

“Ms. Etta’s Fast House”

Teaser from Ch. 1

Mr. Watkins used his life savings to start a successful business of his own with his daughter, Chozelle, a hot-natured twenty-year-old who had a propensity for older fast talking men with even faster hands. She often toyed around with fellows her own age when the opportunity to lead one of them around by the nose presented itself. Chozelle’s scandalous ways became undeniably apparent to her father, the third time he’d caught a man running from the backdoor of his storeroom, half-dressed and hell-bent on eluding his wrath. Mr. Watkins clapped an iron pad lock on the back door after realizing he’d have to protect his daughter’s virtue, whether she liked it or not. It was a hard pill to swallow, admitting to himself that canned meat wasn’t the only thing getting dusted and polished in that backroom. However, his relationship with Chozelle was just about perfect, compared to that of his meanest customer with his daughter.

“Penny! Git your boney tail away from that there dress!” Halstead King grunted from the checkout counter. “I done told you once, you’ too damned simple for something that fine.” When Halstead’s lanky daughter snatched her hand away from the red satin cocktail gown displayed in the front window as if a rabid dog had snapped at it, he went right on back to running his mouth and running his eyes up and down Chozelle’s full hips and ample everything else. Halstead stuffed the hem of his shirttail into his tattered work pants and then shoved his stubby thumbs beneath the tight suspenders holding them up. After licking his lips and twisting the ends of his thick gray handlebar mustache, he slid a five dollar bill across the wooden countertop, eyeing Chozelle suggestively. “Now, like I was saying. How ‘bout I come by later on when your daddy’s away and help you arrange thangs in the storeroom?” His plump belly

spread between the worn leather suspender straps like one of the heavy grain sacks he'd loaded on the back of his pickup truck just minutes before.

Chozelle had a live one on the hook but old man Halstead didn't stand a chance of getting at what had his zipper about to burst. Although his appearance reminded her of a rusty old walrus, she strung him along. Chozelle was certain that five dollars was all she'd get from the tight-fisted miser, unless of course she agreed to give him something worth a lot more on the back end. After deciding to leave the lustful old man's offer on the counter top, she turned her back toward him and then pretended to adjust a line of canned peaches behind the counter. "Like what you see, Mr. Halstead?" Chozelle flirted. She didn't have to guess whether his mouth watered because it always did when he imagined pressing his body against up hers. "It'll cost you a heap more than five dollars to catch a peek at the rest of it," she informed him.

"A peek at what Chozelle?" hissed Mr. Watkins suspiciously, as he stepped out of the side office.

Chozelle stammered while Halstead choked down a pound of culpability. "Oh, nothing Papa. Mr. Halstead's just thinking on buying something nice for Penny over yonder." Her father tossed a quick glance at the nervous seventeen-year-old obediently standing an arms length away from the dress she'd been dreaming about for weeks. "I was telling him how we'd be getting in another shipment of lady's garments next Thursday," Chozelle added, hoping that lie sounded more plausible then. When Halstead's eyes fell to the floor, there was no doubting what he'd had in mind. It was common knowledge that Halstead King, the local moon shiner, treated his only daughter like an unwanted pet and that he never shelled out one thin dime toward her happiness.

“Alright then,” said Mr. Watkins, in a cool calculated manner. “We’ll put that there five’ on a new dress for Penny. Next weekend she can come back and get that red one in the window she’s been fancying.” Halstead started to argue as the store owner lifted the money from the counter and folded it into his shirt pocket but it was gone for good, just like Penny’s hopes of getting anything close to that red dress if her father had anything to say about it. “She’s getting to be a grown woman and it’d make a right nice coming out gift. Good day Halstead,” Mr. Watkins offered, sealing the agreement and extending his cheapest customer the opportunity to slink his conniving behind out of the same doorway he’d tramped in.

“Papa, you know I’ve had my heart set on that satin number since it came in,” Chozelle whined, as if the whole world revolved around her. Directly outside of the store, Halstead slapped Penny down onto the dirty sidewalk in front of the display window.

