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Chapter Sixteen—Half & Half

Lila was pleased that Bryan had put her boxes back in the trunk. It had been awhile since a man had helped her do anything, or on second thought, maybe it was the first time she'd allowed someone to do that for her. Lila had watched Bryan's reaction to Kay's report at the conference. Not just anyone would've jettisoned Randy Crawford. A tiny part of her hoped Bryan cared for her, but how could he? She was a realist. He'd probably written her off as a member of the River Watchers. Still, there was something about the way he looked at her. But that wasn't important. She wanted to focus on what was real. The conference had gone better than expected. Two TV stations had interviewed Nell, one from Baton Rouge and another from Monroe. She'd be sure to watch the evening news. After all these years, word was starting to get out. Lila pulled into the Half & Half, located at the border between Louisiana and Arkansas. She needed coffee to settle her nerves.

Hentsbury was located in a dry county. Everyone heading to Arkansas from Louisiana or in the other direction, stopped at the Half & Half, especially to buy beer. The liquor half lay in the state of Louisiana, but the grocery, was in Arkansas. The big joke was you could go from one state to another in less time than it took to sign your name. Against the wall were the refrigerated cold drinks. Lila walked to the back, opened the freezer, and pulled out two bottles of cold water. She stood in line.

“Guess we shop in the same place.” Bryan was in his sweatpants and windbreaker, his hands wrapped around a six-pack.

“Hi, Bryan. Thanks for everything you did today.”

“Crawford had no right.”

All week long she had been talking to the veterinarian about her horse, Diamond. The horse had been in her care for more than twelve years and was suffering with Cushing’s disease. He was unable to shed, so his coat had become abnormally long; he could possibly go blind. Each morning she fed and brushed him. But the vet had been advising her about an herbal treatment. Ordering flaxseed and magnesium proteinate was at the top of her to-do list for the afternoon. In the past, Gerard would’ve taken care of such things.

“You know anything about horses?”

“Enough to know how to get on ‘em and how to get off.”

“I’ve been having a problem with my quarter horse.”

“My daughter’s the one to ask. She knows everything about animals”

“How old is she?” Lila pictured the family living in a ranch-style house with a newly updated kitchen, ferns on the porch and an American flag planted in the middle of the lawn. Not that Lila had any problems with Old Glory. She’d pegged Bryan as the type of guy who didn’t want people to figure out where he stood, sort of the strong silent type. She wondered if his wife worked or if she had dinner waiting on the table for him every night. It wasn’t like she actually wanted to know. She fancied herself a good judge of character and she couldn’t figure him out.

“She’s seventeen,” he said. “Tells me what to do.”

“Sounds like a teenager. And her mom?”

Bryan shrugged. “Not around anymore.”

They stood at the register. Rae-Ann kept the line moving, an attractive woman in shoulder-length blonde hair. “That’s right. Heard the doctor had a long talk with Annie’s husband, said if he didn’t stop drinking, he’d end up with liver problems in addition to everything else that was wrong with him. Glad you like our new section with sugarless candy and cookies. My idea, too.”

Rae-Ann chatted up her next customer. “I know,” she said, ringing up several cases of beer and handing out a Powerball card. “Last month there were closings all along Highway 85, a fish and tackle and a beauty supply. I tried to talk them into staying open, but they said it was time to sell everything and pull up stakes. I hate to see it,” she said and handed over the ticket. “If you win, I’m putting in my request right now!”

It was Lila’s turn at the register. “A large cup of coffee, please.”

“Hey, Lila. No pastry?”

She gazed at the cellophane-wrapped brownies and cinnamon rolls displayed on the counter. Lila was tempted. “Don’t think so. Trying to lose weight.”

“I’ve been trying to lose those same ten pounds for the last twenty years,” said Rae-Ann. “Don’t matter. Now I eat anything I want.” Rae-Ann looked over the counter at Lila’s suit. “How come you so gussied up?”

“On my way to Little Rock. Mind if I leave a few petitions around for the Roberts family?”

“Don’t think so, honey. All those papers will gum up the works.”

“I can move them.” Lila started to rearrange a display of sugarless gum to make room for the cinnamon raisinets.

“Please don’t do that.”

Bryan stepped up to the counter. “Afternoon, Rae-Ann.”

“Bryan.”

“Business is always good at the Half & Half.” He looked at the line queuing behind him and held a six-pack to his chest. “Why not slip those petitions under people’s windshields in the parking lot?”

“That’s a great idea,” echoed Rae-Ann. “There’s a bunch of cars out there right now. See them?” She pointed through the cases of beer to the outside window, glad to move Lila along. She had other customers.

Seemed to Lila that it was the best offer she was gonna get. She followed Bryan out to the lot where people were loading cases of beer into their flatbeds. “Take a petition?” She removed a flyer from her stack and handed it to him.

He pushed it away gently. “Don’t think so. I’d lose my job. Now we don’t want that to happen, do we, Miss Lila?”

Lila needed to convince members of her church that the Ouachita River was polluted. In fact, many men in the congregation talked about it, especially at church potlucks. Fishermen who had grown up around the Ouachita knew that the old gal was in trouble. All you had to do was to look at her. As boys, some of them had found cockle shells along the riverbanks, told each other stories about sharks teeth and whale vertebrae that rested as curiosities on the tops of their grandparents' or parents' TV sets. The river was an Ouachita Indian name that meant sparkling silver water.

They knew that the river was polluted. But not everyone agreed it was polluted because of the Hentsbury plant. Many said it was just the way things were, like when a woman steps on a scale, you don't discuss her weight in public. But once faucets in the area began to pour forth water that resembled the color of shit, opinions raged. The local water company claimed that what people saw at the bottom of their glasses was harmless sediment. They said it helped the water taste better. Others said it was time to hop into their SUVs, drive to Hentsbury and to give the city council a piece of their minds. The majority drove to Walmart to stock up on cases of bottled water.

“Maybe God just wants it that way.”

“Tyrell, you're an intelligent man,” said Lila, never one to shy away from a lively debate. Tyrell was a member of her church's executive board and always wore white and blue plaid shirts. “Are you meaning to tell me that you think the river is polluted because

God stuck his hand in the water and swished it around? And why would he do that? Why would he pollute the water when water is the source of life?"

"I didn't say that, Miss Lila. Don't be putting words in my mouth."

Lila Shawn was known throughout church as being a plucky woman who harbored strong opinions. Sunday school kids at Piney Grove Missionary loved her for that same exact reason.

"I told my mom I don't want to be baptized," said a kid in her class who had recently moved to the area from some miniscule patch of a town in southern Louisiana. Ryan was a small kid with painfully neat clipped hair, always dressed in a button-down shirt, his shoelaces in double bows. "Says I have to."

Lila studied him. "Ever dyed cloth?" He said never. "Know anyone who did?"

"My grandmother," the boy admitted. "Sometimes she used to dye our kitchen curtains."

The older girls in the back of the room giggled. Ryan shot them a terrible look.

"When you get baptized," said Lila, "it's like you take a piece of cloth and change its color, make it bright from something washed out."

Convincing Ryan was one thing, but Tyrell, something else. "I don't think you can blame the paper mill for everything, and excuse me for saying so, Miss Lila, but that's what you do. Makes me want to plug up my ears and sing Dixie."

"The pollution has been documented."

“If you say so. But let me see it with my own two eyes,” he said, moving his glasses along the bridge of his nose. “I’ll believe it with my own two eyes before I believe anyone else’s. Now if you don’t mind I have other things to attend.”

Lila invited several members of the River Watchers to talk to the congregation about what was happening to the Ouachita, men and women who were stationed upstream, working part-time jobs stocking fishing ponds for hunting lodges, and also monitoring water quality for whatever federal or state agency would pay them. They spoke to a small audience in the Sunday school room who sat behind a blue board filled with images of bears and hearts and a cross in the middle of a large oak desk. Lila had tried to corral as many of Tyrell’s fishing buddies as she could, but most had declined. “Sorry, Miss Lila. The in-laws don’t like us to be late,” or “Need to cut the grass this afternoon.” Still, a small group gathered for her “special educational,” mostly tempted by promises of Lila’s famous homemade bread pudding served with whiskey sauce. A few already sat in chairs holding paper plates that were heaped with layers of bread and custard, smothered in a delicious yellow sludge, listening to a man and a woman talk about test results.

“You can see for yourselves,” they said. “These have been double-checked by scientists in Little Rock.” They passed around ampoules filled with dirty water. They said the fish were suffocating because they couldn’t get enough oxygen and because of that, fishing clubs were shutting down, moving further north. “You’ll have to drive five or six hours, a lot further than you go today. Not safe to fish around here anymore. No ifs, ands or buts about it.”

“Is that right?” said Tyrell.

“Yes, sir,” said one of the River Watchers. “Ask Fish and Wildlife. They’re planning to post notices all around town and in the newspaper.”

“So what do you think?” she asked after the presentation.

Tyrell thoughtfully rubbed his chin. “I see where you’re going. But I know that God is involved. Haven’t given up on Him one inch.”

“Nor I.” Lila pointed to her heart. “I feel him right here all the time.”

“That’s nice, Miss Lila. So why don’t we get out of his way?”

“We’re not in his way—his way is every way.” If she could get Tyrell to where he would be willing to listen, she might have a chance with more of his hunting buddies. God had nothing to do with the pollution of the Mud. “What about our good work? I can’t believe that God created this earth for us to mess up so badly.”

Tyrell didn’t have much more to say, but he did tell Lila how much he missed Gerard at the last men’s retreat. “Never met anyone who knew his way around horses like he did.”

Tyrell gave her a hug and said he sure was glad that she was doing better and knew it had to be hard to lose such a good man. He also told her he’d heard some ugly rumors. “Keep your nose clean,” he said. “Stay out of trouble.” On the way out he complimented Lila on her delicious bread pudding.

Chapter Seventeen—Out Cold

Lila spoke to the women in her church. They did dishes a lot more than their husbands and knew when water turned the color of shit. Plus, they remembered Miss Lila from summers when she'd taught their kids driver's education and trusted her. She wanted to recruit Tyrell and several members of his fishing club and some of their wives to come to the next meeting of the River Watchers. "What you're seeing when you turn on the faucet is a whole lot of the same thing that comes out of those kitchens in Arkansas." She asked them to sign the petition for the Roberts' family. But that's when she started to get those crank calls.

"Commie bastard," said a gravely barely audible voice that sounded like it had been prepped by several shots of whiskey. She thought that the obvious thing was to change her phone number. At night, she slept better, but then envelopes started to appear beneath her front door with similar messages, letters clipped from magazines and pasted on lined paper like from some murder mystery.

One afternoon as the sun shuddered through the trees in a harp of October's changing light, Diamond cantered up to the side of the house. The quarter horse was in better health. The horse's coat was now growing in normally thanks to an herbal treatment. She grabbed a carrot from the vegetable crisper and stepped through the side door. She always told her friends that horses understood what most people overlooked. "Why didn't I think of that?" she said, nodding her head in agreement as Diamond chomped away. "Go straight to the horse's mouth." She patted her quarter horse. She

remembered the press conference and how Crawford had thrown her reports to the floor, stomped on them and fled like a coward.

Diamond pushed her sideways with the dark plum of his nose. But how was she going to arrange a meeting with Crawford and force him to acknowledge that the board was illegally allowing Rand-Atlantic to dump their run-off into the Mud River? If she called for an appointment, she'd be on hold with his secretary for the next twenty years. "Girl, you watch yourself. You be careful now," she heard Gerard say in the back of her mind, which is just when the new bunch of her puppies sniffed the air.

Lila thought it might be a skunk or a deer passing through her backyard trying to gobble up her crop of late summer tomatoes. The puppies whined. She bent down to touch their fur. They licked her fingers. Immediately, a tall presence reached out from behind and smashed her over the head with something hard, a rock or a slab of concrete. She felt Gerard's hand, pushing her down. She crumpled, her cheek pressed into Diamond's manure, hands splayed beneath her. She tried to, but couldn't move. She'd always been able to move. A cold pain shot through her forehead, making her feel that blow to her head. It was the strangest feeling, being in a body that wasn't responding, lying prone on her stomach bleeding. She knew she had to move, but how? Gerard was there, but he didn't say anything. She knew what he'd say, tell her that none of us could change anything—so we may as well enjoy ourselves, but then her world started to spin, a kind of tornado that swept up houses and cows and mobile homes, dropped her hard on the ground, which is when everything went black and she didn't know how long she lay there eating dust. She thought she saw a light on in one part of the house. A woman

walked by with a scrap of paper, an enfolded message, and put it in her palm. There was nothing on it. She awoke to the puppies licking her nose and mouth with their warm tongues. By this time it was dark, the moon shelved against a backdrop of inky clouds. She stumbled forward to the house and each step registered a bolt of pain. Lila picked up the phone, pressed the emergency button. "I'm hurt bad," she said, until she heard sirens and a voice say, "Get her to the hospital quick."

"D'you know where you are?" asked a doctor who loomed in front of her bed. She tried to bring him into focus. "You're in the West Monroe General Hospital," he said. "My name is Dr. Marzelli. You've suffered a serious injury."

Standing on either side of him, machines beeped and displayed green bars. Tubes snaked above her head.

It was another week until she gained consciousness, her feet wrapped in pulsating socks that squeezed her legs. Her son stood at her bedside. "Mom?"

"Casey?" She didn't recognize her own voice. It sounded like a growl.

"Press my hand, Mom. Just try." His warmth infused her palm. "The puppies?" she managed to ask. "Diamond?"

"Is that what you're worried about?" She shook her head yes. "I've been taking good care of them." He laughed. "They've been asking for you. Saying where's Miss Lila?"

"Good...to see...you..."

“You too,” he said. “Arlene will be stopping by later this afternoon after she picks up the kids. She sends her love. You’ve been in intensive care for a week now. But you’re gonna be okay. The doctors say that you’re making a great recovery.” She found it hard to talk. “Water?” Casey found a blue plastic cup with a straw and held it to her mouth. Lila questioned him with her eyes. “We don’t know. There was a bloody slab of cement where you fell at the side of the house. We tried to save the footprints. But the Sheriff’s office doesn’t want to investigate. They said there’s not enough evidence. I know. It’s crazy. Right now the important thing is you.” He pressed her hand. “I’m glad Dad’s not here. He might take a shotgun himself and start hunting around for the person who did this. But I tell you, Mom. I’m just not comfortable with your staying in that house by yourself. By any count, I think you must have people mad at you in at least two different states, maybe more. I’m not telling you to stop what you’re doing. But for Pete’s sake, do you have to piss off every politician in the entire state of Louisiana and Arkansas? Is that really necessary? I don’t know how Dad put up with you always running around.”

Once she was well enough and back in the house, Casey continued to visit and they continued to talk. He tried to be helpful and sat by her side as she issued instructions from her bed. “You’re right. I need to protect myself. I want you to get me two grown German shepherds, young enough so I can train them. Get in touch with that old security company you used to own and have them install a system on the property.”

“Consider it done.”

“I’ll also need for you to get me a gun.”

“Mom! Why do you need a gun?”

“Why do you think I need a gun? In case I have to shoot somebody with it.”

“Can’t you just stop all of this? Wish you could just be my kids’ grandmother and forget about everything else. Stop running around doing everyone else’s business and for what? We worry about you. All the time.”

“I know you do, son. Love you, too, Casey.”

“Love you, Mom.”

Lila gave Casey a hug and walked with him out to the front door just to show him she could. Once he’d left, she fell down on the living room couch, a relic from the days when her children were small and when Gerard was alive, when everything felt safe and warm. Now she felt alone and scared and needed a gun to protect herself. The world had changed since she taught high school. She used to take her students on tours of the bayou backwaters, spring floods and canebrakes, hollow stalks that waved green blades and produced seeds only once in their lifetime, or the mayhaw, whose marble-size reddish fruits fed deer, raccoons, and squirrels. She remembered her guided walks to pick mayhaws along the Ouachita for a grocery store that made them into jellies for the holidays, took field trips showing students how the Spanish moss, actually a plant related to bromeliads, grew in long, thread-like gray veils on trees. It was all such a long time ago, and seemed longer than that—everything had changed. But what she loved more

than anything else was to walk around the bayou after a rainstorm and watch white egrets patrol the swamp with a slow steady gait, eyes focused downward on what was and wasn't there. Thinking about it made her eyes moist. These days she cried easily. She thought about Grandfather Leo and how he'd told her stories about the Louisiana Cardinal whose feathers had caught on fire after eating a talking caterpillar. Every day, a woman from Ruston came by to cook and clean. Her kids had their own lives although she knew they would do anything, if she asked, or give her anything she needed. John lived in Atlanta. Casey was busy building a contracting business and supporting his family. More than anything, she was aware of being alone, especially at night when she watched the evening news hugging Gerard's cushion that he always used to place behind his back.

Lila went back to bed and stared at the ceiling. The phone rang. "Hello," she answered in a shaky voice.

"Lila Shawn?"

"Yees."

"Bryan Thurmond. Remember?"

Bryan? He was the last person she'd expected. Lila placed the cellphone on speaker so she could sink into her pillows and listen.

"Hey, Lila. Heard you got knocked up."

She chuckled, the first time she'd laughed in weeks. "Yes, she said, returning the jibe. "Got hit with a cement block. How'd you know?"

"Bad news travels fast. So how you doing?"

"Doctor says he'll evaluate me after physical therapy. Starts next week."

"You're in my prayers."

She was even forgetting the names of her grandchildren. What was wrong with her?

"Let me know if I can do anything."

"The Mud River," she said. "Make them stop."

"God bless you, Lila. Sounding just like your old self."

"Thanks." She hung up. It was nice to hear his voice—his words kept repeating inside her head. Sleep wrapped Lila inside a soft blanket.

Chapter Eighteen—Sitting Ducks

Bryan watched Mark approach in an orange tractor. Everything about the machine appeared orange. Sitting inside the cab, Mark looked like a giant glazed donut. It had rained for the last several days as two weather systems, one rolling down from the Ozarks and the other from the Gulf, had collided and drenched the area in tropical storms.

Autumn weather. A crew had put out a call on the radio for chainsaws to remove a bunch of felled trees. By this time, the sun had resumed its rightful place, but the ground still felt spongy with oil that collected in purple and green rainbows along a scar of ditches. There was an oppressive stink in the air like a convention of cigar smokers had taken up permanent residence.

Mark slid down from his tractor. He reminded Bryan of himself when he had been in his late twenties, easy to run off at the mouth, but a team player who always got the job done. Mark had served in Afghanistan where an explosion had left a jagged welt in the middle of his forehead. Bryan sometimes called him Harry Potter. His daughter had loved reading those books. “There you are, Potter,” he said. “I thought maybe you went home to plant watermelons and got lost.”

“Sorry, boss. Dwayne asked me to help him. Said it didn’t matter, we’re part of the same team.”

“Dwayne? Dwayne said that?”

Mark took a quick swallow from a can of Arizona sweet tea and spit out orange dust.

“Had me delivering tanks of water.”

He was pissed. "Next time you tell him to call me on the radio, okay?" Bryan wondered how Mark, who'd served in the army, could not understand chain of command. And what was Dwayne doing poaching guys from his team? "Doesn't he have his own damn crew or did they all die?"

"Dwayne said you'd sent him the Roger."

"Roger my ass." Bryan felt an urge to hit something. "I never heard squat."

"Hey, man, sorry. I really thought you had." He pulled out a paper sack from his backpack and suspended it in the air like a rabbit. "Bryan, you eat lunch?"

Sounded like Dwayne was up to his old tricks again, but how would Mark know about that? "They sat on a metal bench in front of the infirmary on the other end of the parking lot, a nondescript white building with aluminum siding. Bryan opened his lunch and took out a turkey sandwich that he'd thrown together in the early morning. He didn't know if he was more pissed at Dwayne or at Mark. He'd gone out of his way to defend Potter, the newest member of his crew who was doing a bang up job, everything from taking readings in the field to fixing equipment. He'd transferred over to Bryan's team from the palletizer. Potter didn't whine to him like some of the other guys about not being able to do one thing or another because of a stubbed toe. But maybe Vernon was right about him. Maybe he was a druggie using on the side. "What's up?"

Potter popped open a soda and threw the aluminum tab to the ground. "Listen, man, I gotta ask you something." He chugged a swallow.

Other guys walked past them, some of them coming from McDonald's and carrying a Big Mac, half of a burger already gone, wrappers lining the edge of the parking lot in trash. Bryan watched Potter fool around with his keys. He took out his lunch, and arranged the sandwich, chips, and soda in a semicircle. Bryan waited. Over the years, he had counseled band members about girlfriends, divorces, and wives. Not too much surprised him anymore.

“Shoot.”

“Salami.” Potter looked at two flapping pieces of bread. “Noreen makes a great sandwich.”

“Lucky man. Make my own sandwiches, do my own cooking,” said Bryan.

“I like to cook.”

“Like what?”

“Chili.”

“Love me some chili. So what's on your mind, Potter?”

He took a bite of his turkey sandwich. A pepper stuck outside the bread. “After Labor Day, I was at Tensas Bayou with my retriever. You've met him: his name's Depot. I brought him by the office once.”

Bryan nodded. Depot was a large black lab that Mark had taken to the vet several weeks ago for shots, and during the afternoon he'd left him in Bryan's office. Bryan wanted to

hurry Potter along. “Old-timey hunters always said if I ever spotted a duck flying, to pull a cap down over my eyes. They said ducks see the whites of a hunter’s eyes from at least a mile away. Course, I never got the chance. Never did much duck-hunting.”

“Man, those old guys know about everything; they know how the marsh is laced with small islands, and where to set up hunting blinds. I was hoping to shoot a few summer mallards or spoonbills, placed my decoys near an inlet of Roseau grass and waited.”

Bryan wasn’t much of a duck-hunter, but he’d been along for enough rides to know about the dense swamp air and its scent of refuge, rowing past veils of Spanish moss that hung in threads from cypress trees. It was a quiet place. “Get any?”

“Nah. Just saw the heads of nutria, those twenty-pound swamp rats.”

“Hear they taste like walnuts, if you season them right.”

“Let those coon asses do that, not me. But I saw a red-shouldered hawk. Sometimes that can be a sign of ducks. But really, I didn’t go out there to duck hunt. Went out there to be by myself.” He said that at the end of the week Dwayne came by and asked about borrowing Depot for a hunting trip.

“How do you ask to borrow a man’s dog when you hardly know him? He didn’t stop there either. Asked how I felt about joining his safety team. He told me to look at the facts. Told me that Vernon’s not going to help me, said he hates you, man. Didn’t he lay you off and almost send you back to the palletizer to rot? Dwayne said he wants to hire

guys who have gumption and commitment. Heard how I'd served my country in Afghanistan. Offered me a spot."

Bryan lined up in a row several crumbs from his sandwich. "So what did you tell him while you were out there delivering water tanks?"

"Told him I needed to think about it. Look, Bryan. I'll level with you. You know I have a baby at home. I need to make more money. But Dwayne never got down to the nut cutting. What was his hourly rate? Did he have an open position? Starting when? As far as I know, he doesn't have a single opening. Maybe he's just messing with me. So you tell me; I respect you. What do you think?"

"Dwayne talking about gumption and commitment? You got to be shitting me." Bryan laughed. "I didn't think the guy knew what those two words meant. Do whatever you want, man; but I wouldn't trust the sonofabitch. All I can say is that I can offer you a steady gig. So if it's regular work you want, you have a spot. You're a good man, Potter." Maybe Dwayne was trying to send a direct message to him about the Sensorcons. He tossed an empty soda can into a black garbage bin by his side. "Whatever has happened in your life will make you a better father. Believe me, I know."

"Maybe," Mark said, jangling his keys again. "Hope so." He chewed his gum. "I really do."

"So what's it looking like at the ponds today?"

"Slime and black pockets of water. Stinks to high heaven."

The smell was an immediate give-away to the presence of hydrogen sulfide gas. “Got the readings?” Potter handed them over. He had sampled the air quality where the runoff from the plant fed into the Mud. “Bet you can’t wait to get away from all this smelly shit and head south again for a real duck-hunting trip in the Atachafalaya?”

“You bet. Nothing like sitting still in the marsh grass and just watching a log drift downstream. But Vernon complains every time I go duck hunting. He says all I know how to do is to get high and sit in a duck blind?”

Bryan kept his mouth shut, looked at readings that Mark had handed over and lit a smoke.

“Sure they’re right?”

“Sure, I’m sure. Double-checked ‘em, just like you showed me.” Mark walked away with his hands stuck in his belt loops.

“Wait a sec. There’s something else we have talk to about.” Bryan knew a lot of guys who’d overdosed right after they’d gone clean. Let them have one bad day and it was over; they couldn’t handle the pressure and went straight back to shooting or sniffing. Bryan wanted to be sure that Mark was healthy, especially with all the shit happening around the Mud. He had to be able to count on Mark who as far as he could tell was one of the more motivated members of his team. And he certainly didn’t want to speak up for him in front of Vernon, especially if he was doing drugs behind Bryan’s back.

“What kind of talk?”

“How you’re fucked up on meth.”

“That’s crap.”

“Thought you’d want to know.”

“I’m in a drug program, for crying out loud. I didn’t realize I had to take out a personal ad to broadcast that to every sonsofbitch. Shit. I don’t want to talk about this anymore. Like no one thinks I have no self-control. What do you want me to do for the rest of the day?”

His anger sounded real. “Get a mid-day and afternoon reading. Put them in my box before you clock out tonight. And Mark, don’t forget to wear your respirator.”

Bryan sheltered his eyes from the sun and watched Mark drive off. He felt that everyone deserved a second chance. God knows, he’d already had several. Standing there, he kept hacking, a dry brittle cough. Damn those cigarettes. And damn Dwayne.

Chapter Nineteen—Laissez Le Bons Temps Rouler

Bryan's friend owned a lounge near Hentsbury. Dale had asked him to step in for a musician who was recovering from a double bypass. Bryan had known Dale from back when they'd both flirted with the mafia. "No way. Haven't picked up a guitar in years." Music was a young man's game. Life was no joke.

Dale pressed him. "C'mon, man. Do me a favor." He was an old friend who had helped him out of tight spots on many occasions. As soon as he said yes Dale called the local radio station about the Night Life's new Saturday line-up. "It's on."

"Only if Jay's on vocals," said Bryan.

Dale rubbed his French Fork beard several times. "If you guys split the take, okay by me."

Bryan wasn't thinking of the evening being a huge moneymaker, only a chance to help out two old friends and get off his jollies. He began to practice.

Jenny passed by his room, "You doing music again, Dad?"

"Just fooling around for now."

"Well, don't let me stop you. I'm going out."

He could smell the smoke of the club in his nostrils and see the disco ball above the stage making its orbit around the ceiling in purple and gold twinkles, the audience in their chairs holding beers as they laughed and began to cheer along with the band toward a

third and fourth round. But it was playing the guitar that he was really worried about. All he had to do was to harmonize every so often with Jay. He had to work the kink out of his fingers, hadn't touched the guitar strings in long time; been too busy logging chemical readings. He called Jay.

"Hey, man. How badly you miss singing?"

"Like a frog misses his missus."

"She's knocking at your door. We've got ourselves a gig."

"No shitting. Where?"

"Dale's Club."

"Dale? That old fart?"

"He needs a favor. You in?"

"Sure, man."

Between Monday and the following Saturday when they were supposed to play, Bryan holed himself off in his room, sat on the bedspread with chord charts and songs spread around him and practiced until his fingers began to remember how hard his callouses used to be. Jenny was on a school trip touring the capitol in Baton Rouge talking to state senators about protection laws for locally endangered species, the Northern Long-eared Bat and the Red-cockaded Woodpecker. The teacher and several parent chaperones were leaving with the class on Thursday.

“Dad, I’m a senior. You don’t have to tag along.” Bryan wanted to make sure there were no evening visitations going on between the boys and the girls. “Why can’t you trust me?”

He did, but he also knew what it meant to be young. “Trust has nothing to do with it.” Unfortunately, there was no way around it—he couldn’t do both the gig and also be a chaperone, just that she was so damned quiet, didn’t talk much about her classes or friends. Her teachers said she was doing okay. So why was he worried? Still waters run deep.

“Here we go.” A drummer whom they’d known from years back joined them on the stage wearing a Saints cap, his belly spilling over his belt buckle like rising yeast dough. There hadn’t been much publicity. The crowd was expecting Roll’em Jack, the double by-pass guy, and had realized that the musicians in front of them were blatant imposters who were doing a passable, but not a great job as stand-ins for his Delta blues. But once Bryan and Jay got their groove, the crowd offered genuine shouts of praise.

“You guys saved my ass,” said Dale after the set was finished. “Can you play next weekend?”

“What about Joe?”

“No way. Doctors are sitting on him.”

“What d’you think?” Bryan eyeballed Jay who knew exactly what that look meant.

“Don’t know,” he said, putting away his microphone. “I made plans to go duck-hunting next weekend with my son. He’s been looking forward to it for weeks.”

“I’ll pay you boys double what you got tonight.”

“Double?” Bryan hesitated and put his guitar back inside his case.

Dale got nervous. “I’ll throw in free drinks.”

Bryan looked at Jay who gave him the thumbs up. “Looks like you’ve got yourself a deal.”

For the rest of that week, Bryan rehearsed in his bedroom. His fingers found the chords, caressed the neck of the guitar. The Gibson let him reach dip into a Mason jar of his memories.

Jenny’s trip had gone okay but she couldn’t figure out, “What am I supposed to do with these postcards?” Every member of the school’s delegation had received a group of scenic postcards as a thank you for their visit: The State Capitol, Louisiana State University, and the refineries surrounding the city in a glowing horseshoe with the name and contact numbers of all the representatives printed at the bottom.

“Remind them how they promised to vote. Send ‘em back.”

They sat in front of the TV and watched American Idol. Dinner was pigs-in-blankets and cherry tomatoes.

She held up the one of the State Capitol. "A lot of them didn't promise, only said that they'd look into it. But we heard about Huey Long and how he built the Capitol."

"Huey who?"

She looked at him strangely. "You've gotta know."

"Thought you talked to them about the bat-eared something and the other what-cha-ma-callit. Who's Huey Long? Any relation to Huey Lewis?"

"Dad!"

They sat on the couch and finished off dinner. Bryan got up to pour another round of diet Coke. Now that he was going to be performing, he was getting self-conscious about his paunch. He was doing sit-ups in the morning and guessed he needed to lay-off the beer and French fries.

"We're playing next weekend, but I'm not feeling good about leaving you alone."

"Here we go again," she sighed "You don't have to worry. I'm not a little kid." No, Bryan thought, but he could never forgive himself if anything ever happened to her.

"You gotta let her go," said Jay. "Stop breathing down her neck. Don't you remember what we were like when we were her age?"

"Sure do. That's why I'm worried."

The day of the gig he picked up the guitar and struck a C chord, felt the sound flood his chest, a transfusion of warmth; his hands moved along the guitar's neck, heard notes

sound pink and blue in the flashing light of the casino. He got ready in the afternoon, glad he didn't need to make the trek to Rand-Atlantic, had sent Potter to log in the morning report. Bryan picked out his costume, not totally different from what he usually wore, black jeans, but accompanied by a Western shirt, pearl buttons down the front and red trim on the yoke. He laid out his clothes, pressed his jeans so they had a smart crease. Potter said he might stop by as long as it was okay with Noreen. Bryan drank two cups of coffee and downed several packets of BC Powder. His queasiness didn't disappear. What if he sucked? Maybe he hadn't practiced enough and people would wonder what had happened to the old Bryan. Sometimes he wondered that too.

Clouds appeared in the sky like someone had brushed them with orange streaks; the sun dipped into a row of branches. Bryan eased his Gibson into his Tundra. Dale had told him to check with the sound engineer an hour before the show. The drummer and the bass guitarist had never performed together. Bryan swung his black leather gear bag to the side of his guitar—extra picks, strings, guitar strap, pliers and Allen keys to tweak his vibrato system, plus a songbook containing lyrics to “Brown Eyed Girl”, “Pink Cadillac”, “Marie Laveau”, and “Every Time I Roll the Dice”, and several other covers. He'd play the old standards, even “I've Got Friends in Low Places” and afterward, take requests. He phoned Jay. “You ready?”

