

"Calu and Hart have brought a vital piece of our national memory back and combined it with a modern, uplifting tale in this exciting novel. Bravo!" —William Mastrosimone

TRENTON

A Novel



John P. Calu & David A. Hart

Part Two

Eagle Tavern Redux

What is this place?" asked Tina Alma as she slipped through a narrow gap in the boards covering the first floor window of an old abandoned building. Her cautious tone telegraphed the teen's anxiety to her companion as she followed him in through the opening like Alice down the rabbit hole.

Darius Hudson slid the splintered board back into place, concealing their point of entry. He flicked open his cell phone. The pale blue light illuminated his dark, handsome face.

"It used to be a tavern," he said nonchalantly, "dating back to the Revolutionary War, but it's been closed up for years."

"A bar?" Tina asked incredulously. "It's our first date, and you take me to a bar? What kind of girl do you think I am?" she asked with mock seriousness, placing her hands on her hips in a defiant pose.

Darius took her gently by the hand. "Not just any bar," he answered, his dazzling smile in contrast to the darkness that surrounded them. "It's called the Eagle Tavern. There's a lot of history in these walls."

"¿*Aguila*?" Tina muttered the word for eagle in Spanish and her best friend Isabel Aguilar popped into her head warning her not to get involved with this handsome black guy. *Your father will kill you if the Latin Kings don't get you first.*

"It gives me the creeps. When you told me we were going to an old tavern, I thought it was to get something to eat," Tina said, swatting at the cobwebs clinging to the long, dark, beautiful hair she had just spent an hour straightening. "My father would not approve of your choice of restaurant," she chided mildly, trying to mask her growing apprehension. "Come to think of it, neither do I."

“I wanted you to see where I work,” explained Darius, inching toward the stairs, “and show you something really special.”

“I thought you were a ticket taker for the Trenton Thunder.”

“That’s for pocket change. I love baseball, but this is where I really want to spend my time.” The former varsity first baseman beamed at his date.

“In a boarded up old bar?” Tina was unimpressed. “Okay,” she sighed with real exasperation. “Show me what you found in here that’s so special.”

He was pleased. At least she was paying attention. From inside the musty, old clapboard building, the two teens could hear the sound of cars sloshing down South Broad Street on the rain-slicked roadway. Luckily, the rain had let up by the time they parked in the alleyway behind the old tavern.

“I ride down this street all the time, but I never noticed this place before,” Tina rambled on nervously. She crept alongside Darius, the wooden planks creaking underneath them as they went. “Couldn’t we just come back here in the daytime when we can see where we’re going?”

“And spoil the surprise?”

The thought of a “surprise” waiting for her at the end of this secret escapade had initially intrigued Tina, but the sheltered high school senior was starting to have second thoughts. What did she really know about Darius anyway? He was a year older than her and had graduated from Trenton High last year. He used to play on the baseball team. He was really handsome. He had an athlete’s build and was sexy, at least according to some of her friends. She had seen him at the high school with some of his friends who still went there. Apparently that’s where he noticed her, too.

She and her friends started hanging out after school with Darius and a group of his pals about a month ago, and the two of them managed to sneak in a brief conversation once in awhile. Last week when the weather was nice, they all took a ride to Cadwalader Park and she rode shotgun in his car. That was when he asked her out on this “date.” Tina didn’t know how to break the news to her parents that she was seeing a boy from the other side of the tracks. She knew that her

devoutly Catholic, hard-working parents, who had their sights set on their seventeen-year-old daughter going to college, would frown upon her dating anybody, let alone a boy from Trenton's seedy North Ward—the housing projects near the Trenton Battle Monument.

“But aren't we trespassing?” she inquired, a telltale quiver of suspicion rising in her voice.

“Oops!” said Darius as the light from his cell phone went dead and darkness surrounded them. “Forgot to charge the battery,” he admitted sheepishly.

“That's not funny, Darius,” she said, standing in an ink black hallway. She rested her hand against the plaster wall for support and found a gaping hole filled with rough lath and loose horsehair. She screamed.

“Don't move,” he said, crawling away from her on the floor.

“Wait! Darius, where are you going?”

She could hear him shuffling his way down the corridor.

Tina couldn't move even if she wanted to. She was too frightened. Here she was in a spooky old building, trespassing with a boy she barely knew. What was she thinking?

A stream of bright light burst from down the hallway near the foot of the stairs.

“And the Lord said let there be light,” joked Darius coming toward Tina. He flicked the flashlight off and on playfully as he drew nearer. “I was hoping no one saw me leave this here today.”

