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Stuffmobile: A Novella

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STUFFMOBILE

by

TED GREENBERG
B.A. Rollins College, 2007

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
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ABSTRACT

The leitmotif of *Stuffmobile*, a modern day Florida-based novella, is that of relational healing: a son with his father, ex-lovers with one another, and, even more challenging perhaps, a son making peace with his dead mother. New beginnings are explored, both as resurrection of long dead feelings and as starting afresh after loss.

A husband finds distraction in a covert project after his wife's death, so much so that his preoccupied isolation worries his two adult children. The son comes to investigate, and his malfunctioning car leads to a reunion and the beginnings of reconciliation. Hours later, an accident nearly derails the relationship once more. The characters here struggle to understand and be understood, to avoid hurting others and avoid being hurt, all while searching for respect and love—just another normal day of the human experience.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The overarching factor in this project is patience: not mine, but that of those around me. As my path has been “non-traditional” and taken longer than most so too must my thanks.

First, I thank Christ, for his infinite, undeserved patience and forgiveness.

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CHAPTER ONE

Stacks of boxes began on either side of the front door, covering much of the foyer's linoleum, scored by nineteen years of footprints. In the two-foot gap between the piles lining the hallway, wear marks continued down the stretch of once-beige carpet that disappeared into darkness. Bits of late morning light entered the doorway and filtered through the obstructed sidelights but did not project far into the gloom. Steve McClatchen's flashlight was still in his car, a quarter-mile away, back down the tree-shaded dirt drive, where the "vintage" 1971 Ford LTD had quit running. He picked seat foam off the back of his jeans then ducked his head and entered the tunnel.

He edged down the passageway. As his eyes grew used to the faint light cast by, of all things, a single twenty-watt candelabra bulb in the overhead fixture, he examined some of the packages lining the hall. Labels peeling from cartons displayed a history of American catalog merchandising: Montgomery-Ward; J.C. Penney; Western Auto; Sears, Roebuck & Co. He turned to move on, and a stray envelope protruding into the aisle brushed his face. He slapped at it reflexively and held it up to the light—the postmark and return address showed it to be a two-year-old power bill, unopened. He stuck it back where he'd found it and moved on.

Steve entered a sizeable living room where almost every square foot of floor was filled with boxes, envelopes, and packages, all sealed. The walkway forked under the central light, again with only a single dim bulb; the left way was dark, but the right path grew brighter. A few steps in that direction brought him to a clearing of sorts: newspaper patch-worked over a six-foot picture window allowed enough glow to reveal an old man, motionless, stretched out in a leather recliner. He wore a threadbare plaid robe over pajama bottoms, and reading glasses hung from a

chain around his neck. A folding table held the remains of a TV dinner. On the combination floor-lamp-side-table, lay a mug, on its side, and a cordless telephone handset, its light glowing dimly. A military-issue .45-caliber pistol lay on the floor next to the man's hand.

“Oh, Dad,” Steve murmured.

He went closer and saw no spatter of brains, no blood. He stepped next to the chair, reached over, and laid his hand on his father's neck—warm. The man in the chair started, sat upright, grabbed the handgun and swung it around the room, blinking and searching for a target.

“Who's that? Where are you, you bastards? Try to take my stuff, ruin everything. Get out!”

“Dad, stop!” He waved his hands in the air. “It's me, Steve. Put that thing away.”

His father and namesake—but “Mac” to most everybody—sat breathing heavily and blinking. “What are you doing here? You live in Miami now.” He laid the weapon down on the side table in a puddle of coffee.

Steve shook his head and retrieved the gun. Keeping the muzzle pointed up and away, he released the magazine and worked the slide to eject the bullet in the firing chamber. He wiped the liquid off the gun using the tail of his shirt, saying nothing.

“What are you doing?” Mac asked. “Why'd you unload my pistol?”

“Just wiping it off. You got coffee on it. Here, I'm putting the clip back in.” But Steve did not pull back the slide, hoping this time Mac wouldn't have enough strength in his arthritic hands to finish loading the gun. It didn't really matter—if his father wanted to kill himself, he could always use the revolver from the bedside table or any of the other weapons in the house.

“What is going on around here?” Steve looked at the piles of dusty boxes filling the living room and the foam peanuts and shredded paper scattered about the carpet. “Mom—”

Mac cut him off. “She’s gone now, isn’t she? You were at the funeral.” He swallowed and rubbed his eyes. “What are you doing here anyway, Stevie? You work down south.”

“You weren’t answering your phone, so Julie called me. She was worried she couldn’t reach you.”

“Nobody needs to worry about me,” Mac said. “Not your sister, and not you. I’m here and I’m fine. One day I’ll be dead, but not yet.”

“Dad, don’t get all morbid on me. We’re not worried about you being dead, but we don’t want you lying alone hurt or something.” Steve smiled. “So please answer your damn phone.”

“If it rings, I answer it! I don’t know what your sister is talking about, it hasn’t rung in days,” Mac said, reaching down to take hold of the offending instrument. He held it out to his son and coffee trickled from the mouthpiece. “Huh. Would you look at that?”

Steve just shook his head and said, “Guess we better get you a new phone. You want to grab some lunch first? I’ve got coupons for Steak ‘n Shake.”

“Yeah, we can do that. I want a mocha shake.”

“Of course. Let’s find your jeans and get out of here.” Pushing his old man to shower would have been pointless, but at least he’d get him out of that bathrobe. “We’ll have to take your truck. My car quit right as I got to your drive. Do you still have a road service?”

Mac stared at him.

“You know, Triple-A or something like that.”

“Oh, yeah, it renews out of my credit card. I probably should cancel it. I can’t kill my old truck.”

*

Mac pushed away his plate, empty save for a streak of ketchup, and said, “Don’t let her take my shake. I’m not done with that.” Without waiting for a response, he rose from the booth and made for the rear of the restaurant. Once Mac’s back was turned, Steve took out his cell phone and dialed his sister’s California telephone number

After four long rings, Julie answered.

“Hey sis.”

“Stevie! Is Dad okay?”

“He’s fine—his usual cantankerous self.”

“Why he hasn’t answered my calls?” Julie asked. “I’ve been trying to reach him for over a week.”

“He spilled coffee in the phone and it shorted out. He just left it lying on the carpet beeping till it died.”

“That so-and-so!” Julie said. “We’re all worried about him and he’s oblivious. How Mom ever managed with him—”

“Anyway, he’s all right. Everybody good on your end?”

“Joey’s got a cold, but it’s turning around. And Sally’s enjoying kindergarten—she made you an “Uncle’s Day” card for Father’s Day. When you get it, call and tell her thanks. Listen, Bob’s waving for me to wrap this up. As soon as we finish breakfast, we’re taking the kids to

visit his mother.” Under her breath she added, “Oh, goody.” She raised her voice and continued, “I’ve got to go. Give Daddy my love.”

“You’ll have to call and tell him yourself, Jules. I’m sneaking this call in while he’s in the bathroom—you know how he gets when he thinks we’re meddling. When we’re done here we’re going to buy a couple new phones, so you can call later.”

“All right, thanks. Take care of yourself.”

*

As Mac approached the booth, Steve switched off his cell phone and asked, “Everything okay?”

“Jeez, can’t a guy even go to the can without a million questions?”

“Sorry. Are you finished with your shake?”

There were loud slurping sounds as Mac sucked up the last drops, running the straw around and around the base of the glass. He went on long enough that heads turned at nearby tables. “Now I’m done.”

*

Driving back, Steve thought how things had been different when Mom was alive. Dad had always had a thing for catalog shopping, but she’d reined him in, made him keep his purchases in the garage. Back then, too, he’d been so busy with his job at the gun shop that he hadn’t had endless time to buy junk. But since the funeral there had been not one but two incidents at the store, including the accidental discharge of a firearm, and the manager had

moved Mac from full-time in the gun shop to part-time, only calling him in to help out during big weekend sales. Thank God Dad hadn't discovered Internet shopping since his wife's death—just by responding to TV ads he had nearly filled the house with “good deals.”

Or had he? Steve remembered something. “Those packages in the front hall—they're all really old. Is that the stuff you used to have in the garage?”

“What if it is?”

“Why'd you move it inside?”

“I like it in here,” Mac said. “That's why. I can keep an eye on it.”

“All right, sorry, just asking... some of that stuff's older than me, I think.”

When they got back and went inside, Steve asked, “Why don't you go relax? I'll hook up the phones for you.”

