ralph challenged.

"Hundred dollars a trip isn't enough for you?"

"Oh, it's plenty. But you ain't putting no liquor on this boat."

"So, what is it? You got something against liquor?" Ralph asked in a much calmer tone.

"No, I like to drink liquor just fine." Emile replied.

"Then what is it?" Ralph asked, a hint of concern in his voice.

"Two things: the guys with the liquor got guns and the Coast Guard got guns, too," Emile continued.

"Now me, I got a gun. But I only use my gun to hunt ducks. I'm not going to get myself killed over whiskey," Emile asserted.

Ralph's face was crimson and he chomped hard on his cigar as he began to speak.

"You knew what I wanted when you took me out. Why did you take my money if you weren't going to help?" Ralph asked, envisioning the first liquor deal he had set up for himself dissolving and his earnest money being flushed away.

"Now hold on," Emile urged.

"I didn't say I wasn't going to help you. I just said you couldn't put no liquor on this boat."

"What do you mean?" Ralph demanded.

"It means you need a speedboat," Emile grinned.

"How much?" Ralph barked.

"Oh, I think Ozio's got one you can get for seven hundred. Real fast, too," Emile smiled.

"Seven hundred," Ralph screamed.

"That's more than I'm making on this whole deal. If I have to pay seven hundred dollars a trip, I'll be out of business in less than a month."

Emile roared with laughter.

"Not seven hundred a trip," he managed.

"Seven hundred to buy."

"Well how do I make the rendezvous?" Ralph asked, beginning to calm.

"You hire Emile," the shrimper explained.

"I'll lead you out and I'll lead you back in. When we get in sight of shore, I'll point the way. You give it the gas and you're home free. And if the Coast Guard shows up, you make a run for it and I keep 'em busy.

"Not bad for a hundred bucks, huh?" Emile beamed.

The deep color of outrage had disappeared from Ralph's face.

"Let's find Ozio," Ralph commanded.

"We're late."