“Darius, I want to go ... now!” Her hands were trembling. “Why did you bring me here?”

“I'm sorry, Tina,” he said, reaching out to stroke her cheek with his free hand. “I didn't mean to scare you. It's not much farther. I hid it under the staircase.”

She didn't budge. “What could be so important that you had to drag me out on a rainy night and break into an old abandoned building? What kind of *work* do you do here anyway?”

“Excavating,” he replied, his deep brown eyes twinkling in the dancing light.

“What?”

“I'm taking a class at Mercer County Community College. We're

involved in an archaeological dig at this site. Last week we turned up a cannonball; before that a hairbrush with some buttons, and lots and lots of pottery shards.”

“That’s what you brought me here to see? Pottery shards?”

He laughed hard and the pure spontaneity of it brought a welcome moment of relief to his skeptical date.

“Of course not,” he said smiling. “Tina, this old place is a relic, a time capsule full of mysteries and wonders from the past just waiting to be discovered.”

“I thought baseball was your passion. Isn’t that what you told me?”

“It was ... I mean, it is,” he fumbled. “I love playing baseball. I really do, but not too many guys ever make it to the big leagues. Besides, I’ve always wanted to find something else I could get excited about.”

“And you think you found it in dirt?”

“No, not in dirt—in the past ... in history.”

She gave him a quizzical look.

“Look, I know this might sound crazy,” he said, “but you know how people give President Obama credit for helping to break down racial barriers? Well, I just want to be remembered as the first African American to write a book on the history of Trenton.”

She shook her head. “Wait a minute, isn’t black history all about slavery and segregation?”

“That’s my point. I’m not talking about black history or white history. I’m talking about *Trenton* history. Too many people are still slaves to the notion that there’s no place for us in our own communities. History made us who we are.”

“Darius, you can’t rewrite history.”

“I don’t want to rewrite it. I just want to make it accessible to *everyone*. Do you have any idea how important Trenton was in the War for Independence?”

“Hey, don’t look at me. While your ancestors were in the cotton fields of Georgia, mine were in Cuba harvesting sugar cane and making rum. What do I care about the American Revolution other than to get a passing grade in school?”

He sighed, disheartened by her lack of interest.

“Darius,” she said smiling, trying to recover his upbeat mood, “if you’re trying to impress me with your studies and your conviction—hey, I’m all for it, but I still don’t understand why you brought me *here*. Couldn’t you have told me all this over pizza?”

“Tina, this place might not be standing much longer, and I wanted you to see it, to get a sense of its past the way I did. That’s why we’re doing the dig. Some big shot developer is trying to buy this place, and for all we know he’s gonna turn it into a Burger King.”

“Can they do that?”

The sound of shattering glass spoiled the surprise he had been building up to. She looked at him with fear in her eyes, and he quickly pulled her down the hallway with him and then crouched near the staircase. He reached up underneath the stairs from behind, quietly pried a board loose, and pulled out a bundled parchment stitched into a booklet with thin leather strips.

A board creaked loudly somewhere in the building. He switched off the flashlight and grabbed her by the shoulders. “Ssshhh,” he warned.

“Yo, Darius!” called a deep-throated voice from the room down at the other end of the hall. “C’mon bro, we know you’re in here!” said another.

“We saw your car in the alleyway,” came the first voice again.

“Yeah, nobody else would drive such a shitwagon,” echoed a third higher-pitched male voice. A peel of raucous laughter rang out from the group.

Darius put his face within an inch of Tina’s. He could hear her heavy breathing and if he had placed his hand on her chest, he was certain he would have found her heart pounding as loudly as his own.

“Tina, listen to me,” he whispered softly so as to not cause her added alarm. “Do you know the way back to where we came in?”

“I ... I think so.”

“Down the hall, all the way to the end then left into the pantry,” he said calmly. “You’ll see a streetlight through the cracks in the window boards.”

He paused to let her process what he had just said. “Please take this book and keep it for me. I’ll explain later. Here, you’ll need the

flashlight. I'll meet you at the car." He handed her the keys. "If I'm not out in twenty minutes, drive away."

"Darius, what's going on?"

Down at the other end of the hall someone stumbled over a chair and a bottle smashed onto the floor. "Watch where you're going, asshole," shouted the deep-voiced intruder. Sounds of pushing and shoving ensued.

"Just do what I say, Tina. Go!"

"Darius, who are those guys?" she asked in a voice laced with panic.

"Trust me, Tina," he said spinning her toward the way out, "you don't want to know."

