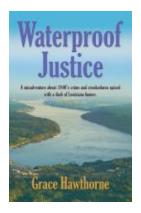


A misadventure about 1940's crime and crookedness spiced with a dash of Louisiana humor.

A Moval

Grace Hawthorne



In **Waterproof Justice**, the world of New Orleans sporting houses and Mafia bosses spills over into the small town of Waterproof causing chaos. Sheriff Nate Houston just wants to recuperate from WWII but he gets caught up in a miscarriage of justice he can't ignore. In addition, he has to deal with a teenage daughter, an unpredictable sidekick, the local matchmaker, and a mysterious new woman in town. All that, and bring justice to Waterproof.

## Waterproof Justice

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### In Praise of Waterproof Justice

From the author of *Shorter's Way*, comes another accomplished novel of memorable characters, compelling plot and pitch-perfect dialogue. Grace Hawthorne captures the spirit of New Orleans and Waterproof so completely I could retrace the steps of the characters and even taste Bitsy's lemon meringue pie.

Betty Hanacek, Director of Capacity Building at Park Pride

Loved loved *Waterproof Justice*. Could not put it down. The multiple story lines play nicely in sync. *Waterproof Justice* has a little bit of everything: romance, suspense, history, lots of humor and even poetry. I fell in love with all the distinctly Louisiana characters

Beth Nowak, Regional Manager Pernod Ricard Wines and Champagnes

Typically I'm anxious for a novel to end. With *Waterproof Justice* I bonded with the characters and didn't want to let go. Fascinating. I'm hoping for a sequel.

Philip Kaplan, First Vice President, Morgan Stanley Wealth Management She sits patiently. Throws a tempting line. Waits for itty-bitty tugs on the line that make small ripples. Before you can say, "Mon Dieux!" Hawthorne has you, hook, line and sinker.

Bob Wells, Filmmaker, Owner of Wells Communications, Inc.

Growing up in Louisiana designing projects for Angola, I recognized the shocking conditions at Louisiana State Penitentiary in the 1940s. *Waterproof Justice* captures that gloom and the fear of an arriving inmate along with the compassion of the sheriff who is delivering him. Grace Hawthorn nails it.

Fred Grace, Founder of Grace Hebert Architects

Also By Grace Hawthorne

Shorter's Way

Yes, there is a town called Waterproof on the Mississippi River in north Louisiana. However, for this book I borrowed the name and moved it down river to the part of the state where I grew up.

## **Waterproof Justice**

**Grace Hawthorne** 

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First Edition

#### **CHAPTER ONE**

(Waterproof, Louisiana 1946)

The pale winter sun came through the glass in the top of the front door and wrote "Waterproof Sheriff's Office" in shadows on the floor. Nate Houston braced his hands on the arms of his chair and carefully shifted his position. Then slowly he opened his desk drawer and looked down at the bottle inside. He hesitated several minutes pretending he had a choice. Finally he took the heavy, brown bottle out and set it on the edge of his desk

So this is what I've come to, not my proudest moment.

The pain persisted, working its way up from a dull ache to a knife edge. Not to worry, he knew how to take care of that, at least for a while. He hated to admit that he needed the doses more often now than when he first began using, but he still had the situation under control. He opened the bottle and poured out a generous amount. The fumes burned his nose, but that was a small price to pay for the soothing warmth to come.

Horse liniment.

The only thing that tamed the pain in his knee. A little souvenir from Germany. A fragment so tiny the doctors missed it, but big enough to get his attention on a daily basis. He massaged the liniment into his knee and relaxed as the heat

began to drive out the pain. Nate put the top back on the liniment and stashed it in his desk.

When he first got home, he thought taking the job as sheriff was a good idea. But he soon found out that having seen war and death up close, it was hard to take a Saturday night bar fight seriously. It was harder yet to deal with what "normal" folks considered threats of life and death. As if on cue, the phone rang.

"Sheriff, come quick! Bud Garvey's got Luther up a tree and he's threatening to kill him." Nate recognized Lucy Castle's voice although it was pitched several octaves higher than usual.

"Does Bud have a gun?"

