

# NOLA'S BLACK DOVE

Jimmie Martinez

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*My Cajun grandfather, Osma Couvillion, who passed away in 1951, believed racial purity was a myth. Paraphrasing him: "Even if every pure White person in the country took a tablespoon of gumbo from the same demitasse, the cup would still be filled." Papa Oz was a wise man.*

JIMMIE

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book contains stereotyping that some readers may find objectionable. In the author's opinion, the portrayal of the people and cultures is a reasonable and appropriate reflection of living in the South in the 1950s and 60s. They are essential in providing an accurate understanding of those turbulent times. Names, characters, places, and incidents are a product of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or locations is entirely coincidental.

# PREFACE

In my last book, *Cajun Crow and the Mockingbird*, the protagonist was a Louisiana Cajun named Noel Corbin, nicknamed Crow. *Nola's Black Dove* is a continuation of his story.

While discussing my previous book with readers, I discovered many had a distorted view of Cajuns due to the stereotypes portrayed in movies and books. In my seventy-nine years living in southern Louisiana, I never witnessed a Cajun riding an alligator in a Mardi Gras parade, funneling hot sauce while partying on Bourbon Street, or sucking crawfish heads with a side of beignets. (I could be wrong about the crawfish heads and beignets.)

For my books, Cajuns are defined as Caucasian French immigrants expelled by the English from Canada in the 1700s who settled in southern Louisiana. I am a descendant of Adrian Quevillion, who was born in France in 1641 and migrated to Canada in 1672. His great-grandson Adrien-Amable Quevillion, born in 1751 in Canada, was brutally exiled by the British government to Louisiana in 1796. He is the forefather of the large Cajun Couvillions clan. My beloved mother, Ella Mae Couvillion, was born and raised in the heart of Cajun country. Her first language was Cajun French, but she learned English to live and work in an English-speaking world.

In 1921, the Louisiana government attempted to wash away Cajun culture by prohibiting Cajun French from being taught or spoken in public schools. Cajuns call this *l'heure de la honte* (the time of shame). During that period, society considered the dark-skinned, poor, uneducated Cajuns who spoke a foreign language to be White trash and pleasure-seeking bumkins. The attempt by the state to

eradicate the Cajun language and culture ended in 1974 when the Louisiana legislature amended its constitution.

The future of Cajuns is uncertain, but their food, music, and resilient pride give me hope that the culture will survive.

# INTRODUCTION

## *The Weaponization of Birth Certificates*

**S**cientists argue that race is a social concept fabricated by society and not based on biology but determined by physical traits like skin color, hair, and facial features. Although a constructed phenomenon, it has historically and significantly shaped America and the world. In 1957, the time when this novel was set, Southern states under the Jim Crow laws mandated that birth certificates include the race of the child's parents as either White or Negro. This left biracial people in a precarious situation, stuck in a racial identity limbo, some passing for White and others for Black. Physical racial traits weren't always apparent, making the foundation of segregation not only repulsive but also absurd.

Politicians who fought to preserve segregation weaponized birth registration and used it effectively to enforce a grotesque racial tyranny. Birth certificates fixed racial identity and were used to determine access to schools, hospitals, marriage, adoptions, and burial sites, essentially creating a stratified caste system. Thus, the birth record was far more than someone's vital statistics. Authorities used it as a means to enforce unjust segregation laws.

*Nola's Black Dove* is a historical novel inspired by actual events with strands of the racial reclassification lawsuit of *Robert Green v. The City of New Orleans*, 88 So. 2d 76 [1956] woven through it. However, by design, the novel strays far from the original story.

# PART 1



# CHAPTER 1

*November 1957: "Mister, I Ain't White"*

**N**ew Orleans's deep-seated and long-standing racial divide cast a dark cloud over the "Big Easy." Fear was in the air as people braced for an inevitable clash. For hundreds of years, the city's steamy reputation, the array of vibrant, colorful flowers, and its lush, verdant surroundings masked the underlying cauldron of anger and resentment fueled by segregation and discrimination. With tensions at an all-time high, one spark could ignite the powder keg of racial unrest.