“Good idea. I've got things to do,” Mac said, disappearing down the canyon hallways. By the time Steve arrived in the living room, his father was settled in his La-Z-Boy and fishing around in the pouch hanging from the arm. He found the remote control and soon the sound of the shopping channel filled the room: “. . . and here we have a lovely sapphire pendant with matching earrings.” Steve heard the sound but couldn't see the television. He moved around and stood behind Mac: the old Zenith was visible through a tunnel in the boxes.

“You know TV's going digital next year and that antique won't work anymore.”

“Shows what you know,” Mac said. “I've got cable now. They sent me a converter.” He scanned the room, searching for a box with less dust on it. “It's around here somewhere.”

Steve unpacked the new cordless phone and made the connections behind the chair. He went into the kitchen for a towel. This room, in contrast to the front of the house, was neat and

ship-shape, the sink empty and clean, the counters uncluttered—as good as when Mom was alive. He tore off some paper towels, went back, and wiped up the spilled coffee. He placed the base on the side table, and set the handset into the cradle. “You’ll have to let this charge overnight, you know. I’m installing the basic phone in the kitchen as a backup.”

“Sure, sure,” Mac said, reaching for the cordless handset.

“Dad, I told you it has to charge. Leave it alone. You don’t need any sapphire earrings anyhow.”

“Are you staying here tonight, or are you driving home?”

“Remember? My car died. I need to borrow your auto club card so I can have it towed. Is there somewhere for me to sleep?”

“Your room is the way you left it, except I washed the sheets after your last visit. Here’s the card—you can call them when you hook up the phone.”

“Thanks. Tomorrow’s Sunday. Do you think there’s some place I can get the car fixed?”

“Sure, some place.” The old man’s attention was back on the television.

Steve connected the kitchen phone in about two minutes and called the motor club. He listened to music on hold for two and a half songs. Finally, a representative answered, listened to his story, and told him they could send a truck to the remote house outside Tampa, but said he had to call back “when you actually need the service.” Steve shook his head, hung up the phone, and went back to his old bedroom. Like the kitchen, it was much the way he remembered: the only clutter was what he’d left behind. The walnut colored paneling still held band posters from the eighties: Led Zeppelin, Van Halen, Pink Floyd, and others. The bookcase was stuffed with paperbacks. The shelf over his scarred wood desk hosted a miscellany of trophies. And sitting on

the blotter was the framed picture of Traci. God, he hadn't thought about her in years. He climbed into the too-short bed and turned out the light.

*

The back seat was more spacious than anything Detroit had produced in years, and worlds better than the pickups most of his friends drove. Times like this, with the redhead cuddled next to him, Steve really appreciated the car. It was the only one his grandfather had ever bought new, and it was fully loaded. The small V8 wasn't too thirsty, and all the electrical doo-dads still worked—seats, windows, cruise control, and the all-important cassette stereo. But the real blessing was the comfort and maneuvering room the back seat offered. Steve was still astonished that Traci Bell, the prettiest girl in his eleventh-grade English class, had agreed to get a burger with him—in reality, she'd nearly suggested it. Their second date found them kissing in the back of the movie theater and a few weeks later they'd moved out to the quiet spot out by Baker Creek Park. She hadn't blinked when he suggested the back seat. Trembling, he'd dared to move his hand up to cup Traci's right breast through her blouse and brassiere. She'd stiffened and glared at him.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?” Traci's voice had echoed in the small space.

Steve had gasped, leaned away from her, and stammered, “I'm sorry, shit, I thought—.”

A smirk twisted up the corner of her mouth. Laughter had shaken her small frame, her mouth opening wide.

“Dammit, Traci, why are you messing with me like that?”

She'd answered by grabbing his shirt collar and pulling him into another kiss.

*

Steve awoke disoriented, staring up at Eddie Van Halen riffing on his guitar on the paneled wall over the bed. He sat up and looked around his old room. With thoughts of Traci fresh in his mind, seeing her photo on the desk was both arousing and depressing. He remembered their last phone call. He'd been home for the Thanksgiving and Christmas breaks after his first semester away, and the two of them had spent most of that time together, much of it in the back seat of his car. He'd gone back to school. A couple months later, just before spring break, Steve had steeled himself and camped out at the common payphone in his dorm. He'd pushed all the buttons to use his calling card and then waited through several long rings. As he was about to hang up, unwilling to talk to the answering machine, Traci had answered.

"Hell-ooo." Her out-of-breath voice had come on amid the pops and clicks of the long distance telephone lines.

"Oh, hey," Steve had said. "I didn't think you were home."

"Just got here." Air sounds whooshing in his ear as she'd taken a deep breath. "Front door's wide open and my bike's on the porch."

"I can call back."

"Don't be silly, Stevie. Give me a sec." She'd put the phone down on the kitchen counter. Steve had heard faint noises and the 'bang' of Traci slamming the front door.

"There," she'd said. "I'm back. How're you doing?"

"Okay, I guess..." He'd paused a few seconds then started again in a rush. "Traci, I don't think this long distance thing is working."

Silence.

“You’re so far away and all.” He sounded lame, even to himself.

“We were together almost all of Christmas,” she’d said.

“I think maybe we should see other people.” Steve had tried to picture those bright blue eyes getting watery, but it didn’t reconcile with her calm, cold voice.

“That’s what you want? You’re sure?”

“I think it’s best.” Steve’s voice had quavered.

“Fine.”

“I’ll call you—”

“Sure.”

He heard a click, then silence for a long minute. When the electronic howler came on, signaling his handset was still off-hook, he replaced it in the cradle.

That had been that. The few other times Steve had come home for holidays he hadn’t seen her. He’d gotten a work-study as one of a half dozen undergrads doing grunt work for grad students and professors researching invasive species in the Everglades. He’d tried dating, but had found floating the river of grass in a canoe offered few opportunities to meet women. Three years ago, when he’d come home for his mother’s last days, Steve had seen Traci again. He’d been standing in the receiving line at the funeral home, uncomfortable in his too-small suit and still bewildered that his parents had kept Mom’s cancer secret from him for over a year. Traci had appeared, wearing a simple black dress. She’d reached out and Steve had taken her hand in his two. He’d glanced down—no wedding band. Their eyes had met, and held. One of his twice-removed cousins had interrupted, breaking the spell, and Traci had disappeared like Cinderella at midnight, lost amidst a swell of sympathy and heavy Southern food.

Steve smelled hot cakes, eggs, and bacon, bringing to mind typical weekends when he was growing up, and he realized his visit was turning out good for his dad after all. He pulled on his jeans and went down to the early breakfast.

“Thanks. This is a real treat.”

“S’nothing,” Mac said. “It was all going to go bad soon anyways. I didn’t want to throw it out.”

“It’s still nice, thank you. I usually have cold cereal or a bagel at home. But let me call the road club before I sit down. I’m sure they’ll take a while getting out here.”

CHAPTER TWO

The tow truck arrived a little after nine a.m. The driver was short, brown-skinned, and appeared sixteen years old. But he grabbed some tools and went to work like he'd been around cars all his life. After a few minutes, the car started, but died again as soon as the external charger was disconnected.

“You got a nice car here, mister,” the tech said. “You really should do a little more maintenance on it. This baby could give you another hundred thousand miles, easy. Right now, though, your battery's dead, probably because the alternator's dead, too. That shouldn't cost too much, maybe a few hundred bucks. American cars are cheaper to work on, y'know.”

“Thanks. Is there any place open today?”

“My cousin's a mechanic. He's real good and has a place in Seffner. There's a Ford dealer in town, too. Their shop's open Sundays now, what with the economy and all.”

Steve hesitated. “What's your name?”

“José.”

“No offense, José, but I think I'd rather try the dealer.”

The small man's smile went a little stiff. “Sure, no problem. My cousin worked there ten years before he saved enough for his own shop. But you're the boss.” He went to work preparing the car for towing. Steve tried to call Mac from his cell phone, but had no signal.

“I've got to run back to the house and let Dad know what's going on—I'll only be a few minutes.”

“I'll be here,” José said.

When Steve entered the kitchen, Mac had both hands in the sink with the water running as he washed the last few breakfast dishes.

Steve said, “The Triple-A guy thinks the car needs an alternator. I’m going into town with him. I’ll call you when I know what’s happening. I may need a ride back here and another night with you.

“You know you’re always welcome here.”

The LTD was hooked onto the tow truck when Steve returned, and the two men climbed into the cab. José turned the rig around and headed toward town. Steve broke the silence, “I’m sure your cousin’s a good mechanic, but I live four hours south, so I think I better stick with the dealer.”

“No worries, man. Let’s see what they can do for you.”