"No Sir, but he's got a baseball bat. I'm tellin' you it's a matter of life and death, Sheriff. You've gotta get over here right now."

Nate shook his head. He didn't see how Bud Garvey on the ground with a baseball bat posed any immediate danger to Luther up a tree. Oh well, welcome to law enforcement in Waterproof.

He grabbed his cane and headed for the door. The patrol car was a pre-war Chevy that smelled of cigarette smoke, Burma Shave, and Old Spice. It was a little past its prime but well suited for patrols through the rolling hills of West Feliciana Parish. A stranger—if ever there was one hanging around—would have had no reason to suspect he was looking at law enforcement. There were no markings on the car, not because of stealth, but because Nate had never found anybody to paint it.

Similarly, he refused to wear a uniform ever again. Instead, he wore a khaki shirt and pants, and an ancient Panama hat with a sweat-stained hatband. His one concession was the small sheriff's badge pinned to his left shirt pocket, which was totally unnecessary because everyone knew him.

He'd lived in Waterproof most of his life. His father had worked a small farm on the edge of town and his mother had

worked at Parchment Products, which canned Grade A Louisiana yams—not to be confused with ordinary sweet potatoes. The culls of the yams were ground up, roasted, and mixed with cottonseed meal to make animal feed. Waterproof always smelled like a sweet potato pie that had overflowed and burned on the bottom of the oven.

Out of habit, Nate reached for a Chesterfield from the half-full pack on the dash, turned on the radio, and sang along with Hank Williams. "Your cheatin' heart, will tell on you ..." When he arrived at the Castle farm, he found the usual suspects, Bud, Beauregard, and Rutledge.

Bud had gotten the two bloodhounds as puppies. "Make great huntin' dogs." In addition to that, Bud and the dogs were on call to help track prisoners who tried to escape from Angola. Just 20 miles north of Waterproof, it was the largest maximum-security penitentiary in the country and by far the most infamous.

Nate had seen more than enough prison camps overseas, but because his oldest friend and mentor Ezra Landry was on staff there, he occasionally made the trip to that officially sanctioned hell hole.

As Nate turned into the driveway, Lucy Castle met him talking a mile a minute. "Sheriff, you gotta stop him. Bud says Luther done broke into Blackburn's Hardware. If Luther done that—and I'm not sayin' he didn't—it's because some of them other boys put him up to it. Luther's not smart enough to think up something like that on his own. He's a good boy and ..."

"It's all right, Lucy. I'll take care of it." Nate maneuvered his long legs out of the car. When he was fifteen, he was a respectable 5'11." Then in one summer he grew four inches. His mother threatened to put a brick on his head to keep him from getting any taller. It obviously worked because he crested at 6'3"

and spent the rest of his life ducking under doorjambs, and trying to fit in.

Sure enough Beauregard and Rutledge were sitting at the foot of an ancient magnolia tree and Bud was sitting on the fender of his old Ford pickup, his baseball bat propped against the front bumper. He smiled and waved. "He's up there with the squirrels, Sheriff. I've been keeping an eye on him just waitin' for you to get here."

"What's with the baseball bat, Bud?"

"Nothin'. I was just messin' with the kid. I wasn't gonna hurt him."

"What exactly do you think Luther did?"

"I was down drinkin' Co'Colas with the fellers in back of the hardware store and Blacky happened to mention that somebody broke in and stole a bunch of junk out of his storeroom. Now who else would steal junk but Luther? I figured the dogs needed a workout, so we come over here to have a look see. It's all in the shed over there." He slid off the fender to the ground. "Now that you're here, I'm gonna head back to town." He threw the bat into the cab of the truck. "See you 'round, Luther."

Bud whistled for the dogs. They came slobbering over, obediently put their front paws on the tailgate of the pickup and waited. Bud gave each of them an affectionate pat, lifted their hindquarters into the truck, snapped the latches of the wire cage, and took off in a cloud of dust.

Nate went to investigate the garden shed. Inside, he found an old, dented watering can with the nozzle missing, four rusty pulleys, a coil of new rope, a hammer with a broken handle, a partial roll of Duck tape, and a handful of assorted screws.