But tourists couldn't resist the seductive charms of a city sculpted from the muck of the Mississippi River. Lively bars stayed open twenty-four hours, sustaining the madness of Bourbon Street. The magnificence of Saint Louis Cathedral stood as a monument to the virtue and holiness of the city. Beneath its pure white spires, a voodoo priest with milky eyes squatted behind a small card table overflowing with chicken bones, handmade dolls, and potions, claiming they all had black magic powers.

In this volatile and fascinating city, Noel Corbin, nicknamed Crow, struggled with inner demons and sobriety while working as a lawyer for the notorious Cajun mafia. The young attorney despised the city's corrupt legal system that seemed to thrive in this riotous environment. The glaring disparity between the rich and poor ignited a fierce resolve inside him to grant his clients the same privileges as the wealthy. Unapologetically bending the rules of a biased legal system, he didn't hesitate to cheat, lie, or tip the scales of Lady Justice in favor of his clients.

Friends and foes were challenged to define Crow. His eyes held a mischievous spark, like a child who pushed the boundaries to their limits, ignoring rules. The cadence of his voice was as smooth and hypnotic as the bayous that flowed into the Gulf of Mexico. He was a master of charming his friends and confusing his enemies. Few knew what lay beneath his façade of ambiguity, but one thing was sure: crossing him wasn't something to be taken lightly. Crow was a polarizing figure; some accused him of being evil and depraved, while others hailed him as a bright beacon in a corrupt world.

In his most celebrated case, he defended a poor Negro, Gasper Babineaux, falsely accused of being a communist provocateur by segregationists who wanted to undermine the civil rights movement. Representing Babineaux almost cost Crow everything. But he won, went to jail, and got his fair share of congratulations and threats. The hero-or-traitor label made him uncomfortable, so he moved back to Bon Terre Isle on the Gulf of Mexico, his Cajun ancestors' home.

His Cajun mob boss and elder cousin, Armand de Valcourt, once told him his greatest weakness was that he didn't know when to stop fighting the establishment. Crow believed a person should get a square deal in a legal system that professed fairness, impartiality, and justice. But he admitted that sometimes, his beliefs took him to unhealthy extremes.

Now, he sat in a New Orleans cell after his second arrest in a year for brawling with a cop and the district attorney. The door squeaked open, and a muscular, six-foot-plus Negro guard with arms like tree trunks stood at the mouth of the cell. He said gruffly in a deep voice, "I ordered your dinner from Antoine's. Tomorrow morning's breakfast is beignets and café au lait."

"Merci."

The officer grinned. "I'm glad you're helping that little Negro girl."

Crow's stomach turned as he remembered when the brave, nearly six-year-old orphan girl with the enormous, warm cocoa-colored eyes framed by long, feathery lashes had whistled through a gap-toothed frown, "Mister, I ain't White!"

## CHAPTER 2

### *The Pirate: Two Months Earlier*

**P**owered by a 1939 Ford engine, Crow's Lafitte skiff raced north into Bayou Choctaw. His hair fluttered in the stiff, late summer breeze. A stocky brown pelican floated in the air, harnessing the winds without flapping its wings. Suddenly, the majestic creature with the seven-foot wingspan plunged headfirst into the wetlands, stunning its prey with its remarkable size and weight. The avian scooped the fish into its expandable pouch and flopped on the water, gulping down its meal.

Next, the vessel flew past a barnacled-skinned alligator sunbathing on the bank. Accustomed to observing boats on the Louisiana swamp, the bored gator yawned, displaying two rows of teeth in his massive mouth. A moccasin with only its head gliding on the water's surface, like a sub's periscope, slithered away from the ripples of the boat's wake. The swamp life continued its never-ending dance between eating or being eaten.