“See you there, bro.”

Bryan entered the Night Life, a lounge in Hamburg, a short drive from Hentsbury. The club had a faded purple awning and a picture of a giant cocktail glass framed in the

window that glowed green by virtue of a single light that was trained on the entrance, surrounded by a wooden molding of mermaids holding on to each other's tails. To the left of the door, was a glass cabinet that contained Bryan's picture from some twenty years ago when he had a lot of dark and wavy hair.

The poster read: Bryan T, which was his professional name, Playing this weekend!

"Hey, Big Guy."

"Good to see you, Jay. Can you believe it? Here we go."

They stepped inside and walked past the bar, an expanse of empty bottles and cans lined on shelves above the cash register for decoration. To the left of the bar, stood a number of Sweet Deal poker machines. Red booths surrounded the stage. Over the years, the walls of the Night Life had retained enough cigarette smoke to embalm patrons in its smell. Bryan looked at the stage, occupied by a number of amps and cables. He checked his watch. "Should be here by now."

"I'll check the back," said Jay. "Dale's usually in his office."

Bryan stood at the rear of the stage tightening guitar strings. Then he recognized Dwayne sitting in a booth, a pit bull dressed up in a beard. Bryan edged his way to the corner of the stage, crouched behind several large amps and stayed there.

"The Wolfe-man found out about the Sensorcons."

"Impossible," said the other man. Randy Crawford.

“No. His mini-me accused me the other day.”

“You mean Thurmond?”

“Told me how I’d got the Sensorcons for some dirty dealing.”

“What do you care?”

“He knows something. I think both of them do.” Dwayne explained how he’d convinced a manager at Rand-Atlantic to split off Safety from Vernon’s environmental team. “Once he bought in, I got to be my own kind of manager. A safety guy—knew I could get signoff on stuff without asking for Vernon’s permission—and if I wanted to, even authorize the use of the Mud as a dumping ground. So here we are. Feel like John Wayne at The Alamo mounting my own campaign. Now Thurmond has it in for me. Can’t tolerate that we’re standing shoulder to shoulder.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Don’t you know?”

“Can’t find the others guys,” said Jay. “What are you doing? Shining your boots? Check you later. I’ll keep looking.”

“You’re blowing this whole thing out of proportion. What about those turnips? I thought that’s why you wanted to get together. My wife loves them. If it were up to me, I’d eat fried chicken every day. Forget about those damn turnips. Ate enough of them growing up.”

“Makes two of us. Just give me a good gumbo and I’ll be happy.”

Jay told Bryan. “They’ll be out in a few.”

“...The turnips were easy enough to pull out of the ground. The back of my Explorer is full.” A cocktail waitress walked by Dwayne and Randy’s booth in a pink V-neck top with the words “Night Life,” printed on her chest. She asked if they wanted another drink.

Randy said no. Bryan hoped that they’d both be gone by the time the band started to play. Randy swished the ice in his glass and took another sip. “My wife loves those turnips. We finished here?”

“Word has gotten out about those signatures.”

“Really?”

“I found out that these are public documents. Anyone can look them up. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Dale wants to know if you have another cable. They’re looking for one right now.”

Randy gave a high-beam smile to a waitress who was refilling a bowl of chips. “Doesn’t matter. The Clean Water Act allows anyone to dump shit into a moving body of water if there’s nothing swimming around in it. There’s no fish. Right? Just keep your mouth shut. We’ve got permits. We’re in compliance.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Nothing’s going to happen. Rand-Atlantic created the Mud River cesspool years before the Act was passed into law. All you did was to sign off on papers by giving them a special permit to continue doing what they have been doing for years. For years, do you hear me? Relax, man. All you did was to verify that there was nothing swimming around there. We can’t help it if the river isn’t the same all the time. Some Greek philosopher said that.” Randy flashed a silver cufflink in the direction of the overhead disco ball. “There’s a legal term for it, grandfather clause. All you need to know is that you’re covered. Every hairy inch of you.”

“Just the point,” he said. “The River Watcher people are saying that there are fish swimming in the Mud and they keep floating to the top. Vernon is burying them in the ash pile behind the ponds. I know that for a fact. He and Thurmond are documenting something.”

“Vernon’s like an iron piling stuck in water.”

The waitress came by holding a pitcher of suds. Dwayne barked something foul.

She held on to the pitcher with long blue nails. “Excuse me?”

“Sorry, ma’am. My friend here is on the patch. His time of the month.” Crawford ordered another round. She picked up their empty glasses, chatted for a few moments at a nearby table, and then trotted back to the bar.

Dwayne watched her move past the tables. “Did I ever tell you how I almost got him fired?”

“Really?”

“It was a long time ago.”

Bryan gave the drummer the song list. “We start with a big opener and build from there.”

“...Don’t worry,” said Randy. “When you signed off on those papers there was nothing swimming in the Mud River. Remember? Do you hear me? Nobody can prove anything. It’s a matter of record. Public record. Whatever is happening right now has nothing to do with you. So let those River Watchers prove that there are fish in the Mud. You hear me? Who cares! You can’t be held responsible for what’s swimming around there now,” which was Randy’s first acknowledgment that anything was swimming there at all. Relax.” Randy put a hand on his shoulder. “Anyhow, how can you be so sure that Thurmond isn’t bluffing?”

“Follow me through the first set,” Bryan told the bass guitarist who was setting up his rig.

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you, man. A woman in HR, a tall bitch who looks like Serena Williams, said those papers are public. Rand kicked her out for too many absences. All Vernon needs to do is to march his happy ass down to City Hall and pay ten cents for a copy so he can see my signature at the bottom of the page. You don’t know the Wolfe-man or Thurmond like I do. They both have it in for me. Big time.” Dwayne stared into the bottom of his glass.

“You may never have considered yourself a hero, but believe me, people in this town are going to thank you. Rand-Atlantic is the bedrock of this community. Bedrock,” he

repeated, “and will continue to be so for years. Buddy, if Rand-Atlantic pulled up its stakes from here, the National Guard would have to save the place. It would be a total disaster. This is the oldest mill in the south. We were the ones who taught everyone else how it’s done. Cardboard boxes and paper towels from here are shipped all over the country, all over the world.”

“You should’ve told me,” he whined and knocked several ice cubes around in his glass. Dwayne bristled. “I’m not some dumb ass.”

“You and me both.” With that, Randy removed his eyeglasses and put them back into their case and they left the Night Life.

Bryan snuck out from behind the amplifiers. He waited for ten minutes and then slipped out the door to get fresh air.

“Over here,” called Jay, who was pulling out a cowboy hat from the back of his trunk. “Gonna be just like old times.”

Bryan watched Dwayne’s white SUV pull out of a space near several orange traffic cones. “This is our lucky night. I can feel it. My bones are talking.”

Saturdays usually drew a moderate crowd to the Night Life. Dale had bought the place years ago and kept the funky décor with its dimly lit interior that made customers feel around for a chair before they sat down. Waitresses lit candles on each of the tables and emptied ashtrays. Early arrivals stood around the bar, chatting with blue-nails who was handing out Budweisers and feeding bills into the cashier register. The lounge had

survived the casinos. Other family bars had been wiped out by the competition and cheap food. Dale had continued to patronize local acts, musicians who had learned their chops during the days of the Louisiana Hayride at the knees of the great ones. Like Bryan, all these guys had attended the same churches and high schools, big LSU fans who never missed a game.

The drummer sat down at his kit and tested the connections, got his sticks ready. Bryan knew him from when he used to get wasted every other night. Now he'd settled into a day job and played occasional gigs at lounges like Dale's. The bass guitarist, the youngest of three boys in his family, had learned to play guitar from his grandma who'd been around the Ozark circuit and played with Glen Campbell, and his daddy, who used to fiddle with Earl Scruggs, or so the legend goes. They used to call him Little Jim. Back then he had challenged all the ladies to see just how little he was. He had three kids. Band members were in their fifties and sixties. The glory days were over. Now they worked real jobs and took care of families.

Jay tested the microphone. *Laissez le bon temps rouler.*

"Think they know how to rouler at the Night Life?"

"Don't matter," said Jay. "Always got my feet planted in the cotton, and the corn, and the soy."

Bryan checked his watch, time to tune his Les Paul Standard. He had owned the instrument for more than twenty years. Bought it from a music store in Shreveport for hundreds, not the thousands they cost now. The Gibson had a maple body, the frets

mother-of-pearl. She had two pickups. Musicians had made offers. Bryan wasn't selling. He had replaced the strings and waxed the wood for the evening's performance. He missed his Chet Atkins Hollow Body, a Gretsch guitar with a quilt maple top that had disappeared after his divorce. But the Gibson always felt good in his hands. He was busy tuning it when Lila walked inside.

He didn't recognize her. She looked different, wore a pair of black pants with low heels, a blue hat with a small feather tucked in the brim. Bryan called from the stage, "You come to hear us play tonight? I'm flattered."

She turned and looked at him with her hands on her hips. "Don't be. I'm here for Randy Crawford. Heard he'd be around tonight."

Bryan stepped off the stage. "You two have a date?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Grab a seat then."

"Can't. Got my dog with me." A German shepherd appeared from beneath one of the cocktail tables and stood at her side on a short leather leash.

Bryan kneeled to pet the dog.

"Wouldn't do that if I were you," said Lila.

Dale came outside from his office to tell her that there were no dogs allowed in the Night Life, only paying customers, which is when Randy hurried back inside.

“I’m looking for my eyeglasses. Left them on the table,” Randy told the same waitress with the blue nails who’d served him drinks.

“Wait a sec.” She wiped her hands on a bar towel. “I stashed them behind the counter. Why don’t you have a seat and I’ll get them for you.”

Lila went up to Randy and leashed her dog in tight. Randy turned as white as Cool Whip. “Just to let you know,” she said. “I’m pressing my case with the Lead District Attorney in Baton Rouge. We’re gonna get a DNA reading about that rock someone hit me with, and just to let you know, I’m carrying. Got a gun right here.” Lila opened up her coat to reveal a plush black lining flashing a metal piece. “Better not send any more of your goons to mess me up. They tried once. It’s not gonna happen again. Ever.”

Randy automatically reached for his side, but found nothing except a cellphone. “Lady, you’re off your rocker. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The good folk may be surprised to find out that a member of their state board is a total crook.”

“You could be sued for libel.”

“Think you’d have a tough case.”

Randy raised his hand and threatened to strike Lila, which he later reported to the press was an effort to scratch his forehead from an itchy mosquito bite. The German shepherd interpreted that as a threatening move toward Lila and jumped on him, at which point, Randy fell to the ground, and sent several chairs clattering on their sides. Bryan jumped

off the stage and escorted Lila to the back of the lounge near the poker machines. “Stay here.” She collapsed into a chair. “Are you okay?”

She pulled her dog closer and nodded. “Just need a few minutes to catch my breath and then I’m out of here.” Two drunks promised to keep her company. They began to pet her dog, but after the shepherd dazzled them with its pearly teeth, they retreated to the bar.

From the stage Bryan watched Lila leave and tipped his hat.

Not knowing what else to do, Randy punched Dale hard in the jaw. The rest of the band members hit a D7 chord and began to play The Boys Are Back in Town. Dale called the cops who piled into the bar shortly afterward. Dale filed a complaint; Potter sauntered into the lounge, having missed most of the action, but got caught up to speed by Bryan who was in high spirits, especially when the cops pushed their way through the door.

“Just like old times, eh Jay?”

“Brings tears to my eyes.”

After their first few numbers, the musicians found a groove, the bass guitar and drums set the pace. Bryan and Jay riffed back and forth together and waded off into new territory, bouncing the notes like a ping-pong ball. The band played a Cajun number that got everyone up from tables two-stepping on the dance floor. The cash register kept ringing, which was music to Dale’s ears.

At the end of the evening he told Bryan, “That was great, man. You guys bring in the crowds.”

He hoped the police were not the kind of crowds Dale meant. “Jay works the real magic,” Bryan said. “Belts out his songs so everyone feels them inside their gut. Best singer this side of the Mississippi.”

“Love you, too, brother.”

After the place closed, Bryan and Jay collected their money from the bar near the casino machines. Dale asked, “How ‘bout you two guys play here on Saturday night regular, the first Saturday of every month?”

Bryan thought to himself, *Laissez le bon temps rouler*, because no matter what happened, he and Jay were two kids who had absorbed Cajun music on hot summer evenings at the knees of their families gathered with a dozen different instruments as mosquitoes zapped themselves in poofs of gray dust against insect-killing light sentries while the picking and singing continued in the background.

Both he and Jay could’ve played better, but they hadn’t sucked, and despite the last several years, Bryan felt he still had it in him. Now he knew that Dwayne was in deep double shit, a thought that contributed to his celebratory state of mind. After they’d packed away their equipment, Bryan asked Jay, “Hey, man. Let’s the two of us get a strong drink. They’re on the house tonight.” He hoped Lila had gotten back home safely. He’d call in the morning.

Music was a young man’s game, but life was no joke.

Chapter Twenty—Brain Tattoo

Vernon sat at his desk and cleaned his nails with the edge of a business card. He'd heard about an investigative unit from the EPA. Just what he needed. For Christ's sake, they worked at a paper mill. There was no avoiding the black liquor created from separating lignin from cellulose. People had jobs. The smell that encircled them was the stink of money. So what? This was an older mill where the recovery process didn't come up to snuff. Most mills burned the liquor in a recovery boiler to produce energy that was recycled inside a plant. He had his eye on an office job located in downtown Atlanta with an air conditioner that worked and his own parking spot out in front. He wanted Bryan to stop hounding him. Sure, Bryan was the best environmental officer he'd ever had, but sometimes he did his job too well. Bryan needed to know when to keep his mouth shut. He'd take care of the hydrogen sulfide levels his own way. Why did everyone floating around him have to make everything so damn difficult? If everything worked the way he wanted, after a few months Mark would self-destruct and Noreen would wise up. Maybe she'd move back home with the baby. Her boyfriend was a loser. Vernon wanted his prospective son-in-law to be someone with polish and education, someone like a lawyer, for example.

“Daddy?”

Vernon answered his phone. "Hi, sugar."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"You can ask me anything."

"How come you keep fucking around with me and Mark?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I think you know."

"How's the baby?"

"Don't baby, me. Why did you lay him off?"

"I keep my business and personal life separate, and you should too."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"I wish you wouldn't use that kind of language."

"How do you expect Mark to support us if he's not working?"

"In a few weeks, maybe they can use him back at the palletizer. I can't make special accommodations because the two of you are living together."

"Like hell you can't. I remember when you promoted that two-bit lunatic in the shipping department because his cousin was a member of city council. How about that kid who missed work every Monday? You did nothing because you were screwing his mother."

“Noreen!”

“I know a lot more about you than you think. So what’s it going to be?”

“I need to think about it...”

“Why?”

“...because my daughter’s boyfriend is a meth-head.”

“He’s not using. Don’t you think I would know? Why can’t you trust me?”

Vernon decided that he’d go by her house tomorrow evening and calm her down, bring over a present for the baby, who’d been named after his wife’s father, Raymond. That usually worked for most people. Maybe flowers. He’d stop by Walmart on his way over.

“And don’t come by the house. You don’t care one iota about my family. And in case you’re wondering, that means not one fucking bit.”

For a moment, he held the phone to his ear and shook his head, then placed the receiver back in its cradle.

On the other end, Noreen slammed the phone down so hard, she almost woke up Little Raymond, who was sleeping in his bassinette. She paced back and forth past the dirty dishes and the microwave oven, heated up a cup of coffee and then decided to pour it out.

The morning Noreen's mother had died of cancer, a mist clung to the top of the cypress trees and fog smothered the ground. She had been twelve. Vernon had been a shit to her mother, his job always came first, fucking other women, second. After Dina's death, he tried to make his daughter feel better. He bought her things. Cheerleading outfits. Pom-poms. He wanted her to be popular and felt if she got involved she would be happy. Have fun, he said. Enjoy yourself. Later, he had wanted her to marry Landon, a corporate lawyer who had come back from up north to set up a practice in Shreveport. It's not that Noreen was a slug. She had already finished two years at Bossier Parish Community College. She wanted to get a CPA license and be busy for every tax season for the rest of her life, a plan that was slightly interrupted when she was twenty-one and still a student. She remembered the glow of that day first meeting Mark. It had stayed with her. The summer had been hot and the sun melted in the sky like copper over the casinos.

It was a Friday evening and she'd decided to hydrate herself with a cold beer. She climbed into her car, the same one she'd been driving for years, her Old Faithful. A hole had rusted through the floor on the back passenger side. It was handy for flipping out cigarette butts and anything else she might be smoking. She drove over the Jimmie Davis Bridge, an ugly span named after a Louisiana governor who was famous for singing You Are My Sunshine. The song's actual authorship according to her music appreciation class was cloudy, the same way her life looked working part-time jobs during school and wearing polyester shirts with nametags from restaurants like Burger King and Red Lobster.

She pulled into the parking lot of The Blackout, a bar with posters on the walls of country western singers and movie stars like Dolly Parton and Sylvester Stallone, stars that were popular with kids like herself from Bossier Community and guys who worked at Barksdale Air Force Base, two groups that could be easily distinguished by either their sweats or khakis. Noreen saw her friend, Patricia. She waved for her to come over.

Patricia climbed on the barstool. They attended classes together. Patricia had a fringe of blonde hair that hung above her eyebrows and a mole beneath her right eye. On anyone else, it would've looked ugly.

"It's been hitting over 90 all week. I could polish off a six-pack by myself," Pat said.

Noreen nodded and pushed her beer toward her friend for a sip. "Haven't seen the Barksdale boys yet. Got my eye on the tall one. I think he's so cute with that scar on his forehead."

"They'll be rolling in soon. You studying all weekend for finals?" She adjusted her bra strap.

"Have to. Need to get all B's to qualify for my scholarship."

"Scholarship?"

"It's my Dad's monthly check, ding-bat." Noreen pressed a cool beer bottle to her forehead. "No grades, no money. That's how the cows lick the lettuce." She sighed and sipped her beer. Red, white, and blue streamers hung on the chairs in preparation for July Fourth the following weekend. Smoke filled the air. It was early enough so that people

could hear each other talk. Later, it would be different—a local band, shouts from the pool table, and an occasional friendly “Fuck you” bouncing across tables.

“Look,” Patricia squeezed her friend’s elbow. She sat up straight, her legs at full extension along the length of the stool. “Here they come now.”

Two men in khakis sat several chairs over from them at the bar. “I’m telling you, it works, man.” Mark turned toward them and smiled. “How you doing tonight, ladies?” They crossed their legs on the bar stools and reassured the two young men that they were doing fine. They looked at each other and shared a giggle.

“I bet these good-looking ladies can figure this out a lot quicker than you.” He ordered beers and turned back to his friend who shook his head and stared into the hard liquor display of whiskey, bourbon, vodka, and gin. “I need to talk to college-educated women, not to low-lives like you.” His friend acted insulted, the shill.

“Figure out what?” Noreen took the bait.

“My uncle’s new invention.”

“Your uncle? This better be good,” said Noreen.

“It’s damned good. It’s a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing.” Patricia watched the pool table. It was tournament night. A good-looking guy with broad shoulders and a thin waist was racking up balls. People shouted encouragements. “Beat his ass, Carl! You got ‘im!”

“I suspect you haven’t, since he’s the one who invented it. You see, you put cheese in the mousetrap and it self-fulfills. Easy as taking candy from a baby.”

“Your uncle actually invented the mouse-trap? You gotta be shitting me,” said his friend, shaking his head. “No way, man.”

“Had to. Any time he ate, the mice gathered around. Couldn’t take it anymore. Spent months in his workshop coming up with a prototype. Didn’t stick to cheese. Turns out that mice eat the same thing as crawdads, which means anything that’s not nailed down to the ground.”

Noreen placed her glass on the counter. “Whenever the trap catches a mouse, it self-fulfills. A self-fulfilling prophecy.”

“That’s right. You got it, girl!”

One year later, Noreen met Mark at a company picnic. He wasn’t dressed in khakis, but in jeans. He was getting ready to swing. “Hey, college girl.” He waved to her from the batter’s mound. “Remember me?”

She called to him, “Sure! Don’t forget the cheese.”

Landon was slightly offended. He rested his hand on the shallow shelf of her hipbones. “Whoever in God’s name is that?” Landon always sounded like he’d just come from central casting for *Gone with the Wind*.

“No one important.” Noreen had met Landon at her job where she ran the back office and tallied how many orders were coming in for each of the southern regions, tedious work

that required her to sort through piles of yellow paper and consolidate everything on a single sheet that got included in the department's monthly sales report. Everyone she worked with said how lucky she was to attract his attention, the young chief counsel of J.J. Miller, who was on his way up. "Stick to him, girl."

The sides were tied and it was the end of the inning. Mark's team was largely made up of employees from a pipe supply company where he also worked. "Hey, Noreen," he waved back. "This one is for you." He pawed the ground, flared his nostrils and waited for the right pitch, the visor of his hat pulled down. A ball came toward him and he kissed it hard with the end of his bat. Mark hit a two-run home run. Noreen pushed Landon's arm away from her waist and clapped.

"What's up? You're not supposed to cheer for the opposing team."

"He's an old friend," she said. "We go way back."

Landon smiled, placed his arm on her waist again, and waltzed Noreen to his BMW in the parking lot. He was not stupid. He could tell when a dart had hit its target.

Noreen dated Landon for another year. She kept repeating to herself all the things that her friends kept saying: He's so good-looking. He's such a good catch. But after awhile, she realized she liked camouflage more than she did linen and told Landon that she wanted to call it quits.

Vernon found out. "Bad mistake. This is gonna cost you big-time."

"Really? Didn't bother you when you slept with your sluts in Atlanta."

“Noreen!” He’d ruined her mother’s life. He wasn’t going to ruin hers also.

She answered Mark’s messages on Facebook. When Noreen told Patricia more about him, she used the word lighthearted. “He makes me feel lighthearted,” and she danced around the kitchen table.

In those first few weeks of being lovers, they did their weekly shopping together, two carts that rolled side-by-side down the same aisle that merged over time into one cart.

They hoarded every detail about each other’s lives. Noreen learned that Mark had grown up in San Diego. His stepfather was an ex-military man who worked as a detective, and thought Mark’s first name was Sport. “Sport, mow the lawn, Sport take out the garbage, wash the car, get me a six pack. Sport, get the fuck out of here.”

He thought his stepfather’s first name was Creep. “What’s the Creep doing now?”

“Shut up. You mean your stepfather?”

“Yeah, him. That Creep.”

After several years, his mother had divorced the Creep. Problem was, that placed the spotlight back on Mark and whatever he was or wasn’t doing.

In his late teens, Mark told Noreen how he’d traveled around the country. He explored the California coast drinking beer and smoking pot everywhere from Crescent City to San Diego with a brief rest stop in Mexico. He drove around the Gulf of Mexico and worked odd jobs, hired on as a swamper driving heavy-haul vehicles transporting supplies to oil rigs. On his day off, he wandered in a mall sipping Slurpees and watching pubescent girls

parade past him in denim shorts and pastel mini-tops. He was bored and lonely. Outside in the parking lot, a recruiter nailed him and described a career with great benefits and travel to foreign lands. Posters of palm trees and women in white shorts added to the allure.

His mother thought it was a great idea. If the army couldn't teach him discipline and responsibility, who could?

Mark trained at Fort Polk, Louisiana, where the army sent units before deploying them to combat. It rained every day, water edged close to his barracks with daily notices to watch out for baby alligators and snapping turtles that could bite through a boot and take off a man's toes, two at a time.

The Red River was the dividing line between Shreveport and Bossier City, but since she'd met Mark, it had become their river, a place where the sun mottled the water's surface and reflected the skyline along a stretch of casinos that served up Alaskan crab and prime ribs to visitors throughout northern Louisiana. They walked along its shore and pointed to spots where they'd gotten high with friends. "Right over there, behind the hardware store," she told him. "Around the corner. Not far from the science museum. But I'm talking too much. What was it like being in the army?"

"I stayed high to deal with the stress. But I wasn't the only one. Guess some of those army choirboys managed to stay clean. Stopped using once I came back."

Occasionally, Noreen got blasted with Patricia, smoked weed with friends, but never did hard drugs. If anything, Vernon had instilled in his daughter a strong regard for a

balanced budget, and a drug habit was antithetical to a savings account. She'd shared her stories about growing up under Vernon's watch, how he'd tried to make up for those years of being a lousy husband by being a tyrannical father. He told her she could never do anything right and how she was stubborn just like her mother. "Never mind about me. I can't imagine what it must've been like for you to be in the middle of a war zone."

Mark kicked an offensive empty beer can until it ricocheted against a tree trunk and rolled along the riverbank. "Got there in 2003, Kandahar Province. The army discovered that the Taliban was about twenty-five miles north of Kandahar. Sent me riding inside a Stryker."

The farthest she'd ever been was to Miami where she and Pat had driven during spring break.

Mark described how an eight-wheeled Stryker carried nine infantrymen. "No, hon, it wasn't shaped anything like a bug. More like an elephant armed with a remote operated weapons system mounted with a M2HB .50 caliber machine gun or a MK 19 40-mm automatic grenade launcher."

"Whoa!" Noreen had no idea what he was talking about.

"And that's not all." He was becoming animated, excited by the armaments of war. "The Stryker could switch from two-wheel drive to eight-wheel drive to save on gas. Nice, huh? Standing inside, I was protected from rocket-propelled grenades by a big birdcage."

"A birdcage?"

“We were the birds. Maneuvered on roads with IEDs.” He pointed to an egret that had just landed a few feet before them. “I was a gunner and George Mahoney was my assistant from Texas. He had this shaved head that stood out whenever he took off his helmet, tattooed with a picture of the brain. He said he could spot danger, and that’s how he was gonna survive the war. George always said he had on his thinking cap. My best friend, he was my best friend.” His voice trailed off. Mark told Noreen how he used a communication device called the Land Warrior. He said it had a lens attached to a helmet that flipped down over an eye and provided maps. “George and I plotted enemy and friendly locations, or marked a trail on the map, by dropping markers—red for the enemy, blue for friendly forces, and yellow for trails.”

She pointed to the seam over his eyes. “This scar?”

He flinched at her touch. “An explosion. I don’t want to talk about that. He saw her scowl. “Another time.” Mark pointed to a boat on the Red River. They heard music and saw people dancing. They stopped and watched a casino boat float past them.

After several weeks, Noreen went with Mark to visit his apartment in Bossier.

Mark walked past a clump of yellow daylilies and opened the door in a run-down house, not too far from Kings Highway. Despite the mild spring, Christmas lights still hung over its porch. He jiggled the lock open. “You know, there was a Big Foot sighting not too far from here. I heard about it from someone at work. Happened near the wildlife refuge.”

“That’s stupid.”

“For real. Guys go camping looking for Big Foot. Tell you what else. James Burton used to live not too far from here. I know that for a simple fact.”

“You mean the same guy who used to play for Elvis?”

His studio had lots of windows but little else, a bed and picture frames of friends leaned up against a mirror, all of them dressed in fatigues. Mark filled up her glass with soda and ice cubes, sat down next to her on the sofa. “So what do you think of the place?”

“It’s got...style.”

He laughed. “One way of putting it. I’m gonna move away from here as soon as I can.”

“Where to?”

“To my own place.” Noreen watched him over the rim of her soda. “Wait a sec. Stay there. I’ll be right back.” He went to the bathroom and returned with a brush and motioned for her to sit in front of a mirror. She hadn’t counted on his being kinky.

“Got to do something about your hair, girl. Welcome to Mark Goshen’s beauty salon. We do cuts and brush outs. Sit right down.”

She was charmed by his northern accent. “Ouch. Stop pulling.”

Mark smoothed the length of her hair, parted the cascade into two bunches, and kissed her neck. “Sit still, girl. I’m not done with you yet.”

“Yes, you are.” She stood up and gripped his belt buckles, drew herself toward him, squashed her breasts hard against his chest, wanting all of her to rub off on all of him,

standing in front of two blue plastic crates that served as chairs. There was a desk and a wooden door held up by cinder blocks. He took her hand and pulled her to the bed. They laughed, rolled side to side, and turned on the radio. Country music. Got up to dance and fell down again, their clothes in a heap. He touched her throat and ran his fingers along her collarbone, his hands climbed her body, touched the roof of her mouth with his tongue. Noreen kissed him back. Felt his need reach out toward her. He ran down the open crease of her ass with his fingers. She tasted him, licked him clean. Mark did a tilt-a-whirl and looked at her brown hair spread over the pillow, discovered the lily tattoo below her breast, made an expedition of her body from top to bottom, then mounted her. Both of them shuddered, lassoed in a warm sticky wash; all night long she breathed in the fragrance of Mark's neck, so different than her times with Langdon, his own smell like an astringent. A peace stretched into her bones as clear and as wide as the bayou. When they awoke the next morning, he made her a strong cup of black coffee.

Noreen finished community college. Neither of them had money and wanted to find a place together. They relocated to Hentsbury where the housing was cheaper, rented a one-bedroom originally built by Rand-Atlantic for employees at the mill, sheathed in drop-siding cut from yellow pine and painted white. The foundation was made of pillars of red brick placed every three feet around the perimeter. Newer homes weren't much better, barracks with basketball hoops in the front yard and a circle of white lilies, heads limp and sighing in the heat. She hated the squat flatness of the place, aluminum arms sticking out from the side of the mill like robots abandoned on the assembly floor and bleeding ash and smoke. She hated the predictability, the smells, the rows of aluminum

body shops and squat storage facilities, restaurants that were embedded with grease from years of serving up bacon and fried catfish, walls that hadn't been painted in eons, all the stories about relatives living within a two-hundred mile radius and the clinics that doctored to their ailments. But Noreen also knew Hentsbury better than any other place because she had grown up where her Grandfather Shields lived. He was related to the original Shields family who had set up the plant and later sold the business to Rand-Atlantic. Noreen had encouraged Mark to apply for a job. After all, she said, he had veteran status and her grandfather might be able to help him out with connections. "All you have to do is mention his name. Everyone in town knows him."

Mark planned to stay at the company for five years and then open up his own pipe supply business. "We'll do great, babe," he said, and traced the lines in her open palm.

"What says Zendo the Magnificent?"

"I see a long life together."

Noreen loved thinking about their future—colorful balloons with strings entwined around each other.

Her period was always regular, maybe missed a day or two, but never three weeks.

Sitting in the bathroom, she rocked the tip of her uterus hoping to coax a recalcitrant period into its full flow. Nothing. She panicked. "Patricia, are you sure this is the right kind?" Her friend from Bossier was visiting.

"They're all the same. Pee on the damned stick and find out."

Noreen returned to the bedroom. "What am I going to do?"

"You want the baby?"

"Yes."

"Problem solved."

"It's not that easy."

"Well, girl. Tell me anything that is."

In the same way that she'd organized her life into a balance sheet of profit and losses, Noreen wondered if this was a good time to have a baby. Mark disappeared after dinner and showed up later, blowing leaves out of the garage at eleven o'clock at night, washing plastic containers in the sink at midnight. She thought he was going crazy. Maybe he was seeing someone. Finally, it was her own body that gave her the answer, a vibrancy that hadn't been there before, a tingling to the edges of her brown hair that took on a new sheen as her body glowed back at her when she looked in the mirror. She'd left a message on his cellphone. I'm pregnant. Mark had come home that evening and took them out for dinner. He'd presented her with a bouquet of pink carnations. But as time went on, he kept telling Noreen he had to work late at the palletizer. He said he was making extra money for all of them. At night he grabbed the bedcovers, threw pillows, and screamed, "Watch out!"

"It's me. Noreen. I'm here, Mark. It's okay."

Beads of sweat hung inside the lines of his forehead. "I'm worried."

“Things are getting better, for all of us. The baby.”

“I’m lucky if I put in thirty hours a week at the palletizer.”

“I’m making money, and after the baby is born, I can work from home.” Noreen was doing part-time work for a CPA firm in Hamburg, which was owned by a friend’s husband. She wanted to believe that love could heal everything.

“That’s not what I mean.”

In the evening, he left messages for Noreen on the kitchen table that he’d be right back. Sometimes she’d get up in the middle of the night. He wasn’t there. She’d turn on the local news to see if there’d been an accident. She started to hear other people talk and didn’t like what they were saying.

