

# LENA

Florida Folk Magic Stories, Book 3



A novel

by

Malcolm R. Campbell

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For Lesa, who tells her stories with quilts.

## One

SO, EULALIE SANG “Lady Luck Blues” as she drove the 1949 clover green Studebaker pickup truck down that southbound road while creeks, wiregrass, longleaf pines, and sunny autumn afternoon savannahs slow-drag danced past the open windows drawing in the salty Florida winds that fussed her hair into sweet disorder around the collar of her bright green dress. She was happy and heading for Willie Tate down in Carrabelle.

The trip was free of omens, as my conjure woman thought of strange lights and oddly flying birds, until we passed through Wilma, then we unexpectedly turned off toward the west on a Eulalie hunch, and then that longing in her blue eyes turned deep-purple dark with resignation when they found the sudden threat in the rearview mirror.

“Lord have mercy, Lena, our radiator’s leakin’. I’m standin’ on the gas pedal, but I ain’t outrunnin’ that devil’s truck.”

I looked past the orange crates carrying her meaningful earthly possessions. The road was gone, all the world, actually, replaced by an army surplus tanker truck snugged up so close I could read the black bowtie Autocar emblem above the grill. Perched high above the engine, the driver looked like Santa Claus, except he wasn’t. He was Chief Alton Gravely of the Torreya police department with a half-smoked cigar in his mouth. Faded white paint on the massive front bumper said Gravely & Sons.

My conjure woman fetched the brass Pentacle of Jupiter pendant out of her purse, doubled up its chain, and shoved it around my neck.

“Jump, Lena. Jump now.”

I leapt out the window against my will just before the tanker hit the pickup at an angle, spinning it off the road into the deep swamp water ten cat lengths from where I’d landed unharmed—screaming metal, then nearly silence when Gravely stopped the tanker ten feet past the wreck, backed up, set the brake, and left the engine idling. The front end of the Studebaker was under water. I sank into the everlasting arms of the dark water where I saw my conjure woman gather time’s moments into one and emerge from the pickup truck as a flash of green light.

When I surfaced alone, a Torreya police car, red light flashing, was stopped where the rear of the pickup angled up onto the shoulder of the road. Officer Edwin Carothers stepped out, sighed, and slid down into the water with a string of profanity.

Gravely walked up.

“Is she dead?”

“No sign of her,” said Carothers. He used the bed’s side rail to pull himself out of the murky water. “Both doors are busted open. She’s gator bait.”

I thought not.

“Let’s get the nigger.”

Carothers grabbed four yellow kitchen oven-scrubbing gloves off the squad's front seat, tossing a pair to the chief, before he opened the trunk of the squad car and pulled out a wire-grass-thin middle-aged black man who had run into multiple door knobs before he died. Beneath his wrecked countenance, the gentle face of Martin Alexander was scarcely recognizable. They carried him like some foul thing to the tanker's open door. It took them awhile, but they finally got him hoisted up on to the driver's seat, facing forward.

Gravely grabbed a grocery sack from Duval's IGA out of the back of the police car and handed it to Carothers.

"Put these empty beer cans and the church key in the truck. Give the thief a bourbon shower and smash the bottle against the front window post." He laughed, and added, "Don't get any on your uniform or you'll smell like a distillery."

"Waste of good booze," said Carothers.

While Carothers was busy in the cab arranging the evidence, Gravely dragged the pickup's broken tail gate next to the tanker. On the pavement, the tail gate's multiple shrieks and cries sounded like a stare of squinch owls, a plea that—wherever she was—my conjure woman was sure to have heard.

"We'll say the damn thing was leaking like a sieve," said Gravely when Carothers reappeared.

"Somebody used it for target practice in the company lot," said Carothers, "tore up the valves, or whatever." His face wore the devil's smile. "I'll bring the squad closer and hope we don't tear up the front end."

"I left the tanker in neutral and released the brake, but with the wheels turned hard right: we may need to give this stinking hulk an extra push."

"I'll make it look good," said Carothers.

"Do that," said Gravely. "We were in hot pursuit. Damn truck burst into flames like an A-bomb over Hiroshima. That's our story."

Carothers used the police car to push the tanker into the water where its location looked like the natural outcome of a wreck. They shoved the tailgate against the Autocar's rear wheels. While Carothers backed the squad a hundred feet into the now-visible north. Gravely sloshed fuel from the tanker's hose all over the truck like a baptism. Gasoline pooled up around the rear wheels and tore the air with fumes. Gravely flipped his near-spent cigar into the resulting puddle at the edge of the road.

He watched the fire with wide eyes that were clear enough beneath the partly cloudy sky to reflect the fire's fierce light westward over the surface of the water where it chased scrub jays out of the watchful cypress trees. The blaze consumed the truck, a feeble pyre for the former U.S. Navy truck for World War II service to its country and to the sin done here. The sky was black with fleeing birds.

A blue heron fled the dark smoke into darkening clouds. Her strident squawk woke mergansers, wood ducks, snake birds and coots that rose up across the swamp in a panic of dark wings that made the sky darker still.