"Luther, is this stuff yours?" he yelled across the yard. Luther said yes and admitted he'd gotten it from Blackburn's Hardware Store. "Did you pay for it, Luther?"

#### Waterproof Justice

"I couldn't, 'cause it wasn't for sale." Luther called down. "Wasn't nobody usin' it. It's been lying around in the back where Mr. Blacky puts the broke stuff. I know 'cause I straighten up for him every Saturday."

"That new rope lying around there, too?" No answer from the tree. "Luther, come down here."

"I'd rather not."

"Bud's gone. Now come down here, I'm getting a crick in my neck."

Reluctantly, Luther climbed down. He hated to leave the magnolia tree because he always felt safe there. Luther loved trees in general, but not all trees were equal when it came to climbing. Pine trees were no good because their trunks grew straight and tall a long way before they branched out. Live oaks were for sissies. Their branches fanned out and then lay down on the ground. A baby could climb them. Magnolias were the best. Their branches started close enough to the ground to reach easily and then grew up the tree like a stepladder. The leaves were thick and green. A perfect place to hide.

Nate looked at the boy and shook his head. He remembered a time when he looked like that. Tall and skinny with big hands and feet. His dad used to laugh and say all his parts would catch up with each other someday. "What are you doing with all this stuff. Luther?"

"I was gonna rig up some pulleys to make it easier to water the ferns Miss Nell's got hanging in the windows. I didn't mean nobody no harm."

Nate shook his head. Luther was in the same grade as his daughter Carrie. The difference was, Luther had been in Miss Nell's sixth grade class as long as Carrie had been in school. "Luther, you can't take things that don't belong to you. Why didn't you just ask Mr. Blacky if you could have them?"

#### Grace Hawthorne

Why did adults always ask questions that didn't make any sense?

Luther frowned, but he patiently answered, "'Cause he mighta said no."

Nate tried to explain the concept of paying for things, but he wasn't sure that was getting through to Luther. As they walked toward the house, Nate took in the scene. A poor place. The small house was weather-beaten gray, the porch swing was broken, and the dogs' ribs stuck out like railroad ties. Luther's beat-up old bike leaned against the concrete blocks that were doing their best to hold up the front porch.

A central fireplace was the only source of heat inside the house. The linoleum floor was covered with kids and a few old toys. Luther's father, Archie, sat in a chair in the living room, his legs covered with an old quilt. His skin was nearly as gray as the outside of the house. Nate took off his hat and hung it on a nail by the door. He nodded to Archie. Luther followed him in the door.

Lucy called out from the kitchen. "Coffee, Sheriff?" Nate accepted the chipped cup and sat down. "Luther, you ever think about leaving school and getting a job?"

Before Luther could answer, Lucy spoke up. "When Archie took sick, Luther went 'round to the plants and stores 'n all, but wouldn't nobody hire him. If you're worried about that stuff out there, we'll make good on it some way."

"Actually, Lucy, I was thinking maybe Luther could come to work in my office. I need somebody to clean up the place, keep things straight. Luther, you think you could do that?"

"Oh yeah, I'm good at cleanin'."

"How does \$25 a week sound?"

"Twenty-five dollars a week!!" Lucy's eyes widened with excitement. "Oh Lord, Sheriff, that would be the best Christmas present ever. It would help pay for Archie's medicine and tide us

over 'til he gets back on his feet. Luther, what do you say?" she prompted.

"When do I start?"

"Why don't you finish out the week with Miss Nell and take those things back to Mr. Blacky tomorrow."

"Why? They're junk to him."

"Just take them back, Luther, because it's the right thing to do. Then *ask* him if you can keep the old stuff and tell him I'll pay for the rope."

When Nate got into the car, he lit a cigarette and ran his hand over his short-cropped brown hair. When he left the office, he had no intention of hiring anybody, let alone hiring Luther. He hoped there was some money in his budget to cover his salary.

On the way back to town, Nate took a side road that led to the river. For no reason he had ever been able to explain, he'd always felt a kinship to Ole Man River. Sometimes he sensed the weariness of the river, always on the move, and yet never moving. Always in the same place, dependable, predictable.

