

# TWENTY GRAND, A LOVE STORY

by Austin McLellan

*"Twenty grand. That's a lot of money in a place like Sloetown.  
'No tellin' what folks might do for money like that."*

— spoken by a man on a street corner in Memphis, Tennessee

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## ONE

Karl Orion reached for his fountain pen and checkbook. The pen was small and delicate in his strong, thick hands. He dated a check as the late afternoon sun forced its way past the dark curtains in his office. From his desk, he could see down a long hallway, where he noticed movement in a distant room. His wife Gloria was still working even though it was getting late. Gloria didn't have many responsibilities at the Orion Pallet Company, though Karl paid her well. It was an allowance mostly, but he was glad to do it. He loved his wife, and would have done anything for her . . . except tell her the truth.

On the check, Orion entered the name of the payee. He shifted uneasily in his leather chair that always felt too small, thinking *I really should get up from this desk more often, get back to the factory and check on the employees. Making pallets is hard work, and it never hurts to visit the warehouse and say Hello to the men. It's hot, dusty, and loud back there, and Lord knows they don't make much money.*

Karl Orion couldn't pay his employees much even if he wanted to. The wood pallet business earned little profit these days, though at one time Orion Pallet supplied customers in nine states. In recent years, sales had dwindled until now his company relied entirely on a handful of local accounts. Orion often considered selling the entire operation and retiring to Florida, especially since he turned seventy last winter. But nobody wanted to invest in an old, dirty industry with shrinking receivables, a decaying property in a tough neighborhood—Sloetown. Yes, he could hit the road, make a few calls, and drum up new business; but he had to admit, his old drive, the old desire, were gone. And he hadn't been feeling well lately. It felt like something else. Like pain.

Karl Orion entered the amount on the check: \$20,000. Then he signed it, his hand tremulous and determined at once. In fact, the harder he gripped the pen, the shakier his grasp. Finally, he reached for an envelope and wrote the girl's name on it.

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That same afternoon in another part of Sloetown, Lester Lewis sat on the hood of an old car in Jackson Park, thinking. It was summer, he had finished high school, and there wasn't much else to do on a hot day in July. The young man was thinking about money, how to get some, but nothing came to mind. A few guys he knew had joined the army, and one girl in his graduation class was going to college. Others had taken work over at the Orion Pallet factory, but he didn't want to work there. He'd heard bad things about that place.

So Lester sat on the old car with his thoughts. The car was a red Cadillac convertible, now spotted with rust, which belonged to his older brother Michael. Years ago, when Lester was a boy, Michael took him and his big sister Cheryl for rides through Sloetown on warm summer nights. The electric top never worked right, so to keep out the rain Michael always parked it under the big trees in Jackson Park. That was a long time ago. Now weeds grew through the floorboard, the windshield was shattered, and a door was gone.

Michael was gone too. He used to work at Orion Pallet but never came home one day. Lester heard stories: there was an accident, a big fire, but he wasn't sure. It was years ago. He was a child then. Now brush and small trees grew up around the car, children played on the swings nearby, and the older boys shot hoops on the court by the street. But the Cadillac remained hidden in a green corner of the park. Lester liked to hang out here. He wasn't sure why, but his head felt better when he visited Michael's old car, as if he was having a talk with his lost elder brother, getting some advice. And afternoons were always cooler in the deep shade of Jackson

Park, a good place to escape the blistering sun of late summer. Sometimes Lester stretched out on the hood of the old convertible, closed his eyes, fell asleep, and dreamed.

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Late that night, not far from Jackson Park, a young woman named Mira Ogilvy sat in her white BMW in the darkness. The street where she waited was deserted. It was almost midnight. She wasn't afraid, though it occurred to her that fear was entirely appropriate right then. After all, she was in a section of the city where bad news is no surprise, an old neighborhood of unpainted houses, vacant lots, liquor stores, one-room churches, and industrial ruins. The official name was Sloetown. That's how they spelled it: with an *O* and an *E* like the gin drink, sweet and fizzy with a kick at the end. No one could say for sure where Sloetown actually began, or ended, but you knew when you were there.

No, Mira Ogilvy wasn't afraid. She wanted to be there and knew Sloetown well enough. Everybody in town knew about the old neighborhood near the river, maybe even before they were born, as if their ancestors had passed the knowledge down to them. But it was no place for a solitary woman, and hardly a place for anyone so late at night.

She waited in her car before a neat, graying house. The woman inside would come soon. The clock in the dashboard read twelve now, later than before. As Mira squinted in the darkness toward the house, a light flickered in the window.

*OK, she's home. Why doesn't she come? What is she doing?*

Relax, the young woman told herself. She looked at her pretty face in the rear-view mirror and waited. Her fingers teased her dark hair, she checked her makeup. She had always taken pride in her appearance. In her youth, her father doted on her, remarking on her beauty every day, and she grew up believing it. Dating began at sixteen and Mira could hardly wait, back then,

though it had brought her more trouble than happiness over the years. In an instant, a succession of men, boys really, flitted through her consciousness. At thirty-two, Mira Ogilvy was unmarried but didn't think about it much.

