

## Rules of Engagement

Bonaparte Hendricks—"Bo" to his friends—got out of his beat-up Ford pickup and hunched his shoulders against the late winter cold.

It was one of those rainy Florida days where the water just soaked you to the bone and the chill wind drove at you like an armored tank.

"Damn, it's cold," Bo muttered as he walked up the steps to Rainy's Produce and Hardware.

Rainy's, located in the tiny village of Hope, planted in the middle of a long string of fruit orchards in Central Florida.

Bo, a Black Army veteran just back from serving in Europe during World War II, was not sure if he considered Hope his home anymore. Located in the heart of Jim Crow territory, it seemed smaller, shabbier than he remembered, and not at all welcoming. Or perhaps it was Bo who had changed. From serving in a great war, perhaps his world had been pried open and its breadth revealed. Back in Hope, he remembered just what life had to offer for a Black man in Florida. For Bo, being in Hope was like putting Christmas presents back in their boxes.

Even as a segregated soldier, Bo had experienced a sample of real French wine, the company of some fine French women, and the tastes and smells of real French cooking. By comparison,

Hope did not offer him even a small fraction of this finery. Rather, the sad reality was that Bo had traded fights—one dictatorship in Germany for another here in the U.S.

Unfortunately, if he chose to go to war in Hope, it could be just as fatal as fighting in the Ardennes.

A dreary day like today made it that much more oppressive, to the point where Bo wondered if he had stepped into another story altogether, from Europe to Florida, and straight into hell. Bo shivered and pulled at his coat. “Damn,” he repeated and walked in the door.

The ramshackle store was small. Bo felt the walls closing in on him as he walked the aisles to pick up a pack of bread and a carton of cigarettes.

He didn’t like being in enclosed spaces anymore. The horrors of war had squeezed him to the point where he rarely slept indoors. Rather, he chose the barn over his father’s cabin. At least in the barn, he could feel a breeze and Croppy the mule served as his main source of company.

Returning to the counter, he greeted Pozy McDonnis, the owner’s son. Pozy was all right. Not too bright, but friendly to everyone, even colored folks.

“Pozy,” Bo said quietly at the counter.

“Hey, Bo,” Pozy greeted.

Bo prepared to pay for his purchase.

Suddenly, from the side, he felt someone push him.

Bo, a good-sized man with a military build, was not easily moved. At six foot four, 225 pounds or so, the shove bounced off him like a beach ball.

The shove came from George Baker, a longtime acquaintance of Bo. George was rotund, a loudmouth who liked to push people around if he felt he could get away with it. His father Rusty was a plantation owner, a drinker, and a bully. George had naturally followed in his footsteps. Bo knew them well. He had picked oranges on their farm. He always gave George a wide berth.

“Excuse me there, Mr. Hendricks,” said George as if he had been blind to Bo’s existence. “I believe I was here in line first.”

Bo and George were the same age, but far apart in terms of society. George had the benefit of his white family. Bo had no one. He had just buried his father two weeks ago and his mother had chosen to get out of Florida just after Bo had been born. He hadn’t heard from her in years. Everyone else—his kin, his friends—had gotten the hell out and moved to other parts of the U.S. No sane colored person wanted to live under the constant and unpredictable threat of a Florida lynching.

George was slovenly and prone to beer and bootlegging. He was a hell raiser as ornery as any nest of hornets. One time just for fun, he beaned Bo with an old moldy orange. This in full view of the other colored workers. Now he stood next to Bo with his usual chump-faced grin and his superior assumption that Bo would simply step aside.

Bo came out of his cold-weather reverie, his wandering thoughts, his distractions, and stared at George. Not a daring stare. Simply a gaze.

“Problem here, Bo?” said George.

“No problem,” said Bo as he stepped back to the counter, threw down his bread, and gracefully edged George out. “I’ll take a pack of smokes there, Pozy.”

Pozy handed him the cigarettes and tallied up the total. “52 cents,” he called out.

Bo gave him a dollar. “Keep the change,” he said and proceeded to the door.

“Thanks, Bo,” said Pozy.

Bo had his hand on the handle when George issued an ultimatum. “Did you not hear me?” he demanded.

Bo looked back at George, gave him the same placid stare, and smiled.

“Sorry, there George. Did you say somethin?”

“I said I was first in line,” he repeated.

“Well, George,” Bo said without raising his voice. “It’s just us here. First or second don’t matter. You’re up now.”

“That’s not the point,” said George.

Bo looked him over. Serenely. Patiently. He knew every move mattered and he was skilled at working around these kinds of threats. He also knew exactly what this meant to him, a proud soldier just returned from serving his country, asked to allow a line cut to a lowly cracker like George. There *was* a line here, an invisible line, and Bo was crossing it as carefully as he might approach an enemy encampment. He gave as much attention to the method as to the accusation itself.