*

There was a distinct carnival atmosphere as they approached the dealership. Not only was a guy sweltering in a clown costume, dancing from side to side and pointing at new cars, but there were also balloons enough for a dozen birthday parties and an inflated bounce house, empty and awaiting children. The clown’s actions grew more enthusiastic as the truck turned into the lot, and, sensing prey, a school of sales sharks followed the disabled vehicle. Steve had barely opened the tow truck door before the boldest one circled in.

“Hi, I’m Jim,” he announced. He stuck out his hand and, when Steve responded, applied the requisite firm but not intimidating grip. “We’ve got some great deals right now. What are you

looking for?" They shook, but the salesman didn't want to let go. He tried to lead Steve toward the new cars. Steve saw a glimmer of desperation behind the man's polished veneer.

"Sorry, I'm just here to get my car fixed," he said, pulling free. The other salesmen began to drift away, but Jim stayed close.

"Sure, I understand. Here's my card," Jim said, trying to keep his smile. "In case service gives you bad news. Or maybe you'll want to try one on for size while you wait. Remember to ask for me—Jim." His face and voice softened, and he added, "Please." He offered his hand again.

"No problem, Jim," Steve said, returning one more obligatory handshake. He turned around and came face-to-face with his ex-girlfriend. "God, Traci, what are you doing here?" She smiled. A cartoon gator in a Ford baseball cap grinned above the pocket of her shirt, and her name was embroidered in blue and orange thread over her right breast. Traci was five feet tall, with short red hair that fell to just below her ears, revealing turquoise earrings that matched her eyes. Steve had to hold himself back from hugging her.

"I work here. Can I help you?" she said, keeping him at arm's length. "Did your clunker finally die?" Shrinking the distance—a little. He glanced down at her hand—no ring, but that hardly meant anything.

"The Triple-A guy thinks the alternator is bad. Can someone check it today?"

There was only one other car in the service drive. "I think we can squeeze you in."

"Jeez, Traci, how are you? When did you start working here? Are you still with what's his name, the druggist's son?" Steve clamped his jaws shut to keep from saying anything else.

"Still as smooth as ever, Stevie. Let's get you written up. Maybe I can take my break."

José walked over, smiled politely at the pretty woman. He turned to Steve and grinned at his discomfort. “I need your signature, please,” he said. “Here’s my cousin’s card in case these guys can’t get the part today or you want a second opinion.”

“Thanks.” Steve took the card: ‘Manuel’s Transmission and Auto Repair.’ He put it in his wallet, signed the receipt, and turned back to Traci.

She entered his information into the computer, printed out a copy for him to sign, then said, “Be right back,” and walked across the drive to the service manager’s office. Steve saw her talking and pointing his way. The man laughed and waved her away. She walked back to her booth where Steve was waiting.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

“I told my boss I lost my virginity in the back seat of this car and I wanted to take lunch early,” she said. When she saw his expression, she laughed. “Don’t be miffed, I’ve been friends with Mike and his family for a couple years now. They kind of adopted me when Mom got sick.”

“Your mom’s sick? I didn’t know. I’ve been busy down south and…” He trailed off, and asked, “Is she all right?”

“She’s in remission,” Traci said. “They did a mastectomy, and she finished radiation a year ago. So she’s back, working full-time at the bakery. I’m sure she’d love to see you.”

“I’d like to see her, too,” Steve said. “I’m glad she’s doing better.” He touched her arm. “Was I really your first? How come you never told me?”

“Let’s get some lunch. We can take my car, unless you want to ask Jim for a test drive?” She jerked her thumb back toward the sales floor.

“Spare me. Your car’s fine. I can’t buy a new one right now, and I don’t want to get his hopes up.” They got into her two-year-old Focus and drove off. One long block and a U-turn later and they were across the four-lane highway and parked at the restaurant. When they were seated and had placed their orders, Steve said, “I’m making this a habit. I was here last night with Dad.”

“You should have told me,” Traci said. “We could have gone somewhere else. But you always liked coming here.”

“I still do. It’s fine. It brings back a lot of good memories. So, what are you doing lately?”

Traci met his eyes. “Mostly working. I still go to church Sundays when I’m off, y’know, to be with Mom and have lunch together after.”

“You don’t live at home anymore?”

“I got a small trailer after I graduated from HCC. I needed my own place, and I think Mom needed space, too. She finally started dating again after I left. Then she got sick.”

“What about you?”

“What, am I dating? Attached? Is that what you mean?”

He blushed. “You know that’s what I’m asking.”

“And you? Are you with anyone?”

“I’ll go first if you want.” At that moment, their order arrived. They waited for the server to leave, and then dressed their burgers in silence. Steve kept stealing glances at Traci.

“There’s no one in my life, hasn’t been since I was an undergrad,” he said. “I work with a research team out in the ‘glades half the time...not much chance to meet anyone.

“All work and no play,” Traci said. “Are you really a dull boy now?”

“Grad school’s an unbelievable amount of work. I dove in and haven’t come up for air since. Got my master’s. Now I’m working on my dissertation. I’m on track to defend and finish this summer. Now will you tell me?”

“You didn’t invite me to either of your graduations.” Traci smiled, took a bite of her burger, and watched him. Then her smile went away and she said, “After you broke up with me, I dated a few guys—”

“Broke up with you? Wait a minute,” he said. She stopped talking and waited. He stopped too, thought for a few seconds, and then said, “Never mind. Go on. I’m sorry.

“Sorry for breaking up with me,” she asked, “or sorry for interrupting?”

“Both”

“All right,” Traci said. “After you said ‘we should see other people’ I tried to take your advice. I went out with that druggist for a while, but he wanted a wife right away and I wanted to finish school. He’s married now and already has two kids. Then I got my degree, went through a couple jobs, bought my trailer, and Mom got sick. So that part of my life’s been on hold, and here I am. I was sorry we didn’t get to talk more at your mother’s funeral, but, well, you had a lot going on.”

Traci stopped talking and looked at Steve.

He met her eyes, held her gaze. “I guess—” “Well, you—” Their voices collided.

“Go ahead,” Steve said. “I thought you were finished.”

“I was going to say something sarcastic,” she said, “like I usually do when I’m uncomfortable.”

“I must *really* make you uncomfortable then,” he said. “Wait, forget that. I’m doing the same thing. What I started to say was I guess we’re both single.” And he thought, *And I’m trying not to smile like an idiot ‘cause I’m glad you’re not married or involved.* “I’m sorry I was so stupid, that I said that dumb thing about dating other people, that—” He paused, remembering her laughing with her service manager.

Traci jumped in. “I’m sorry you were so stupid, too. You were selfish, and I was so angry I wanted to scream. I had a good job, running the local vet’s office. They really liked me, but I was so hurt and pissed at you I couldn’t concentrate. I messed up a bunch and they let me go.”

Steve tried to meet her eyes, but could not. He stared at the food on his plate, which looked greasier and less edible by the minute.

“I guess that’s it then.” He painted swirls of ketchup on his plate with a French fry. “I’m really, really sorry, and you’re really, really angry. We can go back to the dealership whenever you’re finished.”

Traci leaned back in the booth and stared at him. “All that education . . . can you really be so stupid?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you think I’d go to lunch with you if there was no hope?” she asked. “If I wanted payback, I could have embarrassed you in front of everyone at work. They know me and like me—they’re on *my* side. You would have been stuck there without even a ride home.”

“So, what’s next?”

Traci shook her head. “That’s up to you, isn’t it? But didn’t I say Mom would love to see you again? Maybe that’s a good place to start.”

Steve smiled a little. “Sorry I’m so thick. Traci, do you think I might come over and visit you and your mom tonight? That is, if my car gets fixed or I can find another way over?”

“Much better. I don’t think she’s busy tonight. And neither am I. But don’t you need to go back to Miami?”

“I’m not teaching this term,” Steve said. “And summer is the wrong time to be in the Everglades.”

“Maybe you could bring over pizza. Mom’s still not doing a lot of cooking, and I won’t get off until five-thirty.” She looked at her wristwatch. “Speaking of which, we better head back. I only get an hour for lunch, and your estimate’s probably ready, too.”

*

When they pulled back to the car lot, the clown still danced from foot to foot at the dealership’s entrance. Sweat circles ringed the orange and blue polyester costume beneath the waving arms.

“Traci, was that time together we, uh . . . in my backseat really your first?”

“You think I’d make that up?” She shook her head and opened her car door.

“Of course not. It’s just you never wanted to talk about it before. I figured you didn’t want to tell me about whatever happened before we were together.”

“Steve, I’ve got to go back to work,” Traci said, “so we can take your hard-earned money. Maybe we can talk more tonight.”

The estimate was more than what the tow truck driver had guessed, but the dealership did have a new alternator for his old car in stock. The mechanic had also done a “Free 27-Point

Service Check” which found a couple more things needing attention, bringing the total price to almost \$700.