Crow spotted mudflats, wetlands, and an enormous expanse of open water when the slow-moving stream led into a lake. He navigated the boat toward Chenier au de Ville, named for an old Cajun family. The stranded beach ridge, formed centuries ago in the swamps when the state's shoreline migrated southward, was now adorned with oak trees, wildflowers, and marsh vegetation. The tiny island was 120 miles southeast of New Orleans as the crow flies and only spitting distance from Louisiana's storm-ravaged Gulf of Mexico coastline.

A gaggle of chattering seagulls hovered noisily by the boat, occasionally swooping into the water to snatch a snack. A vast landscape of golden-brown marshy plants stretched beyond the horizon, and meandering streams surrounded the island. To reach it, boats had to travel a narrow, serpentine stream that crept sleepily through patches of chest-high wetland vegetation to meet the shallow interior lakes that fed into Bayou Choctaw and drained south into the Gulf.

Standing on a wobbly wooden dock, a barefoot man-boy wearing baggy shorts, shirtless, and a dirty red headscarf tied in the style of a buccaneer above his bronze face waved at Crow's approaching boat. Pierre de Ville, or Gator, was in his early twenties and had gladiator's biceps, big paws, and soulful eyes. He dreamed of being like the infamous pirate Jean Lafitte, who had operated in the Gulf and swamps of Louisiana.

In 1815, at the Battle of New Orleans, Lafitte emerged as a legendary French hero for assisting General Andrew Jackson in defeating the bloody British. The Cajun forefathers, exiled from Canada during the French and Indian War, nursed centuries of bitterness toward England. Boys who lived on the coast didn't play cowboys and Indians. When not fishing, hunting, or trapping, they pretended to be pirates, fighting the feared English with wooden swords and black patches over an eye.

Gator was simple, with a young boy's mind in a man's muscular body. But in the tradition of his ancestors, who settled in the marshes before the American Revolution, he had inherited skills that made him one of Louisiana's best sportsmen. Crow cut the engine and threw a rope into Gator's calloused hands, stained with two decades of the sun. While securing the vessel flush against the rubber-tire bumpers surrounding the wooden pier, Gator intermingled Cajun French with English, yelling, "*Mon cousine, you got dat bonbon pour moi?*"

Crow stepped off the boat onto the dock and reached into his shirt pocket. Pulling out the largest Butterfinger he could buy, he said, "Is this what you want?"

Gator squealed in a high-pitched voice like a mezzo-soprano, and his face broke into a delighted smile. Then he ripped off the wrapper and bit hard. Finally, with a mouth full of chocolate-coated teeth, he mumbled, "You da best." Crunching the candy bar in his powerful jaws, he glanced at his bare feet and said softly, "Mom ain't feeling too good. Those *hommes du petrol* done scared her to death."

"When were the oilmen here?"

Fear crept into Gator's voice, and anxiety was stamped across his usually smiling face. He thrust his hands deep into his pants pockets and peered at the ground. "Dey comes every day. Mama has *un papier* from dem sezzing dis is dier land."

"You're not going anywhere. This land and the patchwork of grassy acres and waters surrounding the island is where your family lived years before America was founded or oil companies existed."

A light of understanding flickered across Gator's face. "Dat's a long time."

Crow grabbed a brown paper bag off the skiff deck and said, "Yes, it's *beaucoup* years."

Tilting his head to the side and squinting, Gator asked, "Did you bring me something else?"

"Maybe. But it's a surprise."

Gator's eyes were luminous, resembling those of an alligator in the dark. "Oh, boy! *Ca c'est bon.*"

With a history of isolation and poverty, Cajuns like Gator and his mom had little except for their inherited marsh property. The swampy Louisiana paradise connected them to their ancestral roots and provided subsistence for life. Crow's stomach twisted into knots as he gazed over the haunting terrain surrounding Chenier au de Ville. The wetlands symbolized hope and security for generations of Cajun families, but now, the swamps were the battleground in an endless war with Big Oil. He felt the ghosts of his ancestors hovering around him, urging him to fight for their beloved homeland.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Dis Baya and Marshes are God's Country*

**A**s he crossed the waterlogged shoreline, Crow was annoyed that his new white rubber boots became encased in muck. In contrast, like a child playing in the mud, Gator enjoyed the chocolate pudding-like sludge oozing between his bare toes. He enthusiastically swung his arms as he slogged along, scaring crawfish and driving them into the swamp water. A stilted white heron stood motionless, studying the two as if silently evaluating their attitudes toward life.

