

The Six
By Elina Jadhav

A cat padded down a street in Washington, D.C. Around a busy coffee shop near Dupont Circle, summer trees stood lush and green, their leaves casting dappled shadows across roads warmed by the afternoon sun. The air was heavy and humid, wrapping the city in its heat. Without warning, a group of rough boys chased the animal out of an alley. The cat darted away, limping slightly on one paw, before slowing to catch its breath. It paused before a local diner to lick its hurt paw, peering through the window at the scene inside. Through the glass, guests sat at neat, tiny tables draped in the traditional red-and-white cotton tablecloths. The aroma of burgers and French-fry grease drifted into the street, making the cat's nose twitch. Drawn by the smell, it slipped behind the dumpster into the pouring summer rain, searching for a scrap of leftover hamburger.

The hour was getting late, and it was nearly dark. The rain was getting heavier, and the warm wind had picked up. The cat settled there for the night, under the dumpster, and waited for the quiet. The rough boys were still running in the streets, cursing at women who tried to stop them.

They were a gang of six. The Six, as they liked to be called. Things were going missing in the neighborhood, and everybody knew the Six were to blame. They boasted that they would never be caught and were known for robbing the local candy store. They met there once a week to plan exactly how they would rob different establishments while leaving no trace. They took great pride in their standing as bad boys. Among them was Little Fred, the smallest by far, with a voice that cracked and a temper that didn't. He talked more than the rest combined: boasting, threatening, promising chaos like he had something to prove. Maybe he did. Maybe it was the way people looked over him, or through him, or forgot him altogether. But the others kept him close. Not out of friendship, really, but because he was the one who always had something to prove, and sometimes, that kind of boy was willing to do things the rest weren't. Mostly, he just liked being noticed.

That evening, the boys decided to enter the diner as the night air remained warm and sticky after the rain. They had no money but were hoping to find someone to shake down. Little Fred got a sick feeling in his stomach as people stared; they all knew who the Six were. Little Fred insisted the boys leave the diner to look elsewhere for trouble.

The next morning, Mabel Booker, the richest woman in the neighborhood, ran, crying, frantically out of the police station. Someone had stolen her wallet. It contained \$400. Ms. Booker, one of the local school teachers and the wife of a prominent developer whose family had old Washington money, ran up to Little Fred, who'd caused enough trouble at school to make her sure it was him, and demanded he return the wallet immediately.

Little Fred stood his ground. "Did you see me take it?!" he yelled at the crowd, who had gathered quickly.

The other five boys just stood there, staring, bewildered. Near the edge of the crowd, the same black cat from the night before crouched low, its eyes fixed on Little Fred. Then Fred suddenly lashed out and kicked it. The animal let out a loud, painful meow, arched its back, and hissed furiously.

Little Fred's friends finally caught on and began to yell back at the angry crowd. "Did you see him take it?!" Mabel Booker was not one to back down from an unruly child. She tried to grab Little Fred by his collar. Before she could, the furious cat darted forward and raked its claws across his face, leaving deep red marks.

Then something strange happened. Little Fred started to cry. His friends began to back away, stupefied. He looked so sad that Ms. Booker immediately apologized and tried to wipe his bloody face with her glove. He cried harder, explaining through tears and slobber that he had never stolen anything in his life except one piece of candy, and he was sorry to make people think that. He admitted that he just enjoyed the attention. People tried to console the poor child. The Five became scared and confessed that Little Fred was telling the truth; they just wanted the attention.

So, when everyone stopped crying and yelling, and it was mostly quiet again, Ms. Booker asked, "Does anyone know where my wallet is? Please tell me, and I won't be angry any longer."

Everyone stared suspiciously amongst themselves, but nobody knew where the wallet was. The cops came to search the townspeople, who all wanted to catch the thief. They searched everyone and did not find the wallet. Nighttime came, and still no wallet. Little Fred and the other five befriended Mabel Booker and went to join her at the diner for some burgers, fries, and cold sodas. It was now obvious that the boys did not take the wallet, and it was a complete mystery. She stared out the dark window of the hamburger joint, wondering where in the world the wallet could be.

It started to rain lightly again, misting over the small diner window that hung in the back of the diner, just over the dumpster. Outside the window, the summer wind picked up, and a few leaves from potted plants swirled along the sidewalk as the children and their teacher shared slices of chilled watermelon alongside their diner food. They enjoyed each other's company for once as they tried to answer a mystery. The cool refreshments provided a protective shield against the heavy summer air outside.

But somewhere, under the dumpster, behind the local diner, amongst other missing items, a certain cat was licking his wounds and chewing on a wallet with a gold chain that had a diamond inlay and \$400 inside, none of which he cared one cent about. The navy-blue color paired perfectly with the sleek black fur of one very mischievous D.C. cat, as a diamond could be seen shining brightly against a loose shard of glass near the open back window, which the wind had blown wide the night before.