“So was the whole crew laid off?”

“They said they needed a more experienced operator.”

“Who said?” Two months pregnant, Noreen was short on sleep and in no mood for bad news. Everything had started out so great between them; now he hardly came home anymore, and when he did, didn’t kiss her hello. Just stared at his computer.

She stood behind him massaging his neck. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Will only take a minute.”

But it always took much longer. If it wasn’t important, why wasn’t he with her? She felt nauseous. Noreen went into the kitchen and started to make dinner, stirring and

splattering oil on the stove. He shouted at her for being careless and then said he was sorry. One night she slammed her soda can on the table.

“I just got a piece of paper, hon. It’s the only thing anyone would tell me.”

“Well, dammit. Did they say for how long?”

“We’ll be okay. I can collect unemployment.”

“Was it because you were using? Getting high on another 8-ball? Tell me the truth, Mark. Don’t lie to me.”

He decided at this moment to do a thorough exploration of his back pocket. “Why do you care so much?”

“Oh, please. Do I have to explain that to you? Are you ten years old?”

He backed off. “I’m still getting over Afghanistan. “Once I came back, a part of me had become diseased. Now everything thinks I’m a monster.” He shook his head. “I came back changed. I need you, Noreen.”

“I need you, Mark. But I’ve changed, also, or haven’t you noticed that I’m pregnant?”

She rubbed her stomach. “Stupid me, hoping the baby would change things. Bring us together...but you’re gone all the time. I keep looking outside at the carport. I can’t handle this anymore.” The words slipped out of her mouth. “I’m leaving,” she said.

“Where the hell are you going to go?”

“I’ll figure it out.”

“But you can’t.”

“Watch me.” The next day she collected a bunch of empty boxes, packed her books from school and climbed into Old Faithful. Mark stood in the driveway, his hands sunk deep inside his pockets.

She moved in with her grandfather Shields and advised Mark that he could sink or swim and she didn’t give a flying fuck either way. Noreen heard from her friends how he worked around the clock, did push-ups on the kitchen linoleum, one hundred at a time. How Mark went duck hunting and stayed in the blinds all weekend, how he got reinstated at his old job at the palletizer.

She missed him the most in the evening after the dishes were put away and she had retired to the bedroom. Knowing there wasn’t anything to watch on TV, she pulled back the sheets and expected him to enter the room holding a glass of something cold, jiggling ice cubes until he set them down on his desk. She missed his personal rituals, even the ones she disliked, like his smoking cigarettes. She missed hearing him call her “honey” and “babe,” and the music of his voice. She missed the way he talked to cats and dogs, and how he made love to her like a wide-eyed boy startled between her legs. Noreen turned toward the emptiness of her bed and clasped her growing stomach. She phoned him. She knew he’d be on break. “Hi. It’s me.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Doctor says everything is fine. The baby is coming along fine. Me too.”

“That’s good.”

“I’ve found out about a special rehab program for vets.”

“Why would I want to talk to strangers? Don’t ask me to do this, Noreen.”

“It’s an outpatient program. Three days a week in the evening for three months. Please, Mark. We can’t get together again unless you do this. I need you to do this.”

He hesitated and began to say something about money.

“It’s free. There’s a registration fee. But don’t worry... Vernon said he’ll pick up the tab.” She lied, but it was a little lie. She’d saved up enough money from her part-time job.

“I thought Vernon couldn’t stand my guts.”

“He’s been hearing about how good you’re doing since you got transferred to Bryan’s unit. People can change, you know. Even Vernon” She wanted to believe that. Noreen was glad Mark was working with Bryan. He was a single dad. She thought he’d be a good influence.

After a month, She moved back in with Mark.

Mark drove to Hamburg, about ten miles from the house. There were six other people and the drug counselor, Travis, a Vietnam vet. The room was housed in a nondenominational church that had sold the building to the Veteran’s Administration. It still smelled of

Sunday potlucks—macaroni and cheese casseroles and bean soup. The group sat around in a circle. For the first month of the program, he stared and read quotes plastered around the wall like “One Day At a Time Is All We Need” and other self-righteous crap. There was a roomful of vets. One of the guys had a stump for a leg. One guy talked endlessly about his veteran’s benefits, mostly how he wasn’t getting them. Another guy babbled about how he felt like committing suicide, really upbeat stuff. Everyone took a turn. If you didn’t want to talk, you passed. He listened carefully to the ticking of the clock while his own words collected at the base of his throat.

“Goshen. We haven’t heard from you.” The wheel-of-fortune was about to stop at his number. Everyone looked at him. “It’s been four weeks and you haven’t said anything. But you keep coming back. I’d like to think it’s my looks.” He struck a pose with a hand behind his head. “Or is it?” Everyone laughed. “So how are you feeling about our talks together? Has any of this been helpful?”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“GI, let me be clear: do you think everything we’ve been saying here has been bullshit or what?”

Mark looked up from his hands. “Could be.” Someone lit up a cigarette. Smoke spiraled in the air toward the ventilation unit. The condenser with its collection of black crud rattled, shut off and turned back on again. Then quiet.

“How so?”

“We’re all vets,” he said. “But it’s not the same.”

“What do you mean?” Travis pressed on. “Sand is sand. Guns are guns. Orders are orders. Shit is shit. We’re all part of the same big machine. This is one big fraternity, man, and we all paid a price to get in...and a bigger price to get out.”

Mark detached a dangling button from his shirt, and twisted it away from his collar. For weeks, he’d been meaning to sew it back on, but didn’t want to ask Noreen. She had enough to do with the baby. He stared at the white plastic button as though it had offended him, and slipped it back inside his shirt pocket and then gave a blank stare.

“Goshen?” asked the group leader. “Do you read me? We’re waiting for you to edify us. Something about everything being bullshit?”

Mark rearranged his shirt. Then he blurted, “My story is not the same as yours.”

“That’s good, Goshen. That’s good. How do you mean? We’re listening. Keep going, soldier.” For a moment he balked. Faces leered at the doorway, wraiths that wanted to drag him away. He survived when he should’ve been dead.

“Go on, soldier,” said Travis. “We’ve got your back.”

Mark looked at him helplessly, threw up his hands as if to begin. But once again he remained mute, words strangled his throat. Mark looked at Travis mournfully, pleaded with his eyes for Travis to leave off.

“You can do this, soldier.”

Mark took out a cigarette and held it between his fingers. One of the other men in the room handed him a lighter. His hands were unsteady. Someone lit the cigarette for him.

Mark described how his unit drove through pomegranate orchards, grape fields and heavy vegetation, all cut by canals or separated by earthen walls. “You wouldn’t believe how fucking beautiful... We had been asked to rescue a patrol that had been surrounded by enemy fire and were running out of ammunition fast, traveling on Route HAWK, which was the only paved road in the area that ran northeast to southwest and entered Kandahar city from the west.”

Words were falling out of his mouth now; he couldn’t stop... “Route RED BEAR, an unpaved road, ran parallel to Route HAWK, west of the Arghandab River. Two routes merged south of Forward Operating Base Frontenac. That’s where it happened.”

He didn’t know why, why he had been the only one to come out of an explosion alive. George hadn’t been that lucky. He hadn’t been lucky at all.

One by one, each man sitting around the circle approached him, even the guy with the stump who wheeled over in his battery-operated chair.

“I’m sorry, bro.”

“That sucks man.”

But it was Travis who hugged him, wrapped his arms around Mark’s torso like a mother pulling her baby from a bathtub. “You’re looking down at death and it’s a big black hole.

Gotta fill it with something. You've got to fill it with something else." Mark wrestled free. "It's your job to keep living. That's what George would want you do." He reached for his hand.

Mark began to cry, felt like a fool, a loser, sitting there in a circle of men who didn't say anything, just watched his chest heave up and down. Then each one of them spoke, "We feel you, brother. We feel you."

Chapter Twenty-one—Car Seat

He was watching a war movie on TV. Noreen had just come home.

“How come Raymond only sleeps when you’re with him?”

“Sorry, hon. Can’t reveal trade secrets.”

She laughed. A few bombs exploded as a soldier looked out of a jeep wearing a camouflage helmet, holding a steering wheel that had come loose. Charlie Sheen in Platoon. Mark eating a hamburger. Depot waiting for him to give him a few hand-outs of French fries. “Don’t those movies upset you?”

“They’re only movies, hon. Travis says it’s not a bad idea. Says he might use it as a new therapy. Help put distance between the real and unreal, something like that. Gave me a list of his favorite war movies. Anyhow, how was your grandfather today?”

She chewed a hangnail. “Not eating much.”

“But what about those groceries you keep buying?”

“Don’t know. Maybe I should talk to Kim. Thank God she’s with him.”

“Listen, babe. Gonna leave to do a few errands. Be back as quick as I can.”

She left Kim a message, peeled off her clothes and went into the shower, scrubbed herself bubbles of soap. The suds encased her belly, streamed down her legs. She washed a second time and rinsed, touched her swollen breasts, traced her dark nipples. She turned

off the water and wrapped herself in a towel. What if Raymond woke up and started to cry while she was in the shower? She opened the bathroom door. Everything was quiet, the baby asleep. The phone. Ringing.

“Hello?”

“Miss Noreen?”

“Yes.”

“It’s Kim.” Kim Perkins was an older woman who had retired from the town library.

“Sorry, I couldn’t pick up the phone when you called. I was unloading wash.” Ms. Perkins helped her grandfather at home to make extra money.

“Have to do my own.” Noreen wrapped the towel around her shoulders. “Saw my grandfather today.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Is he eating okay?”

“Well, he has a hard time keeping down solid food.”

“What about all those cans of soup?”

“Mr. Raymond gives them to me. I hope you don’t mind. He says he hates to see food go to waste. He can’t wait to meet his new great-grandson. You coming by soon? He said you would. Congratulations, by the way. A new baby is a blessing.”

“Thanks, Miss Kim.”

“But the doctor did give him some medication for pain,” she remembered. “I drove him to his appointment last week.”

“Did the doctor say anything?”

“Nothing that he talked to me about. Mr. Shields met with his personal doctor, a Dr. Trang.”

Noreen jotted down his name. “Thanks for everything you’re doing.”

“Yes, ma’am. You take care of that new baby.”

Mark drove several miles to the recycling store, formerly a feed barn with high ceilings and beams across the ceiling. He walked inside and a doorbell rang, made it sound like the ding-dong of a schoolhouse. To his left, there were glass shelves filled with different pocketknives. On another sat appliances, their electric cords wrapped around their motors. In addition, there were teacups and coffee mugs and the usual bric-a-brac. But he quickly scanned the refuse, tried to pick out what he needed, and walked to the back of the store near the cash register.

“Hey, Mark.” She was the owner’s daughter, blonde and blue-eyed in tight jeans with boots and a midriff shirt exposing her navel, her idea of a Nashville country singer. “Can I help you?”

“I heard you have a used car seat.”

“Not used,” she giggled. “Pre-owned.”

She dug in the back and pushed a bridge table and a vacuum cleaner out of the way.

There was a lamp whose base was the neck of two swans entwined around each other.

“Here it is,” she said. “The seat is torn, but you can use electrician’s tape to patch it up.”

She wrestled with a chrome handle and tried to pull it loose from the wreckage. “Let me help,” he said, as she took a moment to press her breasts firmly against his back.

Mark ignored her. Instead he set the seat on the counter to make sure that the belts snapped. He’d clean up the corduroy seat. “How much do you want for it?”

“Depends. I can give it to you for fifteen.” Mark took out his wallet. “Or I can give it to you for ten if you put me in touch with somebody local who’s cooking up stuff.”

“What do you mean?”

“My brother told me to ask around. Said you’d be the real person to know. He says Sudafed and fertilizer are what people are using these days.” She stood up straighter and whispered in his direction although there was no one else in the store to hear. “Easy enough to buy. Visit two departments in Walmart—pharmacy and gardening. It’ll take you longer to stand in line.”

“How old are you, girlie?”

“Fourteen.” She rocked her hips forward.

“Does your mother know what you are doing? And tell your damn brother to go to hell.”

“Too bad. I thought you were one of those really cool guys.”

“I don’t want to be one of those cool guys. Find a life before you lose the one you already got.” He took out a ten from his wallet and laid it in front of her. Anyone who had lived in Hentsbury for more than six months could walk out their front door and find any trailer where they were cooking up stuff. He guessed she was bored and flirting. What else was there to do in this town if you were fourteen? Even last week he’d heard that a group of kids had siphoned off anhydrous ammonia from a fertilizer truck parked overnight in a Walmart lot. He guessed no one would find them. Every day he looked at Noreen and Little Raymond and promised himself he’d never start using again. “I’ll buy this seat here, if that’s okay with you.”

“Whatever,” she said. “I guess Big Daddy doesn’t know how to play anymore.”

Sonofabitch. The school bell jolted against the door as he walked out. The heat hit him square in the face. He put the car seat in the trunk and drove home. They put the seat into the car and tried it out for size. She wouldn’t go anywhere with the baby unless he was in a car seat.

Noreen relaxed on the couch. She had spent the last several hours cleaning and was watching The Ellen DeGeneres Show. Ellen made her laugh. There was a stack of papers on the coffee table, bills. It was getting easier with Mark working more regular hours on Bryan’s team. “Maybe I should let Vernon come by. After all, he is Ray’s grandfather. But I hate the way he treats you.”

“You two were fighting long before I ever showed up.” His cell rang and he placed the call on hold. “Vernon.”

“Vernon?”

Mark nodded. He pressed the phone into her palm. In the meantime, the dog whined. “Sit, Depot...Go ahead and talk to him.”

She made several confused hand gestures, the last one being a revolver to her forehead.

She put the phone on speaker. “Hi, Vernon.”

“Good time for me to stop by?”

“No, please don’t. The place is a mess.”

Vernon tried again. “I’d like to see my grandson, if that’s okay with you.”

She whispered to Mark, “He wants to stop by.”

“Tell him it’s okay. It’s okay,” he reassured her.

“What time?”

“Would an hour be too soon? I can’t stay long. I have to check a few readings at the plant.”

Oh why, why, why had she said yes. Vernon was going to come by and he would see the dirty dishes piled up on the sink and the wash waiting to be folded in the laundry basket and the garbage filled with stinky diapers and she didn’t even have a beer to offer him.

She had gone shopping for her grandfather but bought nothing for herself. How stupid. But then she remembered. There was a six-pack of a microbrew from Fayetteville that friends had given her after Raymond was born. They were saving it. She had shoved it into the back of the refrigerator. "I don't know what to do first."

"Relax," he said. "Just put up a pot."

In exactly one hour, Vernon's outline was visible through the screen door, his image mapped into small squares. His nose had a tilted fleshy end. His green eyes were flecked with hazel. An Adam's apple bobbed above a silver Ranger's ring at the knot of his tie. He held a package with the largest red ribbon Mark had ever seen.

"Welcome," he said. "Good to see you, sir."

Vernon stepped through the doorway and they shook hands. He looked around and saw a neat kitchen, not a dirty dish in sight. The kitchen's plywood cabinets were stained walnut with white handles and the linoleum floor mimicked the pattern of pinewood. Venetian blinds covered the windows. Two coffee mugs rested on the sill where the stem of a begonia was rooting in water. Mark motioned for him to sit down. Couch cushions were plumped; yesterday's sports section was folded on the coffee table. Elves.

Noreen ventured out of the bedroom holding Little Raymond. Depot danced around her heels. She had taken a quick shower and swept her dark hair upwards with a bronze clip, dressed in shorts and a day-glo orange tank top for the hot weather. She wore a thin gold chain around her neck, playing dress-up for daddy. She usually wore sweats. "I just changed him," she said, and held up Raymond bundled in a plastic diaper that had

miniature dogs running around his waist. "Meet grandpa," she said, and walked to the couch, cradling the baby in her arms.

Depot dropped a rubber toy at Mark's feet. "Not now, Depot. Lie down!"

"You need to take him out for walks," said Vernon. "Labs need exercise."

"Vernon, I think Mark already knows..."

"Babe, it's all right."

"Can I hold him?"

Noreen lined Vernon's arms with the baby, laying his feet down first and his head last, his hair a reddish tinge that whorled over his skull.

"Hi there, Little Raymond." He gazed into the baby's eyes and tickled his chin, allowed the baby to wrap a hand around his forefinger. He looked up at Noreen. "Thank you for allowing me to come by. I know we've had our disagreements, but this isn't one of them." The baby drew him toward an invisible root that connected him with his past, to his wife, Dina, to Noreen and all the Shields family, there in his arms, this infant whose fists beat the air for his own portion of entitlement. After a few minutes, Vernon handed the baby back to his daughter. "I brought a gift." He pointed to the package that was sitting on the floor.

Noreen gave Raymond to Mark and removed a huge red ribbon. "I'll save this for Christmas packages." She worked her way through the wrapping paper, foil with the words "Congratulations," and "New Baby," printed between pictures of ice cream cones

and balloons. "It's a car seat," a deluxe version with a leather cushion and a double safety catch with certificates of excellence included in the package.

"It's beautiful, sir," said Mark. "Can't thank you enough."

"Want a cup?" asked Noreen. "Just made a fresh pot."

"No, thanks. Need to get going. See you soon, I hope." He waved good-bye to the baby, wiggling his fingers. "You doing okay, Mark? Everything all right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Glad to hear it." Vernon opened the screen door and got in his Tahoe.

Noreen scooped up the red ribbon and wrapping paper into her arms and threw everything up into the air. "Whoa! That went a whole lot better than I thought."

Chapter Twenty-two—The Deal

As Safety Coordinator, Dwayne was a hard man to pin down. He seemed always to be away on inspection, or visiting vendors for samples of defoamers and degreasers and who the hell knows what else. Bryan suspected that in between visits, he was busy installing deer stands outside his hunting lodge.

Dwayne had a regular team who worked for him, mostly guys who hunted in the same lodge and who rotated vacation time so they could hunker down inside deer stands and bag enough steaks to freeze for the winter, men with back problems and diabetes who didn't take their doctors' warnings too seriously, especially if it meant changing diets or quitting smoking, not that Bryan had done that either, but he was on the patch and trying to quit, wanted to be alive as long as he could for his daughter. Who knows? Maybe some day he'd even have grandchildren. Many of those same men had been on Vernon's team before Dwayne had corralled them into a separate group. Before then, both sides of the house had worked side-by-side.

Dwayne's men operated an antiquated piece of equipment called the dead man, a system of ropes and pulleys that trawled the bottom of the reclamation ponds. The actual "dead man" was a large bucket that dumped out a constant supply of muck for Bryan's crew to smooth out in layers of "cake," remains of fiber products. It took a full week in the upper pond to do the job. Then they set up equipment in the lower pond to begin the same thing, back-and-forth, twelve months of every year. Rand-Atlantic didn't believe in equipment

upgrades. Neither did Dwayne's crew because if the system was automated, they were all slated to become dead men—out of a job or relocated to another state.

In the past, most of them had worked with Bryan. They had gossiped about why he had been crowned Vernon's golden boy, but Bryan had certificates, even if he didn't have seniority. After a few weeks, they stopped bitching. They admitted that none of them actually wanted to work for Vernon. He paid too close attention to the time clock, which meant there was less time off to go deer hunting, which was the only good reason to work at all.

Dwayne had just gotten off the phone with Lopez, an engineering grad that the company had hired to put in a new diamond robotics division in the mixing plant. Dwayne wasn't sure if Lopez had a green card.

"McCullor, from Safety."

"How can I help?"

At least the man was polite. "We've been having a hydrogen sulfide problem."

"Robotics is not the issue."

"How can you be so sure? We're concerned about guys passing out at the detention ponds. Maybe your area has changed the mix to cause that to happen?"

"What did you say your name was?"

Lopez had begun to annoy him. "McCullor."

"Sorry, McCullor. Already talked to Wolfe and walked his guy, Thurmond, through the operation. He's monitored the wood chips in the boiler and said it was okay. I'm not even sure we're going to bring that online. What can I do for you?"

"I heard we were flushing out the system."

"Wolfe didn't tell you? A week from today," he said. "Next Monday. We're getting ready now. Running a few more batches through. We'll be down for a week."

"A week?"

"Environmental guys want to see if there are leaks or a chemical mixture that has to be retuned. If the mix of air in the boiler is right."

"You really think that's gonna do the job?"

"Last place I worked we recycled everything."

"No fucking way."

"Way. Evaporated black liquor from the vats, used the dissolved wood material as steam and electricity."

"Can't hear. Too noisy."

"It's a closed-cycle system," said Lopez, shouting each word slowly.

"You don't have to scream, for crying out loud. I'm not fucking stupid." Then Lopez

rattled off something that Dwayne heard, but didn't understand about treating effluents from different stream sectors. "We controlled nitrogen oxide emissions from the recovery boiler and lime kiln from the auxiliary boilers by controlling the firing conditions. Collected and reused. I already walked Thurmond through the whole thing. Suggest you talk to him about it."

Sure. Like he was gonna do that. Dwayne didn't like being the last one to get information and the collection plate wasn't being passed his way. "Sounds like you don't think this is gonna work."

"Didn't say that, McCullor. Talk later, gotta go."

"They teach you all that in school?" But Lopez had already hung up. Dwayne stood there was the silent cellphone to his ear. He'd stop by to talk to the smart-ass in person. Maybe his department needed more hard hats, safety glasses, and earplugs, stuff that Dwayne always was good for.

"Where can I find Dwayne?" Bryan got a shrug. "Know where he's hiding out?" Bryan asked someone else at the ponds and got the same response. To his surprise, he found him sitting in his office on the second floor of the administration building, consulting the oracle of his cellphone.

Dwayne motioned for Bryan to sit down. "What can I do to you, Thurmond? Little early for house calls, ain't it?"

“I was thinking how I needed to pay my buddy Dwayne a visit this morning.”

“Bet you were.”

Bryan lit up. He'd run out of patches. Dwayne got his cigs and blew out a puff of smoke. Opened a window. Sat back down. A deer head was mounted on the wall behind them and stared across the room with glazed yellow eyes. “So what's on your mind?”

“Appreciated how you helped out with the bridge. Last minute and all.”

“Good enough. But next time, pizza's on you. Savvy?” Dwayne's eyeballs rested on the ceiling. He aimed a line of smoke at the fluorescent light fixture. “But you didn't come here to call in an order, or did you?”

“Dropped by to pick up those Sensorcons.”

Dwayne sneezed and impaled a worm of snot on his beard. “Damn cold. Can't seem to shake it.” He dabbed at his beard with a tissue and tossed it into the trash.

“So what do you think?”

“Look, Thurmond. You're a good guy and I'll level with you. Don't feel right about loaning out those babies.”

Bryan whined a little bit like a jilted suitor. “Last time we talked, you said they'd be ready in a few weeks, so here I am.” He waited. Dwayne's desk was a mess—junk scattered everywhere—discount coupons for Sweep the Swamp pizza, a pile of keys. “If I didn't know better,” he said, “I'd say you didn't trust me. Now that hurts my feelings.”

“You’re breaking my heart.”

“So are you worried that I might damage the equipment?”

“Listen, bro. You got to understand. Those Sensorcons cost thousands. I’m being cautious.”

“Is that a yes?” He didn’t answer. “We’re a team. You and me. Remember?” Bryan watched Dwayne’s eyes dart around like two fish hitting the side of a fishbowl.

“Say I give you those Sensorcons; what do I get?”

“What d’you mean, what do you get?”

“I mean, you’re itching to get those Sensorcons and you can’t stand that I have them. So if I let you borrow them, what do I get? One hand washes the other. Didn’t Vernon ever tell you that?”

“Not exactly.”

“So what did he tell you?”

Bryan hesitated. “What a nice guy you were.”

Dwayne pitched another tissue into the wastebasket. “Anyway, don’t know how you can stand working for that guy. You could have his job in a minute. The way he’s handling this hydrogen sulfide thing. You’d think he was a card-carrying member of those River Walkers, whatever you call those people.”

“How d’you figure?”

“Reporting those readings. Giving out statements to the press about needing more oversight.”

Now they were getting someplace. “Vernon’s got to report those readings. EPA, OSHA, all those agencies. It’s his job.” The portables he used forced Bryan to measure emissions standing right on top of them. Dwayne’s equipment allowed a safe distance, and plus, it was more accurate.

“But you don’t. You can fudge.”

“Why would I even want to do that?”

“We don’t need him.”

“I don’t have any problem with Vernon,” said Bryan. Now the dogs were out of the kennel. Bryan smashed his cigarette in the Hot Springs ashtray that was sitting at the edge of Dwayne’s desk. “But I will tell you what I have a problem with. I know how you falsified documents to get the state board to buy you that fancy equipment. I have a copy of the affidavit you signed right here.” Bryan reached into his back pocket and unfolded a piece of paper and laid it out in front of Dwayne. “That’s your signature, isn’t it, certifying no life in the Mud? We wouldn’t be having this thing with hydrogen sulfide if the company wasn’t dumping out its mega gallons.”

Dwayne took a hard look and folded the paper back up into quarters and handed it back to Bryan. He shook his head. “Why the fuck wouldn’t I sign that? Why the fuck wouldn’t I?”

Bryan popped a Tic-Tac into his mouth. “Dag gummit. You tell me.”

“I know what you’re thinking, Thurmond, but here’s what you need to know. You may be my junior by ten years, but every day we’re rowing inside the same boat and by my count, not getting anywhere. What do you have to show for it? What do I have to show for it? You think Vernon cares about you? Wrong. The only thing he cares about is getting promoted to the corporate office so he can feel good about himself. I know that for a fact. He’s waiting for a chance to jump his checker to the first row of the board and say, ‘King me.’ I’ve worked with the asshole long enough. You think he’s gonna take care of you? Sweet dreaming! Why wouldn’t I sign something if it means that I’m going get a little piece of action? How does that make me any different from anyone else?

Everyone’s screwing everybody else, or haven’t you noticed? Well, I have. No one gives a rat’s ass about Dwayne. And why? Because they think they’re so much better, so high and mighty. Let me tell you something. Last month, my wife had an aneurism and the doctors replaced one of her arteries with a water hose. She can’t move more than a hundred yards without stopping for ten minutes. Everyone’s crying holy warthogs about hydrogen sulfide. The whole world’s filled with bad shit. What difference does it make? We used to sit on the patio and drink together. Now she can hardly get out of bed. And you don’t want to know about my medical bills. I’ve seen the same things happen over and over. The federal government paid my father to plow under his cotton field and left

him with nothing to do except lie down and rot. I'm not going to be screwed over by those same assholes." Dwayne grabbed the tissue box.

"I feel for you, bro. But when that EPA drops by, they'll want to know about those signatures. Your signatures."

"Let them. What do those investigators do all day except sit in a cushy office and push paper around? Probably the same stuff we make here. I'd like to see any one of them do what we do, sweat like pigs in front of these boiling vats and swim in a river of freaking chemicals, filing for disability before we turn sixty. The way I see it, we're giving those guys their jobs. Am I right, Thurmond, or am I right?" His eyes darted back and forth.

"Anyway, Randy Crawford has a few surprises coming his way."

"Like?"

"Like I know something he don't."

"He seems to think he knows everything."

"He don't." Dwayne was certain about that one.

"What do you know about those EPA people? When are they scheduled to show up?"

"December 9th."

"You sure?"

"Got it straight from the horse's mouth. From Crawford himself."

“And what about those Sensorcons?”

“Tell you what,” said Dwayne. “I’m feeling good today. I’ll give you a loaner for a month.”

With better equipment, he could be sure that his readings were on target. “Deal, said Bryan. “I’ll send Mark over.”

“That druggie guy?”

Bryan ignored him. “No, the veteran. You gonna be around?” Dwayne said he’d leave the Sensorcon with Lopez. Bryan got up. “Don’t work yourself too hard, Dwayne.”

Dwayne looked straight into Bryan’s eyes. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I sure won’t.”

Chapter Twenty-three—Gail, the Younger

Getting ready was taking twice as long as she had planned. She corrected a blob of mascara that had fallen into the corner of her eye and accidentally smeared the stuff across her nose. “Fuck,” she said to no one in particular and moistened a tissue to erase the streak. If only she could make the knot inside her stomach disappear. Last night she had stayed up to iron her jeans, which she did rarely. Grunge was acceptable at the nursery five days a week, one of the job’s attractions. She used to work as a registered nurse on home assignments, now was lucky to be spraying seedlings with fertilizer and pricing pots with white stickers—lucky to be working at all. This morning she was going for a different look—something that telegraphed warmth and reliability, two qualities she knew little about.

Gail, Jenny’s mother, tugged at her hair with a brush, trying to decide if she should capture her brown mane into a ponytail or tame the frizz with a blow dryer. After several moments, she pulled the wisps tightly away from her scalp into an elastic band and shook her head and sighed. She was a forty-one-year-old woman with a bad complexion from a steady diet of pizza pockets, corn dogs, and beer. As a nurse, she knew about nutrition, but that was what she could afford right now. A loose white blouse hid her gut. She was trying to eat better; she was trying to do a lot of things better, even taking medicine that caused her hands to tremble. The doctor said the pills controlled her mood swings. She had to take them to keep the courts happy—trembling was the price of her freedom.

Gail looked at the clock, and then at her daughter’s framed photograph from junior high. She wondered what Jenny looked like now. She probably wasn’t wearing braids, any

sixteen-year-old was past braids, but this was her baby, her only child, her little girl who some years ago had written to Gail that she never (and she had underlined the word never twice in red) wanted to see her again, which is when the court had sent Gail to the nuthouse and given her father full custody, or maybe it was after; that whole period in her life remained a blur. The only thing Gail had anymore that belonged to her daughter was Mr. Purrfect. Jenny had left the cat with her because her father was allergic.

It was time to leave. The restaurant was about an hour's drive from her place. One of the nursery suppliers had sold her a '76 Super Sport Chevy Caprice for cheap. She hoped the car wouldn't stall. She took one final look in the mirror.

She could never sleep in on the weekend with Beverly's six-year old brat Jason, waking her up. The kid had a thing for buses and ran an express line every Sunday morning from the living room couch where she slept, to the TV set that was the last stop on the line. Jason wore his baseball cap, a gray relic from the time when he lived with his father, and brummm, brummm, brummed across the wooden floor, a Playskool bus with plastic play people.

"Gail, wanna to get on?" he'd ask. "Ten cents." He reached out his little paw to collect bus fare.

She turned over on her side and faced the cushions. "I'm walking this morning." The kid would never leave her alone. To make matters worse, she'd missed a few mornings picking up fresh flowers from the depot, and Jeff was chewing her ass. He said she was

on probation like she was a criminal or something. Let him try to get up at four in the morning and drive a white van all over town that shimmied at thirty-five miles an hour. But when Beverly came home from work with a shit-eating grin on her face, she knew something else was up.

“Can you babysit this Saturday?”

“Babysit?” Jason really wasn’t a bad kid. It was enough that she picked him up at school every day, which was the price she had to pay for sleeping on the couch.

“A guy at work asked me out, but I told him I had to get a sitter first. Please, Gail. I haven’t been out with anyone for a decade,” which wasn’t totally true because Beverly had been out the previous weekend. “He wants to take me to a restaurant.”

“Who’s the guy?”

“The manager of the auto parts store. You know—the one I always talk about.”

She knew everything about the guy. He had a ten-year old kid and drove an ‘83 Camaro that he’d bought from his father. Bev had told her that he was cute. Other than that, she knew he ate lunch with Bev in the break room every day and liked Vienna sausages dipped in hot sauce. “Nice. How much can you afford to pay me?” Extra babysitting money might be just the ticket she needed to get her ass out of there. She wasn’t making enough at the nursery. Sleeping on couches was getting old.

“Actually, I was hoping you’d do me a favor.”

“Really? I do you a favor every day.”

“Well, if you’re going to be a total shit, how much do you want?”

“Whatever you think is fair.” That was Gail’s big mistake. She should’ve never left the price open-ended.

The guy picked her up Saturday evening and she showed up again at the apartment on Sunday morning, long after the express bus had run around the couch a dozen times. She was trying to get Jason to stop crying, “Where’s Mommy? Where’s Mommy?” The kid was in pajamas with blue dinosaurs running up and down his sleeves and looking at her with long, wet eyelashes. He was in a panic. The freckles on his nose were about to wash off. Oh God. What was she supposed to do?