Crow saw Mrs. Blanche de Ville sitting on the porch when they reached the soft sandy path through the oaks. Her black-and-blue, shiny-coated coonhound, Haint Blue, sat at her feet, scratching fleas. Crow's deceased mother had been a compassionate woman who delivered food, necessities, and medical care to the de Villes and other families living in the remote areas of the marshes. Crow visited the island throughout childhood and had enjoyed playing big brother to Gator.

The unpainted camp sat on towering coal-tar creosote piles buried deep in the sandy, water-soaked soil. The wooden posts anchored and protected the building against fierce lashing winds and floodings. Humid breezes circulated easily through the drafty walls of the house. For much of the year, pesky, impish, blood-sucking mosquitos and sandflies floated through the warm air, nipping bare skin at dusk. A grove of oak trees with Spanish moss dangling from their gnarly branches like hangman's nooses protected the

weathered bones of the house from winds, provided shade to cool it and made a sanctuary for migrating birds to roost.

Chickens pecked in the sandy yard beneath the trees. The home had a front gallery, two small bedrooms, a kitchen, and no bathroom or electricity. An outhouse sat in the residence's rear, and a large cistern offered potable water. The chenier was a historical time capsule, preserving a slice of Cajun culture.

Blanche's legs quivered as she rose. The chair creaked and continued rocking after she stood as if her spirit lingered in her seat, unwilling or too tired to depart. She gripped a gnarly wooden cane and a cigarette. A tall, thin, sixty-plus-year-old woman with short brown hair sprinkled with gray wore a sleeveless pink cotton dress and a pair of black alligator shoes. Since she was wearing her Sunday best and had made a special trip to town to call him, Crow knew that Mrs. Blanche had something serious on her mind.

She made the sign of the cross. Her brown, watery, red-veined eyes were downcast, and her voice quivered. "I tink of *votre mere* and *pere* plenty. How you been?"

Crow didn't want to dredge up horrible memories of his parents' deaths. He replied in Cajun French, "*Je vais bien.*"

Observing his pain, Blanche coughed and changed the subject. "Crow, ain't you got a girl yet?"

"Good ones are hard to find. Are you available?"

She widened her tired eyes, and a fleeting spark appeared in them. "*Mon Cher*. You're such a flirt."

They both chuckled as he hiked up the twelve cypress steps. When he reached her, they embraced. Crow thought she smelled like the earthy, nutty aroma of his mother's gumbo brimming with shrimp and okra slowly cooked in a simmering dark roux and spiced with the holy trinity of seasonings: celery, bell peppers, and onions. A solitary tear slid down his cheek as the aroma brought back memories of his sweet and beloved mom. "Please sit," he said kindly.

Blanche fell into the rocking chair. Gator sat on the top step, studying the paper bag by Crow's feet. The dog lay prone, closing his droopy, bloodshot eyes.

Reaching into a multicolored, old, embroidered cloth purse next to the rocker, Blanche retrieved a letter and a folder with leather straps. She handed both of them to Crow.

“Dey gave me dis *papier* dat says some judge in N’Awlins done gave my land to an oil company. Dat can’t be right. I got a deed in dat pouch dat my pa had recorded in the courthouse dat says dis property is our land. It’s been de Villes’ home since too many great-grandfathers came here from Canada. If I don’t have da baya and marshland, den I have nothin’.” She waved her right hand toward the open marshland and said, “Dis baya and marshes are God’s country. Can you help?”