“Sorry, there, George,” said Bo diplomatically. “Didn’t see ya.”

George let loose his protest. “How could you miss me? I bumped right into ya.”

“Did you, now? Well, I guess that’s my bad. Thought it was the counter. Go for it, now, George. Pozy’s waitin.”

Again, Bo turned to leave.

“You know the rules,” said George.

Bo turned around, stood in front of George, and crossed his arms. “What rules is that, George?”

“You a nigger. You wait your turn.”

Bo’s nostrils flared. He took a deep breath and steadied himself. Now he crossed that line.

“What you orderin there, George. A bottle a pop?”

“Yeah. What of it?”

“What it’s worth to you?”

“Whaddaya mean? It’s worth a nickel.”

“No, I mean, say, it costs you a couple teeth, broken finger, a black eye, a cracked rib? Somethin personal. What’s it really worth for all this trouble?”

George swallowed. He was a talker, not a fighter, a man prone to pick fights when it was to his advantage, but not to back up his bravado if it was mano y mano.

Bo had called his bluff, and George was forced to consider the question. What was it worth, a bottle of pop compared to a confrontation with Bo? A strong man, come back from the war, willing to fight, even if he fought a white man? But George knew he was being watched, and in a small town, word passed quickly of conquests and losses, especially among men.

“Are you threatenin me?” George huffed.

“Threatenin?” Bo countered thoughtfully. “I spose it depends on you, George. I’ve got no beef here. I’ll just walk away, mind my own business. You’re the one got to choose.

What's it worth? That bottle a pop. It's just a drink. Goes quick. Throw away the bottle. Sun sets. Nother day comes. Like always in Hope. Nothin happens. Threat works both ways, you know, George. So, what's it worth? A nickel? Your time? Some pain? Just askin."

Bo's eyes settled firmly on George. Everyone knew where Bo had been and how he'd killed Germans with his own hands and lived to talk about it. Now George caught those same determined eyes, maybe a hair trigger away from going back to war.

George nodded and backed down. "Go bout your business," he said and turned to the counter. Pozy quickly rang him up.

"I'll do just that," said Bo. "You two have a nice day."

Bo eased out the door and got into his truck. He drove slowly back to his cabin deep in thought. When he arrived, he started his preparation. He knew exactly what to plan for.

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Bo eased into his chair for his favorite time of day. It was sunset in Hope. The expanding spring light added warmth to the horizon. The rain had stopped. The evening had settled into a fresh set of stars against a backdrop of gold and red.

Bo sat on his porch with a lantern lit on the table next to him. Across his lap, his favorite deer rifle.

As he often did these days, Bo thought back on his life. He had wondered, even under fire in Europe, if he'd ever come back here. He had chosen to return; mostly to take care of his sick father.

Now he sat alone, the quiet an assuring gift. After the bloody scenes of battle—guns, hand grenades, tanks, bombs, bodies scattered in the fields—he appreciated the gentle sounds of nature, the reflection of the sun at dusk, the serenity of life lived alone. If only people could get along as well. But Bo knew. This peace was temporary.

He missed his father, his one solid source of companionship. But Buster, who had gone on to a better life, had escaped with his body and soul intact. Bo had doubts if the same would happen to him. His finger on the trigger said otherwise. Bo had gone to war and come back prepared to continue the fight. All he needed was a good reason. Today he had found one.

He thought about the young woman he had met while working his way, mile by mile, through the Ardennes. Amy Latoise, who lived near the tiny village of Asanne. Same age as Bo. A slim girl with dark brown hair and lovely eyes. She spoke a little broken English, enough to communicate with Bo and his comrades.

Amy had been caught on the front lines in the middle of a major onslaught of soldiers, weapons, and battles all converging on her homeland. She gave his squad whatever shelter she could offer and shared information regarding German outposts. Bo in turn gave her some of his rations and a few cigarettes. Their encounter was swift, bewildering, even brutal in its end. She died from German machine gun fire as she forged for supplies around the village to assist them.

“You will not forget us?” she asked the night before she died.

“Never,” he promised, and he had kept that promise. As a memento, she had given him a necklace threaded with a tiny

silver dove pendant, a small gift of appreciation for their efforts to liberate her country. He kept it hidden in a small pouch in his little cove in the barn.

That was more than a year ago. Now he was anticipating another kind of attack in his own homeland. He took several deep breaths and lit a cigarette. He waited. If this was the end, he was ready. Like a good soldier, he had planned, practiced, and now sat patiently. Whatever came, he would fight tooth and nail.

His thoughts returned to his father and what he suffered under the hands of white men. At this moment, Bo wondered if his father saw him from the great beyond and if he would be proud of his son for taking a stand.

He had to believe Buster would be right behind him, gun in hand, ready to fight with him. He knew his father. When it came to his son, Buster would be there on the front lines leading the charge.