“Don’t worry. She’ll be back,” she kept telling Jason. But no phone call. Finally, around eleven o’clock, guess who opens the door while she’s standing in the kitchen up to her neck in Cheerios and milk?

“Hey Gail.”

“Where’ve you been?”

She giggled. She definitely was high.

“Tell that to your kid. He’s been crying his freaking eyes out all morning. Where’s my money?” Then Beverly copped an attitude and said she’d never agreed to pay her a nickel.

Gail's eyes blurred. Back when she was little, her mother had called them her bloopies. She grabbed the couch cushions and pitched them in Bev's face and started to dump ashtrays on the floor and ground the mess into her disgusting carpet.

Beverly screamed, "I'm going to call the cops!" Jason ran into his room and shut the door. She felt sorry for him, but she couldn't do anything about his mother being a loser.

"Stupid bitch. Good luck getting someone to pick up your brat who doesn't even know who his fucking father is!"

"Shut up. I should've listened to Stinky!"

"Stinky!"

"She said you always have temper tantrums. Like some freaking three-year-old."

She threw her stuff into a duffel bag. "Shit head," she said. "Talking behind my back."

"Fuck you. Give me my house key."

Delivering wedding floral arrangements in the Louisiana heat was the hardest. Each hydrangea, lily, and rose moved from a refrigerator to a van making sure that flowers wouldn't wilt by the time their team arrived. Linens and white porcelain plates stacked near chafing dishes lined up like defensive linemen ready to block an onrush of people dressed in sequined gowns and rented tuxes, laughing and congratulating each other for knowing such a perfect couple who were going off on a honeymoon to the Bahamas or

Key West or maybe shooting alligators in the Everglades. Her goal was to star in her own extravaganza at Wrightsville Beach in North Carolina, a party that would continue all weekend, guests sitting around a pool shaped like a mermaid, sipping drinks from frosted glasses with tiny pink parasols speared with olives and cherries, passing along envelopes for her to deposit in a white satin bag with a twisted cord. The next day, Gail dreamed that she and her husband would sit like a pair of Bonnie and Clydes on a heart-shaped bed and count their winnings. The plan was to buy a house on Country Club Lane. She could see it: a two-story home with a walk-in closet filled with diamond-studded jeans for each one of their wedding anniversaries.

She kept telling Jeff, yes, she could work any overtime. Jeff was the owner of Boudreaux Nursery and Design Studios. First she slept on her girlfriend Stinky's couch in Shreveport. When they weren't working, they watched TV. She had introduced her to someone who needed an extra hand—that would be Jeff, a man in his early fifties who looked like Burt Reynolds except he had a blonde handlebar mustache. Jeff liked surrounding himself with young things in short skirts, (he called them his rosebuds) but mostly he needed extra hands to help with special events. Society weddings were his big moneymakers, bigger than Valentine's or Mother's Day. All kinds of flowers were flown in fresh from New Orleans via Georgia: roses, sunflowers, whatever he could find in season.

She was a one-woman hit squad. Gail's job was to spray each centerpiece and dispose of any blossom or fern that was starting to fade. Sometimes Jeff would let her prepare branches of flowering quince by shaping their ends. He showed her how to wire a lily's

stem to make it stand up straight, said he'd train her to build centerpieces. If she were a quick learner, he might even hire her, emphasis on the might. Before he began, he selected a base from the storage room where he stored differently shaped bowls, even hearts for Valentine's Day—anchor pins, foam, sculpting sheets. Then he started to build a skeleton, an armature, he said. Depending upon the season, he'd choose forsythia, plum, quince, or, anything with a sturdy stem that wasn't going to break. Around the skeleton he'd anchor flowers, cutting stems to different lengths, sometimes creating a fanning effect with the highest point being at the middle, or moving blooms around a focal area and filling in spaces with greenery, beautiful leaves that could be serrated or striped, even berries poking from between flowers. He liked to use white—roses, callas, carnations—paired with red—more roses, Gerbera daisies—and a third color, orange, or yellow, sometimes lavender depending on the event. She liked tea roses and decided to incorporate them into her wedding. “Learn your palette,” he told her. Jeff pushed a pair of clippers into her hand so she could begin to trim a bunch of flowers for the next arrangement.

Jeff's old lady was from Texas. She showed up about once a month to go out for lunch. The other rosebuds told her that his wife was going out with a sergeant from Bossier City. Some of the girls liked to flirt with him. He was too old for her. She was attracted to Bryan Thurmond, leader of the Do Daddies, a country-rock band. He played for Jeff's wedding receptions, but also in nightclubs along the Bossier Strip. She kept staring at his hands. In Gail's book, a man's hands were his most important feature, the way they were shaped and what he did with them in bed.

Stinky and Gail went to hear him. She called her Stinky because she wore all kinds of cheap perfume. “Maybe you should worry about paying me rent. You owe me three months,” which is why Gail had moved in with Beverly.

Bev gave her free rent in exchange for Gail picking up her kid from childcare and staying with him until she got home from work. She helped Jason hang up his backpack and fixed him a snack. Bev lived in a two-bedroom apartment with a small galley kitchen that smelled of grease and cigarettes. But just as she was getting used to her work routine, Jeff stuck her on what they called the shine shift to pick up flowers from the depot near the river. The only good news was that Beverly knew Bryan. She said that he used to deliver newspapers to her family’s house in Shreveport and finally got the bright idea to ask her cousin to babysit so they could go out and hear him play. “Bryan lived across the street with his foster parents. Think they adopted him.” She put on a pair of tight jeans and a low-fitting top, curled her hair into blonde clouds that drifted along her face. They arrived early. “There he is,” Bev said, and pointed to Bryan. He was setting up speakers. First they ordered a pitcher of dark. “Hi, Bryan. Remember me? I used to live across the street from you. In that old house with the big oak?”

He stood for a moment holding several electric cords. “Little Beverly! Remember how I hit a baseball through your front window? Your dad made me mow the lawn for the entire summer to pay him back.”

“Told you he would remember me,”

“Sounds like he really remembered your father.”

Her friend began to knock back tequila and beer chasers. “Haven’t had so much fun since Jason was born.” Gail doubted that. “It’s not easy being a single mother. Hiccup. And Gail, honey, I don’t believe what everyone says about you. You’re a good person. I don’t believe a word that Stinky says about you. Even Jason says that you’re his favorite babysitter. He says...” The waitress stopped at their table and they ordered another pitcher.

Several hours later, after the Do Daddies had finished playing their last set, Gail dragged Bev through the parking lot. She could hardly stand. “Shit, Beverly. You really outdid yourself.” They passed by Bryan who was stacking sound equipment outside his truck.

“Need help?” He took hold of Beverly’s waist and walked her over to the car. She fell out on the front seat. Gail waited outside. She couldn’t believe she was standing six inches away from Bryan Thurmond.

“You look familiar.”

“I work with Jeff Boudreaux.”

“You the girl with the spray bottle? You’d make a sweet centerpiece. Forget it, just a bad joke.” He gave her two freebies. “Come around to my next show.”

Gail thought she owed Stinky a favor. She asked her to go to Bryan’s show, no hard feelings.

BJ’s was a supper club, a posh place that the Chamber of Commerce recommended to out-of-state visitors. Gail put on a new pair of leather ankle boots paired with an off-the

shoulder knit top and slacks from a resale shop around the Southern Hills district. Stinky picked her up from Jeff's place wearing her God-awful perfume. "Geez, Stinky. Couldn't you tone it down a little?"

"Would it hurt you so much to call me by my real name. My name is Miriam."

Tables were set up in half circles around the stage. A man and a woman at the table next to them wore matching velveteen berets, each with a rhinestone pin of a lizard squirming along the brim. They ordered drinks. Stinky surveyed the field jangling her enormous hoop earrings. The band finally appeared. Stinky couldn't stop clapping.

During a break, Bryan stopped by the table. "Hope you're enjoying the show." He introduced the next song. "Merle always liked to mix a little misery with his gin, and so do we." He took a drink and lifted it to the crowd while everyone cheered and hoisted their glasses. He put down his drink and hit the chords. Memories and drinks don't mix too well and jukebox records don't play those wedding bells...

When Gail got home, Beverly was on the living room couch wearing a T-shirt stained with a blob of spaghetti sauce.

"Hi."

"Where'd you and Miriam go?"

"I'm so tired. Mind if we talk about this tomorrow?"

"Meet any cute guys?"

“C’mon. Can you please move?” Her sheets and pillows were pushed off to one side of the couch.

“Can always count on you to have an attitude.” Beverly gave her a dirty look. The next weekend they had the big fight. Gail handed over her house keys and drove to the flower depot where she slept in the car. In the early morning, she picked up Jeff’s order.

“Look who the cat dragged in.” Jeff was already on the phone. She brought in boxes and wheeled them into the refrigerator room on a dolly. Then she passed out and hit the back of her head on the cement floor. God moves in mysterious ways. Jeff took Gail to the hospital where she got a prescription for Prozac with two refills. Autumn found another place to live. Winter moved in. There were fewer flowers.

Jeff said she could sleep in the back room of the shop for a few weeks. There was a futon whose cushion had been converted into a thin pancake by a succession of people who had sat there watching a small TV. But at least there was a bathroom. Anyhow, she was finishing her Friday dinner of Chinese take-out, when she heard keys jangling at the door. She figured it had to be Jeff. “Hey. What’s going on?”

His eyes were bloodshot and his handlebar mustache drooped. He reeked of alcohol. He looked at her with a smile straight out of the Big Bad Wolf and removed his jacket. Something was not right. “My little rosebud. I’m here to collect the rent.”

She slowly backed up to one of the boxes and saw a metal platter sticking out from the top. "But Jeff," she said, stalling for time, "I thought you said I could crash for a few weeks until I found a place."

"I did," he nodded. "And you have." He kept moving toward her. "And now I have something special to help you enjoy your stay even more." He stepped toward Gail in his designer running shoes and laughed at his own joke. This wasn't the Jeff she had worked with every day who had taught her how to make centerpieces, being sure to graduate the size of stems and branches to create the appearance of movement. "Come here," he gargled under his breath. He grabbed her by the shoulders and slammed into her chest. For a moment, his eyes rolled back into his head. He pressed her hand over his dick. "Feel that, baby."

"Dammit, Jeff," she said, trying to push him away, "have you lost your mind?" She couldn't believe that the man who she'd known for the last six months with a stellar reputation throughout Shreveport was about to rape her.

"I want to see you naked. I want to see you in the night." Fuck. It sounded like a bad country-western song. He pushed her on the futon and up-ended her T-shirt.

"Dammit, Jeff. Get a grip. What kind of drugs are you on?"

His eyes rolled again; he unzipped his pants. She reached for the platter from the box and hit him as hard as she could, but not hard enough to knock him out. She jumped out of his reach. "I don't believe this."

He rubbed his scalp and winced, then removed his hand. It was bloody.

“Tell me, what do you think all your society customers are going to say once I tell them that you tried to rape a twenty-year-old girl? Huh? Do you think they’ll want you to do flower arrangements for their June weddings? Just think about that for a second.”

“No.” He started to cry.

“Idiot.” She left him holding his dick and whimpering on the futon while she reached into his jacket and pulled out a wallet with his money and credit cards. “Don’t think you’ll be needing these.” She stuffed whatever she could into her duffel and ran into the street. One way or another, she was fucked again. Her car was in the shop; she caught the bus and sat in the back, leaned her head against the dirty plate-glass window. The bus was mostly empty. Just a couple holding hands, an old guy hugging a brown paper bag, and a few girls tottering in heels toward their seats. She looked out the window and realized where she was, Bryan’s name on the billboard of The Chaser, a smaller club along the Bossier Strip. She got out.

“ID?” A blonde with stringy hair waved her through a black curtain. Clouds of smoke rose from the back where a half dozen gambling machines lined the wall. A row of backs faced her. A small bar was off to the left with beer signs flashing neon letters—Bud, Michelob, Abita—and a large clock hung on the opposite wall in the shape of an alligator, its tail curved and pointing to the number twelve. She was glad to get away from Dr. Jeffrey Jekyll and Hyde. She kept telling the waiter, “I’m waiting for a friend.”

There was Bryan dressed in tuxedo pants and a black vest like he had just arrived from one of those society weddings, except he wasn't wearing a shirt. "Like the show?"

Twenty eyeballs turned and plowed into the back of her neck. She didn't say anything; tears in at her eyes. "C'mon now. It can't be that bad. Some people even clap when I play."

"No, the show is great. Really."

"So why are you crying?" A bunch of guys had just arrived behind Bryan, given him pats on the back.

After the show, orange bloopies began to swim inside her head, that same feeling of dizziness and nausea. Being sucked inside a tornado. Usually, it passed. Bryan appeared with a guitar strapped around his shoulder. He reached out for her.

She told him, "Someone tried to rape me."

"No way. Did you report it to the cops?"

"I bopped the bastard with a metal tray and ran. Then I came here."

He drove to his apartment, a one-bedroom in a condo development on the outskirts of Bossier and tucked her in his bed. She stared at his beautiful hands. He went to the living room. She heard him turn on the TV. Shortly afterward, he began to snore on the couch. She heard big rigs whiz past the place, headlights fanning through the Venetian blinds and climbing up the wall. She couldn't sleep, wasn't even used to sleeping in a real bed, got up and squeezed on top of him, straddled his legs. Bryan was still in street clothes.

She unzipped his jeans and found what she was looking for, ran her cheek against the length of his penis. “Gail,” he moaned. “We shouldn’t do this right now. Don’t do this.” But she did, and afterward when she felt something warm and bright in her belly, she knew that she had become pregnant and was going to name the baby Guinevere.

The next day she used Jeff’s money to get her car out of the shop.

Chapter Twenty-four—Scalded Ass Dog

It was October and the fan was collecting dust. Vernon had returned from Atlanta and told Bryan to make an appointment with Randy Crawford. “See what kind of information you can get about this EPA visit. We want to talk the same game as the state environmental board. Otherwise, one of us is screwed.”

Bryan wanted to tell Vernon about what he had overheard at the Night Life.

“I tried to get those sonsabitches to understand. D’you think they did?”

“No, sir.”

“Only good thing was being away from this sinkhole. Empires have been built on paper. Did you know that, Thurmond? The Han dynasty in China invented the stuff, wrote down the Emperor’s menu and served it with his tacos and rice.”

Bryan couldn't help himself. "So you like Hentsbury's stink better now?"

"Not the place, Thurmond. A man has to take a certain pride in what he's doing. What's that word?" He stirred the air with his hand. "Integrity. A man's got to be able to look at himself in the mirror and think, there goes a real good-looking sonofabitch."

"A man has to take care of his family."

Vernon opened up a pack of spearmint gum and shook a stick in Bryan's direction. "That's what some men do. Maybe you. Maybe me. Not all, maybe some. I've seen a lot of sorry motherfuckers in my day, and I haven't been all that sterling myself. Takes time to learn how to be a man."

"Maybe so. But I'm still the one who needs to make sure that Jenny turns out okay."

"Did the same thing with Noreen. But let me tell you something, Thurmond. We only get so much say. Our kids grow up and have their own mind about things."

Bryan removed a stick of gum from Vernon's packet and started chewing.

"So Perlson asked me to sit down around the big table. And there's that bozo Chad sitting next to him. You remember Chad?"

"Hard to forget."

"Chad's in a yellow tie and brown tweed suit. Swear it could've come from Goodwill. Perlson asks if I knew why he'd called me over to Atlanta. Told him I didn't. Said he's

concerned about the plant's direction. But get this. Perlson said that he doesn't want to flush out the system. That's going to take over a week. Right? I say right. He said that's too long. Orders double this time of the year. Said the company can't afford to be decommissioned."

"Sounds like he's been listening to Chad Sweeney."

"But I reminded Perlson how he'd already given us the green light. You heard him on the conference call. Remember? He must have early onset. Told him that there's a health and safety issue, and the EPA's getting wind, and all about that Roberts boy during the summer. The River Watchers have been blasting that piece of information as far as D.C, which hasn't helped our case one damn bit. But here's the clincher. Chad told me that Dwayne doesn't think flushing the system is a sound approach. Dwayne doesn't think... You know what I told him? I looked him square in the eye and said, 'Fuck Dwayne McCullor right in his lying ass.'" Vernon smiled like a chubby choirboy. "Now I got it's up to me to figure out how to deal with whatever the EPA is gonna hit us with. When it's over, Perlson will thank both of us. You need to talk to Crawford and find out what the state is planning. Do your reconnaissance."

"Sir, I may not be the best person to talk to him. We've thrown some punches. There was that press conference, remember, the one you sent me to? Crawford got in Lila Shawn's face. And..." He was about to tell Vernon about the evening at the Night Life.

"You need to kiss Crawford's ass and make up. Don't tell me you're going sweet on that River Watcher lady?"

Bryan flinched. "She's sorry-looking." Bryan wasn't about to tell him anything about him and Lila.

"Don't matter. Sorry still goes to bed. Anyway, we're too old to chase tail; it's like stuffing a marshmallow into a slot machine. Probably why God invented those little blue pills. You ever think about getting married again, Thurmond?"

It wasn't the first time he'd asked him that. "Maybe."

"You know Rae-Ann?"

"Everyone does. I mean it in a good way. She runs the Half & Half."

"I like a woman who takes care of business. You know what she told me?" Vernon didn't wait for an answer. "She takes out a half-page ad every year for the town's annual fishing tournament at the wildlife refuge. People trust Rae-Ann. They tell her all their sob stories.

"She knew Pastor Franklin's family before he moved away."

"A couple of years ago, wasn't it?"

"Think so." Vernon kept talking. "Eudora, his wife, had cornered Rae-Ann at the back of the store and blurted out how she had become pregnant at thirty-five years old with their fifth child, but never had told Pastor Franklin. Eudora said she'd been pregnant almost every two years since she had been twenty-four and was getting wore out. But she made Rae-Ann swear not to say a word. That's right; the woman had an abortion. Even Dwayne talked to her. Last week he stepped into the Half & Half. Not a lot of people in the store, just two other guys buying orange juice and talking car parts. One of them was

having problems with his starter. Dwayne pushed them aside at the register. She asked him what was wrong. He mumbled something about Randy Crawford. They're having a fight."

"What's it about?"

Vernon folded another stick of gum inside his mouth and picked up his cellphone. "You make the appointment with Randy Crawford and tell me what he says about us hitting a homerun for Rand-Atlantic. He's the man in charge, at least for right now." Vernon's fan was on full swing. "Find out what's up."

"There's something else, sir."

"Not now, Thurmond." He scooted in his chair to a whiteboard calendar. "How come you're still standing around?"

"Dwayne said that EPA is gonna arrive December 9."

"Dwayne! Why wasn't I informed?"

Bryan shrugged. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Don't be a fool, Thurmond. You know exactly the reason why not. When they're here, we'll have to recommend slowing down production so the smokestacks don't burn full-tilt. Speak to Lopez in robotics. Did you do that already? Hear he's the man in charge. Keep your records straight. I want to see those hydrogen sulfide logs in my office by next week. Lastest Wednesday. You hear me? Even if we can't cover Rand-Atlantic's ass, we can at least cover our own. Don't want to be hog-tied by a bunch of lawyers. Gave it my

best. Tried to help. Don't have a clue what Dwayne is up to, but whatever it is, he's gonna want to run away from this whole thing like a scalded ass dog. Mark my words. At least we have a month to get ready."

"Anything else?"

"I'm counting on you, Thurmond."

Bryan hoped somebody with a lot of pull with the Big Guy upstairs would throw him a line and pull him ashore. He didn't know if he could do it by himself.

Chapter Twenty-five—Grackles

Vernon had known her husband Earl, but always thought of the Half & Half as Rae-Ann's, a place that had begun as a truck stop for coffee, originally staged behind several trees and a gravel parking lot on the border of Louisiana and Arkansas. Drivers kept wanting more—gum, chips, cigarettes, magazines, then canned goods, sandwiches for the road, fried chicken wings, pizza, and sodas, things to sustain them on the long haul between southern Louisiana and the paper mills of Arkansas and farther north up into Minnesota. Rae-Ann's husband got a liquor license and the store continued to expand until his death, which is when Vernon discovered the Half & Half and Miss Rae-Ann. Since then, he'd been asking around. It seemed as though her husband of thirty years had built up the places at the crossroads of two trucking routes. The store had begun as a coffee bar, a place for truckers to buy their morning cup and a pastry. Rae-Ann had baked lemon, banana, and pumpkin breads, cut them into thick slices at one dollar apiece. It was all the same recipe with the addition of different fruit and flavorings, anyone couldn't have done it. Earl's customers kept asking for more—gum, chips, cigarettes, magazines, then canned goods, sandwiches for the road, fried chicken wings, pizza, and of course, sodas to wash it down. The store expanded. Earl nursed his bottom-line until his big day came: he was able to afford a liquor license. Deliveries were made every morning. The driver stacked cases that reached nearly to the store's light fixtures. The place became a goldmine. By closing time, the cases had been reduced from six to one deep. The store's success had made it possible for them to put both daughters through college and now the girls were grown and out of the house. Five years ago, Earl had been

diagnosed with a rare blood disease. It wasn't leukemia. At least that would've been treatable.

Vernon made sure to arrive before she took a lunch break, saw hundreds of Grackles prospecting for worms after a torrential rain. He passed beneath them heading toward the highway where several trucks zoomed by carrying loblolly pine up to the mill, naked toothpicks of wood without a branch among them stacked and spilling over the back of a cab—tree trunks that were about to be transformed into paper products—paper that was indispensable to the lives of men and women—envelopes, stationery, newspaper, folders, books. Civilizations had been built on paper.

Vernon had overseen that process, been entrusted with making sure that the vats of chemicals, which could easily dissolve a man's leg, were safe and protected, that is, until Dwayne had bullied his way into making Safety his own concern. Even so, he had bigger catfish to fry. His job was to protect Rand-Atlantic—to make sure that the company did not receive publicity from its release of mill effluents—chemical runoff. But after twenty years in Hentsbury, his job as head of the Environmental Division was testing Vernon's last nerve. He'd give it one last try. He looked at his watch. Perlson would be at his desk.

"Tray Perlson, please. Wolfe here." Vernon heard several voices in the background. Perlson got on the line.

"Give it a rest, Wolfe. We've been dealing with this forever. Call me next week."

He didn't understand why the company never seemed to budget enough for modernization. Instead, they invested in fences and redirecting county roads so that no one could identify raw sewage that collected in green and black pools at the back of people's houses, ditches not even lined in clay. He'd tried to wise up honchos to the danger that engulfed them; this latest H₂S scare had not been the first, although Bryan Thurmond acted like it had been. Bryan was still learning, still a little wet behind the ears. But it was those River Watcher types who irked him, always acting like he was hiding what was going on. What did they expect? Didn't they have families to support?

Once he got his hoped-for promotion and occupied a spot in Atlanta on the company's national Environmental Safety Team, he'd initiate one small change after another. That's why they needed him, someone who knew the real score, not some bozo who never had to sweat for a living.

He parked the Tahoe and got a thermos from his backpack. Every morning the same thing floated through his head. After he retired, maybe he'd move to Florida and sail around the Gulf, or maybe he'd get lucky and help Noreen raise Little Raymond. Or maybe, and there was another maybe.

He'd always thought marriage was a woman's job the same way that women picked out curtains. He'd met his wife Dina at a company Christmas party. She'd been on a winter break during her last year of college and had come with her parents, a fundraiser for the local Boys Club, daughter of Raymond Shields, a Hentsbury blue-blood. She filled the outline of his fantasy— an attractive woman with connections.

Vernon bought a pecan pie she'd baked for a silent auction. For years, he hadn't thought about that, how she'd handed him the pie and balanced it on her two palms like an offering. Vernon courted her like a military campaign until she'd agreed to marry him, and then got busy conducting other campaigns. He had to create another identify, not that Texas redneck who couldn't afford to have air-conditioning.

She looked at the clock. Rae-Ann had expected him to come through the door at any moment. After all, it was getting close to 7:30. Vernon was always on time. Earl had been the same way. But that's not to say she hadn't heard a lot of scuttlebutt—over the years people gossiped, called him an intolerant asshole, including her brother, Joe Nicholson, who hadn't lasted long as his second in charge. He complained that Vernon was a micro-manager. Of course in his more generous moments, Joe admitted that Vernon was one of the best environmental safety officers around, but not a pleasant guy to work for by any stretch. Rae-Ann was attracted to Vernon's youthful good looks with a head of hair and large hands that could pick up three cases of beer at one time. And she knew by the way he looked at her, his eyes traveling along her neckline to whatever he could see or imagine, that he was attracted to her as well. She was a fifty-three year old woman feeling something that she hadn't experienced for a long time, something that resembled lust.

“Hi, Rae-Ann.”

“Morning, Vernon.”

“How you doing?”

“Clear to partly cloudy.” Vernon moved to the back of the store and waited for Rae-Ann to finish with a customer so he could talk more privately. He stalled and picked up a sugarless candy bar, several packs of gum, and eyed a bottle of energy drink to caffeinate him up for the long day ahead. On second thought he put it down: his doctor had told him to keep away from the stuff—wasn’t good for his blood pressure.

Vernon felt Rae-Ann’s eyes watching him. Now he walked down Aisle 3 toward her, a stream of morning sun shone a spotlight on the whole wheat bread. He picked up a can of Vienna sausage with a pop-up aluminum top and placed it inside his shopping basket. He handed her his thermos, battered from years of use. “I can drink this stuff by the gallon.” She turned on the spigot of the coffee pot and kept her finger on the spout. “A pack of Marlboros, please.”

Rae-Ann pointed to a pack of tobacco-less cigarettes.

“Fuck no.” He shouldn’t have said that. No way to talk to a lady. Rae-Ann handed over the Marlboros and a book of matches without looking at him. Outside a customer parked his car and pushed the door open.

“How’s your new grandbaby?” she asked.

Vernon removed a picture from his wallet, showed her the photo. “One helluva a little guy.” He shoved the picture back inside his wallet. “How’re your kids doing?”

“Youngest just moved to Virginia. Talked to her last night. She’s opening an import-export business. I tell her to be patient. Building a business takes time. She wants me to retire and move in with her. Says she and her husband have an extra room.”

Vernon didn’t like the sound of that. “And what did you say?”

“Oh, I thanked her and said I’d think about it. But between you and me, I don’t want to weigh them down.” Rae-Ann pulled out a package from a shelf below the cash register. She held up an afghan that dusted the counter.

“You taking up crocheting?”

“This is for your grandbaby, doofus.”

Weren’t baby blankets pink or blue? She’d stitched a billy goat across the blanket in white thread. “Noreen’s gonna love it. No one’s ever crocheted her a blanket. Especially not an orange and green one with a billy goat.”

“I love goats.”

“Had no idea.”

“When I was a little girl, summers I used to walk there all the time with my auntie. She’d tell me the story of Billy Goat Gruff and how that was him creating a smelly steam cloud over the Mud River because he wanted to stop us from crossing his bridge.

“I used to ask her, ‘What’s a troll, Aunt DeeDee?’

“She’d tell me, an ugly selfish little man with scaly hands, and he lives right down there,

and if you listen carefully, you can hear him sing:

Well, come along! I've got two spears,
And I'll poke your eyeballs out at your ears;
I've got besides two curling-stones,
And I'll crush you to bits, body and bones.

Vernon took the box and slipped it beneath his arm. A customer walked up behind him. He tasted the spearmint gum he'd chewed on the way over to cover up the smell of cigarettes.

"Wondering if you'd like to come with me to the VFW dance?" The customer standing behind him jangled his truck keys. "It's this weekend. They have live music. A local band."

"Sounds good, Vernon. You know where I live?"

Yes, he knew where she lived. He'd driven by her house all the time. "Saturday at seven?"

"See you then."

Vernon tipped his Rand-Atlantic hat and walked in a straight line to the doorway past cases of beer that were stacked up in columns about five feet high. This is the house that booze built. He laughed at his own joke. Vernon usually was not a funny guy.

Chapter Twenty-six—With Crawford

Once Bryan returned to his office, he called the office of the River Watchers. Lila picked up. “The inspection’s been scheduled for December 9.”

“Thanks, Bryan. I was about to call you with the same info.”

Randy Crawford’s secretary scheduled Bryan for an appointment with Crawford right away, said he had a cancellation and she could fit Bryan into the slot. Just his luck.

On Wednesday morning, he handed Potter the crew’s work assignments and told him to submit reports. Then he drove to Hamburg, about an hour’s ride from Hentsbury.

The environmental board’s district office was housed in a plantation-style building with Greek columns constructed of molded plastic. He’d been there before to pick up test results sent over by the lab in Little Rock. Bryan passed Joey’s Automotive & Towing and the Ashley County Tourist Commission, which was publicizing their forthcoming Dog Rescue Festival with a “Wow the Bow-Wow,” contest about dog breeds, and demonstrations in baking dog biscuits “right from your kitchen pantry.”

Bryan pulled into the parking lot at the back of the building. Jenny would love to go. If they did, he’d end up bringing home an animal. Maybe another time...

The office was on the ground floor of the building. It had lots of glass windows, and a billboard on the lawn about upcoming fishing contests. Bryan saw a young woman behind the desk with a strawberry-blonde ponytail. Dressed in a purple and green pants suit, she looked like an explosion from a paint factory. She smiled politely and raised a

finger to indicate that she'd be right with him.

The secretary muffled her voice over the receiver. "I wouldn't be surprised if she got up and left him tonight. Serves him right." She looked at her calendar. "You Mr. Thurmond? Been expecting you. Have a seat. Mr. Crawford will be right with you." She went back to talking to her friend on the phone.

Bryan reviewed the available reading material, publications from the environmental board in Little Rock and the federal environmental office in D.C., plus an assortment of Fishing & Hunting magazines scattered on tables with several announcements of upcoming country music concerts by the Tompkins Brothers in El Dorado. Bryan selected a publication about North Carolina. He had a cousin who lived near there. After checking the clock for the umpteenth time, Crawford opened his door. "Sorry, Thurmond. On the phone with Atlanta."

His assistant smiled. "Want me to order out? Hump day special at the Down Home."

Crawford was the picture of an Arkansas professional, wore a dark suit and white shirt and an American flag pinned to his lapel. "You like elk, Crawford? Lunch on me."

"Thanks."

They entered his office that was furnished with two leather chairs, an oak desk, and green curtains. "Have a seat. It's been awhile since I've had a visit from the environmental officer at Rand-Atlantic." He shuffled papers on his desk without looking up, found a paperweight inscribed with the logo of the River Rock Casino and rested it on top of the

pile. Finally satisfied, Crawford checked his cellphone to harvest any messages he'd received in the last fifty seconds. "Thurmond, sorry about the wait. Been on the phone all morning with Atlanta. Couldn't be helped. All this EPA business."

"S'okay."

Crawford rocked in his chair. "Guess you understand. Know how you've been rescuing damsels in distress and what not. So tell me what can I do for you on this beautiful morning?"

"Wondering how your office is planning to get ready for the EPA investigative unit."

Crawford reached for his water bottle and screwed open the cap. "Who wants to know?"

"Vernon. He wants to protect both your butts—Rand-Atlantic's and the state's."

"That's mighty neighborly." Randy took a long sip from his water bottle. He tipped his head back until Bryan thought it might touch the top of his chair, thought about other places he would rather be at this moment. Bryan had no idea what Randy Crawford thought about him, but knew he had to remember him. Crawford was playing it cool.

Those other two times he'd been out of his natural environment, not sitting in a big chair in his air-conditioned office, but Bryan didn't think Crawford was the type of man who'd come at you guns blazing. He wasn't Dwayne McCullor, that's for sure. So by the time the man had finished his sip of water, Bryan was curious about what he had to say.

"If you're talking about that hydrogen sulfide spike, I'm well informed." He sat back in

his chair and admired his nails.

Bryan started over again. “Are you aware that a young boy recently died, and that the infirmary has been admitting more men with symptoms of hydrogen sulfide poisoning?”

“You referring to that Roberts boy?”

“Sure am.”

