

From Part One of *Pink Cadillac*

Kismet

(Opening section of the book)

The car looms first as a speck in the dust-flurried road, comes closer under the canopy of cypresses and Spanish moss, the constant noonday boiling sun above her, and she halts herself, setting down her cardboard suitcase with the decal that reads **paris, france** over the picture of an airplane circling the Eiffel Tower (decal she spent candy money on years ago, along with one that read **hollywood** over a bevy of klieg lights and new york swirled 'round the Empire State Building) and giving her hip a tiny hitch as she raises her thumb and lets it sway honey-bee slow in the stillborn air.

Car coming closer, and she sees it's an unearthly color—it's pink—and long, with fins ... a Cadillac, she's almost sure, just like the pictures with starlets perched on them in the movie magazines. Fins high as waves, not that she's ever seen a real ocean wave. Floating like a pink vision in its own swirling cloud of road dust, yet closing now, about fifty feet away. There's something huge and black strapped to the roof of the car, she has no idea what it is. She's been walking this road from sun-up, after sleeping the night in a stolen-into barn, still picking straw out of her berry-blonde hair, and breakfasting on ... come to think of it, she hasn't had anything to eat all day, not that she's unused to going hungry ... yet for a minute she believes she's hallucinating the whole mirage.

But now she can hear it, thrumming engine, louder and louder; it's running smooth, but she picks up a subtle but definite ping, ping, ping in the pistons. The car's ripping right at her, the girl boldly takes a step forward, the pink Cadillac edges left but slows, she can see three men inside, a beefy dark-haired guy in the back, blond string bean riding shotgun, and a beautiful man with a wave of pitch-black hair nearly as high as the car's fins behind the wheel, and

they're all looking at her—bump that hip!—and she can tell the driver's thinking of stopping, but the shotgun boy turns toward him and waves his hand toward the back seat, where now that they're right next to her, she can see is stuffed roof-high with tweed-covered boxy things and long what-looks-like-guitar cases, and like that the Cadillac speeds up and Daisy Holliday eats dust.

And glowers. It isn't that she's more than a slip of a thing anyway, as her aunt Ruth always said, and she's sure she could have fit in some ways, even if the car was rocking full.

She's somewhere between Kentucky and where she's heading, Memphis, hoping she's closer to the river city, but not knowing; the last three days have passed in a wearying blur. She has less than \$40, the only money she can expect until she gets to Memphis and finds some kind of job, and has eaten from swiping eggs and vegetables. What she'd give for a hamburger. But Daisy keeps telling herself this is the long walk, the dues you gotta pay, the way when you start singing and the records start selling that you'll know what it all means. Remembering walking the road. The sun. The dust crunching in her teeth. The dream shimmering bright in front of her...

She climbs a hill and freed from the tree canopy squints for a second in the full bloom of the golden sun, then looks down the curling road and laughs to herself. There, dust all settled now, is the pink Cadillac, its baby-outfit-colored hood canted up; and the three men, sweat now on their brows, poking and prowling round a steaming engine, clearly to no earthly avail.

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The rumors peaked at a record show in Sheffield, a long room filled with the usual vendors with the usual milk crates stuffed with worn, cloth-soft cardboard LP covers, the usual classicals from the '50s and '60s sporting buxom Sheherazade models, fans swirled over their privates, and that to-die-for black banner across the top: rca living stereo, as well as lots of early rock, *Ricky Sings*

for You, Elvis's For LP Fans Only, The Big Bopper Love's You! And the usual denizens in their stretched, too large black T-shirts and black motorcycle boots, or the pressed-chino-wearing, public-school teaching jazz aficionados. Colin Stone hawkeyes his way through the crowd. He long ago gave up the hope of finding anything he could use at shows like this — in the CD age, almost everything worth hearing has been put out, lots of it through his own label, Blue Moon Records — but there's been a recurrence of the story of what Colin calls the Great Lost 45, and here he is on this drizzly Saturday morning with all the music geeks, ears up.