“You done cost me more money than you’re worth,” he spat viciously. “I have half a mind to take it out of your hide.”

“Not unless you want worse coming to you,” a velvety smooth voice threatened from the driver’s seat of a new Ford convertible with Maryland plates.

Halstead glared at the stranger then at the man’s shiny beige Roadster. Penny was staring up at her handsome hero, with the buttery complexion, for another reason all together. She turned her head briefly, holding her sore eye then glanced back at the dress in the window. She managed a smile when the man in the convertible was the only thing she’d ever seen prettier than that red dress. Suddenly, her swollen face didn’t sting nearly so much.

“You ain’t got no business here, Mistah!” Halstead exclaimed harshly. “People known to get hurt messin’ where they don’t belong.”

“Uh-uh, see, you went and made it my business by putting your hands on that girl. If she was half the man you pretend to be, she’d put a hole in your head as sure as you’re standing there.” The handsome stranger unfastened the buttons on his expensive tweed sports coat to reveal a long black revolver cradled in a shoulder holster. When Halstead took that as a premonition of things to come, he backed down like most bullies when confronted by someone who didn’t bluff so easily. “Uh-huh, that’s what I thought,” he said, stepping out of his automobile idled at the curb. “Miss, you alright?” he asked Penny, helping her off the hard cement. He noticed that one of the buckles was broken on her run over shoes. “If not, I could fix that for you. Then, we can go get your shoe looked after.” Penny swooned as if she’d seen her first sunrise. Her eyes were opened almost as wide as Chozelle’s, gawking from the other side of the large framed window. “They call me Baltimore, Baltimore Floyd. It’s nice to make your acquaintance, Miss. Sorry it had to be under such unfavorable circumstances.” Penny thought she was going to faint right there on the very sidewalk she’d climbed up from. No man had taken the time to notice her much less talk to her in such a flattering manner. If it were up to Penny, she was willing to get knocked down all over again for the sake of reliving that moment in time.

“Naw suh, Halstead’s right,” Penny sighed after giving it some thought. “This here be family business.” She dusted herself off, primped her dry twigged pigtails, a hairstyle more appropriate for much younger girls, then she batted her eyes like she’d done it all of her life. “Thank you kindly, though,” Penny mumbled, noting the contempt mounting in her father’s pensive expression. Halstead wished he’d brought along his gun and his daughter was wishing the same thing, so that Baltimore could make him eat it. She understood all too well that as soon as they returned to their shanty farmhouse on the outskirts of town, there would be hell to pay.

Although, whatever Halstead saw fit to beat Penny with, it wasn't no never mind to her. At age seventeen with scuffed knees and ashy elbows, Penny became a woman that day in front of Watkins Emporium. There was no turning back now. She was a woman and they'd be no denying it, although she had no idea what to do about that, yet.

"Come on Penny," she heard Halstead gargle softer than she'd imagined he could. "We ought to be getting on," he added as if asking permission to leave.

"I'll be seeing you again Penny," Baltimore offered. "And next time, there bet' not be one scratch on your face." Those words were meant for Halstead. "It's hard enough on women folk as it is. They shouldn't have to go about wearing reminders of a man's shortcomings."

Halstead hurried to the other side of the second hand pickup truck and cranked it. "Penny," he summoned, when her feet hadn't moved an inch. Perhaps she was waiting on permission to leave too. Baltimore tossed Penny a cordial wink as he helped her up onto the tattered bench seat.

"Go on now. It'll be alright or else I'll fix it," he assured her, nodding his head in a kind fashion and smiling brightly.

As the old pickup truck jerked forward, Penny stole a glance at the tall silky stranger then held the hand Baltimore had clasped inside his up to her nose. The fragrance of his store bought cologne resonated through her thin nostrils for miles until the smell of farm animals whipped her back into a stale reality, her own.