“I’m told that the youngster had asthma and his family couldn’t locate his breather in time. The plant can’t be held responsible for incidents like that. As far as the infirmary goes, they submit monthly reports to this office. There are a slightly higher number of men who’ve been reported with drunks. Maybe they were celebrating too hard after a hunting trip. What do you think?”

“Are you shitting me?”

“Believe me, Thurmond, I am not shitting you.”

“You do know what’s happening, don’t you?”

Crawford took a few more gulps from a water bottle. “Let me tell you what I think is happening. Rand-Atlantic makes millions every year, not just from the mill, but also from other subsidiaries throughout the country. The company’s operations started right in this area. They built Hentsbury from 500 acres of hardwood forest, and they’ve been keeping this place going. I’m no dummy. The state owes them a debt. So we have a unique relationship that continues to this day. Do you catch my drift?”

“No, I’m not sure I do.”

“You’re a smart man, Thurmond. I know you take pride in your work. But I need you to lose the readings about those emissions. Atlanta has been hearing good things about you. Tell Vernon your hard drive crashed. He’ll buy it because he doesn’t know the first thing about computers, anyway. By this time next year, you’ll be in Vernon’s seat and he’ll be standing at the mall washing cars. Too bad he’s so confused and doesn’t know which deck of cards he’s playing with. Don’t worry about the investigative team. It’s pro forma.”

“Are you trying to buy me off?” Crawford had set his sights on Vernon. He didn’t know why, but he could guess—Vernon was too stubborn, independent, and didn’t like signing his name to anything he didn’t believe in.

“Sorry you see it that way.”

“What other way is there to see it?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a free country. Decide for yourself.”

The paint explosion walked inside and placed two lunch bags from Down Home on his desk.

Bryan looked at his watch.

“Word to the wise, Thurmond. Stay away from that Shawn woman. That report she put

together is full of holes. She's pumping you for information. That's all. Using you to get her self elected to public office. I hear she may want to run for my office! Some friends of mine are members of her church. They say she's a nut case, a real cunt. Even tried to take away their fishing licenses. I wouldn't bet money on anything she says."

Bryan stood at the exit. He'd been listening to people like Randy Crawford for a long time, men who thought anyone could be bought off, who knew how to bend people to his own purpose. He was like Little Albert, another kind of mob, but a whole lot less charming. Bryan held onto the doorknob, already half-turned open. "You know, Crawford, I find that very interesting." The doorknob felt warm in his hand. "Because let me tell you what I see. I've been doing this job for six months, and before that, I worked at the reclamation ponds, driving backhoes and four wheelers piling ash into mounds that we covered up with a layer of yellowcake, waste from the mill. When the ash got covered with enough layers, trucks topped it off with red soil so if anyone came around and looked, they wouldn't have a clue what they were standing on. Turnips and Johnson grass, all the way down. But we knew. All of us knew. I've watched men puke out their guts and spit blood, dead fish float down the Mud. I've seen deer with tumors the size of baseballs hanging from their bellies. I held a boy in my arms who was dying because he couldn't catch his breath from the hydrogen sulfide emissions. Do you have any idea what that feels like? Do you really? And you're telling me not to be concerned? You're telling me that nothing is happening. You're telling me to stand around with my hands in my pockets when somebody comes around and wants to know what I've seen? I'm sorry, sir. But I can't do that."

Crawford seemed unperturbed and unwrapped his sandwich.

“I know you went to a bunch of fancy colleges. Have them nailed to your wall. But if you don’t mind, I’d like to ask you one thing.”

Crawford was about to take a bite. “What’s that?”

“How do you sleep at night knowing you’re poisoning a community and its children?”

For a moment, his suit became two sizes too large.

“Thought so. What do you want me to tell Vernon?”

Crawford took out a pickle and savored the crunch. “Tell your boss I’ll be in touch with his fat ass real soon.”

Chapter Twenty-seven—Jalapeños

Bryan didn't have Lila's unlisted number. It was at home. He rifled through his office and found the report Lila had distributed at the press conference with the River Watcher's office number printed at the bottom. Bingo. Punched in the numbers. Called. Counted the rings. Another woman picked up. His hands felt clammy. He was consorting with the enemy.

"Lila Shawn there, please?" He closed his door, nervous. What if she picked up?

"May I ask who's speaking?"

"Bryan Thurmond."

"Bryan? What a surprise. Always good to hear your voice."

"We need to talk. Can you meet me at Brookshires on 165 in Monroe? Tomorrow morning?" He realized he might be pushing it. "Are you feeling up to it?"

"I'm picking up, aren't I?"

"Great. Six-thirty then?"

"You're buying."

"No problem. Thanks, Lila. See you tomorrow."

Jenny was getting ready when he left the house the next morning.

He arrived at Brookshires. A few tables separated the produce section from the deli

counter where they sold fried chicken and potato salad. The market had just opened a sushi counter and hired a group of Asian men in white chef caps to prepare fresh trays, which is what they were doing now. But the idea of eating raw fish didn't appeal to Bryan, even though Jenny kept telling him sushi wasn't only raw fish, and that it was healthier than anything else he ate, including those jalapeño peppers. Along the walls of the produce section were giant posters of melon, corn, potatoes, and red apples. Further down was a discount produce bin filled with items on their way out, but still okay if you knew what to do with them. Bryan held a Styrofoam cup containing enough sugar to give him a morning jolt. He couldn't stay long, had to drive to Arkansas, an hour away. Lila walked through the automatic doors wearing a blue watch cap and using a cane.

"Thanks for getting here early." He pulled out her seat and let her to get settled. "How've you been?"

"Apart from this cane, fine." She took out a pencil and pad. "Have to write down everything so I don't forget. Problem is, sometimes I forget to write stuff down."

They laughed.

He reached for his cigarettes but realized he couldn't smoke in the market. It was just the two of them, not including the other dozens of early morning shoppers, many picking up lunch at the deli counter and hurrying back to their cars with Styrofoam boxes. "Let me buy you a cup." She pulled the cap over her ears and handed him her thermos, hair sticking out in tufts. "Regular or decaf?"

"Regular."

Bryan returned with sugar packets, creamers, and napkins in hand. He took out a tab of Nicotine gum and popped it into his mouth.

“That stuff help any?”

“Not much.”

“So what’s up? What’s the big rush?”

“Remember that evening at the Night Life?”

“How can I forget?”

“While I was setting up to play that evening, I overheard someone talking. He’s the head of safety at the plant. Name’s Dwayne McCullor. He and Randy Crawford were having a friendly chat. Anyhow, cut to the chase, Dwayne told Crawford he was getting antsy because he signed off on legal paperwork about the Mud not having any fish so that Rand-Atlantic could do their dumping there. He was getting fried because he found out this is a public document. Anyone can walk into public records and get a copy. Dwayne said that Crawford hadn’t leveled with him about public documents.” She covered her mouth with the thermos. “Saw Crawford yesterday. Vernon wanted me to find out about this EPA investigative unit that’s bringing their circus act to town, and Crawford asked me to lose all my documentation. Help me out here. I’m getting confused. Any ideas?”

She sipped coffee and tugged at her hat. “Relax. Rand-Atlantic and their friends are running scared. That’s all. The kettle can’t hold the steam. Now Crawford is worried. You hold the key to the castle. Rand-Atlantic says they’re complying with fed guidelines.

Could be damning if those readings go public.”

“What about Dwayne?”

“What about him. I have a copy of his affidavit at home in my files.”

He thought he was the only one who had stumbled upon this information. “You knew?”

“Deacon Turner’s got his eyes and ears. Calls them his retiree spy network. We talk to each other regular about what’s going on. But none of this surprises me. This has been going on for a long while.”

Shoppers filled the aisles of the produce section. Carts wheeled past the table where they both sat. “Good to know I’m not going crazy.”

“Far from.”

“Something else.” He’d been waiting to ask. “Last time, you could’ve bled to death, skull cracked half open on the floor. Why do you do all this?” She stared past the display of fried chicken. Bryan needed a smoke, dreamed about going fishing on Lake D’Arbonne, something he’d read on the Internet to help relieve stress. He visualized water lapping at the dock and boats ready to push off into the water.

“You don’t understand.”

“Try me.”

She poured salt on the table from shaker and inscribed a circle. “After my husband died, I felt sliced down the middle. Didn’t get out of bed for four months. Anti-depressants. Had

the TV on 24/7 thinking about the should've beens and the only ifs. Gerard had wanted to take us to Paris. Said we never had a real honeymoon. I wished I had gone. But I was too busy. I always put him off. 'Maybe next summer, I'd say, or after Casey graduates from college.' He was a good man, and I tried to be good to him, but maybe not good enough. Friends knew I was in bad shape. They told me about the River Watchers."

Bryan sipped his coffee. His father had worked for a diving company in the oil fields. His mother had been a Lebanese woman who'd thrown him from a car window before their crashed heap billowed up into flames. His adopted parents were the God-fearing type. Music had saved him. Drowned out the sirens in his head.

Lila lightly raked her scalp. "Itches." A large white bandage ran along the back of her scalp to her forehead. Her hair hung in clumps, close-shaven spots grew in copper bristles. People behind the counter were setting out fresh trays of sushi. He'd never tried the stuff.

Bryan remembered her beautiful braid. He was sorry that he'd said anything. "Didn't mean...It's just ..."

"Shut up. I know I'm a fright."

She held her hand toward him and it began to shake. "Still not 100 percent. The doctors say that it'll probably take a year for me to recover completely."

"Look, if you need anything, call. Need help with your horses? Dogs?"

"My dogs would tear you to pieces."

They walked out of Brookshires past a display of plastic pumpkins, bright orange globes with black handles and bags of candy, shopping bags in the shape of ghosts. He wanted to check the discount basket for peppers, but he didn't have time. Bryan had planned to cook a big pot of chili over the weekend. Jalapeños always gave it a kick. Maybe he'd invite her, wouldn't mind looking at Lila for as long as it took to finish a bowl of chili and drink a glass of red wine. He walked to her Jeep, but she turned around.

“Almost forgot. My two monsters eat tons of kibble. Have to buy a 50-pound bag.” She stood on her toes, kissed Bryan's cheek, and wheeled a shopping cart back into the supermarket.

“I'll give you a call.”

“Make it soon,” she said.

Chapter Twenty-eight—Lemon Meringue

Jenny was meeting her mother, the first time they'd seen each other in four years. Bryan was taking her to Millie's, a place they used to go to as a family for breakfast after attending church. Jenny came into the kitchen. She had her mother's nose, straight but arched at the end into a small bulb, built small with quick hands and platinum hair that the stylist praised every time she had her bangs trimmed. "Women would die to have your color hair, honey. That's something no one can ever get out of a bottle." She always seemed more mature than most girls. Or more quiet. For months after he got custody, Jenny sat in her bedroom with the door closed, except for when he stuck his head in the doorway and asked, "Honey, how are you doing?"

Jenny zipped her hoodie. "If Gail starts screaming, I'm gonna call you to come get me. My phone is fully charged." She held it up to him like an FBI badge.

"Don't worry. Your Mom is on meds now. But why now? How come you decided to see her?"

She looked out the window past the morning glories growing on their hedge. "I started to remember some of the good things she did before the divorce like the time she baked me a chocolate birthday cake with vanilla icing."

"You ready?" Jenny climbed inside his Tundra. She checked her phone for messages. "Maybe she'll bail." Several empty water bottles rolled around on the back seat as a crop duster circled overhead. Long stretches of soy grew on either side of the highway. An egret poked its beak into a watery ditch that was outlined by wild hibiscus.

They edged their way into Millie's, a coffee shop that sold meals to truckers driving fertilizer along Highway 165. But it also was a family place. Everyone in town knew Millie. She ran the local garden club and offered pictures of different plants for kids to color while they waited for their mac-and-cheeses to arrive. Jenny pushed open the door. There were two oversized men sitting across the floor from her. A man and a woman sat in another booth and shared a slice of lemon meringue. There were a few other customers, but no Gail. Jenny stood in front of the cash register. She turned to Bryan and whispered, "It's okay. You can leave now."

She sat in a booth next to the door and took one of Millie's plant flyers. There were small boxes of crayons at each table. She started to color and watched the door. Two truckers walked toward the counter. One looked around her age and stared in her direction.

It felt like everyone's fork was suspended in mid-air, everything filmed in slo-mo. Her mother walked into the restaurant and craned her neck, looked around for Jenny toward the back of the restaurant. Oddly, no one but Jenny noticed, everyone in booths drinking Millie's weak coffee with free refills. Her mother was heavier, hair several shades lighter than Jenny had remembered. Jenny wondered how long it was going to take Gail to find her. She hid behind the menu and peeked out from behind the napkin holder. What's the first thing you say to your mother after not seeing her for four years, after wanting to see her every morning at the breakfast table, wanting to hear her voice at night? Gail came closer.

"Here you are."

“Hi, Mom.” The word felt round and sweet inside her mouth.

“Glad to see you.” Gail squeezed Jenny’s hand and eased her way into the booth.

“So what do you think? Have I changed much?”

Gail placed her purse on the floor between her legs and quickly surveyed her daughter.

“You’ve grown up.” Jenny noticed the heavy make-up covering the circles beneath her eyes, and a tremor in her hand when she reached for the menu. “Mmmm, let’s see.” Gail scanned the menu for the usual coffee shop items, burgers, hot dogs, and something called zydeco chicken wrap. “A Coke,” she said, and saw surprise on her daughter’s face. She wore a denim suit with silver zippers.

“That’s all? I thought we were having lunch?”

She felt for her purse on the floor between her legs. “Get whatever you want. I have plenty of money. “It’s just that this medicine I have to take makes me lose my appetite. Side effects.”

Her mother had gained, not lost, weight. “A grilled cheese for me and a Coke.”

The waitress took their order. “Pickles with your cheese, honey?”

“Yes, that sounds just fine.”

The young trucker at the counter swiveled on his seat and winked. She turned back to her mother who saw the flyer under her plate.

“What’s that? C’mon, let me see it.”

“I didn’t know what else to do while I was waiting for you.”

“Jen, sorry I was late.”

“Ten minutes isn’t that late.”

“I grow those plants at the nursery. They’re hibiscus.”

They spread the crayons on the table; Jenny held the red one and her mother a green one and they finished the page in silence as they waited for their order to arrive at the table. Soon the flower was covered in red with a green leaf winding along the bottom of the page. They sat back and admired their work.

“You must be mother and daughter. You look just alike,” said the waitress. “I wish my daughter would spend time with me,” she said. “She’s always too busy running around every which way. I ask her ‘What can be so important you can’t spend time with your own mother?’ But you know how young people are. Crazy. Just crazy! You’re lucky to have a daughter like her.” She smiled and placed the Cokes on the table, the grilled cheese accompanied by two slices of pickle and a bag of chips. “The chips come with every meal.” She seemed glad to deliver more food to their empty table. “Let me know if you need anything else.” She reached into her pocket for a pad and pencil. “Don’t throw away your picture. Miss Millie would love to hang it up.” She pointed to the wall opposite them that was filled with pictures of different plants and more than one hibiscus. The waitress turned toward a couple waving at her from a booth across the room. “You enjoy your meal now.”

Jenny ate her sandwich. "Want my chips?"

Gail waved them off and picked up her Coke.

"Dad says hi." He hadn't, but Jenny couldn't think of anything else to say. They sat, the buzz of the restaurant around them, doors opening and closing, people standing by the desk waiting to be seated, waitresses fanning themselves with menus.

"How is he?" Gail looked inside the well of her cup and stirred her ice cubes with a straw. "Seeing anybody?"

"Don't think so."

They talked about Jenny going to community college to study zoology. "I told grandma."

The waitress appeared and filled their water glasses. A string of yellow cheese drizzled from Jenny's sandwich to the plate. "Our pies are homemade. We make them right in our own kitchen. Our specialty is the lemon meringue. I can bring two forks."

Gail turned to her daughter. "Get yourself some."

"That's okay, Mom. I don't eat sweets."

The waitress placed the bill face down on the table and carried a slice of lemon meringue across the room.

Jenny watched her mother rummage through her purse. She turned her purse upside down and shook out everything out. Jenny watched as gum, stamps, hairbrush and lipstick tube fell onto the table. "I must've left my money at home...I was in such a rush ...I swear,

honey. Do you have..."

Jenny couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Same old mom."

"You've got to believe me...The medicine makes me forget things. It's the side effects."

She grabbed the bill from her mother. Jenny bolted for the cashier, slammed down a twenty, and rushed outside.

Her father wasn't there. Too early. She could call. But she didn't want to wait. Why had she been stupid enough to think that her mother had changed? She wanted to run. Maybe she could walk to a nearby car lot and pretend she was a customer.

"Need a ride?" It was the young trucker from inside Millie's, now by himself, his hands inside his pockets.

She saw her mother about to push open the restaurant door. "It's just..." There was no time to explain. She knew it wasn't safe to drive with a stranger. But this was an emergency. She swung herself up into the cab of his truck. They pulled out as her mother ran into the parking lot calling her name, waving the flyer.

"Jenny! Come back! Please. Let me explain."

He got on the freeway ramp. "By the way, my name is Dan."

She told him her address and was relieved to see that they were getting on Highway 20 toward West Monroe. Inside the truck, it smelled like fertilizer and made her nostrils sting. Jenny repeated her address.

“Near the animal shelter. Right?” She nodded yes. “It’s none of my business, but what was that about?”

“You’d think she’d finally have her act together.” What was she thinking? Why did she think anything had changed? A soft rain began to fall. Dan turned on the windshield wipers. She raised her chin to catch a few drops at the open window.

Bryan kicked himself hard. He should never have left his phone when he went outside. It had to be time already and she still hadn’t called. Something had happened. He knew it had something to do with Gail. It had to be. She was like his personal Katrina. He blamed himself. He believed she was getting better, at least that’s what he’d heard from her family, and he had been the one to encourage Jenny to go ahead with the meeting because he believed it would be good for her. After all, Gail was her mother. He checked his messages. He went into the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee from the Brew Master. It was cold. He spit it out. He turned on the TV but was unable to find any local news. For a moment he feared she could have been raped or kidnapped, but then he heard the front door open. Dan stepped inside first. Jenny hurried past him into her bedroom. “Aren’t you Jay’s son? Jay Curtis?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I remember you when you were just a little kid. I think I met you once at a company picnic.”

Dan shrugged. "I used to live with my mother I have to finish my deliveries. She's not hurt or anything. Just helped her out."

"That's all right, son. Thanks for bringing her home."

Dan left. Bryan went to Jenny's room and knocked on the door. "Honey?" No answer.

Bryan sat down at the kitchen table and put up a fresh pot. The phone rang.

"Is she there?" Gail.

"Tell her the money was in the car. In the glove compartment!"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm asking you to do me a favor, Bryan. Tell her, please."

Gail's car ran perfectly on the way back. If she hadn't been so upset about being late, nothing would've happened. She imagined herself taking out several clean bills from her wallet to pay the tab, a mother treating her daughter to lunch. She'd ruined everything. She hated herself. She stopped at the gas station to buy a pack of cigarettes, picked up her phone and dialed.

"Hey, darling. How'd it go?"

Gail heard the smile inside her mother's voice. "I messed up."

"What do you mean, you messed up? I told you to leave early, didn't I? What happened?"

No, don't tell me. I'll probably die before I get to see my granddaughter again." Her mother's voice exploded. "Since Bryan got custody, she hasn't visited once." Gail knew exactly how many times. "Make a list for yourself so you don't forget things. Don't I always tell you that? Check off each box. Why don't you ever listen? You always think you know better than anyone else. I don't know why you left nursing. You should've never left."

"Mom, I lost my license, remember?"

Cars at the gas pump blurred. Blackbirds gathered on the telephone wire like beads on a Mardi Gras necklace. She crushed the cigarette package inside her hand. Her mother was about to say something else when Gail hung up. She lit a cigarette. She wasn't far from Bryan's house—maybe she would just drive around the neighborhood for old time's sake. She decided to park at the back of the house. The last time they'd seen each other had been inside a courtroom. The back door was always unlocked. "Hello," she said.

"Anyone home?"

Jenny walked into the kitchen. "Why are you here?"

Gail handed her daughter a twenty. "The money was in the car. Look, I know I've been a fuckup," she said. "But I've got a job now and I'm saving my money."

"Please leave."

"Come to Grandma's. You can see Mr. Purrfect. If you don't, I'll let him go. Wouldn't bother me...there'd be one less mouth to feed. I could just put him in the car and let him

out on the highway.”

“Even you wouldn’t do that.”

“Oh no?” Gail wobbled slightly, her eyes began to swim around in her head, unfocused.

“I’ll leave Dad a note.”

“No,” she said. “Come with me right now.” She held the car keys in her hand, didn’t recognize her own voice screaming, “Little girl, you’d better come with me right this minute. If you know what’s good for you.” She pulled Jenny outside. Bryan had just returned home. Jenny was crying.

“What’s going on here? Why is she here?”

“She threatened to leave my cat on the highway.”

He looked at Gail. “Are you crazy?”

“I didn’t ...”

“You told me you would,” said Jenny. “You told me you’d put him on the highway.”

“I’m driving you home, right now. Jenny, take my car and follow me. Just filled up the tank.” It took Bryan an hour to drive to Gail’s place and come back home.

She rolled down the window and took a breath of air. “I can’t understand why you married her.”

For a long time, he didn’t say anything. “You overlook certain things when you’re

young.”

“So what happened? Did you get old?”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“Like what?”

“We were just kids. We liked to watch comedies and westerns where the good guys always won. But then she got sick. She started to scream. I didn’t know what to do except play music. Some weekends, I skipped coming home. We didn’t know how to help each other.”

In the evening, Bryan lightly knocked and opened Jenny’s door. She was lying on her bed staring at the ceiling. Her walls were plastered with posters of animals. “I love you, Jenny. Don’t you ever forget that.”

Chapter Twenty-nine—Purple Ponytails

He couldn't get the fertilizer stink out of his nostrils. The twenty-five pound sacks he delivered throughout northern Louisiana were made from liquid raw sewage. Every time he climbed back into his cab, the odor seeped into his clothing and scalp. Even his pet Chihuahua, named Beast, ran away from him. He'd been doing this for too long. By the end of the summer, he planned to quit and carry his happy ass to community college. If he needed to pay extra for books and tuition, he'd get a job, but not delivering fertilizer. It wasn't helping his social life, not one bit. What girl would want to go out with him smelling the way he did, especially someone like Jenny Thurmond?

Once he got home, his sister was in the kitchen. She sliced a lemon in two halves and gave them to him. "A lemon? You giving me a lemon?"

"Try washing with them. Next time you come out of the shower, you can thank me." She flashed a shit-eating grin and went into the living room.

Rhonda was a witch in metal braces. She burned candles and lit incense in her room. Still, he was desperate enough to try anything. He squeezed lemon juice inside a sudsy cloth. It stung his skin. He scrubbed. The water was steamy. He scrubbed a second time and rinsed. Then he put on his clothes. "Hey, Rhonda, why didn't you tell me about this sooner?" She was sitting on the couch reading a fashion magazine. At sixteen, she was three years his junior. Her hair was tied back with a purple scrunchie identifying her as a member of the Purple Ponytails, her all girl band.

Rhonda rattled the magazine in his face. “Just read here about the lemons. I want to try avocados; they’re supposed to be good for your complexion.” Then she sniffed her brother. “Wow. It worked! You don’t stink!”

“Hey, Rhonda.”

“Hay is for horses.”

“Quit it. Do you know a girl named Jenny? Jenny Thurmond?”

She turned a page in her magazine and removed another stick of gum from her pack. Her eyes were adjusting to a new pair of contacts. As lead singer for the Purple Ponytails she couldn’t wear glasses on stage. In the meantime, her eyes were watering. “Why do you want to know?”

Now he was DOA for sure. “No reason. Just wondering.”

Rhonda considered herself an authority in all things related to love. After all, she read romance novels, several towers of them by her bedside, but all her brother ever did was to drive sacks of smelly fertilizer around town. What did he know about asking a girl out on a date? Rhonda kept flipping pages. “Where’d you meet?”

“On my delivery route.”

Oh, that sounded romantic. She yawned and rubbed perfume from a pull-out page on her wrist. “Nice.” She twisted the smell up to his nose. He pushed it away. “She’s in my Spanish class. We sit next to each other.”

“Liar.”

“Is that so? I happen to know that Jenny volunteers at the animal shelter. The two of you would make a great pair. You both smell.”

“Actually, she did tell me that...I mean that she volunteers...not that we smell.”

She tried again. “So where did you meet?” Rhonda stretched out on the couch.

Dan explained how Jenny was meeting her mother for the first time in years. But mom had stuck her with the lunch bill—so she ran out of Millie’s Restaurant and had asked Dan to drive to her father’s house where she lived. “That’s the whole story,” he said.

“You could’ve been arrested, dingbat.”

“I thought her father was going to blow my brains out. But luckily, he and Dad are old friends.”

Ten years ago her own mother had decided to move back to California without giving Rhonda the chance to go with her. Dan’s mother was local. She held up a picture of a model wearing jeans with a white cut-off blouse and high boots. “Do you think this would look good on me?”

“How the fuck am I supposed to know...Look, I was wondering...”

“Or do you like this one better?” She held up another page, one of a vampire, actually a girl twirling around in a black lined cape. “It would look better lined in purple. Then it really would be hot.”

“Do you have Jenny’s phone number?”

The really crazy thing was that while all the boys at school were panting to go out with Jenny, she couldn’t care less. Jenny wanted to meet dogs, real dogs. The only real conversation Rhonda ever had with Jenny was about her dog Beast. His old girlfriend had been arrested for possession of marijuana. Now he was heading into more shit and what for? She’d have to keep her eye on him especially once he enrolled at the local community college. “I might,” she said. “If I tried hard.”

“What do I have to do?”

Rhonda batted her eyes at him. “Whatever do you mean, sir?”

“What do I have to do to get Jenny Thurmond’s phone number?”

“Play drums in my band this weekend. Gerry has the flu.”

“You want me to play in a fucking girl band?” He’d been playing drums since he was a kid and was good at it.

“Like you always told me, you gotta pay your way to play.”

The deal was that she give him Jenny’s phone number post performance, didn’t want him squirming out of the evening. The Ponytails were appearing at her high school. It was one of the big events of the school year. Winners of a fire safety essay contest were being announced. The Monroe Fire Chief was going to pull up in his truck to hand out awards. Tables were set up outside the auditorium where local vendors were selling stuff like fire

extinguishers and fire alarms; the PTA was pushing bowls of Five-Alarm Chile and slices of Red Hot Red Velvet Cake.

Since it was such a big occasion, the Ponytails decided it was time to dye their ponytails purple. Rhonda's father didn't think so. "No daughter of mine is going to walk around with purple hair." Actually, Dan thought her hair looked kind of cool. But mostly, he was glad to find out that the drum kit was set up behind orange plexiglass where he could hide from the audience. He'd made one big mistake: a few days before the show, he joked with his sister about wearing a purple ponytail. Leave it to Rhonda. She showed up with a clip-on extension and insisted he wear it.

Saturday afternoon, strollers were lined up at the back of the school auditorium to allow any parent to make a quick get-away with a noisy toddler. The principal, Mr. Dealey, asked everyone to raise their hand if they were sitting next to an open seat. Everyone got settled. It was time for the Purple Ponytails to play their original song, Little Mr. Hot Spot. Rhonda introduced the band. "We have a special guest playing with us this evening, Dan Curtis. He's my brother. Take a bow, Dan."

Without thinking, he stood up wearing the purple ponytail. He saw Jenny Thurmond sitting in the middle of the audience. Everyone laughed. It was too late to yank the ponytail. But then he remembered Buddy Rich and Elvin Jones. Gene Krupa. Even Ringo Starr. Drummers were supposed to be weird. He took a deep bow. Dan started to lay down the rhythm. Rhonda sang with her girls on guitar and keyboards. Their dad was in the front row.

Dr. Dealey got up on stage and asked the audience to give the Purple Ponytails a big hand. “Aren’t they great folks? Let’s hope Little Mr. Hot Spot doesn’t show up in any of our homes. He’ll burn down the whole place. Isn’t that right girls?” The band members waved and gave their purple ponytails another shake before going off stage. Dan knew the song was written for the guitar player’s ex-boyfriend who had dumped her for an incoming freshman. He followed them off stage with his honorary ponytail tucked under his arm. “And now I’d like to introduce Fire Chief Dennis Williams who is here today to announce the award for the best essay in the Mr. Hot Spot contest. Mr. Williams, will you join me on stage.”

A silver-haired African American man in a dark blue suit with brass buttons and the whitest shirt Dan had ever seen stood up not too far from where Dan’s father was sitting. The Fire Chief made his way to the microphone, his sleeves adorned in gold braids and a silver badge pinned to his jacket. He wore a white cap with the same braid trim, quite a contrast, thought Dan, to the Purple Ponytails. Anyhow, the Chief flashed a Colgate-white smile and shook Principal Dealey’s hand while a reporter from the Monroe Citizen kneeled below the stage to take photographs. Once the picture had been taken, the principal left to speak to a group of teachers.

“Thank you, Principal Dealey, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, grandmothers and grandfathers; all you teachers and families who have come out today to celebrate Fire Safety month. Since we began this project five years ago, we’ve cut down on the number of fires by twenty-five percent. What does that mean? That means more lives saved and more homes protected.

“You look like a group who understands what steps to take when there’s a fire—very large ones.” Everyone laughed. “But before you leave today, I’d like you to take a look at our special display of fire extinguishers and fire alarms—think about adding another level of safety to your home, that is, if you haven’t already. All equipment has been certified by the Fire Department, on sale today at a fifteen percent discount. Now I think that’s a great deal.” Everyone applauded again.

“But before I leave I am honored to announce the winner of the Mr. Hot Spot contest. High school seniors from three different parishes participated and the judges read many fine essays. Let’s hear it for all our contestants and a round of applause, please, for our judges. The Chief motioned for the judges to stand. “And now, let me announce the winner.” Everyone leaned forward. Winning the contest would look good on a college application or a job resume. Chief Williams tore open an envelope. “Just like the Academy Awards,” he said. “The winner...Jenny Thurmond.”

Jenny clapped her hand over her mouth and turned to her father, Bryan. He gave her a hug. Dan was backstage with the rest of the band. Rhonda noted his interest. “Let’s give this little lady a hand.” Jenny wore jeans and a black and white checkered top with boots. Chief Williams handed her a check. “On behalf of the Monroe Fire Department, I’d like to award you one hundred dollars and hope you can will use it to further your education.” She stood there waving the check. “And now we’d like to hear the winning essay. What do you think ladies and gentlemen?” Everyone applauded again. Rhonda groaned.

“Don’t be jealous,” said Dan. “You’ll have a shot next year.”

Jenny stepped up to the microphone, never looked at the audience, eyes stuck on her paper. She read about a German shepherd named Brad who had rescued his blind owner from a house fire.

“We need a Brad in our department,” said Chief Williams who shook her hand and invited all families to climb into the No. 1 fire truck that was parked outside the school.

Principal Dealey added, “Don’t forget to stop by the PTA tables for a slice of Red Hot Red Velvet Cake. It’s going fast! Let’s thank Chief Williams for being here with us today.”

Dan watched Jenny at the back of the room. She was standing next to her father who was talking to his dad Jay.

“Not now, lover boy,” said Rhonda. “We need your help.”

“I’ll move the equipment into the van later. Pay up,” he said.”

Jenny already had recognized Dan from his bow on stage. She had been such a freaking mess when they had met months ago—he had picked her up in front of Millie’s—her meeting with her mother had turned into a FEMA disaster. She must’ve looked like an idiot jumping into his truck while Gail screamed at her from the parking lot. Gail had called Jenny several times since then to apologize. She had tried to explain that she had just misplaced her money.

“I liked your essay,” he said. “Dan,” he introduced himself. “Remember? I picked you up that day...”

She shrugged. "It wasn't a very good day. Thanks."

Other people stopped to tell Jenny how much they appreciated her story and wished her good luck. They heard how she was going to a special community college to study animals, such a shame about all those endangered species of birds fluttering to the ground and dying every day, and how they loved visiting the zoo in San Diego. Had she ever been there? No? She had to go. Maybe her mother and father could take her during summer vacation. They had wonderful exhibits; personally they loved the penguins and the pandas the best, even drove around the park in a trolley with a green and white awning almost all the way out to the ocean, but also had heard how she volunteered at the local animal shelter, which is where they got their dog, Cindy. They believed in rescuing animals and had done their part during Katrina. What a busy girl she was and good luck again. Good luck. She looked across the auditorium where Dan waved his purple ponytail.