“Ouch,” Steve said, “is that other stuff really necessary?”

“It’s all normal maintenance,” Traci said, “and safety items. But you *can* refuse it.”

“Go ahead and do it. I’ll put it on my credit card. At least the car will be running.”

Another car pulled into the service drive and Traci said, “I need to help these folks. Why don’t you wait inside?”

He poured a cup of free coffee and leafed through the offerings on the corner table—mostly sporting, hunting, and fishing magazines, with several new car brochures mixed in. He picked up the lone copy of *Southern Cooking* and browsed the recipes, thinking about his conversation with Traci. He glanced out at the service drive and caught her looking in at him, no particular expression on her face. She turned back to the customer she was helping. Steve took out his cell phone and dialed his dad’s number.

CHAPTER THREE

Once Steve went out to meet the tow truck, Mac gathered the breakfast things into the kitchen sink. His son popped back in to say he was going into town with his car as Mac was finishing up. When he heard the ‘clunk’ of his son closing the front door, he dried his hands on a kitchen towel and stepped out onto the back porch. Mac took paint-spattered jeans and a t-shirt from a nail in the wall and hanged his bathrobe in their place. He sat on the built-in bench, and exchanged his house slippers for a pair of boat shoes, similarly splashed with paint. He strode out to the garage, an oversized structure set back toward the rear of his property. Mac no longer slouched. Now he stood as tall as his five-foot-nine could manage. His walk displayed a sense of purpose that had not been evident until now. Halfway to the outbuilding, he snapped his fingers, did a smart about-face, and returned to the house. Whistling a slightly off-key version of “The Halls of Montezuma,” he reentered and eased through the house toward the front door. He stopped at the power bill sticking out into the aisle and ran his finger down the row of packages until he came to a cardboard carton the size of a shoebox. Mac dislodged it from the stack, letting the upper ranks slide down to take its place. He tucked it under his arm as the dust settled and went back the way he had come, again whistling.

A minute later he was unlocking a padlock on the garage’s people-sized door, an entrance dwarfed by the two vehicle doors to its left. Mac entered and flicked on a wall switch. He was in a room about six feet square, facing a security door. He put his package on a shelf and fastened heavy barrel bolts at the top and bottom of the outer entrance. He fished around on his crowded key ring, found the one he was looking for, and used it to open the two deadbolts securing the plain metal slab. He donned a pair of aviator sunglasses and retrieved his parcel. He pushed open

the heavy door, revealing darkness. Mac felt along the wall, encountered a switch, and flipped it on.

The glare was startling, even though Mac was expecting it. Light shone from two dozen various fixtures and reflected off foil clad ceiling and walls. The vast interior had been partitioned into two rooms, each large enough to hold a school bus. The air in this first space was hot and still. Mac tapped the meter on an industrial fire extinguisher with his fingernail. Satisfied it was working, he closed and locked the door. Inside, thin irrigation hoses crisscrossed the painted concrete floor. Otherwise the area was empty and swept clean.

Standing in this room, Mac couldn't help thinking about his wife Susan and their final years together. The surgery and radiation at the beginning had been bad enough, but when he'd had to watch her suffering through the chemotherapy treatments Mac had thought he was going to lose his mind. Somewhere in that first month he'd come across an article on medical marijuana. He didn't know where to get any—he hadn't smoked since before Stevie was born—then he thought of the gear he'd brought back from Vietnam. Sure enough, in one of his olive drab duffle bags, under his uniforms and other souvenirs of that long-ago time, one of two old metal flashlights held a little bag. About half the seeds in that decades-old stash had germinated, so in just over two months Mac was able to start pinching off a few buds. Not only had the weed helped Susan's pain and nausea, but also the detailed busywork of indoor farming had been a welcome distraction from the doctor visits and therapy.

Mac shook away the memories, stepped over the grid of poly tubing, unused since Susan's death, and crossed the room to another door. This one led into the second bay. When he opened it, a blast of cold air rushed around him. This room was lighted in a more normal fashion,

and Mac took off his shades. He put them down on a shelf next to a cassette boom box and pressed *Play*. Bob Dylan's nasal voice filled the space as Mac retrieved a cough drop tin from a small hollow where shelf met wall. He opened it and took out a half-smoked joint, lit it, and took a deep hit. He held the smoke as long as he could, then coughed and smiled. He took another hit and smoke drifted from his mouth as he sang along with the music. With the joint hanging from the corner of his mouth, he took an antique Case folding knife from his jeans pocket and opened the smaller blade. The yellowing tape sealing the carton disintegrated as he slid the knife through. He fumbled with the newspaper packing and extracted the prize: a small box bearing the picture of a familiar rodent. Opening this, Mac took out a red wind-up clock with bright yellow alarm bells on top. Mickey Mouse grinned from its face. His white gloved hands marked the minutes and hours. Mac smiled like a kid on Christmas morning, wound the key on the back, and set the clock. He laughed out loud when the clapper hammered out its tinny clanging. Chuckling, he took another toke. Then he picked up his tools and went to work.

A little later, another bell rang, this one inside the rotary dial phone mounted on the garage wall. Mac tried to let it ring itself out, but when it kept going he frowned, turned down the music—Joni Mitchell now—and answered. “Yeah.”

“Hi, Dad. Is everything all right?”

“Fine. What's up?”

“You took a while answering the phone.”

“I was on the crapper,” Mac said. “Do you need a ride?”

No, thanks. They're going to finish the car today.”

“Then why'd you call?”

“You won’t believe it. You remember Traci? She’s a service writer at the Ford dealer. We had lunch together.” “That’s nice, Mac said. “What’s wrong with the car?”

”Alternator, battery, some other stuff.”

“How much?”

”Everything? About \$700. I’ll put it on my charge card.”

“Remind me tonight. I’ll write you a check.”

“You don’t have to do that, Dad. I’ll manage.”

“Your mother would have wanted us to pay for it. Take it. When will you be back?”

“The car will be ready in a couple hours, but I’m going to drive around a little and see the sights. By the way, I told Traci I’d get pizza for her and her mom tonight. Did you know Mrs. Bell was treated for cancer? She’s in remission.”

“I heard something about that.”

“Why don’t you come tonight?” Steve asked. “I didn’t mean to take time away from us. It’s just I ran into Traci again and heard her mom’s been sick—”

“I don’t know . . .”

“I’m sure it’s all right. But if you want, I can check with Traci and make sure.”

“If she doesn’t mind, it’s okay. And don’t forget: I like pepperoni—lots of it.”

“I remember. I’ll see you later.”

Mac hung up the phone and raised the volume on the music. Joni’s sweet singing voice and the conversation about his son’s old girlfriend reminded him of Susan again. He rubbed his eyes, took out his lighter, relit the joint, and went back to work.

*

Steve hung up his cell phone and glanced at Traci. She was standing at her desk in the service drive. She looked his way again—and this time smiled a little. He smiled back then dropped his eyes to the magazine on his lap. He wondered if Alfonso’s Pizza was still in business and went to find a phone book. A short time after he’d gotten the number, he heard Traci’s voice come over the public address system.

“Customer McClatchen, please come to the service drive. Your vehicle is ready.
Customer McClatchen to the service drive, please.”

Outside in the service drive, Traci stood, telephone in hand, near the door to her booth. Mike was next to her, looking like he’d put his arm around her shoulders if it weren’t for company policy against sexual harassment. Steve went out to the service drive and Mike stuck out his hand. Steve responded. Mike smiled and used his left hand to enclose Steve’s clasped right hand.

“I feel like I know you,” Steve said. “Traci’s told me how your family’s been good to her, especially while her mom was sick.”

Mike turned to Traci and smiled. “It works both ways, Steve. I bet she didn’t tell you how she’s helped us. We met in the hospital, her with her mom, and us with our oldest boy Franklin. Traci babysat Jason, our little guy, a bunch of times when we were busy with doctors.”

“Why was Franklin in the hospital?”

“He has leukemia,” Mike said, glancing away. He met Steve’s eyes again. “But he’s in remission and hopefully will stay that way. Anyhow, Traci’s been a real blessing to us.”

“It’s nice how that’s worked out for you all.”

“Traci’s terrific,” Mike said. “But I don’t have to tell you that. And then she came to work here. But I’m sure you want to get out of here. I’ll let her explain your repairs. Nice meeting you.”

“Thanks, likewise. And thanks for fixing my car.”

“No problem,” Mike smiled at Traci then crossed the drive to his office.

She read from her clipboard, explaining the work that had been done, and then asked, “Any questions?”

“No,” Steve said, “but why so formal?”