What brought him here was a phone call from a friend/source named Dieter Brink, who said he'd met a man in Dusseldorf who said he'd actually seen a copy, at a Saturday show in a small Bavarian town, Bad Potlach. Colin quizzed him closely. The label was Bearcat Records, the artist billed as Daisy Holliday. The disc itself was a wide 78, which sounded plausible since 45s were still a novelty in 1956. On the phone, Colin felt his fingers glow hot.

But Dieter's contact hadn't bought the record—it had been for sale for a ridiculous 21 DM—which seemed suspicious. How could he not have grabbed up what might be the only copy of this signal moment in rock history? Something seemed funny. Who was the dealer? Dieter said a man named Firth, no one anybody knew well. Englishman. With a modest six boxes of old wax discs. Possibly a hobbyist. From the north.

Englishman named Firth. Colin racked his brain. He knew a bloke named Frith, Edgar B. Frith, who used to handle rockabilly out of Leeds, but a call up there brought only the question, "Colin, you still obsessing 'bout that myth? Only cuts Bearcat ever put out were with Sonesta Clarke and the others on that album you already put out. 'Sides, wasn't Bearcat Jackson dead when you have him making your 'missing link' record?"

Colin said no firmly, but only in his head. On the phone he thanked Frith and said he was sorry to bother him.

Firth. A phony name? No, didn't make sense. Twenty-one DM — that was about £6, which was what you priced records simply because they were old. Which meant, if the disc actually existed, this Firth saw it only as a 78 on a label he'd never heard of, which meant he didn't know anything.

Which made Colin more suspicious. Even his self-penned liner notes to his Bearcat collection mentioned the rumors of the Great Lost 45 (or 78 or whatever). The A side—the only side—was supposedly called *Pink Cadillac*, produced by Thomas “Bearcat” Jackson, with a Dell Dellaplane (who went on score films in Hollywood in the '60s) playing sax. He'd talked to people who had heard it over WHBQ—swore they had. That when it was first played it caused a buzz as bright and loud as the first time the same station and DJ played *That's All Right, Mama* by that glory-craving mama's boy Elvis Presley. 'Cept this time it was a girl singing. A bluesy voice everyone thought was black—same deal as with Elvis—and rocking with grit and passion, like there was no tomorrow. Recording played on WHBQ for a week or two, then pulled off the station, mysteriously.

And was it ever pressed up for sale?

Colin had never seen a copy, no one had that he could trust. Just the rocking song, the spine-rippling voice frozen in the memories of now housewives and car salesmen in Memphis ... and the story so much like that of Presley's that Colin sometimes wondered if it was all just a wishful-thinking hallucination, the nascent myth of a Queen of Rock 'n' Roll to go along with the world-changing power of the King.

'Cept one woman actually sang him a lilting, truly catchy chorus: *I don't care if I ever come back / In my Pink Cadillac, my Pink Cadillac*. Just that kind of lyric, devil-may-care, spit-on-it-all. Colin's pulse jumped.

And if the record existed? Then there had been a Janis Joplin in the South 10 years before the doomed belter, an interracial band working eight years before the Stax house band, a singer who right now might have the glory afford-

ed Elvis. (Colin, in the States on other business, had watched on CNN the 20-year death ceremonies from Memphis and wondered somewhat wryly if we were all observing a religion in formation that mimicked nothing so much as that from when the calendar jumped from negative numbers to positive.) If the record existed, almost everything we knew about rock history would have to be rewritten.

And that was before he saw a picture of Daisy Holliday.

It was a picture of her later, though, when she was singing on that '70s Love Boat, but she didn't look that much older than she must have been in '56, blonde hair up just so, soigné nose, a vivid, sassy cut to her mouth. It was just a glossy get-work head shot, Daisy Holliday in a wide-collared, low cut blouse, her hair half-teased, but even with the banal period trappings, the picture spoke to Colin. She wasn't just lovely; there was an intense focus, a beautiful determination that ... well, that he had found once before and against all reason these nine long months long years later was evidently still hopelessly....