Carothers pulled the squad closer and stopped on the shoulder behind the accident scene. He put on his hat and straightened his tie.

"That son of a bitch put the kibosh on our conjure problem," he said as he walked forward to view the spectacle. "We're lucky nobody saw anything."

"Luck, hell," snapped Gravely. "The Lord watches over the lovers of law and order, peace and justice, the shades of the valiant, and the venerated dead."

"So let it be written, Chief. I was hoping we'd surprise Eulalie's ghost with a pillar of fire."

"You kidding, with high-test ethyl bringing twenty-four cents at the pump, I sold most of the load to Andy Messersmith while he was signing the final papers to buy out Montgomery's Gulf station," said Gravely. "Hardly enough left to barbecue the coon."

“Andy’s customers love that Gulf No-Nox even though some folks say he’s a Nazi whose name started out as ‘Messerschmitt’—like the Luftwaffe aircraft,” said Carothers. When Gravely didn’t respond, Carothers added, “Well, I better call this tragedy in to the county.”

The truck settled into the arms of the swamp like they were fated for each other. It might have rolled in deeper and ruined their fire, but the tailgate served as an effective chock.

“Tell Sheriff Marks he has a mess to clean up,” shouted Gravely.

Gravely looked like what people called him: “One foot in the grave, Gravely.”

They stood a few feet from me but I was well hidden by the sweet flag grass at the water’s edge. I didn’t move. If they saw me they’d shoot me out of pure-dee spite. They didn’t talk much. Smoked cigars and walked up and down the highway writing in their notebooks. Several cars passed, the drivers slowing to look at the mess.

Gravely stared across the swamp, put a cigar between his teeth, but didn’t smoke it as though he was too busy contemplating to find a match. Finally, he stopped and said, “This don’t make no sense.”

“Why’s that, Chief?”

“Word was she was heading to Carrabelle.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“So why did she get off course?”

“Trying to lose us, I expect,” said Carothers.

“Must be it,” said Gravely. “She was speeding up, maybe planning to turn off when we were too far back to see her do it. But she lost power. Radiator leak, I think.”

“If you hadn’t seen her turn, we’d be looking for her in Carrabelle now with too many witnesses.”

The chief laughed and finally lit his cigar again. They heard the siren, then, and looked off down the road.

A fire engine with a gleaming bulldog hood ornament arrived first. Three men got out and glanced at the burning truck. Two of them unrolled the hose while the third, a man who—as my conjure woman would say, looked like he slept in his hair and his hat—approached Torrey’s finest.

“Lieutenant Hoskins and his gallant volunteers, cousin Sam Aikens and Arlo Smith,” said Gravely grinning like they were old friends.

“Chief Gravely, what’s the victim’s condition?” Hoskins didn’t bother to smile, and his middle-aged blue eyes were focused on the chief like a raptor.

“The thief in the truck is likely burnt to a crisp. The driver of the pickup is missing.”

“Missing?” asked Hoskins. He turned around when he heard a blast of water hit the side of the tanker. “Gasoline fire, gentlemen. Get the fog nozzle, Cuz.”

“Will do, said Aikens.

“New guys?” asked Gravely.

“Too new to be on that pumper.”

Hoskins watched his men until they finished swapping out the nozzles and managed to envelop the truck in a thick cloud of fine spray.

“We looked in the cab of the Studebaker and found the doors open and the driver gone.”

Hoskins turned away from Gravely, frowning when the chief could no longer see his face, put on a pair of goggles, tossed his hat in the back of the pickup, and plunged down into the water next to the driver’s side. His head disappeared from view. When he emerged, his hair looked better. He was carrying Eulalie’s purse and Bible which he unceremoniously dumped on the hood of Gravely’s car before walking into the swamp again. His coat and boots must have been waterlogged into dead weight.

“Hell,” said Carothers when he opened the purse, “Eulalie was packing heat.”

“Pop gun twenty-two,” scoffed Gravely. “Almost as lethal as a cap pistol.”

The coroner arrived next in the Sanctified Church's Roadmaster hearse. He parked well shy of the tanker and fire engine like a vulture waiting for fresh road kill.

"How many we got?" he asked when he came over to the chief with his burly helper. They were both dressed in black.

"Coroner Mack Watson and his assistant Billy Bob Clements are always decked out for a funeral," the Deacon often said," observed Carothers.

"One, maybe two," said Gravely. "While we're waiting to find out, Mack, answer me this: why'd you steal that old crate from the church?"

"Officer Carothers said on the radio we're transporting Coloreds today. If I carried one of them in my official car, Whites would start refusing to die and I'd be out of a job."

"Death might take a holiday," said Carothers. "Can't have that."

"Probably look like Frederic March," said Mack's assistant.

"Billy Bob here is the most literate man named 'Billy Bob' on the planet," said Mack.

Hoskins came out of the water just as everyone started laughing.

"Telling jokes while the fire department does all the work, Daddy-Os?"