The Grass Is Always Greener

To Luis Alma, the traffic along Calhoun Street seemed heavier than usual. The potholed boulevard was one of only two local arteries connecting Trenton to Morrisville across the Delaware River without a toll, but the volume of cars made it seem more like a weekend than a typical Friday morning in late September. The forty-three-year-old landscaper watched with growing interest as more and more cars turned into the parking lot next to the Shiloh Baptist Church as if it were a Sunday.

Leaning on his rake, Luis thought back to his phone conversation with the redneck Deputy Commissioner of Parks who had chosen Luis's firm to clear away the overgrown grass and debris littering the dry canal bed running along the south side of the church. "The place is an eyesore and a refuge for homeless derelicts just like the rest of the neighborhood, but the church members are complaining. I'd send in my own crew but we ain't got nobody available for *Calcoon* Street, if you catch my drift. So just get in, do the job and get outta there as fast as you can."

Thinking about his bid and how quickly it had been accepted, Luis wished he had gone higher. At the time, he was looking at the contract as a stepping-stone to more county work for Alma's Quality Landscaping and doing everything in his power to keep his three crews busy. The season was almost over, and his men could use whatever money they could make now to help them get through the winter.

Had he known the canal's history, this first-generation American, the son of Cuban immigrants, would have appreciated the irony of an engineering marvel of the industrial era: hand dug by countless Irish

immigrants—now being cleaned up by three Latinos armed with a power mower and weed whackers.

Brought back from his musings by the sound of car doors slamming, Luis suddenly realized he wasn't the only one distracted by the traffic motoring up and down Calhoun Street. His crew had also stopped to take in the steady stream of well-dressed men and women stepping out of trendy cars and parading into the church. This must be a funeral service for somebody pretty important, Luis thought to himself.

"Ay, *Mamita*," muttered one of his men leaning over the fence to admire a leggy blonde in a form-fitting blue suit. As she made her way up the church steps, she paused briefly to pull her long hair back into a ponytail and adjust the hem of her skirt. Luis made a mental note to buy his wife a suit just like it and to keep his teenaged daughter away from his horny crew. As if on cue, his other worker let out a wolfish whistle of approval.

"¡*Basta!*" exclaimed Luis. "Hector, Felix—*vamonos*. Back to work!" He appreciated the sight of a pretty woman as much as any man, but this was his business, his livelihood. He had grown it from a father-and-son operation into a thriving enterprise with a payroll, uniforms, trucks, and equipment to maintain, and he knew when it was time to keep his men in line.

Grumbling, the two men turned their attention back to the work at hand.

Inside the modern, sand-color brick church, Reverend Lionel Evans was nervously greeting guests as they arrived for the funeral service of Reverend Hollis Markham. Tiny beads of sweat formed on his smooth, bald head and trickled under his stiff white collar. The wife and daughter of the deceased had been the first to arrive and the hardest for him to receive. Leaning on each other for support, the two women were led to their seats by the fashionable daughter's impeccably dressed husband, local real estate developer Randal Whittaker. To the others gathered around the casket paying their last respects,

Reverend Markham was a revered community activist who had spent most of his eighty years working on behalf of the poor and needy. But to his family—the grieving widow, daughter, and son-in-law—he was a husband and father first.

Following Reverend Evans' rather lengthy eulogy, which he delivered with conviction, if not flair, Trenton Mayor James "Jimmy" Dodd approached the podium to share an intimate account of his first meeting with Hollis Markham.

"We met at 'Tony Goes,' which some of you still insist on calling the Casino Restaurant," the four-term mayor and former high school guidance counselor recalled, warming up his audience.

"I was seeking office for the very first time," Mayor Dodd continued. "The Reverend had summoned me because we had a difference of opinion about what to do with a particular abandoned lot on the corner of Hanover and Montgomery streets. I don't have to tell you that when Reverend Markham summoned you, you went." The people were nodding their heads in agreement.

"You see, at the time, I was in favor of building a state office high-rise, and the state boys assured me that the money would have been good for the city, but to his credit, the reverend was adamant that what Trenton really needed was decent low-income housing. Well, he won that battle—and I'll bet I wouldn't be mayor if he hadn't." Scattered laughter filled the room as Dodd went in for the close.

"I learned a lot from the right Reverend Markham. We all know how much he loved this city. We owe it to him to keep on making it better." The mayor paused for effect and then stepped down from the podium and moved to the far side of the room as if swept there by his emotions.