No, don't go there, he told himself, at least not now, and with vivid effort he pulled his thoughts back from that cacophonous London streetcorner to the record, the record....

He knew how much he wanted *Pink Cadillac* to exist. What he didn't understand was why, if there really was a record, everyone didn't know about it. How could it be lost? Why was he standing in this flyblown record show in this grim northern city waiting for, what? Would he have to go through every stack of records looking for the Bearcat label? (There weren't that many 78s, but who was to say the disc hadn't ended up in the similarly-sized LP bundles.) Could he just ask? Oh, sure, and then hear the old, "Right, Colin, you still tooting that Lost 45 tune? Yeah, sure I got it. Yeah, yeah. How much Blue Moon Records willing to pay?" And what of this Edgar B. Firth?

He was strolling the back row of the show, elbowing past the wide-shouldered guys burlying up to the record stacks, with their practiced fingers flicking

through the stacked records, when he came to a breathless stop. A small table, a black-haired man with a cowl and a pointed chin—positively medieval looking, Colin had to say—with a small name tag that read, edward g. furth. New man, Colin didn't know him. With a feather duster, scratching it over what was mostly promo CDs. Unlikely, yet—

“You do any old records?” Colin asked, standing before the waist-high table. Nobody else was bothering with Furth's goods.

“LPs? Sure.” A high-pitched voice.

“I'm thinking 78s, American.”

“You a blues guy? Chess, Aristocrat?”

“Sun?” Sun Records was the label Bearcat Jackson should have been on, except the story was he was too proud to work for anyone but himself.

“Don't have any Sun, sorry.”

“Anything else from around then?”

“Nothing.” Shrug from the short man.

Colin said, “Anything lately, might have sold?”

“You must be looking for something special, mate. If you want to put in an order—”

“Rare record, not even sure it exists. Called *Pink Cadillac*.” Close look at Furth's eyes, nothing. “On the Bearcat label.”

Ah, a flicker.

“Bearcat, you say. Name's familiar.”

“He had his own label in the early '50s. Maybe resurrected about '56.”

“Sounds like something I should know about. The artists?”

“Sonesta Clarke was the big one. Couple others. Guitar player named Clayton Booker. Played with Ike Turner, cut some sides with Bearcat, had a later career in Chicago with Little Lester.”

“Booker, Booker.” The wolf-like man closed his eyes. “Clayton, Clayyyy

Booker. I can see something with that name." Quick nod. "Might have had that."

Colin took a step forward. "Any idea where it went?"

A shrug. "Records come and go, mate."

Well, that must've been it. Booker's Boogie. Ripping instrumental. A raw, barb-wire sound to Booker's guitar. The Bearcat himself ostensibly playing harp. Colin owned three black-lacquer copies.

"Should I take your name, mate, for this *Pink Cadillac* thing?"

Quick thought, then Colin shook his head. "No, appreciate your time, though."

"Anytime, friend."

It just didn't exist, did it? It was too good a story to actually be true.

But ... he had the feeling again. Tingle in his fingertips, quickening of his blood.

It was the only pulse quickening he could muster these days. The only strong counter emotion to what he felt every time he started to think about his wife, Robin, which, dammit, was still all the time.

Concentrate on the record. Had anybody ever looked into this? Colin's tingles now told him he was off on a singular adventure. To the States, eh? He flew into New York a couple times a year, but hadn't been to Memphis for the four years since he'd met ... well, since he'd met Robin there. He'd been working on the Bearcat release then, chasing down rare disks, interviewing the usual suspects—Sam Phillips of Sun, Rufus Thomas, the famous DJ Nat D. Williams—and he'd found her his expected last night in town, in his hotel's lounge, where she'd been singing all week, Colin hustling past the velvet-curtained door chasing the Bearcat's scent.

But that night he was ready to relax. A beer in front of him. The place almost totally empty. And this blonde singer curled over a Martin guitar with a glass slide on her finger, fretting out startling blues.