"Dan! Over here," said Jay. "Bryan, have you met my son?"

Bryan laughed. "The purple ponytail guy. Sure, I remember you." They shook hands.

"Your sister might be on to something after all," said his father. "That's a good look for you."

Dan held up the purple ponytail that was fastened to a large rubber band, allowing it to stretch across his forehead, a special Rhonda creation. He tried it on again and whipped the ponytail back and forth. "You think so?"

“Your dad and I used to play together in the Do Daddies. But we didn’t have cool purple ponytails back then,” said Bryan. He ran his fingers through his buzz cut. “Now we’re just glad to have hair.”

Vernon approached wearing a black suede vest and a green silk tie and held Rae-Ann’s hand. “Well, lookie here,” she said. “All loyal customers.” She was spiffed up in a skirt, not her usual parka and jeans that she wore behind the counter.

“Good to see you, Rae-Ann,” said Bryan.

“Vernon, Rae-Ann, you know Jay? He works at the plant.”

Vernon seemed to be in a good spirits, dug into a piece of red velvet cake with a white plastic fork. “Mmmm.” They stood around for a few talking about the program and the Purple Ponytails. Vernon turned toward Jenny. “Congratulations, young lady. You read very well.”

“A great story,” agreed Rae-Ann.

Jenny knew this had to be Vernon, the man her father had described so many times as a hard ass with a softer center. “Thank you,” she said.

“Have you applied for that scholarship from Rand-Atlantic? You know we have an education fund for children of our employees.”

“No, sir. I sure haven’t,” said Bryan.

“I’d be glad to recommend you.”

Bryan flashed a quick look at Jay who on many occasions had listened to his old friend whine on and on about his finances, always talking about needing a second job, but never getting one. “Brother,” he’d say. “Quit your complaining. Do I look to you like I’m rich?” For a moment, Bryan wanted to throw his arms around Vernon and hug the big asshole. Instead, he took a step forward and extended his hand, proud of his daughter and excited about a possible a scholarship for her to attend college. “Appreciate it, sir.”

Vernon shook his hand and walked away with an arm around Rae-Ann’s waist and pulled her by his side close. Bryan watched the way they laughed and shared forkfuls of cake as they made their way through the back of the auditorium. He was decked out in expensive-looking clothing, most likely from one of his online retailers. Vernon cut an impressive figure, all right, but there was something different about him—for the first time, thought Bryan, he actually could see his soft center.

Chapter Thirty—Shields Down

Vernon stood by the information desk. A young girl wore braces from her hip down to the knee; the feet of other patients were wrapped in ace bandages. Others needed canes, slings, people in wheelchairs, a woman in grey braids, walkers. A little blonde girl spun around in circles beneath a TV that was tuned to the morning news, making herself dizzy and falling down while everybody who was waiting to be called, watched her and waited.

The desk attendant called out, “D’you have an appointment? Name and date of birth? Okay sit down, you’ll need to wait until you’re called.”

Vernon found the florist’s shop, where he bought a bouquet of pink and white carnations. He took the elevator to Raymond’s room on the third floor. There were two beds. Only one was occupied. Sheets were pulled over his frame. Except for the grey whiskers that covered his cheeks, Shields’ cheekbones stood out like tent poles. He wore a silver Masons ring, loose on his right hand, a fisher king who had won an award for catching a twenty-six pound bass. Vernon and Dina had gone to one of his awards ceremonies. Now each time Shields exhaled, he heard a rattling wheeze like the sound of air escaping from a punctured balloon.

Vernon had already been through this with Dina. He’d watched her waste away. Probably wouldn’t like meeting him in any afterlife. Vernon had visited her grave and told her he was sorry. How by the time she’d been diagnosed, the rift between them had grown into a Red Sea that neither of them could cross. She slipped away without asking for help or his

support, and when she died, he vowed to make sure he'd be there for Noreen. Some things he had learned too late.

"Hi." It was Mark. He was sitting on a grey chair near Shields' bed.

"Where's Noreen?"

"She went home."

Vernon was disappointed. "How is she?"

"Not great. You know how close they are."

"The doctors?"

"Dr. Trang said there is nothing they can do except make him comfortable. He said he'd call if there's any change."

"I can't believe this."

"Trang said he's been treating him for months. He said Raymond didn't want Noreen to know—she has enough on her plate."

Vernon filled up a vase with water and placed the flowers on Raymond's tray table.

"What are you doing here anyway? Go home and take care of her, Goshen." They spoke standing on either side of Raymond's hospital bed. A catheter emptied into a plastic jar that was filled with a muddy brown liquid.

"Mark, sir. Please call me Mark. My name's Mark, not Goshen."

“Okay, Mark.” Vernon crossed his arms over his chest and listened to the gurgle of Raymond’s breathing. “I’m sorry about calling you a meth-head. You’ve got to understand...”

“Any father ...”

“My daughter’s talking to me again. You made that happen.”

“Little Raymond did that, sir, not me.”

“You encouraged her.”

“Noreen’s helped me also, sir.”

“Call me Vernon, not, sir. Okay, Mark?”

Noreen kicked back shot of wheatgrass ordered from the health food store from Natural Stores in Fayetteville. Mark gathered her into his arms and held her for as long as he could before she collapsed on the sofa. “You mean you left him in the hospital?”

He sat on the couch and pulled her to his side. “Dr. Trang promised he would call if there was a change in his condition. I spoke to the nurse on duty and Vernon was still there. Don’t go crazy on me.”

She shook her head, got up to check on Little Raymond in the bedroom, and came back to put away dishes. “I’m not going to let my grandfather die in that hospital.”

“He’s being cared for.”

“I’m calling hospice. Tomorrow.”

The next day, Noreen made a succession of calls to Dr. Trang, Mark, and to the social worker. Her grandfather was weak but holding his own. The social worker said she would look into hospice care, but said that finding a nurse who was available on such short notice would not be easy. “Can you try? Can you please really try?”

Noreen went back to the hospital. She listened to the nurses outside the room chatter about their weekends. Her grandfather opened his eyes, didn’t recognize her. In the afternoon, she received a call from the social worker. She had located a home-care nurse who had recently applied to renew her license. First Noreen had to know that the woman’s license had been revoked several years ago due to personal health issues. “She’s not some Dr. Kevorkian, is she?”

Later, Noreen got another call later from the social worker.

“How’s he doing?”

“No change, but he’s stable,” said the social worker. “I’ve got good news. I found someone.”

Noreen was energized. She remembered Vernon telling her, “Momma won’t be coming home.”

“Why?” She’d waited for his answer.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes, yes. You were going to tell me about the nurse.”

“She’s licensed, but she’s been on probation, waiting to get recertified. Should only be a few weeks now. We can hire her with your approval as long as you understand that you will have to assume full liability.”

“Why on probation?”

“Passing bad checks, credit cards.”

“Any chance you can find nurse who doesn’t have a record?”

The social worker sounded annoyed. “About two weeks. Maybe more. She has an outstanding record as a nurse. You can always keep your grandfather where he is while we look for someone else. I understand this is difficult for you. If it were up to me, I’d...”

She didn’t want to hear whatever it was. “There’s no time,” said Noreen, making her way back to the kitchen and refilling Depot’s water bowl. “When is she available?”

Thank God there were so many sick people. She didn’t mean it that way. The thought of landing a nursing job had sent Gail into spasms of alternating ecstasy and panic. She’d become a nurse because of her high school science teacher, Mrs. Bertram, who also happened to be the school’s guidance counselor, and had decided to make Gail her pet project. “Gail, you’re a smart girl. You must know that. I don’t understand why you’re

not applying yourself.” She didn’t know that my father had just died and my mother was in the deep ozone. “Someone like you should go to college. Not end up pregnant like a lot of the girls around here. Is that what you want? What’s bothering you? I told her I didn’t know. “Think about a career in nursing,” she advised. “It pays good money and you can work all over the country.”

Mrs. Bertram always wore a St. Agatha medal around her neck and was partial to Peter Pan collars and black skirts. I had heard through the grapevine that she had almost become a nun. Why she had turned away from the path, was unknown; however, there was talk. “Being a nurse is about being a healer. Helping people through a difficult time. Let me ask Corinne what her schedule’s like.”

I figured I’d play along.

I took the bus to meet Miss Corinne in the hospital cafeteria after school. She wore a white hat that looked like a toy sailboat wobbling on her head, her hair caught up in a ponytail and running out through the stern. “My aunt tells me you are interested in nursing.” We sat at a table surrounded by people in green baggy suits. She squirted dressing on her salad and speared an asparagus with a plastic fork.

I smiled my sweetest smile sitting opposite this young woman in her late twenties who wanted to do her aunt a favor and help out a poor kid. “Uh-huh.”

“What would you like to know?”

I asked, “Do you like nursing?”

She squirted more salad dressing in her bowl, and shared stories about working in pediatrics with newborns and how much she loved it.

I thanked her for talking to me about nursing. “Good luck,” she said, and waited for the elevator to take her back upstairs to pediatrics. “Let me know if you have more questions.”

I didn’t want to become a nurse, but found Mrs. Bertram’s interest flattering. It was the first time anyone had said I was smart. To please her, I made an effort to graduate, even registered as a candy striper at the hospital. Afterward, she gave me a card that said, “Wishing You the Best of Luck,” and signed it, “Your Friend, Clare Bertram.”

Each time her phone vibrated, she expected it to be the agency or Bryan. Her old white uniform hung in the back of her closet, but since then, she’d put on twenty extra pounds. Maybe the agency could rent her one. Her patient lived in Hentsbury, a drive from where she lived, but doable as long as her car held out.

The phone rang.

“Bryan? Is that you?” She was short of breath. “I was wondering if you could tell me about the Shields family. I have to come through on with flying colors. Otherwise the court might decide to lock me up again. Jenny’s beautiful, Bryan. You’ve done a great job. I wanted to tell you that. I think of her all the time when I’m at the nursery. All that

work volunteering at the shelter. Did she tell you I gave her a gift? She didn't? I was afraid you wouldn't call."

"Gail, what do you want?"

"Bryan? Are you there?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about Raymond Shields. I know his family is from Hentsbury. I'm going to be his nurse. He has terminal cancer. Probably going to be drugged out on morphine. But I want to know the whole man, the whole person, and I want to do a good job. It'll mean more jobs. Bryan, you still there?"

"Doesn't the family usually tell you things like that? What about the agency?"

She really didn't hear him, grateful that he was talking to her at all. If she received a positive recommendation, it might lead to referrals that would pay better than misting seedlings at the nursery and then maybe she could visit Jenny at college and take her out for a real lunch, steak or anything else she wanted. "Bryan, I'm worried I'll screw up. I didn't mean to ruin our marriage."

"We've been through this dozens of times. You don't need to rehash ancient history..."

"I never wanted to hurt you or Jenny."

“It’s okay,” he said. “You know what it means to be sick and you understand what it means to get better. You did. You already have. You’ll do fine. You’re a great nurse,” he said, which is what she needed to hear.

“But it wasn’t only me. You weren’t easy to live with either. It wasn’t all about me, Bry. You had your own nightmares. You never wanted to own up to it...It wasn’t all my fault.”

“I know that,” he said. “I still get my nightmares.” He told her how someday he hoped they could become friends, especially for Jenny’s sake, but she didn’t know how she could become his friend when she’d loved him more than she ever thought she could love another person. It was so much easier when he was there. Her doctors said she was manic-depressive, but she also knew about his terror of being abandoned while the sirens wailed and the lights flashed in the background. It’s just that Bryan was better at hiding things, but one of these days, he was going come up against it and she wouldn’t be there.

Members of the emergency room staff had brought Shields home. They slid his long frame from the gurney to his bed. Hospital staff assembled the IV drip above his head.

Gail Thurmond sorted his pills. She took Shields’ vitals and noted them on her chart. She ran a Vaseline stick over his lips and held his hand. “How are you doing, Mr. Shields?” His eyelids fluttered. He inclined his head forward. “You’re home now. Your

granddaughter brought you here. Noreen. Everything's going to be okay. We're taking good care of you. You need anything?"

"Water." He raised a finger and drew a circle in the air.

She threaded a straw into his mouth and rested it on his bottom lip. His lips caught the straw. She made notes in her log about his blood pressure, temperature, and heart rate, and called them in to the hospital.

"Drink slowly," she said, and held his hand. "That's right," she coaxed. "Let me plump up your pillows."

He dropped his head back and closed his eyes. "He's stable now," she said to Noreen and Kim. "I gave him his evening dose of morphine. Not in pain. You two ladies want coffee?" Noreen said she could use a cup. Kim said as long as she was making a fresh pot, sure. Gail went to the kitchen.

"I'm glad she's here," said Noreen, whispering. "She's been a lifesaver."

Gail stayed during the evening with Shields until Noreen and Kim returned in the morning. She'd been there with him for several weeks.

Noreen wiped her grandfather's head with a damp cloth, blue veins protruded on his forehead. His face had a yellowish cast. She held his hand. His fingers closed over her own. "Grandpa? It's me. Noreen." The baby fussed in a portable crib she had borrowed from a friend. She placed a nukkies in the baby's mouth. "Little Raymond's here," she

told her grandfather. "Both of us are here, and your nurse. You remember your nurse Gail?" He nodded.

Kim sat down next to Noreen. Her hands were unadorned except for a gold wedding band and a watch whose face was surrounded by diamonds, a Christmas gift from her late husband. Kim noticed a flyer on the side table in a pile of Shields' mail. "I got that, too. You going? Deacon Turner's been worrying me to death about it. He said the committee needs all the help it can get."

"Lila, that River Watcher lady, she's asked me to go."

"I'll tell you one thing. Somebody has to do something."

Shields' opened his eyes and made a sound. Both Noreen and Kim bent down to hear him better. His voice was hoarse. "Go," he said. "Both of you go."

October. Noreen wore black slacks, dark glasses, Mark a black suit. They said little to each other on the drive to the funeral home. Vernon drove. There was a long line of cars waiting to park. Some already had pulled into the overflow area. Noreen got out and held Mark's arm. Vernon recognized faces from the mill, retirees with walkers, canes, pulling along oxygen tanks like pet dogs, a few of Raymond's old fishing buddies, members from his fishing lodge, and some of Rose's old friends. All had come to pay their respects. Deacon Turner and members of his church found empty seats. "Hello," a woman said to Vernon as he entered the chapel.

Noreen saw Bryan who stopped by to shake Mark's hand. "Sorry about your loss."

Bryan's daughter Jenny, stood by his side. They hunted for seats.

Distant relatives took Noreen's hand. You've grown. The last time I saw you... The chapel filled up. People twisted around in their seats and talked quietly, respectful of the occasion. An organ in the background. Yellow roses and white lilies lined the podium.

Deacon Turner, in black robes, got up and addressed the assembly. "Brothers and sisters, thank you for coming. We are here to honor the memory of Raymond Arthur Shields, a member of this community, and to lend our support to his bereaved granddaughter, Noreen Wolfe, her partner, Mark Goshen, her father, Vernon Wolfe, and to the entire Shields family. We say Amen."

Amen.

"Many of us knew Brother Shields, but not many knew the entire man. I was privileged know him toward the end of his life. He understood that there are no divisions between people."

Amen.

A line formed on either side of the aisle. The director of the library explained how his contribution to the genealogy collection had allowed them to document the town's role in the growth of the lumber industry; he had written to the Smithsonian, hoping to get a grant. Relatives stood up to tell stories, jokes, to cry about someone whom they hadn't seen in years.

It was Noreen's turn. She removed her glasses. "After my mother died, my grandfather raised me. He taught me to be the best I could. I want to thank my partner, Mark Goshen for being at my side, Gail Thurmond, his nurse, and his friend, Miss Kim. I want to thank my father, Vernon Wolfe, who's helped us more than he knows."

Jenny stirred. Bryan took her hand. "Is Momma here?"

"She's sitting in front," he whispered, and pointed to the first row next to the family.

Raymond Shields had elected not to have his body on display. Everyone drove to the Weeping Widow Cemetery to a special plot reserved for the Shields family members. He was buried next to his wife. Shields had made a big fuss in his lifetime about not being laid to rest there, but in the end, he had chosen to be buried with the rest of his kin.

After the last shovelful of dirt had been tossed, everyone drove to Mark and Noreen's house, which had been scrubbed in preparation for the onslaught of well-wishers. Never let it be known that the granddaughter of Raymond Shields was a slob. Long before friends and family arrived, Mark had gathered up glasses, plates, bottles, and the many spoons that had been randomly distributed throughout the house. He put his military training to good use by mopping, waxing, and washing windows. There were still several flowerpots on the carport that grew nothing but weeds, but those didn't count for much. In the days before the funeral, Noreen cooked and produced mounds of macaroni and cheese, spaghetti and meatballs, fried asparagus bundles, and raspberry bars, all piled into aluminum tubs. The Half & Half donated several coolers filled with beer. Rae-Ann had taken out a quarter page in the local newspaper to memorialize his passing, as did

Bedders, the town's newest funeral home. Rae-Ann was there with Vernon. Noreen wore a black dress and black shoes with silver-toned buckles. She looked like a Puritan in a Thanksgiving Day play. Mark's attire was equally somber, a black Harley shirt and black chinos with a windbreaker. Friends and family crammed into the cottage and immediately headed for the drink and food table. They had developed a powerful appetite from sitting in church all morning listening to people testify about Shields' life. Kim ran the food table and Mark stayed close to Noreen and Little Raymond. Sorry to hear of your loss. He's gonna catch the big fish up there in heaven. Mark my words. You take care. Your son is beautiful.

Standing behind the kitchen table, Gail handed out cans of soda, beer, and bottles of water. She was the only one in the house dressed in white, everyone else was in shades of black and gray. She wore a white nurses' uniform with a plastic name tag over her right pocket that read, Gail Thurmond, RN.

Jenny came up and asked for a can of Sprite. "You look great in your uniform, Momma. Doesn't she Dad?" Gail stood there and smiled.

Chapter Thirty-one—Celebration Time

Throughout their marriage, Jeannette always found time to remind Deacon Turner that he talked enough for two people. Being a minister's son, he always told her that he'd come by that honest. But today he was spending his afternoon cleaning up, vacuuming, straightening, and complaining about Jeannette's paints and canvases that were scattered throughout the house. Most of the walls were hung with pictures of flowers and mallards. Her dream was to build her own studio with an eastern exposure where she could paint while Deacon Turner administered to pressing church business. They couldn't move. Where could they go? They certainly couldn't sell their house. Jeannette's studio was squashed between her kitchen and dining room where she stored her canvases and acrylics. Whenever she visited her sons in Monroe, she made a point of stopping in a store that sold a fair selection of both. She painted flowers in bright colors whose petals extended in purples and oranges. She painted sunsets filtering through the bayou and children holding hands around a schoolyard. Her paintings replaced the view of the ditch with her own vision—without fumes, without black sludge collecting in tires along the shoreline..

“When are you going to move this mess into the garage?”

“Mess? As soon as you clear up your mess in the garage!”

“I'm getting around to it.”

“And I’m not holding hold my breath.” Jeannette grabbed two kitchen mitts, opened the stove door, and hauled out a large cast-iron pot. “Everything’s ready. Haven’t spoken to Nell since the press conference.”

Dirksen checked his watch. “Hear anything about Carson?”

Jeannette lifted the casserole and banged it on the stove’s burners. “Been seeing a school counselor.”

“Now ain’t that something.”

“Nell says she keeps thinking about that moment when she’d left his hospital room to refill a water pitcher. When she came back—gone. She blames herself for not being with Rincon when he passed.”

“She can’t blame herself for that.”

“It’s not about blame. It’s what she feels inside.”

“You right. But we gonna get her job back.”

“She’d rather have Rincon.” Jeannette moved her pot to the back of the stove. “That man Thurmond helped with the petition. Never thought he’d come around. One of those company men.”

“He’s dating Lila.”

“Dirksen, everyone one knows that.”

“You women know everything.” He gave Jeannette a spoon and asked for a sample, just to make sure the seasonings were right. “Nothing like your shrimp artichoke casserole. They better get here soon, else my plate’s gonna be double-wide.”

“Deacon Turner, your heart doesn’t need any more extra pounds than the ones you already got.”

“It’s your cooking.”

“No it ain’t either. It’s the fried food you eat when you’re not here. It’s bad for your cholesterol. Cal’s gone most of the time working pipelines. Wish he could be around more.”

Dirksen bent back a slat of the Venetian blind. “That’s them. They pulling into the carport right now.”

Jeannette and Dirksen met their guests at the door. Cal was in his weekend attire, sweat pants and a gray sweatshirt, a corona of grey hair at his forehead. He held two large bottles of Sprite and a six-pack of beer and gave them to Jeannette. “Can’t buy beer in Hentsbury, but there’s always the Half & Half.”

Nell wore an orange Razorbacks logo shirt with black stacked heels; rectangular bamboo earrings swung against her cheeks lit with blush. Carson handed Deacon Turner a brown paper bag. “Hi, there sweetheart.” She hugged Jeannette. “Can’t wait to see your latest.”

“In the kitchen?”

“No, honey, your paintings. But whatever you’re doing in the kitchen smells real good!”

Carson handed Jeannette a paper bag. “What you got?”

“Tomatoes. From my uncle’s garden.”

“Thanks, son. Nothing much grows around here anymore. At least nothing you’d want to eat.”

“C’mon in,” said Jeannette. “Get anything for you, Carson? A can of Sprite? I can put ice in it.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He sat down in the living room, careful to navigate around Jeannette’s art projects, then emptied out a plastic container filled with differently colored Legos on a glass tabletop that had been cleared for the occasion.

“Smells good.” Cal settled on the couch next to Carson. “Even outside. You folks spray with freshener?”

“No.” Jeannette took off her apron and draped it over a chair. “The company’s shut down the smokestacks. Been running ads on TV about how they’re community partners—now ain’t that a hoot.”

Cal was sorting out Legos with Carson, blue in one pile, red in another, little people standing on the sidelines.

“EPA coming by in a few weeks,” said Dirksen. “That’s what the spy network says.”

Carson looked up. “Spy network?”

“Unofficial arm of the Committee for Rincon Roberts.” Dirksen was about to continue when Jeannette gave him a look that would’ve frozen a herd of deer in the middle of summer.

Jeannette grabbed her apron. Carson played with his Legos and drank his soda while Dirksen watched. “How you doing?” he asked. The boy shrugged, bony shoulders visible beneath a plaid shirt.

“He’s having a hard time,” said Cal, who handed Carson a few Legos. “Ain’t you boy? We all are. My mother died last year. This is worse. She’d already lived her life. Some days I don’t even know how to put one foot in front of the other. Nell’s son died in Iraq almost two years ago. Now Rincon.”

“Is that EPA team gonna whack ‘em, just like you said, Pops? Whack ‘em good?” He reached for another Lego. “Gonna make ‘em pay for everything?”

Cal brushed the top of the boy’s head. “That’s right, boy. Just whack ‘em, finish them off...Can you believe they fired Nell for taking too many sick hours running Rincon to the hospital?”

“It’s illegal.” Jeannette called from the kitchen. “Talking to the lawyers next week.” They heard a crash. “I’ve got it,” she called to them. “No worries! Just dropped a pan.”

“Hope it wasn’t dinner,” said Dirksen.

“You need any help in there?”

“Nell, you stay right where you are.”

“It’s because I took Rincon to the hospital and talked about their poisons. No one sitting behind those desks can tell me different.”

In order for them to afford to pay a lawyer, Call said they’d all have to stop eating until the end of next year and maybe for a time after that.

“Oh, honey. We’re not gonna live on tomato soup and crackers.” Nell shook her head, her bamboo earrings swaying. “It’s one of those pro bono types from Tulane. They say we got a good case.” She went to the kitchen to give Jeannette a hand.

“Who are these people, Dirksen?”

“Men who don’t give a rat’s ass.”

“Between you and me,” he said softly so Carson wouldn’t hear, “I’m worried about Nell. Holding talks in peoples’ houses. Petitions. Now lawyers. She hardly sleeps at night. Gets up and goes to the kitchen crying so I won’t hear.”

“She’s brave.”

“Brave takes a toll.”

“Maybe you should see someone in our Lifeshare Group at church. Might help the whole family. Helped the Lawsons when their boy got killed in a tractor. Remember? Or

that Rawlins girl who had to move clear across the country to tend to her mother. The church will pair you up with someone who knows your situation.”

“Don’t like telling other people my business. I’m just worried with Nell not working about how we gonna make ends meet.”

Dirksen picked up a Lego that had bounced its way under the couch and handed it to Carson. He sat back down. “Cal, we’ve been friends for a long time.”

“That’s right. Since we were kids sitting on your parents’ porch swatting mosquitoes and asking each other questions.”

“Could hardly ever ask you something you didn’t know. Always teaching me, even if it was half made-up in your mind. Missed those years when you moved away. Didn’t have no one to talk to. I’m asking you to listen to me now. Hear me out. I know your family needs help, Nell and Carson, you too. Look at it this way—it can’t hurt.”

Carson sat on the couch and silently played with his Legos. “What’cha building?” asked Dirksen.

The boy shrugged. “Don’t know yet.”

“Won’t bring him back. Don’t see how some group’s gonna help.” Cal shook his head.

Dirksen looked at his friend, his own eyes reddened by a lifetime of exposure to chemical irritants and an ongoing lack of sleep. “Nothing will, he said, “but it might do ya’ll a bunch of good.”

“Thanks, Dirk. I’ll think on it.”

Jeannette sounded the dinner call. They filed into the kitchen and found seats around the table. Jeannette placed the casserole on a ceramic trivet. Nell cut up a plate of corn bread and allowed a chunk of butter to melt on each one. “It’s been awhile since we broke bread together.”

The Deacon uttered a short prayer. “God bless the Roberts family, Cal, Nell, and Carson; we wish them strength in the days ahead so that they may find help and guidance; and Lord, thank you for your creative gifts in bringing food to our table and all the beautiful paintings that adorn our walls.” He looked at Jeannette and hoped to redeem himself. “Amen.”

Jeannette nodded. “I used your tomatoes in the salad.” She offered a bowl to Carson. “They’re real sweet.”

The boy smiled. “Thanks, ma’am, but I don’t like no salad.”

“Go ahead,” urged Nell with her elbow. She was sitting next to him. “It’s good for you.”

“Nana’s right,” said Cal.

Carson dished out a single piece of lettuce and a slice of tomato and motored them around with his fork.

“Careful, boy,” said Cal. “Watch you don’t overload your plate.”

He looked up from sliding his tomato back and forth. “What’s for dessert?”

“Lemon ice-box.” Jeannette ladled out helpings of shrimp stew over bowls of rice, brown sauce flecked with red peppers cascaded over each dish.

For a moment, the boy sat quietly. “That used to be Rincon’s favorite. Used to eat two pieces, mine too, if I’d let him.”

They looked at each other across the table, finished serving and passing, sat with full bowls and plates, forks held in hand and began the orchestration of eating together. Jeannette retrieved a bottle from behind a stack of canvases and poured out a glass for each one of the adults, red wine shimmering on a white tablecloth. “I’d like to propose a toast.” They raised their glasses. “To Rincon. And toward Nell’s reinstatement!”

“Hope that company goes to hell.” Carson drowned his words inside a large gulp of Sprite.

“Boy, you shouldn’t use that kind of language, especially not at the dinner table,” said Cal. “Now you apologize to the Turners.”

“No apologies needed,” said Dirksen. With heads slightly bent, they concentrated on the choreography of feeding their hunger, the place where all truth comes from.

Amen.

Chapter Thirty-two—Puppies

Bryan was stuck behind a pick-up that was hauling a port-a-potty. He was eager to get home after doing his morning chores.

A big rig barreled along the right-hand side of the highway. The air smelled of humus, the loamy fragrance of earthworms doing happy flips inside earthworm tunnels, pine needles nested in clumps at the side of the highway, blimps of clouds in the sky after another pummeling rain. Bryan checked his cellphone for weather predictions, the only predictions that he believed in, and sometimes not even those, pulled into the garage and went inside where he heard Jenny singing from the shower, Reba's "I Keep on Lovin' You." He'd taught her that song.

For a long time after Rincon's death, she had ventured out of her room only to check the refrigerator or go to the bathroom. Now she'd returned to eating in front of the TV where they watched evening reruns of Jeopardy. Sometimes during the show she texted her mother. "Gail got the answer to that one." Jenny threw up her hands, in celebration. "She scored!"

A girl needed her mother, but exactly what kind of mother? Gail had done time for minor fraud and selling oxycodone to minors. He wanted to believe that people could change. Bryan had caught Jenny on the bounce. Thank God she took after his side of the family. She'd be the first to go to college, maybe win a scholarship. He had bought purple and gold LSU banners for her to hang in her room.

"What do you want me to do with these?" She eyed them suspiciously.

“Whatever you want.” That wasn’t so hard to figure out, or was it?

One day while she was out of the house, he slipped into her room, curious to see where she’d put them. He looked around. Disappointed, he found the banners tacked behind her door. The rest of her walls were covered with posters from National Geographic and Wildlife magazines. An assortment of otters, bears, and elephants gazed at him with melancholy eyes. Her clothes were on the floor, books scattered, her bureau awash in framed pictures of summer vacations, one of Jenny holding a kitten she’d found at a rest stop. Bryan didn’t touch anything, didn’t want to be reprimanded. He softly closed the door, but noticed a foil package on her dresser that was stamped with a curious name: Venus Aroused. A condom. Really? Could she be having sex? She was seventeen, almost eighteen. He had been a whole lot younger when he started sleeping around. But she was a girl. He couldn’t grasp her lying next to a sweaty pimply boy with bad breath. What if he were an older man, someone she’d met at the shelter who’d ensnared her with stories of Appaloosas and Catahoulas, someone who could see into her heart and corral her into bed? Bryan tried to remember if he’d ever talked with her about sex. She always seemed more interested in cataloging species of owls and mountain lions than boys. He had promised a puppy. A puppy wouldn’t cost that much, especially one from a friend who was willing to let them have the animal in exchange for a good home. Bryan and Jenny had planned to spend the day with each other. He watched her as she snapped on her seat belt, and tried to see if he could identify anything different about her face: a heightened blush on her cheeks, an excited cast to her eyes. But he knew why she was smiling. They were going to pick out a puppy.

“We going to Paws? The Humane Society?”

“None of those places. It’s a surprise.” Bryan exited at Swartz and drove past the Dollar General and Jonny’s Pizza. The chain always advertised Sweep the Swamp specials, piling on crawdads in the middle of cheese and hot peppers. “Feel like a slice?”

She shook her head and looked at him with a determined stare. “First, puppies.”

The house was hidden behind a hedge of wild honeysuckle bushes. Bryan pulled into Lila’s driveway. A gate blocked the entrance. He called a number on his cell. The gate slid open.

“This place looks like a movie star’s! Look, dad!” The house was in the Acadian style with a steep sloping roof and a wrap-around porch standing on about five acres of land. There was a group of horses. Jenny pointed to a paso fino, a mare with black legs and mane. They passed by a procession of oak trees. He avoided running into deep puddles on either side of a driveway. Two snarling German shepherds ran at the car from behind the house, growled and jumped on the doors to display a equally matched set of sharp white teeth.

“Cleopatra! Butler! Stop! It’s okay.” Lila called the animals to her side. “Stop! They’re friendly,” she said. “Just like to put on a good show. Bark is louder than their bite.” Jenny got out of the car and reached out her hand. Butler pushed aside Cleo’s nose and took a turn at sniffing. “You must be Jenny.”

“This is Lila,” said Bryan. “Lila, my daughter.”

Jenny looked back and forth at them both waiting with awkward smiles. “You two know each other? From work? Didn’t I meet you?”