Guess that's what I am these days, dependable, predictable. I remember when I couldn't wait to leave this town, travel, see the world. Well, I did that and it turns out the world is no bed of roses.

Nate watched the river for a while. He wondered if maybe there was a reason the river flooded occasionally. Broke out of its banks and ran helter-skelter over the land. Not with the intention of destroying anything, just to remind people that it could be free. That idea pleased him.

He lit another cigarette. He was glad to be home, but not only had *he* changed, so had everything else. Before the war, his daughter Carrie was a happy eight year old, now she was about to be a teenager. Before the war, he had a wife, but she died of pneumonia two years after he enlisted. Before the war, Miss

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Laura was just his mother-in-law, now she was the anchor of his family.

At supper that night, he told Carrie and Miss Laura about his visit to the Castles. "I didn't go out there to hire Luther, but when I saw the way they were living, it just seemed like the right thing to do."

"I think it's a great idea, Dad. I know Luther better than most people and he's not nearly as dumb as everybody thinks he is. I bet he'll do real good."

### **CHAPTER TWO**

(New Orleans, 1946)

"Basin Street is the street Where the elite always meet In New Orleans, the land of dreams ..."

"You're right about the land of dreams, Louis," Minnie Tucker tilted her head back and let a large swallow of B&B trickle down her throat. She remembered when Basin Street was *the* street of Storyville, the Park Avenue of Prostitution. Grand old townhouses standing side by side offered the best food, the best booze, the best music, and the best girls in New Orleans, all in sixteen wonderfully, sinful square blocks of The District.

Storyville was long gone, but the customers were still there. The elite politicians, underworld bosses, businessmen, law enforcement officers, high-rollers from out of town all still came to the land of dreams and Minnie and the girls were there to serve them.

Thank goodness winter had finally rescued the city from the summer heat. Minnie lingered a few more minutes listening to Louis Armstrong's trumpet, then she turned off the big Philco radio standing against the wall. Six o'clock, time to get ready for the evening's business.

Originally, Storyville was set up to confine prostitution to one area, make it legal, and thus protect the servicemen returning from World War I. After World War II, the boundaries of Storyville were dissolved and it became illegal again, once more with the idea of protecting the returning servicemen. The landladies just laughed, the same way their predecessors had laughed when Alderman Sidney Story rounded them up twenty-four years earlier. "You can make it illegal, but you can't make it unpopular." They found other accommodations and continued business as usual.

Minnie was proud of her house. She owned it free and clear, all twelve rooms, antique furnishings, wrought-iron balconies, and patio. As she walked down the back stairs, crossed the walled garden, and entered the main house, she breathed the cool evening air and listened to the familiar sounds of New Orleans, the music from street musicians, kids tap dancing on the sidewalk, boats on the Mississippi just over the levee.

When she passed her large cheval mirror, she tilted it slightly forward and checked her reflection. Not bad for forty-five. She'd maintained her figure, had some professional help keeping her hair strawberry blonde, and made sure she was always stylishly dressed. She favored Joan Crawford shoulder pads because they made her waist look smaller.

Appearances were important and Minnie demanded high standards from her girls. No sloppy-looking loungewear in the house and no suggestive clothing on the street. Minnie ran a high-class establishment that attracted a better class of customers.

Her house often catered to two generations in a family. It was almost a New Orleans rite of passage for a father to take his son to be initiated into the world of sex by his favorite girl. Minnie encouraged the tradition. Some loyal customers had even earned the privilege of having a charge account.

#### Waterproof Justice

"Evenin', Professor," Minnie said as she passed through the parlor and heard her piano player tuning up. Jazz set the tone for the evening. The bar looked well stocked, hors d'oeuvres were ready, the crystal chandeliers were gleaming, everything was in order. She stepped into the little alcove beside the front door and saw a line of men stretching down the block. She recognized most of the faces. It promised to be a good night.

At 7:00 on the dot, the doors opened and the house filled with men, most of whom knew the routine. Speak to Minnie first, get a drink from the bar, sample the food, have a smoke, relax, and then meet the girls. The girls mingled with the guests and then, one by one, took their "gentlemen callers" upstairs.

Along about eight o'clock, the maid came into the parlor and told Minnie someone outside wanted to see her. "Tell him to come on in here, no need to be shy."