In life, Reverend Hollis Markham could be a powerful ally or a formidable foe. The son of an Alabama preacher, in the early 1960s he and his family were part of the second great migration of poor blacks out of the south. Arriving in Trenton with high expectations, the family found only menial work and no less segregation than they had left behind. With little more than the hope he carried in his heart, Hollis joined Reverend Martin Luther King's Civil Rights crusade.

The pursuit of equal rights became his passion, and he carried the torch until the day he died.

Along the way, he held various elected and appointed positions in city and state government. While he gave 100 percent in every situation, those closest to him knew that his most cherished work was serving as mentor to the many youth organizations in the adopted city he had come to know, love, and call home.

As a man of God, Hollis also made quite a name for himself, preaching with rare conviction from the pulpit at the Shiloh Baptist Church until his retirement two years earlier. In the last few years of his ministry, he had come to terms with the anger and impatience of his youth, and—just as he had once shorn his trademark Afro and replaced his colorful leisure suits with three-piece pinstripes—he had softened his tone and embraced a broader mission of racial and economic harmony for all Trentonians, regardless of race, religion, or means.

Today's ceremony was a reminder of the many hearts and minds he had touched in many different ways. From soul-searching parishioners to at-risk youths, from radical activists to right-wing politicians, men and women had packed the church to say farewell to an individual who had earned everyone's respect, whether you agreed with his views or not.

Yet despite the many positives of the life now being eulogized, a dark cloud shrouded the mourners as they listened to one touching story after another. While nobody spoke of it directly, preferring to address their loss obliquely as a "tragedy," the question on everyone's mind was *Who murdered Hollis Markham?*

Outside, behind the church at the far end of the parking lot, Luis Alma and his crew were putting their equipment into the back of a white Chevy pickup. The warmth and brightness present earlier in the day had given way to shadows and clouds as the sun left the sky for longer and more frequent intervals. Luis didn't need a weatherman to tell him a storm was coming.

As Hector and Felix climbed into the rear of the truck and reached into the cooler for bottled water, Luis walked around to the driver's side to log in their finishing time and check his cell phone for messages from his other two crews. Suddenly, a nearby car alarm shattered the peace and quiet of the late afternoon.

Hector and Felix jumped down from the tailgate and joined their boss in the cab. The piercing shrill of the alarm drowned out any thought of conversation as they watched an old brown Pontiac Bonneville, dragging a tail pipe, slam over a curb and swerve into the street. Sparks flew as the pipe bounced up and down on the poorly paved road. A "Save the Old Barracks" decal waved from the corroded bumper. Luis couldn't make out the face of the driver, only the dark color of his skin.

Intended for traffic control, the police cruiser positioned at the front entrance of the church made a quick U-turn and screeched off, siren wailing in hot pursuit of the Pontiac. A patrolman on foot came around from the front of the church and ran toward the sound of the car alarm. He crouched down and disappeared behind the car.

Watching the whole scene through the window of his cab as though he were at a drive-in movie, Luis could feel the tension building in his temples. When the cop on foot patrol didn't resurface and the car alarm continued to wail, his concern grew serious. The instincts that had earned him medals for his Army service in Iraq during Operation Desert Storm came back to him in an instant and he knew what he had to do. "Stay put," he shouted to his men as he climbed out of the truck, slamming the door. Felix and Hector were more than willing to obey.

Luis kept low as he moved toward the spot where he had last seen the officer. He bent down and checked under the cars. Nothing. He headed in the direction of the car that was making all the racket, a late-model silver Mercedes coupe parked about four cars away.

By now, most of the crowd from inside the church had moved outside, including the striking blonde who had distracted Luis's crew earlier. She was visibly upset as she exclaimed, "That's my car alarm!" to nobody in particular. Standing on either side of her were

Mayor Dodd and Reverend Evans; the two men looked and gestured toward the parking lot but appeared frozen to the church steps.

Moving cautiously among the parked cars, Luis's foot struck something soft. He looked down and saw the cop lying there, face up, silent and still. The hair on the back of Luis's neck and arms stood straight up.

It was clear to Luis that the officer had suffered stab wounds to the chest and arms. He checked his pulse; it was faint, but he was alive. Luis pulled out his handkerchief and folded it over a deep puncture in the officer's chest to staunch the flow of blood. Next, he removed his own belt to use it as a tourniquet on the man's badly slashed right arm.

Before Luis could think of what to do next, two things caught his attention. The first was a man in a gray hooded sweatshirt running from the parking lot and disappearing down the canal bank. The second was an image that only registered in his mind after he had started off in pursuit.

The officer's gun was missing.