In the next week, as he extended his visit, courting Robin Longworth assiduously, successfully, flying with her back to England as his slightly stunned but joyful bride, he would in quiet moments ask himself what first caught his eye; and the best answer he had was that it was a simple shape: the evanescent curve her hair would make falling across her left cheek as she leaned over to dig into the guitar. Sure, there was her voice, strong yet gentle, and her eyes, a startling blue; and certainly in practical terms the way Robin was immediately ready for someone like Colin—a serious man who could love her and move her out of the stuck place she was in—just as he was ready for a wife, even if he couldn't quite admit it to himself. But it was in the moments the curve of her hair met the flawless arc of her face—the flutter of light and shadow; ever-lost seconds of fragile perfection—that remained the most moving vision; and it was the memory that always moved him most now that she was irretrievably lost.

Could he go back to Memphis? Face her hometown again? Maybe feel compelled to call on her parents? Was he ready for that? Or— a thought that was still more academic than real—could he not begin to move beyond his grief until he went back there?

He hated that word grief. It seemed so obvious, so afternoon talk show, so insufficient for the gray hovering deadness he swam through nearly every day.

Yet he could just about hear that voice he'd never heard, on a record he had scant evidence even existed, sung by another beautiful blonde who if still alive would be almost 60 years old.

Our hearts jump in the strangest ways.

At least, Colin sighed, they jump.

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The first thing you see is a dusty parking lot, empty but for a couple broke-down-looking jalopies, a wide-hipped black Ford pickup truck, and next to it a totally out-of-place sea-green MG sportster, little beauty that looks as

funny out here in the middle of nowhere as you do. It's a car just like a model you built a couple years back, when you were still into kid stuff, and as you walk past you admire its polished wood dash and gleaming black-leather seats. But you're hardly out here to peep at expensive sports cars.

Indeed, you're not quite sure why you're out here. Sixteen-year-old kid from East Memphis with sandy hair and big ears that seem to pop out of your head like something just spooked you (yet girls, thank God, still call you cute); sophomore in the all-white high school, honors your last semester, idea you might become a doctor; and yet this overweening passion has risen up in the last six months: This negro music you hear at night over radio station WDIA, the way you sneak it into your room on the radio you got for your birthday to be able to get the baseball reports, but the record names already nudging baseball heroes like DiMaggio and Kiner out of the pantheon of your imagination. Each syllable is magic, like notes from foreign lands: Chuck Berry, Ivory Joe Hunter, Little Richard, Sugar Pie DeSanto, James Cotton, The Prisonaires, Sonesta Clark, Howling Wolf, Ike Turner, all these ranters and shouters, crying like the very sky is falling, and churning up this wild beat that makes your feet start tapping and your hips shake when you're up in your bedroom with the radio pressed to your ear doing your trigonometry homework. A smile. Mr. Frederick, I was working really hard last night, and I think I figured out the cosine of *Moanin' at Midnight*. Can I get extra credit?

It's still a secret the way you love this negro music; you know your Dad would skin you he heard you listened to it, and Mom would get the long face like she did the time you slapped a baseball through her kitchen window. Most of the kids at school don't quite feel they can admit it though you know you're far from the only well-brought-up kid ga-ga over the new sounds. Some of the louder ones, though, the guys with souped-up cars and friends at Humes High in town, wear their love proudly. They call themselves rockers and have outlaw sideburns and piled up pompadours of Brill Creamed hair and play WDIA loud

as they cruise out to Willie King's for burgers and malteds. In your hugely growing secret self you sort of wish you could look a little like that, except that ... your Dad would skin you and Mom would get the long face.

But the secret has an unsettling power, just like the stirrings of your desire for, god, how many of the girls in your class, Beverly Domino, and Barbara Smith, and Nancy Jo Singer with the butterfly in her golden hair, and the need for the music seems amazingly linked to this discovered desire for these girls: Like you just discovered there was this whole part of your body down there with a blooming life of its own.

