

## THE DEVIL'S RED NICKEL

### Excerpt

"Let's head back outside to catch the parade," said CJ, reaching for a cheroot.

Clothilde rolled her eyes and dusted off the arm of her jacket as CJ lit up. "Hope the barnyard smell's gone."

As she brushed past CJ toward the door, he caught the faint hint of jasmine in her perfume, and he found himself hoping that Clothilde had forgotten everything she had learned about medicine.

The Juneteenth parade was in full swing when CJ and Clothilde stepped back out onto Welton Street and into a crowd of people lining the sidewalks for blocks. The hickory smell of Poppa Loomis's Georgia smokehouse barbeque permeated the dry morning air as the Montebello High School band marched by, strutting to a fast-paced 160-beats-per-minute cadence.

"I want you to wrap this thing with my father up in a couple of weeks," said Clothilde.

"Thought you said you'd need me for a month," said CJ.

"The two additional weeks are just for insurance. From what Charlene says, you won't need the extra time. Either way, you come out ahead."

Clothilde's generosity made CJ wonder if he was being set up. But with his finances in the shape they were, he wasn't about to argue. "Let's head for higher ground. There'll be less people up near Mae's Kitchen."

"Good. My car's parked up that way anyway," said Clothilde, feeling a bit claustrophobic. She took the point and seemed to relish running interference as they wove their way through the crowded sidewalk toward Mae's. Each time CJ nearly caught up with her, someone cut him off. After a block and a half CJ caught sight of Dittier Atkins standing in front of Mae's Kitchen waving a monorail protest sign above his head with one hand while Geronimo's leash tugged at the other. A Lincoln convertible filled with Winston Dunn, the councilwoman for District Seven, and someone CJ didn't recognize cruised past Dittier. Even from a distance, CJ thought he saw a hint of a scowl on Dunn's face.

Clothilde stopped two doors down from Mae's, in front of Prillerman's Trophy and Badge, waiting for CJ to catch up. When he did, she said, "I've got to head down to LoDo to check with Tyrone on the construction. How long before you can give me something concrete?"

"Give me a week." CJ knew that by the time the official autopsy findings on LeRoy Polk worked through the Denver General Hospital bureaucracy and the cops finally sank their teeth into the case, he'd have a head start.

Dittier caught sight of CJ and began waving his protest sign frantically as he worked his way toward CJ and Clothilde. CJ responded with a raised arm and clenched fist. Dittier and Geronimo were about fifteen yards away when the front of Mae's Kitchen exploded in a mass of flying glass, splintered wood, brickbats, and hundred-year-old tin ceiling tiles that sliced through the air like boomerangs.

Instinctively, as if he were back in the jungles of Vietnam, CJ hit the ground, pulling Clothilde with him. Almost in unison, the crowd let out a low, piercing howl, but the loudest and most distinctive noise that CJ heard as he rolled on top of Clothilde and felt the crush of bodies falling on top of him was a guttural, endless squeal coming from Geronimo.

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