"That's the kind of people we are," said Gravely. "Mutt and Jeff were doing such a good job putting out the fire and you were dragging the swamp for Eulalie Jenkins, we thought it'd be rude and unprofessional to get in the way out of your jurisdiction."

"Eulalie? Christ, Gravely, what kind of asshole runs a little old lady off the road?"

"A drunk asshole," said the fireman climbing down from the steaming cab of the tanker. There's a church key, fifteen empty beer cans, and a totaled bourbon bottle in here along with the stiff."

I hoped Hoskins would see the truth of things.

"Don't touch anything until the real police get here," said Hoskins. "Speak of the devil, here comes Sheriff Luther Marks himself," he added when a faded county car arrived.

"Sorry, we got delayed by a crime spree in Estiffanulga. What have we got here?"

"A dead thief, a missing conjure woman, a burnt truck, and a damaged pickup," said Gravely. "We were in hot pursuit down from Torreya. The bastard looked like he was going to pass her, but he clipped the Studebaker, overcorrected and went into the swamp. The tanker burst into flames after it hit the water as though sparks from the pickup's tailgate touched it off."

"No skid marks," said Marks.

"He tapped the brake when he hit Eulalie," said Carothers. "Didn't lock up his wheels, though."

"Eulalie Jenkins?" asked Marks.

"Afraid so," said Carothers.

"That old lady cured my polio when I was a kid," said Marks. "Hell of a way to end her life. Where's her body?"

"No damn sign," said Hoskins. "There's a current here. If she drowned, she might be off a way snagged on duckweed. Want us to call Bob Tankersley, ask him to bring out his bass boat?"

"Sure," said Marks. "How about the fire?"

"The truck was leaking gasoline from a loose valve," said Gravely.

"Like a sieve," added Carothers.

"Damn thing burst into flame before we could get inside and extract the drunken perpetrator," added the chief.

"There must have been a considerable amount of fuel on the road beneath the truck," said Hoskins. "It was fully engulfed when we arrived."

"Bullet holes," said Carothers.

"I doubt that," snapped Hoskins.

Marks' deputy took a few pictures of the charred remains and made some notes.

“I’ve known Eulalie a long time. Tried to locate her. Found the pickup’s doors open, but nobody there,” said Carothers.

The sheriff pointed at Carothers’ drenched trousers. “I see you tried.”

“Least we could do,” said Gravely. “You want our notes?”

“Type ’em up and mail me the file. It’s plain as day what happened here.”

“Then it’s all yours,” said Gravely.

The sheriff frowned. “I’ll put in a special request to Gravely and Sons for a couple of wreckers to haul these vehicles to the impound lot.”

“We’re experienced wreckers,” said Gravely.

“Better yet,” said Carothers, “leave the vehicles here with some Burma Shave signs.”

Watson smiled. “How about this:

*The safest rule*

*No ifs or buts*

*Just drive*

*Like everyone else*

*Is nuts!”*

“Burma Shave!” yelled Gravely. “The perfect drivers’ safety campaign.” He slung his cigar into the swamp. “By the way, if you ID the thief and find the driver of the pickup, we’d appreciate knowing—for the files.”

“Will do,” said Marks. “Still can’t believe Eulalie’s dead.”

“Killed by one of her own, looks like,” said Billy Bob.

The coroners finished their work. The fire department finished its work when Aikens and Smith convinced Hoskins to quit searching for my conjure woman. Hoskins, his shaggy blond hair in a tangle, was still wearing his goggles when he lit a cigarette and stared at the blackened tanker with an uncertain expression. Even his persistence hadn’t led him to the ten unblemished jars of moonshine scattered into the water. Had he listened, the silent cypress trees who witnessed the day could have told him the ardent spirits were hidden amongst burrowed crawfish chimneys.

Sheriff Marks and his deputy poked around, saying, “Open and shut, open and shut.” When the garbled voice from their car radio caught their attention, they agitated the gravel like high school kids when they tore hell heading for Sumatra.

“Those clowns are driving like high school kids in an Oldsmobile Rocket Eighty-eight,” said Hoskins.

“Probably got a report of a defenseless box of doughnuts alongside the road,” said Aikens.

Hoskins smiled and Carothers didn’t.

“Chief, I’m sure Bob Tankersley will find the body even if there is a bit of a current,” said Carothers.

“Tankersley ain’t no Dick Tracy, Edwin.”

“More like B. O. Plenty with twice the stink,” said Carothers.

Gravely laughed at that, and while he was laughing, he threw Eulalie’s soggy purse and Bible into the back of the squad car before they drove away.

“Aikens, did you notice anything odd about the tanker’s gear shift?” asked Hoskins.

“Badly charred, but only an idiot would miss the fact it’s in neutral,” said Aikens.

“Explains why the police and sheriff didn’t notice it,” said Hoskins. “Things aren’t what they seem here but, as usual, we’ll file a report that won’t see the light of day.”

Then, with the help of Fire-Back Crawfish, Mosquito Fish and Little Grass Frog, I looked for her in the large world as heaven’s rains came down, as Eulalie would say, like the tears of angels.