"Ain't a him, Miss Minnie, it's a her."

"A girl looking for work?"

"I don't think so."

Minnie was a bit puzzled. Why else would a girl be knocking at her door? "All right, put her in the little office, I'll come see what's goin' on."

When she opened the office door, a tall female was standing by the desk. She had clear sun-tanned skin and thick dark hair which she wore in a long braid down her back. She wore a nice pair of slacks and a white shirt. Minnie watched her for a moment. Although she stood perfectly still, there was an air of sadness about her.

"I'm Minnie Tucker, the landlady here. What's your name?" "Ruby."

"Well, sit down, Ruby, and tell me what I can do for you."

The girl sat, ankles crossed, back straight, hands clinched tightly in her lap. She looked straight ahead. "I need a job." She

hesitated and Minnie wondered if she were going to cry. "I'm staying at the boarding house over on Burgundy ..."

Minnie interrupted, "We call it Bur-gun-dy."

"Burgundy. The room's paid up 'til Saturday. Then I have to leave."

Minnie noticed the wedding ring. "Where's your husband?" Ruby looked down at the slim gold band. "Gone."

Minnie was beginning to get the picture. Fast-talking city man meets innocent country girl in her late twenties, bordering on being an old maid. Never a good combination. "Are you sure he's gone?"

Ruby nodded. "He left a letter."

Minnie had heard the story before, many times. Although she felt a little bit sorry for the girl, she couldn't take in every brokenhearted woman down on her luck. As gently as possible she said, "Honey, go back home. You don't belong here." No response. Minnie tried another approach. "The truth is, I can't use you. Don't get me wrong, it's not because of your looks, although you are a little on the tall side, but that don't matter. I had a gal in here once who only had one arm. Customers loved her. It's just that you're ... Men come here looking for a good time, for fun, energy, excitement. I can tell already you're not too exciting. You're... quiet. You got no sizzle."

It took Ruby a minute to figure out what Minnie was talking about and the kind of business she was running. She knew she ought to leave, but where would she go? Instead she sat and waited

In exasperation, Minnie got up and poured two glasses of brandy. "Here, drink this."

Obediently, the girl downed the contents in one gulp and that caused a bout of coughing and watering eyes. "It's best if you sip it."

#### Waterproof Justice

Minnie watched Ruby. It was obvious she was making a real effort to hold it together. Push through. Never, never cry. Minnie could identify with that.

"It's against my better judgment, but I'll try to help you. First I need some information. Are you in trouble with the law? You pregnant?"

Ruby shook her head twice.

"So, where did you come from and how did you get here?"

Ruby swallowed several times, but otherwise remained still. "I grew up on a farm in Mississippi. We had nut orchards."

Minnie started to ask for clarification but decided against it.

"My mama died when I was fourteen. Then I ran the business for my dad. My brothers got drafted. I don't know where they are now. The company sold the orchards. My dad had to leave to look for work. Then I met this man," her voice nearly broke, "and we fell in love. We came here and got married. Now he's gone."

About what Minnie expected. She should stay out of this, but there was something about this girl ... "You said you ran the business for your father. What did you do?"

"Kept the books, did payroll, bought stuff, paid bills."

"Were you any good?"

"Yes."

"Are you honest?"

"Yes."

Minnie couldn't remember when she'd had a conversation with more information and fewer words. "Listen, tell you what, I'm gonna take a chance on you. I got a room upstairs and I sure could use an honest bookkeeper to keep track of all the payoffs and bribes I gotta make to run a legitimate business. You reckon you could handle that?"

"That's all I have to do? Manage the office?"

The relief in her voice was so clear, Minnie almost laughed out loud. "Don't worry, Honey, I got plenty of girls to take care of the rest. By the way, what's your whole name?"

"Ruby Bladder."

"Mon Dieu! I can't have a girl working for me with a name like that, even if you're not seeing customers. I got a reputation to uphold. I'm almost afraid to ask, but what was your maiden name?"

"Smith"

"Half my customers are named Smith. That won't do either. Let me see ... OK, from here on out you're gonna be ... Ruby ... Ruby Canelle. It's French. *La canelle*, it means cinnamon 'cause you kinda smell like cinnamon.