“It’s my job, Steve. I take it seriously.”

“No problem then. Do you want me to pick you up later?”

“No, it’s out of your way. Why don’t you meet me at Mom’s about six?”

“Sure,” he said. “Is Alfonso’s still the best bet? And what do you guys like on your pizza?”

“Yes, it’s the only real Italian restaurant nearby. Mom’s trying to eat healthier since her cancer, so veggies, no meat. You remember what I like, don’t you?”

“Still pepperoni, pepperoni, and more pepperoni?”

“Yes,” Traci said, “and I don’t eat it often, so tell them to go crazy. You’re not leaving your dad home alone tonight, are you?”

“Thanks for reminding me. I told him to come along, but he wanted me to make sure it’s all right with you and your mom.”

“Tell him if he doesn’t come he’s in trouble. I called Mom earlier so she could clean her already immaculate home. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

Steve took the paperwork inside and, wincing a little as he handed over his credit card, paid his bill. Then he remembered his dad was going to reimburse him because Mom “would have wanted us to pay for it.” He smiled. His old man always had to make excuses for doing something nice. Blaming his generosity on Mom somehow made it all right.

*

Traci returned to her office to process paperwork until, hopefully, some more service customers showed up. She liked working for Mike at the Ford dealer, felt like she was pretty darn good at her job. But the war and the housing crisis had created a mess that some folks were calling a recession and others were likening to the Great Depression. It was killing the new car business, and a lot of people were putting off maintenance and even repairs. She didn’t worry too much for herself. She’d gotten a good deal on her used trailer home and had nearly paid it off. Her mom was okay, too, had almost finished paying off her mortgage. But a lot of others at the dealership were really hurting and things weren’t likely to turn around any time soon.

Traci realized worrying about business being slow wouldn’t fix anything. Besides, she had a treat in store: pepperoni pizza from Alfonso’s. Granted, the delivery guy was almost cute and way overeducated—though sometimes none-too-bright. In the meantime, she decided to do one of those annoying things management loved—make calls to try to drum up business. Truthfully, she did hate waiting around for things to happen, so she might as well. She scanned the list of overdue maintenance customers, took a deep breath, and dialed the first number.

*

Mac was ready to test his day's work. He cautiously pushed a yellow button on a bright red box. This caused a plunger travelling in a tube to move a quarter of an inch, which took pressure off the winding key of the Mickey Mouse clock, which began to tick. He watched the second hand on his wristwatch as a minute passed. The steel clapper atop the clock began beating the bells where he'd sanded off the yellow paint and the test lamp he'd connected to the wire leads flickered on and off. Mac realized he was clenching his teeth and made himself relax. He disconnected the test rig, picked up the metal plate on which he'd fastened the contraption, and hung it on a couple of bolts tack-welded to the back door of a turquoise 1960 Dodge van parked in the center of the garage bay. He secured it with lock washers and nuts and routed the wires hanging from this timing assembly through a hole into the back of the van. Finally, he opened the door, made some electrical connections inside, and closed it again—carefully.

After this, Mac went back through the grow room to the front door and closed the light switch. He removed his sunglasses and tried to see around the room, but the darkness was complete. Using a tiny keychain light, he made his way back to the rear of the vehicle. Mac stood in the darkness, listening to his own breathing. He reached out and pressed the yellow button again.

*

Steve drove up Mango Road to Skewlee then followed back roads around to Baker Creek Park. He drove to where he and Traci had parked on that special date eleven years before. The greenery was still as he remembered, scrub oaks and leggy azaleas, but he also found an

unwelcome addition: in the place where he and Traci had first had sex someone had dumped a worn sofa, recently enough that the black fabric with its huge red and white flowers was not yet sun-bleached. He turned off the motor and sat there taking in the setting. Something about the place or the couch brought him back to a scene from his childhood, Mom and Dad getting frisky not long before Steve's twelfth birthday.

Mom's voice had come from the kitchen. "Whatever are you doing, Steven McClatchen? What would your mother say if she saw you holding me like this, and in the kitchen no less."

"My mama? She'd be egging me on, telling me to make her another grandkid, that's what she'd be saying," Dad had said.

Both children had been home that Saturday, *Speed Racer* playing on the television. But the cartoon couldn't compete with the live entertainment. Stevie had sat on their family sofa with its subdued but similar floral print and traded grins with little sister Julie. Their parents' foolishness, though "kind of gross," must have made an impression, though Steve hadn't remembered it until today.

A light knock on the car roof startled Steve back to the present. A young deputy sheriff stood there, nightstick in hand. Steve turned on the key and rolled down his window.

"Is there a problem, officer?"

"That's what I was going to ask you, sir."

"No. I used to live around here, just back visiting old haunts. This is still a public park, isn't it?"

"Yes, but not many people come here. I like to keep an eye out for kids drinking and people dumping trash like that couch. Can I see some ID?"

“I guess so,” Steve said, fumbling for his wallet. “Like I said, though, my address is in Miami now. My dad lives up north of the lake. You may know him, Steve McClatchen, he was pretty good friends with the sheriff when I was growing up—they were both Marines and both liked to fish.”

“You’re Stevie McClatchen,” he said. “I remember you. My big sister talked about you in high school. You remember Shannon Fields, don’t you?”

“Sure. So you’re little Petey?”

“Deputy Pete Fields now.”

“It’s good to see you. How’s your sister doing?”

“Fine. She’s an RN working in Tampa. I’ll tell her I saw you.”

“Thanks. Hey, do you know what time it is?”

Fields looked at his wristwatch, an impressive matt black device with orange numbers.

“A few minutes past five.”

“Good, I still need to pick up a couple pizzas.”

“I won’t keep you. Drive carefully.”

*

Mac got out of the shower, toweled himself dry, and stood in front of the mirror. There was still something of the Marine in his physique, though he was getting a bit soft around the middle. He sucked in his gut, told his reflection “Semper Fi,” and looked at the scar on his upper arm, just above the tattoo he’d gotten with his buddies in Saigon. He traced the wound around to the back where the bullet had exited and looked down at the other one across his calf. Mac went

into the bedroom to dress. He put on clean blue jeans from the laundry basket on the floor, then, miracle of miracles, there was a chambray shirt hanging in his closet, so he didn't have to iron anything. He laced up his newest pair of running shoes and returned to the bathroom. He opened the medicine cabinet and took out his Old Spice. He started to open it, but it reminded him of Susan, so he simply wiped off the dust and replaced the bottle on the shelf.

Mac remembered Traci's mother now—small-boned, with auburn hair and a sprinkle of freckles. Susan had been so different, a tall blond who'd filled out a little after their kids were born. Still, she'd kept herself in pretty good shape—he'd always found plenty to appreciate in her appearance—at least until the cancer. God, she had gotten gaunt toward the end. He forced his thoughts back into the present—pepperoni pizza and a situation that could turn into real drama between the two kids.

What was her name, anyway, Traci's mom? Hell, he ought to remember. She'd been his only date since losing Susan, but that had been like two years ago. Whatever her name was—D-something—she'd been sweet to Susan and him during the chemo, had brought casseroles from the church ladies every Sunday afternoon for almost a year. Deanna, that was it—pretty, in a quiet sort of way. He shook his head. Three years Susan was gone, and it was still hard to think about anyone else. Besides, his project kept him plenty busy. He couldn't spare any attention till he was finished with that.

*

Deanna checked her living room for the third time since she'd gotten home. How could Traci invite people to dinner on such short notice? And to bring them here, instead of to her own

place—she paused and took a breath. It was all right. Her home was fine—small, but clean and orderly, the way she liked it. And it was only pizza—No. Big. Deal. The clock read five-forty-five—too early to put out the salad? Deanna took another deep breath, centering herself, then grabbed the willow-patterned bowl from the fridge and placed it between the candleholders on the tablecloth. She picked up a plate, spent a moment examining the pattern and remembering her mother's china, lost twenty years earlier. The front doorbell's elaborate melody sounded and she checked the time again—still ten to six. It wasn't Traci. She would have let herself in. Deanna paced to the front door, paused before the full-length mirror in the foyer, and adjusted her dress once more. She smiled and opened the door.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Hi, Mrs. Bell, guess I’m early. Traci’s not here yet.” Steve stepped inside holding two large pizza boxes with a bottle of wine tucked under his arm. “Your house is just like I remember it.”

“Where’s your dad?” Deanna asked. “Traci said he was coming.”

“I asked him to meet me here. That sounds like his truck now.” He opened the front door in time to see a 1962 Dodge pickup come to a halt next to the LTD. Wisps of smoke drifted around the vehicle as Mac stepped out. He grabbed a box off the front seat and carried it to the front door.