“I used to teach high school,” said Lila. “Bryan tells me you volunteer at the shelter. My son adopted Cleo and Butler there. Butler got that name because he’s black with a white throat. Cleo’s named after Cleopatra, the Egyptian queen. She thinks she’s royalty. Walks ahead of me and only minds when I call her by her full name. Cleo-patra! Want to know a secret? Sometimes I even talk to my horses. ‘How’s it going?’ ‘Warm enough last night in the barn?’” Jenny laughed. “It sounds crazy, I know. They never talk back. Not like people. Never argue although they do get flustered around the geese. The geese chase the horses around and nip at their hooves. They help exercise each other, the geese and the horses, I mean.”

“We’ve met before. But where do you and my dad know each other from?”

“I’m a member of the River Watchers.”

“River what?”

“We take care of the Ouachita. River Watchers.”

“Jenny had a friend who died because of the hydrogen sulfide emissions.” Bryan sunk his hands in his back pockets.

“You can say his name, Dad. I’m not gonna cry. I hate when you do that. Rincon Roberts.”

“Heard about him.” Lila stepped around her dogs.

“Can we see the puppies?”

“In the washroom. It’s nice and warm for them next to the heater.” Lila opened the back door and Cleo and Butler pushed ahead. She pointed to two doghouses sitting near a toolshed. “Outside. Cleopatra! Butler,” she commanded. “Always keep them outside.”

Jenny and Bryan slipped away from the dogs. Inside the house, another large dog jumped on them. “Down! That’s Breezy. Ain’t she purty? She’s the pups’ momma, black lab and shepherd mix.” They walked past a green corduroy sofa decorated with gold fleur-de-lis pillows. Behind a TV was a sliding door that led outside to a garden. They went through the kitchen to the back. Breezy followed. In front of the dryer was a wicker laundry basket filled with newspaper, and inside four puppies rolled up in a ball next to each other, their eyes shut, paws resting on each other’s heads.

“Oh, Dad. Look. They’re so tiny.” Breezy settled next to the pups and began nursing. Jenny’s face lit up like a Christmas tree. “I like the black one with the white star on its nose. We’re friends already.”

“They’re two weeks old,” said Lila. “After six weeks, you can bring him home.”

“Can we visit before then? Please, Dad. Say yes!” Bryan said he didn’t think there’d be any problem doing that. Jenny smiled and sat down, waited for the dogs to finish nursing before she transported them into her lap.

They left Jenny to enjoy her seventh heaven. Bryan and Lila strolled back into the kitchen.

“If she adopts a pup,” said Lila, “we’ll be related.”

“How d’you figure?”

“Breezy’s my dog. I’m grandma to her pups.”

“So that makes me?”

Lila set out coffee cups with milk and sugar. She hesitated. “Happy, I hope.” She located a bottle of Kahlua on a top shelf. “Want me to warm up your drink?”

“Sure.” He extended his cup filled with black coffee. “To a new family member.” They clinked mugs. He noticed that Lila’s hair was growing white around her scar. Bryan took several sips and looked at her across the rim of his cup. “You feeling safe around here?”

“I’ve got my dogs”

“They’re scary, all right, but still I worry about you.”

“And a security fence. Carry a gun in my glove compartment.”

Bryan spilled his coffee and reached for a sponge from Lila’s sink to wipe it up. “You scared Randy Crawford half to death with it.”

“I had one helluva good time doing that, too.”

They listened to the soft yips of the pups from the washroom, sat around for the next hour and finished what was left of the Kahlua. The air was getting thick outside, the sky darkening.

“How’s Vernon? Think he’ll testify?”

“Vernon’s a cagey bastard but always played square by me. One thing I do know, he doesn’t care for you, thinks you don’t get the big picture.”

“She raised her glass. “We’ll see about that.”

The Kahlua-laced coffee had warmed Bryan’s stomach. Everything was suffused with a glow, the same feeling he got sitting in front of a fireplace. He wanted to put his arm around her. “Gotta get going. Hey, Lila, thanks for the puppy. Jenny’ll give it a great home.”

On the drive back, they stopped to eat at Johnny’s Pizza. It was past lunch-time. They sat near the salad bar. Jenny kept talking about the puppies and how she’d already picked out a name. “I’m gonna call him Domino because he’s black with a white spot. What do you think?”

Bryan examined packets of Parmesan cheese next to the salt and peppershakers and reached for a stack of napkins. “Fits him.” He picked up their order from the counter and brought the pizza to the table. If figured whatever they didn’t eat, he’d take home. Always good for breakfast. “Nothing like the smell of a thick-crust pizza to warm a grown man’s heart.”

Jenny lifted the first slice from the pie and stacked several more on her plate. A thread of cheese oozed out from its side. Bryan sprinkled his slice with hot peppers and cheese from the table. “Listen, Dad. There’s something I have to tell you.”

Oh man, he knew it. She was about to tell him that she was no longer a virgin, or if she wasn't gonna tell him directly, describe how some jackass hurt her. Bryan wondered if she'd already told her mother and what Gail's response had been. He braced himself. He wasn't terrific in the broken heart department.

She chewed her crust. "Promise you won't get mad. You promise?" She asked again. "You promise?"

He gazed off to the salad bar. Someone in a white apron was refilling a tray of cherry tomatoes. "C'mon. Sure. What do you think?"

She caught a dripping skein of cheese and wrapped it back around her slice, then used a paper napkin to blot the grease, moved her paper plate around several times and positioned it directly in front of her. "I want to take time off before going to community college."

"You what?" Bryan banged the table and sent the aluminum pie pan spinning and clattering to the floor.

"You promised not to get mad."

"How can you not go to college?"

"Everyone is looking at us. Calm down. You're embarrassing me."

"I'm embarrassing you? What happened? I thought we were a team. I thought..."

"Dad..."

“I don’t know what to say. I...”

“Look, I appreciate all your hard work and everything, but I need to take time off. I never said I don’t want to go to college.”

“This is her idea, isn’t it?”

“Lower your voice. Who?”

“Your mother’s. I knew it. I should’ve never let you get back together.”

“You didn’t let us do anything. And if you really want to know, she told me I was out of my freaking mind.”

“Ha! That’s the first good advice she’s ever given you.”

“Excuse me,” said Jenny.

“You heard me right.”

“Didn’t you always say that I had to forgive her because she was sick? Can’t you see how hard she’s trying?”

He tried another tactic. “I’m glad that you two are talking to each other. I really am. But what does this have to do with your getting a degree? What does this have to do with your going to college?”

“Can you shut up for one minute and let me talk?” She banged her fist on the table.

People at the salad bar were staring at them as they picked up cucumbers with black

tongs. One girl elbowed a woman who looked like her mother and giggled. Jenny put a slice of pizza on her father's plate. "I knew this wasn't going to be easy. Listen. The zoo is building a new section for birds. They're planning to name it after Rincon. They asked if I'd like to help set it up beginning next summer. I'll be making money. I can save up for college. Dan does that. Why can't I do the same thing? This way I can pay for my books and clothes. How's it gonna help if you do everything for me?" He couldn't believe this was coming out of her mouth. "You always told me to be independent and to speak my mind."

"Don't remind me."

"At least you have a sense of humor."

"I wasn't trying to be funny."

"C'mon, Dad. It's for Rincon. Thought you'd be glad. I can do something for him."

He remembered Rincon's face, the convulsions, his arms dangling from his side. But he couldn't change that, none of that. After all these years of inching toward the finish line, scrimping and saving, staying up at night worrying about how he was going to give his daughter the chance he never had, to make her life easier so she wouldn't have to go through a succession of shit jobs in bars and beer halls, each completed grade had been another steppingstone toward a goal that shimmered from the top of a seven-layer cake inscribed with the words, "Congratulations, Jenny." He thought about how so many times, the things you want so badly turn out so different. But as he looked at her sitting

across the table from him, he recognized that she was a lot like him—strong-minded and willful, but still wanted his advice. “Promise you’ll go to community college afterward?”

“That’s always been the plan.”

“What if after the summer ends, the zoo says, ‘Miss Jenny, you’ve done a terrific job; we want you to stay and become the administrator of the new Rincon Roberts wing?’”

“Oh, Dad. They’re not going to ask me that.”

“That’s not my question. I want to know what are you going to say?”

“I’d say, ‘thank you, but I want to do something else. I’m not exactly sure what that is right now, but I want to learn h more so I can work with animals.’ Besides, they wouldn’t even ask me that unless I had degree.”

Bryan felt relieved. “So you’ll start after summer?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Promise?”

She promised.

He steadied a third slice of pizza in his hand. “Now it’s my turn to ask you something, and your turn to promise that you won’t get mad.”

“Shoot.”

“I was in your room the other day and noticed a condom on your dresser.”

“I’ve told you a thousand times not to go in there without permission. My door was closed shut.”

“I wanted to see where you’d hung those LSU banners.” She wiped a blob of tomato sauce from her mouth. “Why are you laughing? What’s so funny now?” He was starting to get irritated.

“Oh, Dad. It’s a joke birthday present for my friend at school.”

Some joke. He was beginning to feel like he didn’t know much about his daughter’s personal life. “Just answer the question. Are you having sex?”

“There’s no one I like. Except,” she thought, “maybe one boy.”

Bryan’s neck stiffened. “He have a name?”

“Dan.”

“You mean Jay’s son?”

“Yeah. We’ve been talking to each other. By the way, what’s going on between you and Lila?” He held a slice of pizza in mid-air. “I saw how the two of you looked at each other. All this business about working together and the River Watchers. The way she kept talking when I asked how you knew each other. C’mon, Dad. I’m not stupid. You two getting it on?”

Outside, they heard thunder followed by a quick crack of lightening, then a downpour that careened from Johnny’s awning. “Looks like we’re gonna be here for awhile.” The

windows fogged up. Bryan reached for another slice. They probably wouldn't be bringing home any extras.

"You're right. I do like her." He took Jenny's hand. "But I want to know," he had a hard time getting it out, "tell me what do you think of her"

Chapter Thirty-three—EPA

John Weatherall from the EPA's Investigation Unit set the Camry's GPS for a motel in Monroe. He made a mental note to request rooms as far removed from the freeway as possible, a double for him and his deputy, Tremaine Collins, and another for their coordinator, Marta Wilson. Renting a motel room in Hentsbury would've made more sense, but they had been advised not to bother. No good accommodations. They'd been traveling for several months and needed a night's rest. Hentsbury and Monroe were about fifty minutes apart. Another team had visited the area five years ago.

Hentsbury was not about any one single catastrophe. This was about a slow accumulation, the multiplication of poisons over the years that made the air, water, and soil a death trap for anyone who lived within a five-mile radius. There was no particular one event, which is exactly what made it difficult to investigate and force compliance. John had copies of reports about cancer, deformities, and respiratory disease. Bad stuff. Open ditches filled with run-off from the paper mill owned by Rand-Atlantic. In his notebook, John had written down, "...violations of the Clean Water Act" followed by several question marks. No one wanted to touch Hentsbury. It was a hot potato. On one side of the ring stood Rand-Atlantic and on the other, the environmentalists. Sandwiched in between were Hentsbury's citizens. The EPA investigatory unit referees were expected to blow a whistle. From reviewing reports, John could tell the situation had deteriorated since the last visit five years ago when the EPA had slapped a \$100,000 fine on the company for having no fire evacuation plan, peanuts for an outfit like Rand-Atlantic.

Now the city had the highest cancer rate in the state and was poised to become first in the nation.

Collins and Marta were sleeping in the back seat. It was before dawn; a windowsill of light filtered through the horizon. Otherwise, the sky was a wash of grey clouds. The sun rose behind a city building and shone through its columns to cast lots along the ground. John turned on the radio. Tremaine would drive tomorrow when they were scheduled to meet Deacon Turner for breakfast, and then with the Arkansas Environmental Board and Rand-Atlantic. Marta was in charge of taping and taking notes. They were collecting information for a Region 6 investigation. After thirty years of working in the field, John had a good notion of how to play the game. Years ago when he was fresh out of college, he'd landed a summer contract with the EPA, metering gas emissions and taking soil samples and sending back results to a laboratory in Little Rock, which made him feel like he had already circumvented the fate of his parents who hated the drudgery of their jobs, the boredom, encountering egos at the end of each fiscal year who fought for control of budgets and the right to advance their own pet projects. The weather always changed with each new administration. His parents had tried to remain neutral in each fray, but more than once, they had been humiliated by City Council for a public works project that had been delayed, a housing development that was deemed substandard, violations that cost the City of Phoenix money. They took the blame, allowed themselves to be scapegoats for department heads and in doing so, year after year, managed to hold onto their jobs—civil service positions that came with health benefits, sick days, vacation, and

a pension—allowing his parents to give him things they never had as two black teenagers growing up in the southwest.

The years had worn them into brown knobs. Locked away, silent. They had schooled their son with an understanding that loyalty was the single-most key to success. But the young John Weatherall was not planning to follow the same path as his parents. Once he'd discovered Colorado, he became an avid skier, glorying in his physical ability to move through a black and white landscape with its velvety gray shadows, cutting his own trail past snow-encrusted pine trees and speeding down steep terrain. Returning from a ski trip, he told his parents about the EPA—how it was like the Coast Guard, different from the Army, but part of the same thing. They listened, folded their hands on the kitchen table and refused to look like the children he thought they were, gazed past the mustache, which he shaved off years later, over his head and out the window to whatever was waiting for him. His father shook his hand and said, "Good luck, son." His mother hugged him. He moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico to start his life.

John Weatherall felt he could help others by being a representative of an agency with the might of the federal government standing behind it, the gold standard, a dedication that lasted for the first five years, his honeymoon. Time on the job warped him into a different shape, not one that was unpleasing, but certainly more serviceable. The people he interviewed didn't see how the agency's hands were tied in red tape restraints, how in some sense, the agency was filled with sadomasochists, learning to enjoy the repeated pleasure of almost achieving orgasm, but not quite. They left the conference table and

returned to their desks to check email and make new appointments, a shell game that could continue for years.

John didn't mind travel or the long hours. He was on a mission to improve the environment. He monitored superfund sites throughout the country where crews did remediation work, cleaning army and naval base radiation and chemical spills. John cast himself as a hero in his own movie. Slowly, he moved up the EPA career ladder, and in doing so, helped his superiors meet their affirmative action quotas. He believed that his job meant something not only to himself, but also to others who greeted EPA teams with a parade of goodwill and home-cooked meals. Here was a group who was going to make a difference. John smiled. He wanted to believe that, also.

His wife was a teacher in an Albuquerque high school. "I turned in those reports about radiation months ago," he'd say. "Not weeks. Six months ago. The readings were off the chart. I haven't heard a single word." He extended his empty hands as if she could give him something he needed.

"Wait a bit longer. You still might hear." Her mind was awash with administrators who were too beleaguered by cutbacks and rising classroom size to pay attention to the needs of children who raged behind their desks.

As time went on, John understood his role. He was not the hero of his youth forging a solitary trail across a maze of bureaucracies. John had a more modest part to play, but even so, it was a part that came with its own job title and description: Air and Soil Sampler, Level 4. His role was to feed the process: interview people, collect data, observe

protocol, file forms in their correct format, and move information along the chain. It didn't matter how long it took, or whether anything happened. He had done what he was supposed to do. That's what the EPA wanted, that's what they were supposed to do. Sometimes they sent him to training and allowed him to file an expense report. But unlike his parents, he never became disillusioned. He found satisfaction in talking with people who allowed him to see into their lives; people with hands trembling and holding back tears who told him about a baby who had died or a mother who was now crippled, or a home that was worth nothing on the market. It wasn't fair. None of it was fair. They were stuck in their own hell and nobody was helping. They all asked the same question: "Why doesn't anyone care?"

The best he could do was to listen. He was a good listener.

What made it easier was that John was no longer swimming in a fish bowl with the responsibility for metering and monitoring, chicken shit work. Not since he had received a promotion five years ago. Now he was in charge of Region 6's Investigation Unit. Over the years, he had done an exemplary job and won high marks from his superiors. He had been patient and was ready. Plus he got a month's vacation off every year.

The Camry's headlights flared bright against the red brick office of the Come Back Inn. He got out of the car and left to book rooms. Tremaine and Marta felt the motor cut off.

"You up?" Tremaine shook Marta's shoulder.

“Uh-huh. Cat-napping.” Marta’s head fell back down on her chest. She was only half asleep.

They had traveled from Washington, D.C. where they had been asked to attend a hearing on toxic waste. Now they were onto their next assignment, a team of three (privately they referred to themselves as “The Gang of Three”), who knew each other well enough to predict what they were going to eat for breakfast, lunch or dinner, a menu that included coffee, Cokes, and a fast-food roulette of hamburgers, chicken nuggets, pizza, or when they were feeling virtuous, a green salad with Italian dressing. John and Marta hounded Tremaine about his smoking. He told them to fuck off, but on the sly was experimenting with electronic cigarettes, sucking one right now outside the car and creating a comic book-size puff of vapor. He felt silly standing there trying to get a nicotine buzz, riffled through the trunk for his Kool’s; there they were, slipped them inside his jacket pocket, and waited for John to return with the keys.

Tremaine was in his late thirties and a borderline diabetic, from a family of Slovak construction workers who had struggled with blood sugar levels for several generations. He knew he had to give up eating Chocolate Brownie Melts from McDonald’s. But it wasn’t going to be easy. He was the baby on the team and its newest member, rescued by John from Region 3’s Office of Analytical Services and Quality Assurance in Maryland. Like John, Tremaine had started out at a lower-level regional position, had conducted field inspections of regulated facilities for the Investigation Unit, which is how they met. His work on the East Coast was tame in comparison to the unregulated world that John moved in, sort of a Wild West. In his world, everyone played by the same rules. Inspect,

certify, stamp, sort of like getting a car smogged and driving away after paying protection money. But in John's world, there were flagrant violations, companies that hid their shit and didn't give a rat's ass, more exciting work than just signatures at the bottom of a paper.

John waved and returned to the car. "Rooms in the back," he said and pointed to where the parking lot decomposed into gravel.

"Did you hear that?" Tremaine shook Marta's shoulder. "Get up, girl. Time to shine."

One side of her face was a darker blush. Her hair was squashed beneath her chin. She opened her eyes. Marta pushed herself forward and sat straight up. "Okay," she said.

"Why do you have to holler in my ear so damn loud? Jack-ass." Tremaine and Marta loved each other with constant put-downs.

Both guys hoisted their carry-ons from the trunk, told Marta they'd meet her at four in the lounge to review the itinerary. She looked around at several fast food joints that book-ended the motel. John and Tremaine hurried along wheeling their carry-ons. Marta followed and used her own card key to open the adjoining room: bed, TV, all the usual stuff including plastic bottles of amber shampoo, pearl-white conditioner, and body lotion. She collected the samples for a homeless shelter close to where she lived. In the mirror she straightened her collar and put on make-up, an attractive African-American woman in her mid-fifties. She rubbed blush on her cheeks and went outside to the Huddle House. Five-thirty in the morning. She was hungry and wanted something to eat.

The Huddle House was a U-haul-sized restaurant with a yellow sign the color of scrambled eggs. Three giant plastic gorillas guarded the parking lot. Inside, a waitress picked up a rag from a bucket of soapy water from under the counter and wiped away a ring of moisture. She barely looked up and held onto her pencil and pad like they were souvenirs from her last vacation. “What can I get for you?”

“Coffee and eggs with sausage. Scrambled light with whole wheat toast.” The waitress poured a cup from the pot in her hand, and repeated the favor for two men sitting next to Marta at the counter who were dressed in green and gray camouflage.

“When I was younger, took whatever I wanted. But I learned,” he said, holding up his coffee cup to his lips and pointing to a lemon meringue pie beneath a cake cover. “Sure did. Did time.”

“Still working at Rand?”

He was the younger man, probably in his late forties. “Not anymore. Signed up for meat cutting school a few years ago. You?”

“Retired. Worked there for more than twenty. Plywood. Dust everywhere. Now I sleep with a respirator.”

“Can’t fight what you can’t see.”

“You two used to work at Rand-Atlantic?” asked Marta, holding her coffee mug.

“Yes, ma’am,” said the meat-cutter. “You thinking of getting a job there?” They looked at this woman with long painted fingernails and a blue blazer who spoke without a strong southern lilt. They chuckled.

Marta got the joke. “No, but I do know people who live up there.”

“A long way from home, aren’t you?” They left the waitress a tip. The older man stopped at the cash register. “I’ll take a slice of that lemon meringue.”

“For Eleanor? She’ll like that. See you tomorrow, Mel.”

Marta finished eating breakfast and went to her room. She found the remote on the nightstand and turned on the TV. There was a weather report about a cold front coming in from the north, City Council news, and a puppy that was up for adoption. Except for the two men sitting next to her at the Huddle House and a few customers sprinkled around the edges of the window, mostly everyone else in the restaurant had been white.

Traveling in the south with two white men would’ve been impossible, not that she had any problem with it—but even though this was 2012, people noticed and that was not always a good thing—it was how they noticed. Some registered obscenity, especially the older ones who held jobs, ran places. Marta could read the signs, a scowl, a shade of disgust, a come-on. Even so, local communities invited the team into their homes for dinner with the expectation that the Investigation Unit was on the side of the little people. Most of the time, cases took months, even years before anything happened. She told them, “It’s not like the Bible where the Lord intervenes on the side of the righteous,” and felt that even by saying that, she had said too much. How could she tell them straight up

that it might take forever? She was glad John was black. He knew how to ease the way with the locals.

Marta got on pajamas, plumped up her pillows, and surfed the Internet. Then she checked the tape machine to make sure it was working properly, recorded a few bars of “1-2-3 testing, testing,” until she was satisfied. She read her notes to make sure she understood the background, accessed Wi-Fi, and downloaded files from the home computer about the Clean Water Act. While John and Tremaine knew the science, in her mind, she did the work, memorized addresses and telephone numbers, filing dates and deadlines. Marta set the alarm and fell asleep soon after she put down the TV remote.

In the morning, they drove to Hentsbury to meet Deacon Turner, an hour’s drive past tall, skinny trees that edged the highway. There was little else that grew. They streamed past stunted dogwood and tulip trees in people’s front yards, azaleas without bloom sitting low to the ground like couches. They passed by metal shops, storage facilities, churches, and a charter school with children streaming in the yard, saw vacancy signs along the highway, the blackened eyes of shuttered stores. They breathed a stench that clawed at their throats.

Tremaine was at the wheel and Marta in front helping to navigate. John slumped across the back seat, snoring.

“Whatever you’ve got, it’s rubbing off.”

She was consorting with her GPS device. “What are you talking about now?”

“Tell me, who always falls asleep in a car, in an airplane, or parachuting from a jet?”

“Very funny. Stop here,” she said. “Back up. You passed it, ding-dong.”

Tremaine turned around and pulled into a carport with a white rusted metal awning. One of the poles was slightly crooked with plastic flowers entwined around the carport. A poinsettia stood by the doorway. The motor cut off. John sat up. A door opened. Deacon Turner came out of the house followed by his wife, Jeannette, an older couple and one of the reasons that The Gang of Three had found their way to Hentsbury. The couple walked toward them in a faltering one-step-at-a-time sort of way, down a cement path toward the car, but still bubbling with effervescence. They were a good-looking couple probably older than she imagined, but then again, Marta could never tell about people’s ages, especially black people. Ha!

“Very glad to meet you. We’re so glad you could come,” said Deacon Turner, and extended his hand to each one of the team’s members. “This is my wife Jeannette.”

They talked about the drive from Monroe, the weather, and how Deacon Turner planned to show them what was really happening in Hentsbury, a town of 6,000, the largest city in Ashley County, Arkansas. “You won’t read about it in the newspaper,” he said. They piled into the Deacon’s SUV, stopped at a diner where the walls were colored in a shade of gray grease. A number of people lifted their eyes to inspect the arrivals, found the mixture of black and white friends sitting together at the same table unusual, but decided there was no cause for alarm, returned to scooping up grits.

After breakfast Deacon Turner got behind the wheel of the SUV, rolled down his window and drove for several blocks, began to point out public roads that had been diverted this way and that, barbed wire fences, and a stone bridge that had been destroyed, preventing a section of town from easily reaching fire and police facilities. “Look here,” said Deacon Turner, and pulled up to an open ditch that contained a foamy mass of blue-black water that made them cough and their eyes burn.

John Weatherall opened his door. “Collins, bring that bag from the trunk.” The two men set instruments on the ground and started to measure H₂S levels, writing down readings.

Marta and Jeannette waited inside the SUV. Jeannette was a thin woman with shining brown eyes. “Yesterday me and Dirksen attended a stroke workshop at the hospital,” she said. “You know, Hentsbury is known for its strokes, and not the good kind either.” She laughed. “Miss Marta, sometimes all I want to do is wake up in the morning and breathe God’s fresh air without worrying about my lungs.”

Marta nodded. It was all she could do. She couldn’t imagine living in this place, a sinkhole, but she also saw brick schools and churches, parking lots filled with people carrying groceries to their cars, a place like any other thousands of cities across the country. “Wish you could too.” Rand-Atlantic’s lawyers had offered a white neighborhood in Hentsbury a nice buy-out settlement as long as they never sued. Places like this made her mad. It was as plain as the black nose on her face.

The men returned to the car. Tremaine and John returned their equipment to the trunk. “That car’s following us everywhere,” said Deacon Turner, pointing to his rear view.

“My escort service. Bet you didn’t know I had one?” A black car pulled along side the SUV. The Deacon waved. “How you fellas doing this morning?”

A man said they were doing fine and tipped the brim of his hat. “I’d be careful if I were you.”

The Deacon shook his head, made a sharp turn at the traffic light and didn’t check the rearview until they got to the library.

The Investigation Unit of the EPA had set up operations in the only library in town with a bank of functional computers and bulletin boards decorated with upcoming community school events and hunting cabins for weekend rental. The library had been built with a donation from Rand-Atlantic, the same place where Lila Shawn had held her press conference. In the meeting room stood a vintage 1950’s oak table that took at least three people to move. Tremaine had stashed a pack of Kools in one of its drawers, removed a cigarette and disappeared outside to catch a few puffs.

John had nixed holding the meeting in either the Post Office (there wasn’t enough parking), or in the local City Hall. Marta needed Internet access. Her laptop had started to crash with a virus that she had accidentally downloaded the previous evening. The computer was still operational, but she didn’t want to take chances. She had asked the home office to FedEx a loaner and was still waiting. FedEx estimated a delivery time around two in the afternoon. But mostly, the investigation unit wanted to arrive

unannounced if they could—that was the point. Meeting at the City Hall or Post Office would've been like sending out an invitation to clean up before company arrived.

Representatives from Rand-Atlanta's office, the Arkansas Environmental Board, and locals from the plant had been invited to give up two consecutive Saturdays to explain how they were in compliance with the Clean Water Act. Marta had sent emails to everyone's calendar: Tray Perlson, Randy Crawford, Dwayne McCullor and Vernon Wolfe. The first Saturday Marta had reserved for Perlson and Crawford, the second for McCullor and Wolfe. Everything was ready. The team had one more evening to prepare before the hearing.

The only similar thing about the men was the way they filed in and out of the library with a solemn look on their faces as though they had been left out of their rich aunt's will. They sat around a u-shaped table. Marta supervised the tape machine and took notes. Thankfully, the FedEx package had arrived. John and Collins wanted to get the conversation flowing, make everyone feel cozy before they got to the good stuff, allowing the men to think that everything was jim-dandy before they started to ask the hard questions when the plastic smiles began to melt.

Each one of the men was interviewed at a different time slot with half hour breaks in between for the Investigation Unit to compare notes and recoup, running out to the refrigerator for cold bottles of water, time enough to process paperwork and feed their files, emailing the home office with preliminary reports.

“Wasn’t it known back in 2007 that there were fish in the Mud River?” Tray Perlson didn’t take the bait. Instead, he masked his eyes, looking above their heads and out the window. Mostly he was annoyed with being called away from Atlanta to testify at this inquisition. He remembered coming before a House committee in Washington D.C. on industrial pollution where Rand-Atlantic got slapped on the hands for running effluents 200 feet away from several local elementary schools. He had to admit that it was a gross oversight, a stupid mistake, but promised that the company would rectify everything, and had donated computers to several classrooms at each school as a token of the company’s sincerity. Perlson responded in a conciliatory manner and gave a speech about how Rand-Atlantic was partners with the community, including the state’s regulatory agencies. These duffle-heads had seemed to forget that his company provided jobs for an entire community. “I don’t have to remind you folks that each state has their own agency for managing waterways. They’re the ones with real oversight. We work closely with the local board.” Marta arched an eyebrow. He smiled pleasantly. “So why are you picking on us poor boys? We haven’t done a thing to get you riled up.” He threw out his hands in a gesture of appeasement.

“Mr. Perlson, do you rubber stamp everything that comes across your desk?” asked John, who met Perlson’s congenial smile with his own.

Perlson pointed a finger toward the door. “You have to talk to those guys,” he said, meaning the state’s environmental quality office. “Not me. They’re the ones who have the answers. If the state gives us the go-ahead, who are we to say no?” Nevertheless, the

interview had its desired effect, letting the home corporate office know that there were more eyes trained on their sights than usual, at least John hoped so.

Tremaine took the next round. He asked Randy Crawford, "Aren't you breaking the law in question by falsifying certain documents?" The silence became more silent. "You can't pretend that you don't know about this. We have documentation showing that there are fish swimming in the Mud River, have been for years, and that the area is part of a wetland, not just Rand-Atlantic's dumping ground assigned by Mother Nature for their personal use. I don't see her signature on this paper. Do you?" He held up a page.

"What kind of documentation are you talking about?"

"Affidavits from individuals who've been living around the Mud River. Plus we have proof that there were dead fish buried along its banks. I'm talking about soil samples. We have them here." He picked up a folder and waved it around.

"Actually, I'd like to see them." Tremaine passed the folder across the table. Crawford didn't bother to look. "Guess it must be from that same bunch of troublemakers who've been bellyaching because we closed their wells, which I might add, was a safety precaution. People will say anything. They'll say anything, especially if they're interested in the almighty dollar."

"We're not asking you to guess," Mr. Crawford. "As the head of the local Arkansas Environmental Board, we're expecting you to give us answers. Your office approved those readings." Randy Crawford reminded the investigative unit of the obvious: the state board had certified that the company could discharge their runoff in the Mud River

because there was nothing swimming there at the time the permit was issued. “Maybe the fish were taking a two-week vacation in Hawaii. Didn’t bother to tell me.” His humor did not get a response. He continued. “I don’t believe you’ll find my signature on that piece of paper you’re shuffling around. Our office depends on Rand-Atlantic’s environmental and safety team to give us answers. I believe Dwayne McCullor gave us the go-ahead.”

“Isn’t that like sending in the fox to guard the chicken house?” asked Tremaine.

Crawford had now assumed a conciliatory tone. “But that’s the way things have been done around here long before I stepped into the picture. You can’t hold me responsible for that.” He said that the permit would be retained on the books for the next two years. At that time, if the community had a problem, they could testify. “It’s that simple. You can save the taxpayers a shit-pot load of money and go home right now.”

More than that he wouldn’t say. Next weekend, they called in Dwayne McCullor.

“Mr. McCullor,” John asked. “Your signature is on this permit.”

“Yes, sir.”

“We are here to do a job,” he said. “We are asking you to do yours.”

“I’m ready to help in whatever way I can.” He adjusted his sunglasses.

“There is evidence that the paper mill is poisoning residents of Hentsbury through effluent run-off that is leaching into the water table and throughout the community. Are you aware of that?”

“Well, yes and no, but not really. That’s not what I’m paid to do. I’m a Safety Coordinator. I don’t get to concern myself with what’s happening outside the plant. Mostly, I order the chemicals, earplugs, safety masks, things like that.”

“Did you or did you not willingly falsify documents?”

Dwayne flinched, said he did no such thing. “Falsify? That’s a helluva way to put a guy on the defense.” He took out a tiny recorder from his pocket. “Maybe you guys need to listen to this.” They heard the sound of twittering birds. Then they recognized Randy Crawford’s voice saying that if Dwayne signed an affidavit and certified that there were no fish swimming in the Mud River, he’d make sure that the State paid for three new Sensorcons.

“That’ll burn Vernon’s team with their shit equipment,” Crawford said. “One hand washes the other. You help me; I’ll help you.”

“So you willingly falsified documents?” asked Marta.