"I'm gonna send my handyman, Big Joe, over to Burgundy to get your clothes. You do have some other clothes don't you? I mean the slacks are all right, I wear them myself when I'm off duty. You'll need a nice dress in case I ever need you to collect the cover charge, the entrance fee. Five dollars. Helps pay for the free booze and food and cuts down on the horny country boys and the drunks coming over here from Bourbon Street. I don't allow drunks in my house. It's \$20 to take a girl upstairs and they collect that in their rooms. You'll need a dress for church too. You do go to church."

"I can"

Minnie was usually good at reading people, but this one was beyond her. "Well, we don't work on Sunday, so I encourage my girls to go. Lots of tourists, so we pick up customers that way. Most of the girls go to Mass at St. Louis Cathedral in Jackson Square. It's not far. You can go with them."

Ruby seemed to be perfectly content to sit quietly and listen to Minnie, but all that stillness was beginning to make Minnie nervous. "Come with me, I'll show you around. You know anything about New Orleans?" The girl shook her head. "You're in the French Quarter, the Vieux Carre, it sits right on the river. Canal Street, a couple of blocks over, divides uptown from downtown." She glanced at the girl to see if she was following. "Think about it like this, Uptown is upriver from Canal Street and Downtown is downriver from Canal. Easy."

Minnie realized she was talking too much, but she couldn't seem to stop herself. Somebody had to fill up all that silence. "Streets have a different name on the uptown and downtown side of Canal. Like St. Charles Avenue is Royal Street below Canal. If you wanna get somewhere you take the streetcar. Don't call it a trolley. The grassy part in the middle of the tracks, we call that the neutral ground."

It had been a long time since Ruby had had a woman to talk to. Back home, the men left in the morning and didn't come back until sundown. In the meantime, she washed clothes, cleaned the house, fed the chickens, worked in the garden, cooked, and did the bookwork. Sometimes she read from the set of books on the shelf. Silent, alone with her thoughts.

She listened to Minnie, but it was the house she was really paying attention to. Ruby was used to bare walls, braided rugs made out of strips of rags, windows with shades not curtains. Minnie's house was very different. There were black marble fireplace mantels edged in gold leaf, red velvet drapes, thick Oriental carpets, leaded crystal barware, antiques, pecky cypress paneling, comfortable chairs, and sofas. It was overwhelming. Even the small patio was exotic with huge palm trees, hanging ferns, and a couple of parrots that shouted foul things at anyone who walked by.

Finally, Minnie stopped talking. In an effort to get a rise out of Ruby, she pointed to a bronze plaque over the door that led in from the patio. "Know what that says?"

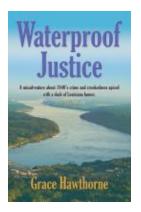
"No."

#### Grace Hawthorne

"Well, it's French. 'Lache Pas! Lache Pas la patate.' It means 'Don't give up! Keep it up!" Minnie laughed. Ruby studied the plaque. Minnie tried to explain. "I'm the landlady so I don't give up on the business, and the men, well, they got to keep it up. Get it?" She waited for a response. Ruby smiled slightly.

Minnie rolled her eyes toward heaven. When she got exasperated, her Cajun accent slipped out. "Actually it means, don't drop da potato, but we're not too finicky about da real meanin'." She shook her head, let out a loud sigh and walked into the parlor leaving Ruby on her own. She walked straight to the bar, "Sam, pour me a double B&B." She looked through the French doors out to the patio where Ruby stood. Minnie downed half the drink in one swallow. "I may have just made a bad mistake."

Ruby stood silently looking up at the moon thinking the same thing.



In Waterproof Justice, the world of New Orleans sporting houses and Mafia bosses spills over into the small town of Waterproof causing chaos. Sheriff Nate Houston just wants to recuperate from WWII but he gets caught up in a miscarriage of justice he can't ignore. In addition, he has to deal with a teenage daughter, an unpredictable sidekick, the local matchmaker, and a mysterious new woman in town. All that, and bring justice to Waterproof.

## **Waterproof Justice**

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