“Dad, you remember Mrs. Bell, don’t you?”

“Steve, call me Deanna. How are you, Mac?”

“Fine, Dee. You’re looking nice tonight. Here.” He handed her the box. “Keep it right side up.”

“What’s this?” She smiled. “You didn’t have to bring anything.”

“It’s nothing, just a few flowers I yanked out of the garden and stuck in a bowl.”

“That’s sweet of you,” Deanna said, lifting the arrangement out of the box. The light from the setting sun reflected off a hundred facets. Half a dozen magenta camellia blossoms crowded together in the shallow crystal bowl on a wet paper towel.

“Wait a second! Mac, this is Waterford. I can’t take this.”

“Dee, it’s just a gewgaw I bought off TV some time back. I’d just put screws in it or something.”

“Thank you *very* much. I’ll give these some fresh water.”

Steve watched this exchange from the sidelines. As the kitchen door swung closed behind Deanna, he said, “I wasn’t sure you even remembered Traci’s mom, and you two are old friends.” He smiled. “And she is kind of cute.”

“Don’t go reading anything into this. Dee’s a good woman is all.”

Traci picked that moment to walk in the front door, and Deanna came back from the kitchen with the flowers.

“That’s lovely! Where’d you get the flowers?” Traci asked, hugging her.

“Mac brought them. Isn’t it a beautiful bowl?”

A moment later, Steve and Traci were face to face for the second time that day, this time in front of their respective parents.

“Hello again, Steve.”

“Hey, Traci.” *Handshake or kiss?*

Traci solved his dilemma by reaching up on her tiptoes and giving him a quick peck on the cheek. “Let’s eat,” she said. “I’m starved.”

After dinner, Steve asked Traci, “You want to walk down to the lake?”

“Why not? It’s a nice night.”

Deanna said, “The mosquito spray’s in the front closet—you’ll need it.”

“Thanks.” She grabbed the can of repellent and they headed out the door.

*

When Steve and Traci were gone, Deanna turned to Mac. “Would you like some coffee?”

“Yes, thanks.”

He watched Deanna walk away. She was trim, in her early fifties, and her figure had filled back in fine since her cancer had gone into remission and her appetite had returned. As the kitchen door swung closed behind her, he got up from the table and scouted the living room. The décor revealed Deanna had a fondness for eagles, or at least her daughter believed she did. A variety of not-so-majestic birds filled the mantle over the fireplace, most homemade or hand-drawn. The one in the center looked like it dated back to kindergarten—a china plate onto which a crayon drawing of flying eagle had been transferred and glazed. Photos elsewhere on the wall showed mother and daughter at school functions, Girl Scout events, and church socials, documenting Traci’s growth from beginning pre-K to finishing college. Something was odd about the pictures, something Mac couldn’t quite put his finger on.

Deanna came back into the room, bearing a tray filled with cups, saucers, a teapot, and a creamer, all in blue and white willow pattern. On a small plate were arranged a half-dozen home baked cookies. “I hope you don’t mind instant coffee. I’m mostly drinking tea these days, since my illness,” she told him.

“Instant’s fine. What’s all this?”

“Just some things I baked when I was stuck at home,” Deanna said. “There’s a few more in the kitchen for the kids, so don’t hold back.”

“Like I would,” he said around a bite of cookie. “This is good. I don’t imagine they’re thinking about cookies right now anyhow.”

Deanna’s cheeks turned red. “I’m glad they bumped into each other again. I hate to see Traci alone. She seemed so happy when they were together, before—”

“Before my genius son decided to ‘play the field’ in college.”

“Maybe this time will be better for them,” Deanna said. “What about you? I mean, what have you been doing lately?” Her face grew redder. “I mean, are you working anywhere?”

He grinned. “Don’t worry, Dee, I knew what you meant. The manager at Sporting World calls me to help out when they’re having a big sale, maybe once a month, but I don’t have much going on lately. You still work the bakery counter?”

“Yes, Brian and Geri are so good to me—they even kept up my health insurance while I was sick. I’m so grateful.”

“I can imagine. That’s pretty generous.”

They sat in silence for a time, sipping from the blue and white cups and nibbling on sweets. Mac realized he was comfortable, didn’t feel pressured to fill the void with words. And Dee seemed fine with it, too. He looked around the room again, as thunder boomed outside.

“That’s it,” he said.

“What?”

“Something’s been nagging me, but I didn’t know what. It just came to me.”

“Yes?”

“You don’t need to say anything,” Mac said. “But your pictures only show one or both of you two, no other family.”

“It’s sharp of you to notice,” Deanna said. “My folks passed away before she was born. And Traci’s father didn’t end up in any photos--we split when she was in first grade.”

“I’m sorry. It must have been hard raising her alone.”

“It had its moments,” she said. “But let’s not go into that tonight.”

“Of course. It’s none of my business, really.”

Thunder sounded again, closer this time. “You’re a nice guy, Mac. Maybe another time. But it’s pouring out there now, and it’s getting late. I wonder where the kids are.” As she finished her sentence, lightning exploded right outside, the thunder so loud the knick-knacks on the shelves rattled.

“Jesus, Dee, I think that hit one of your trees.” Mac wiped condensate off the picture window, trying to see the yard.

Amid the rain drops, white pellets of ice began bouncing off the cars, the ground, everything that wasn’t sheltered.

“Where are Traci and Steve?” Deanna said. Look at those hailstones.”

The cars were barely visible in the downpour. The hail had grown to the size of golf balls, “I think the kids are all right.”

“Do you see them? Where are they?”

“The dome light of Steve’s car was on a second ago, now it’s off. They’re probably just weathering out the storm.”

*

As Steve and Traci closed the front door and walked up the drive, a cloud of mosquitoes swarmed them.

“God, I forgot what it’s like up here,” Steve said, swatting at his exposed skin. “This is nuts.”

Traci laughed, spraying her arms with mosquito repellent. “Come here, let me get you.”

“That stuff’s not going to stop this bunch,” he said, running toward his LTD. “Quick, let’s get in the car.”

Traci stopped in her tracks, giving the insects a better target.

Steve looked back. “Jeez, it’s just a place to talk without being eaten, right?”

She ran to the passenger side of the car.

“Okay,” Steve said. “Brush off as many as you can before you open—“

“Shut up and unlock this door!”

“Sorry,” he said, running to unlock her door. She got in and slammed the door. He ran back to the driver’s side—right as Traci pushed the lock button and held up the keys she’d grabbed on her way in. She grinned at him.

“Come on, let me in.” He banged on the window. “They’re killing me!”

She relented and Steve jumped inside. They slapped bugs for several minutes without talking, him pouting, her smirking. She said, “Let’s see what you’ve been listening to,” and stuck the keys in the ignition. She pressed *Play* on the cassette deck. Nothing happened.

“That died a while back. I just listen to the radio.”

She pushed buttons and got nothing but static

“It’s all tuned to Miami,” he said. “We’ll have to spin the dial.”

They both reached for the knob and their hands touched.

“Sorry,” he said. “What are you grinning at?”

“You should see yourself.”

He turned on the overhead light and adjusted the rearview mirror.

“Wow.”

“Wow is right.”

At least a dozen welts decorated his face, neck, even his right ear.

“These bugs are as bad as in the ‘glades,” he said, brushing his arms. “I’m glad I’m wearing long pants.”

She laughed. “I’m surprised Mom didn’t warn us more. We’re quite the pair.” She checked herself in the mirror. “That spray works—I’ve only got a couple bites.”

“That’s ‘cause they were all biting me.”

She looked at the back seat. “You don’t keep the beer cooler in back anymore.”

“I hardly drink beer anymore, just with hot wings. You remember those we had on our Christmas camping trip?” He stopped. Those two days had been their last real time together.

“Traci, I’m sorry I was such an idiot.”

“What do you mean ‘were’?” she asked. “Nothing’s changed.”

He turned towards her. She was smiling. His arm was along the seat back already. Now he moved it down to her neck, and leaned in—and felt her stiffen and move away.

“What are you doing?” Her voice filled the car.

He smiled, expecting her laughter, but no. She was serious. “I’m sorry, I thought you were—”

“We’re not sixteen anymore. If you’ve decided you want me for real this time, you’re going to have to court me.”

“What?”

“We start at square one,” Traci said. “We’ve been apart, what, ten years? I’m not jumping into anything. You have to show me you won’t let me down again.”

“When I saw you again,” Steve said, “I kind of hoped we could pick up where we left off.”

“I can tell,” Traci said.

“Well, it seems like neither of us has dated anyone in a long time. I mean grad school’s been crazy—you’ve no idea.”