She looked in the mirror again, adjusting the pearls around her neck. Something was there. In the mirror . . . in the street. Movement outside the car. Her hands gripped the steering wheel and she peered into the darkness, down the block where broken streetlamps bathed everything in gloom. No, it was nothing. Only shadows. She checked her doors—locked. She glanced toward the house and felt her pulse quicken.

*Why doesn't she come?*

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Inside the house, Cheryl Lewis sang a lullaby to her restless baby girl. Maybe the child will sleep now, she thought, as a smile broke across the infant's chubby face. But when she moved away from the crib, the crying resumed. Cheryl looked at her watch—after midnight now. She sang again, knotting her hands and perspiring in the warm summer night. Then she walked quickly to the living room and parted the curtains. Out front, the white BMW waited near the sidewalk. She flicked on a lamp. Maybe the woman in the car would notice and be patient a minute longer till the baby stopped crying. It wasn't a good place for her to wait, at that hour.

Cheryl Lewis looked up and down the street. Everything appeared quiet, but she knew that silence could deceive in Sloetown.

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Not far away in the humid darkness, four young men crouched low behind thick honeysuckle that covered an old chain link fence someone had pushed down years ago. They knew that lady would come here tonight in her fancy white car. That's what they heard. That's

what people been saying up in Sloetown.

But it was late and the heat and mosquitoes had found them. They sweated and slapped at the bugs. Empty beer cans lay nearby. One man cursed while another told him to shut up. Another man stood up and walked into the shadows to pee. A fourth man felt the hardness of a pistol against his waist, pulled it from his trousers and laid it on the ground. He had never used a gun before, and he wasn't sure he could use it now. But he'd seen a boy get shot during a fight on the basketball court in Jackson Park, so he thought he knew how a gun worked. He'd even watched the man who sold it to him load the bullets. He looked at the black pistol lying on the ground, waiting for him. All the young men smelled the honeysuckle and breathed the thick night air.

"There she is," one of them whispered harshly. A white BMW had come to a stop before the Lewis house. The man who went to pee ran back to join the others. They jostled each other as they crouched together, as if they sought reassurance from the bodies next to them. The young men watched the car. The woman inside was doing something.

"Let's come up from behind," one said. "She won't see us then."

"Who cares if she see us?" the youth with the gun said. "I don't care 'bout nuthin but the money."

"What if she ain't got no money?"

"Shut up. Les go round back and come up quiet. Then she won't see us and drive off." It sounded like a good idea, but no one moved.

"What if her windows is roll' up?" So one man showed a chunk of brick in his hand. Then they saw the light flicker at the house.

"Look."

“Move!” someone grunted, and they rose from behind the fence and walked down the street, clinging to the dark spaces beneath the broken streetlamps. They approached the expensive car that looked out of place in Sloetown. One young man gripped the brick he carried, another fondled the gun. The woman inside the BMW examined herself in the mirror. She heard something. The pearls around her neck swung wildly as she turned to face them.

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At the end of the block, a homeless man pushed a shopping cart along the sidewalk, eyeing the gutter for empty bottles, aluminum cans. He'd collected several already. They made a tinkling sound in his cart as it bumped across tree roots which had busted through the pavement. The bottles and cans would bring a few cents each. If he could find enough that night, he could redeem them at the junkyard in the morning and get enough money for a sandwich or a drink. But it was late now, he was tired, and needed a place to lie down. *Maybe back up in the bushes somewhere around here?*

Then he heard something. He looked up toward the sound. Something was happening at the far end of the street . . . men running, a white car, voices.

The homeless man rubbed his eyes. The beers he drank earlier made him dizzy. He looked again into the night—the men, the white car were gone now. He wiped his eyes again. No, they were still there! He squinted, staring into the darkness at the end of the block: more voices, louder, then a woman's voice. It didn't sound good.

“Trubble,” he muttered, and spun the cart around. He disappeared into a vacant lot.

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The baby cried again in the gray house. Cheryl Lewis went to her quickly as she glanced into her younger brother's bedroom. Past midnight and Lester wasn't home yet. Where the hell

was he? She had to work early tomorrow, and he'd have to watch the baby in the morning. That was fine. Lester did have a nice way with the little girl, and knew how to calm her when no one else could. But it was late now. She'd have a talk with him when he came home.

Cheryl sang to the child, rearranged her little blanket, and leaned down for a kiss. Then she hurried to the front of the house thinking *Mira can't wait much longer, and dammit, it's not a good place to park anyway, not this time of night*. She unlocked the front door and stepped onto the porch, her breath pounding. Her eyes narrowed, searching for the white car in the night.

But all she saw was darkness under the broken streetlamp that fizzled and spat.