



Denied: A Governor, a Confession, *and No Mercy*

A dying man confessed. A widow begged. A deputy pleaded. A judge signed his name. And the Governor of Louisiana looked them all in the eye — and said no. Six men would hang, and political power would have the last word.

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The second trial brought a bombshell. One of the six defendants, Rosario Leona, stood up and confessed: he and he alone, he declared, had fired the shots at Dallas Calmes that night. The other men were completely innocent. He was taking full responsibility.

It sounded like the kind of dramatic courtroom moment that ends trials. It did not end this one. The prosecution quickly pointed out something damning: Leona had recently learned that his tuberculosis had advanced to a terminal stage. He did not have long to live — certainly not long enough to be executed before the disease took him. His confession was, the prosecution argued, the act of a man

trying to save five others while escaping the noose himself through natural causes. And there was another problem: portions of his testimony were directly contradicted by physical evidence. Bessie Calmes had testified that shots came from two separate locations in the yard. The two Black workers had said the same. One man, alone, could not account for both sets of muzzle flashes.

Judge Ellis instructed the jury to disregard Leona's confession. The jury obliged. All six were found guilty again, all six sentenced to death.

"He did not care who fired the killing shots. Instead, his goal was to execute all six men and send a stern message to the Mafia."

— Larry Calmes, describing Governor John M. Parker

Rene Calmes made the long drive to Baton Rouge to speak with Governor John M. Parker face to face. He told the governor what he knew in his bones: only two men had fired weapons that night. He needed a little more time to find definitive proof. He asked for a temporary Stay of Execution. The governor denied the request without deliberation. He told Rene that all six men would hang, full stop. His message to the Mafia would be written in six deaths, not two.

Governor Parker's history was no secret. Before being elected governor, he had been one of the leaders in the lynching of eleven Sicilian men in New Orleans jailed in connection with the murder of Police Chief David Hennessey. His association with the KKK was openly acknowledged. He was not interested in the finer distinctions of who held a gun and who held a satchel.

Then Bessie Calmes herself went to Baton Rouge. The widow of the murdered man — accompanied by Dallas's brother-in-law George Harpole, and backed by a written petition signed by Rene Calmes, Judge Columbus Reid, former Judge W.S. Rownd, and many local citizens — pleaded personally for clemency for Joseph Bocchio. Bocchio had been the driver. He'd stayed in the car a block and a

half from the scene. He had no criminal record. In Sicily he had studied engineering and trained for the priesthood. He had raced cars, written poetry that newspapers published, and was tinkering with improvements to automobile engine design from inside his prison cell. He was not, by any stretch, a career killer.

It did not matter. The governor sent them to the Attorney General's office. The Attorney General promised expeditious review. The following week, two letters arrived. Stay of Execution: **Denied**. Clemency for Bocchio: **Denied**.

"It is obviously wrong when political power and influence outweigh equal justice and common decency to the point of totally ignoring the value of human life."

— Mayor Charles Anzalone

While the prisoners awaited execution in New Orleans Parish Prison, authorities uncovered a planned Mafia-linked jail escape. They found a large cache of dynamite and hundreds of feet of fuse hidden behind the home of a known Mafia member. He claimed, naturally, to have no idea how it got there. Federal agents swept the railroad bridge over Pass Manchac for explosives and stood guard until the prison train carrying the condemned men had crossed safely into Tangipahoa Parish.

Even as the nation moved on from the story, the people of Independence lived inside it. Mayor Anzalone described streets that used to bustle now going quiet — people staying home, leaving only when necessary, afraid of both the Mafia and the Klan and what might happen if the wrong two people ran into each other. "Everyone was scared," he said simply. The strawberry season that had made Independence feel abundant and alive had given way to something that felt more like holding one's breath.

Coming in Post V — The Final Chapter

A moat is dug around the courthouse. Machine guns are set on tripods. A man stabs himself in his cell and is rushed, bleeding and seated in a chair, straight to the gallows. Rene Calmes climbs thirteen steps and looks two men dead in the eyes. And when it's all over, there are no winners — only the dead, the grief-stricken, and questions that may never be answered.