“And you have no idea what it’s been like taking Mom for cancer treatments, watching her lose her hair and throw up anything she tried to eat—“

Steve felt like she had punched him in the chest. Memories of his mom’s death three years earlier came rushing back. He put his forehead on the steering wheel and took a deep breath, then another.

“Shit, Steve, I’m sorry,” Traci said. The muscles of his forearms strained as he clenched the wheel. She touched the back of his neck.

Face still buried, he said, “I would have done anything to help her, but my parents didn’t let me. They didn’t tell me.”

Traci stroked his neck. After a minute, his breathing slowed to normal.

“Better?” She was still lightly touching his neck, still speaking to the back of his head.

“I guess,” he said. Give me a napkin, please. In the glove box.”

She passed him a handful.

“Thanks.” The word was muffled. He blew his nose and wiped his eyes.

“What do you mean, they didn’t let you?” Traci asked.

“Mom made Dad keep the cancer secret,” Steve said. “She wanted me to finish my stupid master’s degree.”

“That’s horrible. They had no right to keep that from you.”

“I was so angry at Mom, but I couldn’t say anything—she was real sick by the time I found out.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m still pissed at Dad for his part in it. This is only the second time I’ve come back since her funeral.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t know.” Steve said. He lifted his head and looked at her sideways. “I’ll tell you one thing, though. If this ‘getting to know you again’ stuff is all going to be like this, I’m not sure I can take it.”

She laughed, but it sounded forced. “What now? Taking a walk is out—with those mosquitoes we’ll be lucky to get back to the house.”

“Why don’t you try the radio again?” he asked.

She spun the knob and found an oldies station near the top of the dial. Softly, the Beach Boys joined them in the car. “Do you remember this?” they said at the same time.

“Of course,” Steve said. “This was playing that first night we—” His mood crashed back to somber.

“It’s still a great song,” Traci said, “and it was special for me, even with what happened later.”

“Thanks. Me, too.” He paused. “Traci, why did you tell Mike I was your first?”

A burst of rain splattered the car then stopped. “Because you’re the first man I made love with. What else is there to say?”

“But you’d never talk about it before, when we were together. You were always so uncomfortable.”

With her finger, she traced the car’s logo—L-T-D—on the vinyl dashboard.

“You’re closing down again, right now.” Rain began pounding the car, making conversation difficult.

“Just accept it. Okay? Next subject.”

“But it feels like I’m hurting you somehow, just by asking.”

“I loved you. What else did you need?”

“I loved you, too,” he said. He banged his hand on the wheel. “Crap! This isn’t working.”

“What?”

“Let’s go back in,” he said, looking out at the rain. “I mean, I don’t deserve your trust or anything—if you ever decide it’s safe to talk to me, then we can try again.”

The rain outside relaxed, grew steadier, gentler. The drumming on the car roof seemed to be trying to sooth their tempers. The bright blur of the living room window struck sharp shadows inside the car.

The rain again began pounding the car in earnest. Steve stared at the glass. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Traci still forming letters on the dashboard.

“Hey Trace.”

“Yes?”

“You were my first, too.” His gaze returned to the rivers on the glass.

“Really?” She stopped her doodling and looked right at him.

“I got the ‘don’t ask’ message back then from you so I shut up. But yes.” He glanced at her then away again.

“Steve,” she said. “Are you embarrassed? Look at me.”

The rain slowed to an intermittent patter. “No, not embarrassed. I’ve been lonely, but I’d given you up for lost. Now, since this morning, I can’t stop thinking about you. And I don’t want to mess up again.”

His hand crept toward her, slowed, and then continued. She gave no signals, just sat, watching. He touched her shoulder.

“Please,” he said, “if you can, when you’re ready.” He stopped. “You’re so sweet. I do want to try again. There’s just something . . .”

“What?”

“This part you hold back. I don’t need to know every detail of your life. But this coldness has always come between us, pushed me away.”

“Deal with it. Or maybe it won’t ever work with us.” Her eyes closed, her jaw tightened. “Shit! Wasn’t I passionate enough? Wasn’t our sex good? Why do you have to get inside my head about everything?”

Traci opened the car door, and stepped out into the swamp-like air. The rain had nearly stopped. She slammed the door shut.

Steve scrambled out of the car. “You see! You get angry and shut down—”

“Shut up! My father did things when I was little, all right? Are you happy now?” Traci hugged herself, rigid. Thunder banged again, not far off, and a light rain began to fall once more.

He moved toward her. “I’m sorry. Come here.” He opened his arms.

“No!” She was crying, her nose running. “Don’t touch me. You got inside my head like you wanted. Now stay back.”

“God, Trace,” he said. “I’m sorry. I’d never hurt you—”

More thunder, this time closer.

“Like hell you wouldn’t.” Her face was vacant. “What do you call dumping me? Or pushing me to talk now, after I told you to back off?”

Steve plopped down in the mud of the driveway, doing the only thing he could think of to make himself less threatening. The rain increased. Traci stood only feet away, yet impossible to reach. Then lightning crashed into the woods next to them with thunder right on its heels. Florida raindrops, some as big as thumbs, slapped them, stinging. Steve jumped to his feet, blinking away the after image of the flash. Traci swiveled to the car, to the house, and back to the car. She ran for its immediate safety. Steve followed. They dove in on opposite sides and slammed their doors. The two sat staring at the splashes on the windshield. The rain sound changed, clicking alternated with pinging metallic notes amidst the drumming, thrumming water—hailstones bounced off the car. Steve reached back over the seat and Traci cringed. “Relax. Just getting the towel.” He pulled the makeshift seat cover from its place, shook it out a bit, and handed it to her. “Here. It’s clean, I put it there last weekend.”

“Thanks.” She buried her face in the terrycloth, rubbing and wiping. After a few moments, she wrapped the towel around her shoulders.

Traci huddled against the passenger door, clutching the towel and staring into the storm. Steve sat, hands at ten and two o’clock on the steering wheel as if he was in driver’s ed. class. He felt strange, lost, unsure of what to do or say, but feeling he had to fill the silence with words. A

physical sensation took over as: the hair on his neck and arms stood; his skin began to tingle.

“Traci—” he began, but was interrupted when another bolt of lightning flash-banged outside the car, so close the car rocked.

Traci screamed.

“Jesus!” Steve said.

The two huddled together in the middle of the long bench seat holding onto each other and looking into the other’s frightened eyes.

“Damn,” Traci said, trying to laugh and relaxing her grip on Steve. “I almost peed myself!”

“Me, too,” he said, unwilling to let go. “That was crazy close!”

Another sound began this one above and outside the car. “What the hell?” Steve said, looking up toward the source but seeing only the sagging headliner. A high-pitched chatter like an endless string of firecrackers exploding was increasing in volume. It was punctuated by a loud crack, and then replaced by a rushing waterfall sound.

“Steve—” Traci began.

“Shit,” Steve said. “Hang on.”

A second later the car shook violently, the front dipping down and rebounding again as the falling branch struck.

Traci’s scream sounded loud in Steve’s ear, and her fingers dug into his back. His mind flickered back to when they’d last made love and he squeezed her tight.

“It’s alright,” he said. “We’re not hurt.” He clung to her, hyper aware of her breasts against him. “You’re okay.”

“What the *hell* was that?”

“It felt like half an oak tree,” he said, “but it was probably just a branch.”

“Just a branch!” Traci said. “Oh, no.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Damn it,” she said, in a low voice. She hesitated. “This time I did pee myself.” She began to cry, hanging on him.

“It’s all right, Trace,” Steve said, arms around her. “Don’t worry about it. Hush, you’re alright. That’s all that matters.”

She held him, crying, and Steve tried to keep from smiling. “Hush.”

After a minute, Traci’s breathing returned to normal. “Tissue,” she said.

“Glove box.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“Mac,” Deanna said, “are you sure they’re all right?”

Mac tried to see the car through the streaked window. “Car’s up on rubber tires. They should be fine. He fished his old candy bar cellphone from his pocket. “I’ll try to call them . . . damn! No signal.” Deanna followed him through the swinging door into the kitchen. He tried again using her old green wall phone—the call rang several times and went to voice mail. “No answer.” They went back to the living room window.

“The rainstorm just turned into a hailstorm,” Mac said. “This mess isn’t ending any time soon. Do you have a big umbrella?”

“Yes, in the hall closet. But you’re not going out in this, are you?”

“It’s no big deal. I’ll be right back.”