“No, ma’am. He was the state environmental representative,” said Dwayne. “I figured he knew what he was doing. Figured his department had run all the tests. Said they didn’t have any more time before the deadline. He’s the guy who gets paid the big bucks. Not me.” He paused for a moment. “I thought only the big guys asked the questions.”

Marta continued. “Randy Crawford specifically said on the tape you just played for us that there were fish swimming in the Mud River. But even so, you had a choice...”

“Yes, ma’am. But I didn’t know that for a fact. I wish I had. And he didn’t actually say that there were no fish. He just wanted me to certify that there weren’t. Maybe I would’ve done something different. Didn’t want to lose my job. I think you can understand that. Like I said, the Arkansas Board is supposed to be the experts. I’ve got a mortgage, a family to support. You can understand that. I only wanted to keep my job. Jobs are hard to come by, especially in this area. Not like where you all come from.”

“It says here that you are the Safety Coordinator for Rand-Atlantic. What do you do exactly?”

“I’m responsible for making sure that men are wearing the right safety gear. We don’t want people to get hurt.”

John asked. “So Mr. McCullor, what did you get in exchange for your signature?”

Dwayne looked insulted. “Nothing at all. Why should I expect anything for doing my job?” He sat with his hands folded.

“Wasn’t it about those Sensorcons?”

“What Crawford did was his own choice. I’m a Safety Coordinator, not the guy who does the testing. All I did was sign.”

John felt that their questioning was not going to produce any results. He asked if they could have the tape. Dwayne removed his sunglasses and passed it over. “It’s a copy,” he said. “I have the original.”

Vernon's turn. The Gang of Three dropped their last firebomb, "What did you do to prevent exposure to H₂S gas in the open culverts throughout Hentsbury?"

Vernon was unruffled, tossed the ball back without much exertion. "We've monitored readings since the end of the summer, which makes about four months. Here they are."

He dropped a folder on the table. "We flushed out the system to ensure no exposure over and above safe limits and that seems to have helped significantly. You can see the before and after. Rand-Atlantic was totally cooperative. They asked us to, I mean insisted," he hesitated, "that we use every precaution."

"Is that so?" asked John.

"Absolutely. Rand has a long-standing commitment to this area. We've been providing jobs in this community for years."

"That's not the issue," said Marta. "We're talking about people's lives."

Vernon got busy looking through his manila folders. He pointed to a report. "Our department first called attention to this matter. That's a matter of record. You can see by the date. Our men were getting sick. We had to act." John and Tremaine eyed each other from across the table. "I have my own copies. I'm glad to leave these with you." He added his reports to the pile.

"So what do you think should be done here to rectify the situation?" John was wondering what to communicate back to Section 6 headquarters, specifically the text field on his report labeled, Recommendations.

“Commitment from the top,” said Vernon. He got up and shook everyone’s hand. “Thank you.”

“No, thank you,” said John.

In between interviews, Deacon Turner introduced the investigative team to people who had worked at the mill; they also spoke to the school superintendent and to a local representative from the state’s health department. They commuted back and forth from their motel and returned in the evening to hamburgers and pizza. Tremaine snuck more fudge brownies into the room.

On their last evening, they went to a Cajun restaurant at the mall in Monroe. Marta ordered the stuffed crab, John the gumbo and Tremaine thought for a long time before he ordered the chicken jambalaya. They sat at a circular booth with placemats printed with pictures of dancing shrimp in calico skirts.

“John raised a glass of red wine and toasted, “To our last evening.” They looked forward to putting the town’s noxious vapors behind them.

“Away from the land of pointing fingers,” said Tremaine, who during their two-week stay had cut down on his cigarette smoking, an accomplishment that he attributed to the overall poor air quality of the place, which had discouraged him from further disrespecting his lungs.

Marta nodded. “Those guys wanted to blame each other for everything.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” said John, men and women who wanted to take the heat off their own plate by switching around the silver. “At least we got them to answer questions. Everyone brought their own halo.” He encircled his hands above his head.

“Vernon Wolfe seemed to have the least to hide,” said Tremaine. He looked at Marta and John’s blank faces. “At least I thought so.”

Marta agreed. “But did you see the way the safety guy, McCullor, and he looked at each other later in the day? Spikey eyes. Wolverines. Oooo—eee!”

They wanted to eat, return to the motel, and pack their gear for a morning flight.

John asked Marta, “When do you think you’ll have the final report to run by us before we send it to headquarters?”

“Should be a few days, at most a week,” she said. “There’s that funny business about the Clean Water Act and those signatures. That was a hot button.”

“Dwayne submitted his tape as evidence. That Crawford guy almost turned red when he heard about it and ran out to call his lawyer. If I were a fortune-teller, I’d guess that Mr. Crawford is going to have a rude awakening. Implicates him in falsifying documents,” said John.

“More than that,” said Marta. “Hear he’s in trouble for assaulting one of the River Watchers. But Dwayne was the one who signed,” she reminded everyone. “He has to bear some responsibility. Don’t you think?” Difficult, they said, to identify the bad guys.

After years of doing whatever the hell Rand-Atlantic wanted, the lines of enforcement were muddied and people in charge wanted to keep it that way.

John leaned back in his chair. "Let the lawyers decide. They're the ones who usually do."

"We should've ordered appetizers," said Tremaine. "When's our food going to get here? I'm hungry."

The waiter finally arrived and wiped off any extra sauce along the rim of each plate with the flourish of a napkin. "May I get you anything else?" He asked in a fake French accent. They looked at their plates. The smell of warm, delicious food dilated their nostrils.

"More wine?"

This was their last night in town and they were celebrating. "Sure, why not? Another bottle, please." Marta and Tremaine nodded their approval, passed around the hot sauce, and buttered pieces of corn bread. In doing so, they recounted the day's interviews, then pushed their chairs from the table, got up to leave, and prayed that whatever they could accomplish by submitting their reports to the home office would be enough to offset the very fucked up meter by a few decimal points, if not by more.

"When do you think the home office will process our report?" asked Marta.

John looked at her and picked up a few minted toothpicks from the register and tucked them inside his pocket for the ride home. "Don't know," he said. "We've seen this before. Your guess is as good as mine."

Chapter Thirty-four—Chattahooche River

Dwayne resided in his Atlanta office, business cards reading, “National Recombination Team, Safety Adviser.” If he kept his ears open, he’d find out what that meant, but knew safety was a part of it—his specialty.

He’d had more than thirty years with no record of serious accidents, unless if you counted the time when Tom Hargrove had smashed his foot beneath a turbine mixer, but that was carelessness on his part and had nothing to do with Dwayne, or when someone else had burned their arm on a pulp-drying machine and had to be rushed to the hospital. A while ago, one of his guys had a nasty smash in the face with the dead-man bucket and broke his nose. Everyone had said he looked better that way. No one could prevent every accident from happening. Not even Dwayne.

Tray Perlson had visited his office in Hentsbury some time after the EPA had left town, a departure that was noted by a reshuffling of personnel that had kept security busy issuing new badges. “We’re forming a national team to reevaluate safety procedures. Need someone with your background.” More than that, Perlson didn’t say. The only other thing Dwayne wanted to know was how soon Perlson wanted him to arrive in Atlanta.

“How soon can you get there?” Dwayne figured he could get there quick. His old friend Vernon would never be able to live this down.

After all the cards were reshuffled, Randy Crawford had been assigned to the burn pile, and Dwayne didn’t mind saying that he was proud of giving him an assist; the man

had gotten what he deserved. You don't screw your buddies without getting screwed yourself because Dwayne was no dumb ass. And that Lila Shawn woman had done her part. Who would've known they'd be on the same side working together? It was almost hilarious. Heard that Crawford was sniffing around for another job in Little Rock where he had friends. By now, it was Dwayne's third week in Rand's corporate office. When he'd arrived, Perlson had handed him a loose leaf binder with diagrams of vacuum drum-type brown stock washer units and pulp drying machines and instructions for running them plus a cost analysis.

Dwayne turned on the air conditioning and was rewarded by a pleasant hum. He sat back and rested his feet on his desk, noting once again the cream colored walls of his office and its contrasting brown trim. All morning people had knocked on his door wanting him to fill out this or that paper, part of his getting signed up for health benefits and insurance. Of course, it should've already happened, but a three-week delay wasn't that much of a slip, at least not where he came from. Around the office, they called him Mr. McCullor and asked how he liked Atlanta. It was a big city, all right, but he hadn't had much of a chance to look around. He wanted to know where there was a decent place to get a drink? Did Mr. McCulloar mean coffee?

Dwayne stared out his window and saw Atlanta's skyline, a jagged puzzle piece of buildings. No trees or rusted equipment. No arguments about chlorine-based bleaching versus peroxide-based bleaching and which one was better. His cream-colored walls were decorated with a poster from the Atlanta Botanical Garden abloom with white Cherokee roses and another of a man with a beard and whiskers, one of the original Shields family

members, who gazed at him through wire-rim spectacles. Dwayne wondered if he could install the deer head from his old office in its place, wondered what the boys on his crew back in Hentsbury were doing right now, and if they were talking about that lucky sonofabitch who'd moved to Atlanta. On his last evening, the crew had taken him out to The Night Life where they presented him with a going-away card, a large Number One printed on its cover. Inside there was an even larger Number Two, which said, "Shit runs downhill." He promised to keep them up-to-date with news about his seminars, trainings, and travels around the country. Dwayne wanted to have a talk with Perlson, and get a better idea what he would be doing here besides pushing around a pencil.

"Get on my calendar," Perlson told him.

What had been the big rush for getting him here, if Perlson didn't want to talk? But what mattered was that he was 490 miles from Hentsbury, Arkansas. He'd arrived in the Atlanta corporate office. Dwayne McCullor, not Vernon Wolfe. He wasn't some dumb-ass who didn't know how to add up a column of numbers. There were calculators for that stuff. He'd spent enough time in deer stands to know how to wait, and that's exactly what he'd do until Mr. Tray Perlson gave him a signal. But it was boring even though he went to the cafeteria in the basement and made friends with the guard in the main lobby.

"How's your day going?" Dwayne asked.

The guard looked up from a computer screen and saw Dwayne's badge.

"Morning, Mr. McCullor. You new?" The guy received a cup of coffee and a paper bag from the woman sitting next to him.

"Sure am."

"Have a good day then," he said, and unwrapped an Egg McMuffin.

Dwayne moved on.

There was no real place to walk. He couldn't just hop into his truck to make a quick trip to the hunting lodge or go to the Half & Half, run his hand down a new shipment of yellow masks in their plastic covers. In the meantime, he thought about his new health benefits, and how they'd allow his wife to get the operation she needed, and how he wouldn't have to pay a dime out of his own pocket. She seemed to like her new digs, a two-bedroom rental overlooking the Chattahooche River, the name of a real river, not like the Mud.

Brother Shields' face stared at him from the wall. He believed that his deer head would look much better in that spot. The phone buzzed.

"Need you to give a report at our ten o'clock meeting," said Perlson.

"Sir?" Perlson had come alive. "What report?"

"The equipment detailed in your binder. Some new supplier wants to sell us stuff. Been hassling me. I need you to get him off my back."

“What’s his name?”

“Olson or Orson or something. It’s in the binder.”

“How long has this outfit been in business?”

“That’s what I’m asking you to find out. And McCullor. Take off those sunglasses. Leave them in your damn truck. Don’t know what you did in Arkansas, but here in Atlanta, we don’t wear sunglasses to our meetings.”

“Uh.” He’d had an eye twitch that was getting worse, something about a damaged muscle due to chemical exposure. Doctor said he should get Botox injections.

“What does uh mean?”

“Can’t, sir.”

“Don’t like hearing can’t, McCullor. Not what I expect from you. Wolfe would never tell me Uh, can’t. You know, sometimes I’m not sure I should’ve listened to my lawyers. See you at ten.” Perlson hung up with a click that resonated inside his aching head. He had one hour to pull together a report.

Chapter Thirty-five—Coda

Big rigs pulled up to the gates of Rand-Atlanta; workers arrived for the second shift. A year had passed since the EPA's visit. Safety and Environmental were now one group. Bryan was leading the charge. Jay coordinated Safety and Mark worked as Bryan's lead.

"Hey, Big Guy. "Knocking off early??"

"Gotta meet with Perlson," said Bryan. "Wants to talk about the safety newsletter. Expect me to hit you up. Safety procedures around chemical vats."

"We don't have any procedures."

"Right you are. Gotta get some." Bryan launched into an explanation about how writing an article wasn't so different from putting together a song, but Jay didn't buy it, blew his nose several times into a checkered handkerchief and shook a bunch of Tics-Tacs into his hand while he hummed a few bars of "I Walk the Line."

"C'mon, man. I need your assist." Bryan had traded sunflower seeds for cigarettes. He spit out a bunch.

"Watch out! Don't be getting my shoes dirty. "

"Sorry, Jay."

Jay knew that his friend had substituted a sunflower seed habit for cigarettes, and watched him pour more seeds into his hand. "What's going happen to us, Bry? We used to smoke and drink and have fun."

“I guess fun got more serious.”

“By the way, did I tell you about that dream I had last night...”

“Oh no. Was I in it?”

“Well, kind of. You see in my dream all the animals had the earth to themselves.

Nothing but squirrels, rabbits, tigers, bears, and everything else. Now the Big Guy, the guy upstairs, ordered them not to eat each other because they were his creatures. He said that the grass and fruit were okay to eat, which was the only thing that wasn't off-limits. As soon as all the creatures had their fill, God made the grass and fruit grow back. But what d'you know? Those animals didn't listen. Mr. Lion started munching on the sheep, and if that wasn't bad enough, the dogs ate the rabbits. The snakes weren't just going to be outdone. They ate the little birdies.

“You don't say?”

“That's right. They would've destroyed each other if we hadn't come along. There we were, the two of us playing and singing, until you dropped your pants and showed them your butt. Scared them back into eating grass again. I must say for an old guy, you got everyone's attention.”

“You're never gonna let me live that down, are you?”

“Not on your life.”

“By the way, how's your boy doing?”

“Dan goes to college in the fall. Your Jenny?”

“Can’t stop talking about Domino. Best thing I ever did. Now she’s applying to community college. See you later bro, and careful what you dream.”

Bryan walked to his car. Tray Perlson had flown in from Atlanta. He’d told Bryan not to worry, that he wasn’t going to make it a regular occurrence. He was in Hentsbury for a few days, and wanted to see what Bryan was doing to shore up his department. Later they would talk about the new issue of the safety newsletter. Perlson had made it his pet project, felt it was a great public relations tool, especially after the success of last year’s Christmas party, which mostly had been Mark’s idea.

He’d been looking for ways to make some extra bucks. Mark had gotten excited about selling earthquake kits to people in California, but found out that before he could, he had to give some guy in Yosemite four hundred dollars, so he tried a few more things, including bartending on weekends, but weekends were the only time he had to be with his family. Instead, he entered the company’s safety jingle contest.

“You wrote a safety jingle? You got to be shitting me.”

“C’mon, Bry. It’ll look good for us to do this thing together, and as long as Rand-Atlantic’s promoting, why not go along with the program?”

They were in the break room. “What do you think, Jay?” Mark offered to split their winnings three-ways.”

“Only if you sing.”

“Sing?”

“Why not? You wrote it.”

“I can’t sing a lick.”

“If you don’t, we won’t.” Jay winked at Bryan and they walked away, arm-in-arm, slowly.

“Okay, guys. But you have to come up with a tune.”

“Hey, Big Guy, think you can come up with a tune?”

“It might be tough, being so last minute and all.”

“C’mon, guys. Can’t have people laughing behind my back.”

“We’re just ragging you,” said Bryan. “We’ll get together over the weekend.”

The night of the contest, Noreen was in the break room with Little Raymond. She balanced a paper plate heaped with a meal she didn’t have to cook. Dan eyed the cool guitars, trying to figure out who belonged to each one. Jenny rode shotgun helping him to figure. The table was filled with platters of fried catfish and chef’s salad and red punch. HR had brought in balloons and streamers, stood there ready to hand out the winning check for three hundred dollars. This year, the company actually had given them a budget.

Every group had their own group of cheerleaders—families and friends ready to shout louder than anyone else as their team approached the stage, and even if they didn’t win,

planned to celebrate the start of the weekend with dinner and a cold glass of beer. “Cheer up,” Bryan told Mark. “Being the last act is the best spot. Everyone will remember us, including the judges.”

Each group came up to the stage and did their best to outdo the other, carrying guitars and waving to the audience, wearing cowboy hats festooned with buttons and feathers, accordions slung over shoulders and polished fiddles, everyone clapping and stomping in their seats.

Finally, it came their turn. They wore yellow safety vests and hard hats. In the corner of the room stood a plastic Christmas tree blinking red and white lights, wrapped empty boxes strewn around its base. Friends were still congratulating the last group on their performance. They called themselves The New Hires. By the sound of the applause, they were the evening’s favorites, still grinning and high-fiving their friends in the front row when Bryan hit his chords and amplified the signal from the microphone to get everyone’s attention with a jolt of feedback. “Ladies and gentlemen. We are the Safety Slingers here to offer a few tips about how to protect your ass.” Everyone laughed. The crowd sat back down in their seats, heads craned; fathers in the back row lifted kids onto their shoulders so they could see better. “Hold on tight and here we go!”

Welcome to Rand-Atlantic

Where we make paper so fantastic

A place where safety comes first

Don’t want to ship you home in a big black hearse

Don't want to ship you home in a big black hearse

A member of the safety team rolled a casket onto the stage, covered in black crepe paper with the letters RIP in gold paint. The box had been rescued from a recent shipment of defoamers. Bryan showed off a little of what had earned him a reputation as one of the great lead guitarists in the ArkLaMiss area. Now Mark and Jay continued to sing, and stood on either side of the casket.

Number one, always have steel toes on
Wear safety glasses, your nose upon
Always use your best common sense
Clean up after yourself, don't make a mess

Sure it was corny, but everyone loved it. The New Hires watched the Safety Slingers exit the stage, and shook their heads in anticipation of the outcome. Judges gathered in a small conference room at the back of the kitchen. Ten minutes or so passed. The crowd drank more punch, kids finished off what was left of the double-chocolate brownies.

Eric Mulvey, manager of the cardboard division, stepped up to the stage and adjusted the microphone to his height. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "We have a winner."

People had already begun to drift outside to avoid the rush home from the parking lot.

Mulvey read from a slip of paper, "Just like the Academy Awards..." He held the paper

closer to his eyes and looked at it one more time. “The Safety Slingers for Don’t Ride Home in a Hearse! How do you like that, folks?” Everyone cheered and the group was asked to come back to the stage and sing the first verse again.

Mulvey awarded the winning check, and Mark, Jay, and Bryan posed in hard hats holding guitars at their sides. HR took pictures for the first issue of the safety newsletter. Jenny and Dan took another picture and posted the photo on the Internet with Noreen and Mark grinning in the background. The local newspaper headline the next day was, Do Daddies Revival Tour.

“Gonna split the check three different ways.”

“Don’t be an asshole.” Bryan pushed away Mark’s hand. “You keep it.”

In a few weeks, Bryan got a call from Tray Perlson, who no longer had a problem remembering his name. “I like seeing my Head Environmental Officer taking initiative. Good work. I heard you play a pretty decent guitar.”

“Was Mark’s idea, sir.” Did Bryan hear Perlson straight? “Excuse me, sir. Did you say Head Environmental Officer?”

“That’s what I said.”

Bryan walked to his car on his way to meet Tray Perlson at the Night Life. Sure, they could promote plant safety and write safety jingles, but Rand-Atlantic had to come up with the big bucks. Bryan hoped that his boss was ready to hear what he had to say, which came down to the question of money—more regular inspections of equipment to

prevent breakdowns, more investment in training, and most of all, he wanted installation of alternate technology to recycle effluents to produce electricity and allow the plant to become energy self-sufficient, a program which might take years, but it had to start somewhere and it might as well be with him. He felt a funny feeling in his stomach like he was going on stage; he didn't know if after his discussion with Perlson he'd still have a job. Bryan walked past a row of turnips. Their green tops waved back at him.

Lila pulled into the garage and popped open the trunk. She needed Bryan's help unloading groceries, came inside and saw that he was stretched out and sleeping on the couch. She didn't want to wake him. Ordinarily, he'd grab a case of water and carry in the heavy stuff. Afterward, they'd sort out the pile on the kitchen counter, stuff that needed to be placed in different rooms—bathroom supplies, detergents, or in the freezer outside. Putting away the groceries in their proper place—tomatoes on the left shelf in the pantry, beans on the right, bags of pasta on the top shelf, making room in the refrigerator for the gallon of milk next to the peach sugarless iced tea, a shared understanding about where everything went without having to say a word. But it wasn't just about putting away things. They liked to surprise each other—a bar of dark chocolate that Bryan bought for Lila or the bag of pretzels that she picked up for him to snack on during Sunday night football.

When she wasn't home, he usually fell asleep in front of the TV. She brushed her lips against his cheek. "Wake up, honey."

"Huh?"

"Wake up, Bry."

He sat up from the couch, put his hand on his knees, and stretched. "I must've dozed off."

"Got back early this morning from visiting my son's family."

"Missed you."

"Missed you, too. Loved babysitting. She's starting to say maw maw. Grandma! Can you believe it? The little girl is starting to talk! By the way, Casey says hi."

"Everybody doing okay?"

"Just fine," she said. "So tell me, where's the brochure?"

He looked at her, puzzled.

"What are you talking about? What brochure?"

"You know. The one that came in the mail. That special travel package to Notre Dame, Paris. We're going this winter when the plant shuts down, aren't we?"

He got up and kissed her again. "Sure thing, baby."

Noreen opened the blinds. Daylight cut broad bands across the kitchen countertop.

Without thinking, she touched each one; her index finger streaked a pathway toward the dirty dishes. She looked out the window. The air was humid. It might mean rain, one of those no holds barred thunderstorms that deposited a lake in her front yard and cleared up later in a chorus of sparrow gratitude. Mark had left for work earlier. He hadn't finished his coffee. Standing there, Noreen heard Raymond's footsteps approach in a soft patter through the living room. He appeared in a duck T-shirt.

"What up Ray? What up, little man?"

The boy smiled and revealed a mouthful of teeth with as many spaces. "Mama," he said, and dragged a stuffed purple duck on the linoleum floor. He lifted his arms toward her.

"You ready for breakfast, Ray? You Mama's big boy?" Ray enthusiastically shook his head to both inquiries. Noreen sat him in his high chair and began her morning ritual, rushed around from closet to refrigerator, took out a container of milk, and assembled items along the countertop and then on Ray's tray. She turned on the radio to the news. The economy was still lousy. No surprises. They were glad that Mark had a job and was working. "Cantelope?" she asked. She put it on his tray but he pushed it aside in favor of a sprinkling of Cheerios to keep him busy as she prepared his bowl of oatmeal—hot water mixed with a packet. Ray threw the fruit to the floor. Clearly, he was not a big fan. "No, Ray." She picked it up and washed the slice in the sink. Who knows the last time she had washed the floor? It was filthy. Maybe Mark could get to it this weekend.

Noreen popped the fruit into her mouth and finished by holding a speckled rind by one end. “You see? This is good. Yummy.” She rubbed her stomach. “Yummy. C’mon, try one,” she coaxed. The boy looked suspiciously at the fruit, and instead, plowed into the bowl of prepared oatmeal, sloshing some around his tray table with a small spoon.

“Mama,” he managed to say in between bites. He knew a few words and was beginning to string them together.

“You’re a good eater,” she said. Really he was a terrible eater, spilling most of what she gave him on the floor. Kim kept telling her that it wasn’t unusual for babies to be fussy.

Kim lived in Shreveport. They spoke on the phone about every weekend.

Ray loved bananas and she sliced one up for him now and placed it in another bowl. His eyes brightened. They were just like his daddy’s. He was such a chirpy baby, always smiling. She had little to complain about, especially now that he was sleeping through the night. In fact, in another month she was planning to start an online class toward her CPA. It was expensive, but they could afford it. Little by little. She figured she could make her own hours as a CPA and also take care of Ray. Afterward, Mark was planning to earn a certificate at the community college in environmental safety. Bryan said that the company might be able to pay for at least some of it.

The baby picked up a banana slice and edged it toward her mouth. “Mama eat,” said Ray. She opened her mouth and he dropped the slice on her tongue. “Yummy!” He mimicked her and smiled.

Noreen laughed. He was such a smart boy. She picked up a banana slice and put it on his tongue. He clamped down hard on her finger. "Oww! You little rascal," she said. "Let go." The baby opened his mouth with banana mash stuck on his tongue. "You're dangerous." He had grown quickly, almost two years had flashed by. "You know that?"

He ignored her, now turned his attention to the rest of the Cheerios, and began to throw every other one on the floor before she could stop him. "It's not a game," she insisted, but he wasn't convinced. He popped a few more Cheerios in his mouth, if only to appease her.

"Down," he said, holding his arms out to her again. "Ray go down. Ray go down."

She'd have to tell Mark. Their baby boy was growing up quickly. She raised him out of the highchair and placed him in his crib among an assortment of his toys, many of them from his Grandpa Vernon. His favorite was a red caterpillar with glossy plastic eyes.

Noreen returned her attention to clearing the mess on his tray, a reservoir of gummy oatmeal stuck with Cheerios and a few slices of banana. She quickly moistened a washcloth and wiped his mouth from the food that was still smeared on his face before he could smear it on something else. They had childproofed cabinets to prevent accidents with household cleaners. "Gotcha," she said. He looked up at her and sucked his thumb.

Noreen checked the clock. She was supposed to be at Vernon's around noon. She rolled the crib in front of the TV and put on Sesame Street, figured she could brush her teeth and comb her hair while he watched the Cookie Monster gobble up the letter Q. She'd wait for Ray to take his morning nap. Then shower. The cellphone rang.

“Hi, honey. How you doing?”

“Ray just finished breakfast.”

“Good. How about you?”

“Another day in the life,” she said. “I’m fine. How are you?” She leaned against the kitchen cabinet.

“Bryan asked me to put in a new order for goggles. The old ones are shot. Give the baby boy a kiss for me and tell him I’ll see him later. You going over to Vernon’s?”

“He’s gonna watch Raymond while I go to the school and pay my registration fees and talk to the teacher.

“Good girl. See you later.”

She forgot to tell him about Ray and go down. She’d tell him later. Noreen ended the call and went into the living room where Ray was watching TV. She dropped to the couch, already exhausted. It was ten o’clock.

When she arrived, Vernon was weeding the front garden, a lima-bean stretch of yard that hugged the side of his house. The garden was filled with flowers and vegetables.

Retirement had turned Vernon into a gardener, his new hobby. He kneeled amongst his tomato plants and peppers wearing a Rand-Atlantic visor with its loblolly insignia, and almost didn’t hear her car in the driveway. By now, he was almost deaf in his right ear.

Once he saw her, he stood up, removed his gloves, and tucked them inside his back pocket.

“Still driving that wreck?”

“Don’t need a car note. We’re still catching up.” But mostly, Noreen was sentimental about Old Faithful. Her mother had bought the car just before she’d died.

“Oh, don’t be so sensitive. I was only kidding.” Vernon wiped his hands on his jeans.

“So how’s my favorite grandson doing today?” Vernon turned his attention to Raymond who was immobilized in the car seat, a smile lighting his face as he opened the car door to rescue him.

“Paw-paw,” Raymond said, lifting his arms from his buckled prison.

“Did you hear that, Noreen? Why you little son-of-a-gun. Just a moment, bud. I’ll get you out of there. Just as soon as I can figure this darn thing out. Second thought. Noreen, give me a hand.”

While he fussed with the straps, Noreen popped open the trunk to remove Ray’s carry-on bag filled with everything he would need: diapers, milk, toys, blankets, washcloth, bib, and plastic tubs filled with snacks—apple slices, gold fish crackers, and more Cheerios. This was the third time that Vernon was watching the baby. She had tried to include everything.

“Rae-Ann said she might try to come by later to see the baby if she can slip out from behind the cash register. I don’t know when that woman’s going to retire. She’s a workaholic.” Vernon opened the bag. “Gosh, Noreen. What have you got in there?”

Noreen wondered if Vernon and Rae-Ann would ever get married. Maybe one of these days they'd tie the knot. At first, Rae-Ann kept saying that she was thinking about moving in with her youngest. These days, she talked about it less often. Vernon asked her when she and Mark were getting married; she teased him and said they should organize a double ring ceremony. Who knows? It could happen. Why not?

Vernon held Raymond. The baby wanted to suck on the stem of his grandfather's glasses.

Noreen panicked. "No, no! He'll choke."

Vernon quickly pulled away the glasses from Raymond's hands.

"Be back by three. Watch that he doesn't stick bad stuff in his mouth. He chews everything."

"We will, won't we, bud? And take your time, Noreen. Don't feel like you have to rush. Get lunch or something. Treat yourself."

She kissed Raymond and Vernon goodbye and nervously looked back over her shoulder. She hoped everything would be okay on her first day back in the office, part-time.

Vernon and Raymond waved. They settled together on the leather recliner; Raymond sat in his lap and played with the pewter buttons of his grandfather's shirt, actually, he was trying to gnaw them, shiny saliva pools around each one. Vernon studied the boy's miniature fingers. His hand traversed his skull as he marveled about this little man who would grow up to remember how he sat in his paw-paw's living room. At least, he hoped so. Vernon didn't remember his grandfather, and not his own father, but that didn't

matter anymore. Now that he was retired, he was glad to help Noreen and Mark. He no longer woke up every morning at five a.m. to drink pots of coffee and check the evening's previous effluent readings. If he wanted, he could even stay up past eleven and listen to Letterman. The phone rang.

"Wasn't expecting your call so early."

"Hi, Vern. You with Ray?" Rae-Ann said things were slow and someone could cover for a few hours, and would it be okay for her to stop by.

"Don't have to ask," said Vernon. "How soon can you get here?"

"A half hour, give or take," she said. "Got to finish up inventory."

Raymond reached for the cellphone. Vernon removed it from his hand and buried it inside the magazine rack. "Now what would your mother say about me if I let you chew a dirty cellphone? No, no. Can't do that. Let's try this. Vernon opened a book that he'd recently ordered online. It contained photos of children's faces. He removed it from the magazine rack where he had stored it earlier. Raymond smiled. "Look at that sombrero. Think you'd like a hat like that? Or maybe this one?" He turned the page. It was a picture of a wedge of cheese with the words 'Big Cheese' printed on the visor. Vernon had wanted that kind of recognition, an air-conditioned office and his own parking spot.

About six months ago, he'd watched management anoint Dwayne in Atlanta as the Big Cheese. They claimed they were rewarding him for blowing the whistle on Randy Crawford, a man who had violated the public trust. Vernon had to laugh. Dwayne

McCullor, that moccasin snake in the Mud River, that conniving bastard, who if you stuck him with a safety pin would bleed gallons of cheap beer, had redeemed himself in the eyes of the EPA lawyers and Rand-Atlantic's management who were happy to sail him upriver as long as he wouldn't rock the boat. Dwayne was happy to accommodate. But not everything had gone to shit. Lila had become a consultant for the Arkansas Environmental Board together with Deacon Turner and Nell. The three of them kept him up-to-date on goings on. They were doing work with Union County in Arkansas.

"When you gonna wash this car?" asked Deacon Turner. "Every time I see you it's a new color of mud." Lila had pulled into their driveway.

Nell slapped his wrist. "You're right about that."

"Mud? What mud? I don't see mud," said Lila. She ran her finger along the outside of the car. "Clean as a whistle." Her finger left streak marks.

The three of them climbed into Lila's muddy Cherokee, while pushing aside empty water bottles and Styrofoam cups. They were going to a meeting of the Arkansas Environmental Board. Union County was planning to build a new school on one of Rand-Atlantic's oldest waste sites. Historically, there had been a high incidence of respiratory disease, and up until recently, no one had put two and two together. But the three of them were good at arithmetic.

"Hey, bud." Vernon walked to the mantle above the fireplace and pointed to a shiny bass, its fins shellacked into sharp points and its mouth open as though it was still gulping water. "Your great-grandfather caught that fish. You gonna to be a fisherman when you

grow up?" The baby coughed hard several times and looked at the fish. He coughed again and started to cry. Vernon stuck out his tongue.

He and Little Raymond laughed. Rae-Ann knocked at the door.