But the negro music hits you all over and makes you feel loose and slap-happy and just beaming with good feeling. Makes you even think negroes—you're careful to call them by the respectful name—might be different from the way you always heard; might be something there you could learn from, they make a music so jumping great. And more than just the music. It just amazes your white brain that there's this whole world of ... blackness ... and that nobody says Word One about it. A world of mystery, fascination, power, and amazing music that blows anything else you know away, and it's right there all around you, and yet it's as faceless as the field hands you drove past on your way down here.

It took all your courage, and even now you're looking back over your shoulder to catch if anyone might see you, just like that afternoon when you sneaked into town after school and walked up and down Beale Street. That's how you heard about the roadhouse out here. It was from a pawnshop owner with a shock of hairs spraying from his nose. "This is where the nigras say the true music comes from," the white man said. "This is the home of the Bearcat."

The Bearcat. Even the name spooked you, like some huge beast risen up in the forest in your dreams. You had heard his records, of course, especially Cryin' Shame by Sonesta Clark, often played still on WDIA, but from the wild sounds, you sort of thought they might be cut on the moon.

“That record, it was cut right in this house,” the pawnshop man said, pointing to the X he’d drawn on the crude map. “Yessiree. Bearcat hisself bought a record cutter from me back 10 years ago. Got to give that boy credit. First nigra to cut his own music. What you think about that?”

What you thought was: I have to see this.

And so you borrowed Dad’s Buick, saying you were heading to the lending library to study, turned south down Highway 61, and here you are.

You’re surprised it’s such a big place. It’s got two stories and looks sort of like it was once a hotel, dotted with windows up top like there’re lots of bedrooms, but recently walled up below except for two windows up front. It’s a funny building, crumbly and worn in a way like nothing you see in East Memphis. Course, it’s a negro house, and like your Dad says, they ain’t got pride.

Except you sort of like the weathered wood siding, the wide porch out front that’s bowed like waves, the stacks of crates of empty bottles—it’s all kind of comfy and lived-in. Not like the squeaky new suburb house your parents bought after Dad got back from the war with the plastic cover Mom keeps on the sofa. Nothing like that at all. As you creep up to the building, you feel like you’re sneaking up on a haunted house—just that kind of feeling, sneaky, forbidden, heart bumping up and down in your throat—yet the place itself couldn’t be more open-seeming and inviting. Look, there’s even a sign above the door that reads, welcome y’all to bearcat’s lair.

But welcome to you? Not much going on, but you’d bet bottom dollar they don’t see many white kids out here. ‘Cept why not? If you love the music, and music’s for everyone, then why not for you? This race thing you think for the thousandth time, it just don’t make sense.

Still, you know you’re not supposed to be here, and you don’t want to get caught, so you’re not going walking in the front door, and you’re not going to be looking in the front windows, and that’s why you’re thrilled to find around back

a small side window perfect for peeking into.

You find a discarded milk crate that holds your weight, take a deep breath, peek your eyes just up over the sill, and ... is that him? God, it has to be! He's big, bigger man than you've ever seen, and amazing looking, wearing a wide-shouldered flash blue suit, his hair conked back, his nose wide and shmushed, and this brilliant gold tooth firing up his mouth. He's talking to someone, you can't make him out, but there are other people there, lanky negroes, some in equally flash clothes, others wearing overalls.

And then they start playing. You lower your head, place it against the wall ... someone's blowing a sax. And good. Bright, bell tones, but ripping.

You raise your eyes to the window, and what you see's the most amazing thing yet: There is somebody playing the sax, but he ain't black at all. He's a white boy, pretty much a regular-looking guy even if his reddish-brown hair is grown out longer than the cuts fashionable at your high school; a well-muscled guy, if a bit wiry, with a football letterman jacket on over a tight-necked white T-shirt; good looking and pretty damn confident, you'd say, being out here with the flashy nigra. Then the most amazing thing of all: the white boy's leaning back and blowing for all he's worth into a golden saxophone—and sounding good.

Your jaw drops. You keep listening and wondering, wondering and listening, but you don't really understand. It's not just that this other white boy beat you out here, it's that he's actually up on a stage, playing with negroes. You blink, pinch yourself. How could that be?