Crow untied the leather bow that held the straps on the folder and read the deed while Blanche watched silently. A surveyor had never legally measured and mapped the de Ville property. Instead, the document described their marshy land using natural boundaries like an immense mudflat, ancient oaks, and a stream boundary. Next, he read the court order. A judge in New Orleans granted Zapata Oil Company the right to seize all the de Villes’ private property except the chenier. The land grab didn’t surprise him. After all, the Zapata company owned the politicians, and their flag figuratively flew over the Louisiana State Capitol building in Baton Rouge.

He handed the papers back to Blanche. “They aren’t taking the chenier, only your marshland.”

Shaking her head, Blanche said to Gator, “Go get dat blackberry pie, gumbo, and da file’ powder in da cupboard for Crow.” After Gator entered the house, she said, “Well, dat makes me feel better. But I don’t want to lose my family’s property, especially to those Tex-ass foreigners speaking a foreign language tearing up tings.” She paused and wiped her hands on her apron. “I ain’t got much to pay for lawyering. But I baked you a pie and made a pot of gumbo like your mom.”

“Mrs. Blanche, your pies and gumbo are world-famous, and I’ll gladly accept them as full payment. I’ll make some calls. It doesn’t sound right that a private company can take your land. But it’s getting dark, and I’ve got to go. If those oilmen come back, call me. You have my number.”



She beamed at the compliment, and Crow saw a twinkle in her eyes. “*Mon Dieu*, you have always been a good boy. Tanks for your help.”

Gator opened the creaking, rusty screen door and handed Crow a rose-decorated tin container filled with gumbo, a small jar of file’ powder, and a pie wrapped in a checkered cloth. Crow nodded at the paper bag on the floor. Gator eagerly ripped open the bag and pulled out a brand new pair of high-top Keds tennis shoes. He beamed excitedly and let out a joyful squeal, just like a child on Christmas morning. “Dey for me?”

“Yes, all for you,” Crow replied, unable to resist the man-boy’s infectious enthusiasm.

“Tanks for de gift. You made my son happy.” Blanche said to Crow and then addressed Gator. “Now go wash your feet. Den, go to your room and try dem on. Crow and I have to talk grown-up.”

“*Oui*, Mama.” Gator lumbered into the house, holding his prized possession tightly like a heron grasping a fish in its claws.

Blanche’s lips pressed into a thin line. “I done heard whispers about how you saved that colored boy from prison. Dat was righteous, yeah.”

Crow wasn’t surprised that even Blanche, out in the remoteness of her island, knew about the Gasper case. “I appreciate your kind words.”

Her voice was low and serious, as though she was in church. “Crow, I knews your mom and dad all deir lives. Like me, dey was proud of you. You inherited da compassionate soul from dem.”

Crow couldn’t respond. The memories were too painful.

Blanche swallowed hard and spoke softly as tears formed in her eyes. “You moved to N’Awlins as a kid and came back a lawyer. Dat’s a blessing for us po’ folks ’round here. Now you got to stop dose outlaw from stealing my property. Dis is all we got.”

“Don’t worry; I will.”

“Da years got a way of passing. Growing old snuck up on me. I knew I’d get old one day, but it happened so fast.” Blanche held her hand, covered with brown age spots, over her heart. “I ’member when you were no taller than a cypress stump. Now you all grown up.”

He stood and embraced her tenderly. She felt tiny in his arms. Haint Blue let out a loud wail. "Nobody will steal what's always been yours."

As she stepped out of the hug, Blanche had a coughing fit. After catching her breath, she unfastened the necklace's clasp around her neck. The silvery medal attached to the chain had the image of Jesus with arms stretched, blessing a fleet of fishing boats. She held it out. "Dis has been in our family forever. I want you to have dis."

"I can't accept your medal. It's too valuable."

She placed the medal in Crow's right hand, folding his fingers over it. "You make me proud to be Cajun."

Crow knew that Cajun pride was rooted in isolation, oppression, and persecution rather than arrogance or a claim of superiority. "I'm also proud to be a Cajun."