

The Message: 1901

Briggs Braddock

“Frazier Baker, a 40-year-old Black man from Lake City, South Carolina, and his infant daughter, Julia, were murdered by a lynch mob on February 22, 1898. Mr. Baker was the first African American to be elected as U.S. postmaster for Lake City.” -*Equal Justice Initiative*

*Author's Note: This story is historically accurate, though creative liberties were taken regarding his surviving wife, Lavina Baker's speech. In an imaginary setting, she gives a fictional lecture on true events.*

She approached the stage, her dark skin painted bright by the dancing flame of the lantern. Her name was Lavinia Baker; a new messenger on racial injustice, joining in on another secret meeting. For a moment, she studied the mass of people watching her with anticipation, before adjusting the fabric of her well worn dress. Lavinia took a deep breath and began.

“I recall it happened in the dark early morning of February the twenty-second, 1898, when the world was still glazed dimly in the moonlight. My room felt empty and hollow, mysteriously quiet; that was, until the drapes on my windows were suddenly engulfed in hungry fire. The flames collected in large puddles on the heart pine floor, then trickled across the planks, snaking and meandering like the roots of a tree. The fire was powerful and malicious, seeming to

have a soul and intent of its own; and a rotten one at that.

It was when I got up to help my family that I first heard the roaring of the mob; a deafening harmony of wicked chants swallowed the yard and had me drowning in panic. It quickly occurred to me they were coming for my husband, the black postmaster of Lake City, South Carolina. They wanted him dead for holding a position of power, with the wrong skin color.” She paused for a long second, her voice quivering.

“My family and I gathered downstairs and fled out the back door, kicking and running with all our might, blinded by the furious glow of their inferno. Outside waiting for us was a terrifying horde of angry men, standing ready with guns and torches. They were hunting us like wild deer, taking advantage of our vulnerability. I was carrying my baby Julia, trying to weave through the mob, when it happened.” Lavinia buried her face momentarily, a collection of tears puddling on the podium. She gathered herself and resumed.

“I heard their guns fire; the shots rang loud and clear. In an instant, half my family was wounded. My husband... and my baby Juila, were gone. The bullet that hit my sweet baby girl struck me in the chest. The pain filled my veins with an electric vigor that’s fueled me, and my people ever since.

Today I speak to this community to express the roles we must now play. It’s our job to continue the legacy of my husband. We need to deliver the message that they failed in their attempt to exterminate his power. They only inspired the rest of us, united us into a common cause, bringing my husband’s story to every set of ears between here and heaven.” Lavinia slammed her hand against the wood podium. The audience roared in solidarity.

Lavinia paused as the burning ambition and passion of the moment spread through the audience like a fanned flame. With a deeper, steadiness to her voice, Lavinia began again.

“Though the state did not grant us justice, we pressed onward with our movement anyway; we broke free from the chains of discrimination and inequality that used to confine us. We challenged the evil that dared to harm our loved ones and the most innocent among us, like my baby Julia. We started a movement that could not be extinguished. We made a petition that traveled past the boundaries of our racist state and all the way up to Washington D.C., where thirteen wicked men were finally charged on twenty-four different Federal counts of murder, assault, and destruction. And that is all before our almighty God hands down his ultimate punishment. The message I need you to deliver, to pass on to family, friends, neighbors— is that we, as a community, can never give up on hope. And we’re only just getting started.” At that, the crowd erupted. Lavinia’s other children watched in delight from the side, and when the mighty applause finally died out, she had one last word to give.

“They thought they were going to knock my husband off his feet. But they gave him wings instead.”