



## PART I: THE RULES

### ONE

#### *Sundown Rules*

Tensions rise in sundown towns long before the sun sets.

The square begins to empty while the light is still full. Tools are gathered. Conversations just stop mid-sentence. Doors are checked and rechecked.

No announcement is made. The movements advance on expectations alone. By late afternoon, the rules no longer require articulation. They are simply observed.

In Greenville, Mississippi, the law does not announce whom it serves. It makes space for some and withholds it from others. When the sun lowers and the streets are quiet, the courthouse remains lit, guarding a peace that depends on separation and a justice that depends on silence.

When Silas Thorn enters the Myrtle County Courthouse, he does so through the front doors on the north side. The signs that once distinguished those doors have now been removed, but no one in Greenville mistakes their purpose. Men who belong inside before they arrive use them.

The building receives Silas the way his life does – without resistance.

The Negro men who perform the town's manual labor pack up each afternoon from the same grounds where their ancestors were once forced to stay. While the rules governing their departure are unwritten, experience has taught them they are as binding as any statute. What has endured is not the language of the rule, but the certainty of enforcement.

Older residents recall the signs that once marked the town's limits:

#### **NO COLOREDS ALLOWED AFTER DARK**

They remember the clarity of the warning and the honesty of its threat. Those signs have since been replaced with more bureaucratic phrasing – **CITY ORDINANCES ENFORCED AT SUNSET** –

words arranged to suggest a uniform way these matters were handled rather than exclusion. No one in Greenville pretends that they mean anything different.

The older signs demanded allegiance. The newer ones feign detachment. They allow the town to insist it has changed while preserving the same result. A warning is still issued. A boundary is still drawn. Only the tone has softened, as if Southern manners might redeem cruelty.

Greenville does not preserve its peace by erasing the past, nor by revising its vocabulary. What was once declared openly is now implied, and what is implied is rarely challenged. As the sun begins its descent, the town readies itself, reassured that the rules, even the unspoken ones, will be obeyed.

Greenville, the seat of Myrtle County, is a town of inheritance. In its one-hundred-and-fifty-year history, every mayor has been born within its limits. The North begins somewhere in Tennessee, and anyone beyond it is a Damn Yankee. The town borders on the east by the Cherokee River and on the west by the Davis Estate, a boundary shaped by gerrymandering and sustained pride in its original owner, Jefferson Davis.

The courthouse occupies the center of the square like a civic monument mistaken for a landmark. Its white columns rise as if law itself had assumed an antebellum form. Built before what residents still call the War Between the States and refurbished often enough to appear cared for, it is the one structure no one questions. It is part of the town's identity.

Inside, the air is cool and regulated. Floors are polished. Flags aligned. Portraits of former judges line the walls in dark frames, their expressions solemn and interchangeable. Their names are seldom recalled, but their authority is spoken of with reverence. In Greenville, precedent has less to do with what was decided than with who once sat behind the bench.

Silas Thomas Thorn III didn't grow up knowing he was different. He grew up knowing only that a Thorn was supposed to be something. People told him this through nods, stories, and the subtle burden of expectation placed on a boy who never asked to inherit anything.

His family name had been known in the county long before he was born.

Silas Thorn Sr. – a portrait in the courthouse hallway – had been a man whose spine seemed carved from granite. He fought for land no one else could farm, bought parcels others could not hold, and waged his battles through speeches more than disagreements. He was remembered not for generosity, but for permanence. He died with his boots on, his ledger balanced, and the world still exactly as he preferred it.

Silas Thorn Jr. – his son – perfected the art of being accepted. He smiled when others smiled, voted the way the town needed him to from the State House in Jackson, sat in pews in Greenville with a presence that implied contribution even when he gave very little. His opponents called him "squishy." His friends praised him as "reasonable." No one could quote a single opinion he ever held on his own. That, in its own way, was his triumph.

Silas III learned early that to be a Thorn was to keep the world still and stable.

The name didn't demand brilliance. It demanded restraint. A Thorn didn't innovate; he preserved. He didn't interrupt; he moderated. The family's influence came not from argument, but

from predictability. Stability was mistaken for virtue because it spared the town from having to choose.

Silas absorbed this lesson before he understood it. By the time he reached adulthood, compliance felt indistinguishable from character.

The law does not pursue disorder. It waits for it.

A man who remains after sunset is not arrested immediately; instead, he first gets a reminder. Then, he is observed. Only when his presence becomes inconvenient does it become unlawful. Sometimes the final step comes first. Those empowered to enforce it determine the sequence.

City ordinances are drafted deliberately. Words like *race* and *exclusion* never appear. Instead, there are references to public safety, curfew, or loitering – each defensible on its own.

The deputy who enforces these rules understands his role as civic rather than personal. He does not consider himself cruel, even if he is. He considers himself orderly. He tells himself he is preserving norms, honoring tradition, or maintaining balance. When he watches a man leave before dark, he feels satisfaction.

If asked, the mayor would say the laws are applied evenly. The judge would say the ordinances are simply procedural. The clerk would say the paperwork is proper. Each would be speaking honestly, as he understands it. Each would be wrong in precisely the same way.

Silas was born in Greenville in 1926. That fact preceded every other qualification. His name appears in church ledgers, property filings, and council minutes written in careful longhand, and so do his father's and grandfather's. No explanation is required. He belongs.

He pauses beneath the courthouse rotunda out of routine. The building was designed to slow a man, to lend meaning to movement, to make justice appear deliberate. Sound softens here. Every step seems pre-measured.

A deputy stands near the stairwell, at ease.

"Good afternoon, counselor."

"Afternoon."

"Quiet so far."

Silas nods. "Let's keep it that way."

"Yes, sir."

Nothing more is required.

At thirty-eight, Silas dresses as his position demands. Dark suit. Conservative tie. Nothing that makes him unique in this setting. He believes self-control is a discipline and discipline is a form of fairness.

The docket for January 3, 1965, is routine and marks the commencement of the New Year. Ordinance enforcement. Curfew violations. A loitering charge near the east bridge. Nothing exceptional. Nothing that signals consequence.

He removes his coat and places it neatly over the back of his chair. Outside the window, the square has begun its transition. Shadows lengthen. Work concludes.

He checks his watch. Time always matters in Greenville.

The first case is ordinary; a White man charged with public drunkenness and disorderly conduct. Before a defense can be offered, the judge imposes a \$10 fine. Nothing more. Nothing less. The gavel falls. The room reconciles back into stillness.

Silas glances toward the window. Three Negro workers are finishing their tasks below. Their movements reflect not only labor, but calculation – how much time remains, how little margin it allows.

He observes them but doesn't comment. They are part of the square's rhythm, present until they are not.

He returns to the docket.

The courthouse remains lit.

As always.