

Chapter 1

‘A Proud Man’

*Your heart is like an empty lake;
Let ‘em fill it with their water of love.
Your soul is like the dried up well;
Let ‘em renew it with their unselfish hope.
Your world is like a book with blank pages;
Let ‘em fill it with their special stories.*

-- Trey

March 15, 2024 - Vidalia High School Gymnasium - Vidalia, Louisiana

A boy of 12 with tousled hair squeezed through the crowd at the entrance to the Vidalia High School Gymnasium.

“S’cuse me, s’cuse me,” the boy said.

At first, the people seemed perturbed. But when they looked down and saw who was trying to get by, they stepped aside. “Go right ahead,” said one man.

The boy made his way through the rows of chairs below the scoreboard and basketball hoops to the front row where his mother had reserved a seat.

Everyone was dressed in Sunday finest ... everyone except for the boy.

His Vidalia Victors baseball suit was splotched with the dust from the diamond. His arms bore the blood and dirt from a slide into home plate earlier that morning. His eyes still had the eye shadow smeared under them. His cleats, covered with Louisiana dirt, clicked as he ran across the floor.

The boy, a slim five feet, four inches, slid into the seat next to his mother.

“Sorry for being late, Mom,” he said. “The championship game went into extra innings.”

She could tell from the gleaming pendant hanging around her son’s neck that his team had won.

“That’s all right, son; you’re here now and that’s what matters. Besides, you didn’t miss much.”

As a man in a dark suit spoke into the microphone at the podium on the stage, the boy looked around. It seemed as if everyone in Vidalia was there. He recognized a few classmates and held up the medallion; they gave the boy the thumbs up sign and big grins.

His head spun around when the man in the dark suit said in a loud, emphatic voice, “And now ... without further ado ... I present ... the man of the hour ... the man we’re all here to honor ... the man ... the man who needs no introduction ... Daniel James -- D. J. -- Johnson ...!!!!”

The room burst into deafening applause; everyone, including the boy and his mother, sprang to their feet.

Johnson rose slowly from his straight-backed brown chair; a small, almost undetectable grimace appeared on his face.

At first, he looked old and unsteady. But when he straightened up, there was a youthful exuberance about him. He was a man of 34, slim and serious-looking. He wore a dark blue suit, white shirt and a tie with small Tabasco bottles printed on it, a popular tie in Louisiana, home to the world-famous company.

As he walked to the podium, he acknowledged the crowd’s applause by holding up his arms, revealing a yellowed band on one wrist.

The boy and his mother beamed with pride with the crowd.

“Yeah, yeah!!,” the boy yelled, whistling and waving.

Johnson stepped to the podium, adjusted the microphone, and cleared his throat.

“Thank you! Thank you! Thank you very much!”

He stood silent until the applause subsided.

What seemed like minutes passed.

Johnson appeared confident, prepared and comfortable. He almost glowed.

“I have waited a long, long time for this moment,” he said. “I can’t tell you how proud I am. And I have y’all to thank.”

The crowd again rose to its feet, applauding and cheering.

Johnson raised his arms and spoke in a tone of voice that startled the crowd.

It was deep, serious and deliberate.

“Twenty-two years ago I was born right here in Vidalia! Y’all know what I’m talking about.”

Again the crowd applauded enthusiastically.

Johnson indeed was the center of attention ... and affection that morning ... because the crowd understood exactly what he meant about his birthday. Indeed, the crowd knew.