Deanna closed the door behind him and went to watch. The dim light showed Mac slogging toward the cars. She twitched back from the window as another lightning bolt slammed down. She opened her eyes again to darkness inside and out. The cars in the yard were just blacker shadows and there was no sign of Mac. She wiped condensation off the window and strained to see something, anything, but there was only rain. Intermittent bursts of hail struck the roof while the downpour pounded down. She moved toward the kitchen by touch, seeking the cupboard with its supply of flashlights and candles.

*

As the door closed behind Mac, the wind nearly pulled the umbrella from his grasp, and he considered for a moment going back into the house. Instead, he sprinted toward his son’s

Ford. He'd only taken a few long strides when a bright flash knocked him to the ground and he lost consciousness. When he woke, he lay still, trying to figure out where he was. Rain was pouring down and Mac felt like someone was pelting him with stones. His ears were ringing and the smell of ozone hung in the air. He rolled over and got to one knee. Something was wrong—the blast—he remembered a flash. Mac tried to see the ground around him, patted the wet mulch. He couldn't locate his weapon. How did he get separated from his unit? They wouldn't have left him unless there had been trouble, but there was no smell of a fire—enough time and rain must have passed for it to clear. Mac was wearing only a sock on his right foot. He found his shoe—a sneaker? After pouring out a half-inch of water, he slipped it on and secured it. He made one more attempt to locate his rifle and then, giving it up for lost, he got to his feet and jogged down the trail to find the rest of his patrol.

*

Once in the kitchen, Deanna found her flashlight and went through the house, lighting and planting Mason jar candles in each room. She lit the trio of pillar candles on the mantelpiece. Cinnamon aroma filled the air, a breath of peace, and she returned to the living room. The rain had tapered off to a steady shower. She could see the cars again, but no lights and no people. Deanna decided to act, and went to the front closet. She donned a hooded yellow rain jacket, stepped into matching galoshes, grabbed a flashlight, and went outside. The beam from the hand lamp revealed her daughter's sub-compact, Mac's old pickup, and Steve's four-door. She ran splashing through puddles to the LTD. The vehicle's windows were fogged, and it occurred to her there could be another reason for the long delay and steamed windows. She'd been prepared

to tap on the window, but now hesitated, not wanting to embarrass her daughter—or herself—if the reunion had turned romantic. Deanna saw the massive tree branch stretched across the front of the car. The splintered end facing her was a foot across and the rest stretched away past the left headlight. At least the hood and right fender had been crushed by oak branch. The interior of the car brightened as the passenger door swung open, revealing her daughter, fully clothed and wrapped in a flowery beach towel. Traci's eyes were red, her cheeks, tear-streaked.

“Mom,” Traci said, pointing at the chunk of wood. “Look at that!”

The driver's side door squealed but opened, and Steve clambered out. He was soaking wet. When Deanna brushed his face with light, she saw his eyes were red, too.

“Thank God you're both alright,” she said. “Come inside. I'll make something hot to drink.”

Deanna and Traci held each other as the three walked through the drizzle to the front door. They stopped on the porch and stomped mud from their shoes. Once inside, Deanna said, “Traci, grab Steve a towel before you change.”

Steve said, “I'm fine, Deanna. Can I do something to help?”

“Sure. Grab a gallon of water from the garage.”

Traci stuck her head back in. “Here,” she said, tossing a towel. “Catch.” She disappeared back down the hallway.

Deanna said, “Steve, after you get the water, why don't you light the fireplace? I don't have any clothes to loan you, but at least we can warm up.”

”Sure, I'll do that,” he said. “Where's Dad?”

Deanna stopped half way through the swinging door into the kitchen and turned around. “Oh, my God. You didn’t see him? He went to check on you two before I did—right before that big lightning hit.”

“Where’s your flashlight?” Steve asked. “Maybe he’s in his truck.”

*

Outside, the rain had nearly stopped, but the surrounding trees and cloud cover left visibility near zero. Steve stood on the porch and shined the flashlight around but could see nothing besides the cars and glistening reflections off a thousand wet surfaces. He went directly to his poor LTD, though he did look around on the way. Once there, he began exploring the area. His mind wandered, and he found himself praying he wouldn’t find his father’s Sears work boots sticking out from under the fallen branch in a macabre imitation of ruby slippers and tornado-tossed house. After satisfying himself that his father couldn’t be beneath the mess unless he’d been driven in like a tent stake, Steve took a quick turn around the other vehicles, shining the light inside each. Then he traversed the parking area a couple times at a jog. As he was about to go back, a motion near the tree line caught his eye. He went to investigate and found an inside-out umbrella rocking slightly in the breeze.

“All I found was this,” he said, holding up the umbrella. “Is it yours?”

“Yes,” Deanna said. “Mac had it. There’s no other sign of him?”

“Nothing,” Steve said. “But at least he’s not under that branch. I’m going to go up the drive and see if I can find him. I can’t take my car, though.”

Traci stood. “I’ll get my keys.” Her hair was wrapped in a towel. She was wearing jeans and an embroidered peasant top Steve recognized from high school.

“That’s okay, I’ll take his truck.” He went back out. Inside the Dodge he found the key under the rubber mat, started up the engine, and began his search.

*

After Mac gained consciousness, he left the clearing, jogging along the dark road, eyes scanning ahead and to both sides. Trusting his hearing to inform him of anything that could overtake him, he made good time. He felt naked without a weapon, but his primary goal was to find his unit. As he ran, he assessed his situation. He was wearing civilian clothes—sneakers, jeans, and a flannel shirt—which made no sense. If he was on leave, he should be in a city. How did he end up in the woods? And it was woodlands, not jungle. He slowed and checked his pockets. His wallet contained about a hundred dollars, a credit card—he didn’t own any credit cards, did he? And his driver’s license was funny, not paper but plastic. The face staring back at him was strange, in color and looking half like him and half like his old man. The expiration date was his birthday, November 17th, but in 2012. That was crazy—he picked up his pace again, trying to think, to clear his head. Then he heard something, a vehicle behind him. Without thinking, he left the dirt track he’d been following and dove behind a pile of brush. He watched as a truck approached, a red and white Dodge pickup, like the one he’d bought right before enlisting, but older. He felt dizzy and noticed pain in his right ear. When he touched it his hand came away pink—blood, but not a lot. From his hiding place, he saw the driver as the truck passed, a young man who looked familiar. For a change, Mac was unsure of what to do—his

instincts said stay concealed, but his head was telling him that something was wrong, he needed help. One thing was certain: the guy driving was no Viet Cong, not with that sandy brown hair and plaid shirt. As the truck drove by, Mac came out of cover and walked to the middle of the road. The clouds parted revealing a moon near full. A breeze sprang up, reminding Mac he was soaking wet. He shivered, still uncertain. The small taillights on the slow-moving vehicle faded as the distance between man and truck widened. The brake lights came on as the truck reached the cross street. Then a lone white backup light came on and the Dodge began backing toward him, weaving slightly as the driver followed the slightly curving road. The whining transmission noise grew louder, and Mac moved to the left side of the road. He thought again of running, but was washed by a wave of fatigue. The driver pulled even with him and stopped.

“Dad, are you alright? You don’t look so good.”

“Dad?” Mac repeated.

A tingling spread from his shoulders up his neck and ears and then to the top of his head. The ringing sound he’d been hearing crescendoed and he swayed. He reached towards the truck to steady himself then slid down and sat at the edge of the street.

“Dad!”

*

Mother and daughter watched Steve drive off through the rain.

“How about some hot chocolate? Or tea?” Deanna asked, turning to Traci. “You’ve been crying.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Alright. Come into the kitchen with me—you can pick out what you’d like.”

Traci sat down at the ice cream table, home to so many meals she and her mom had shared. Deanna boiled water and placed an assortment of hot cocoa and teas on the table in front of Traci.

Deanna said, “I guess your reunion with Steve didn’t go that great.”

“Mom!”

“Then what *should* we talk about?” Deanna asked. “Do you have to work the Fourth of July? Does the dealership have big plans?”

Traci sighed. “Mike hasn’t said what service hours will be or who will be working. It’s on a Saturday, so we’ll be open at least part of the day.”

The house lights flickered a few times and went out again. At the stove, the teapot started whistling. Deanna brought the kettle to the table, filled their two cups, and returned the pot to the stove. She asked, “Drop a chamomile tea bag into my cup, please. I’m having a brownie—do you want one?”

“Sure, Mom. Thanks.”

Deanna put two in the microwave and, when the timer beeped a half-minute later she brought them to the table.

“I hope Mac’s all right,” Deanna said.

“I’m sure he’ll turn up,” Traci said. “I can’t believe that tree fell on Steve’s car. And right after he just spent all that money on it. It’s just not fair.”

“Can it be fixed?”

“I don’t know,” Traci said. “I didn’t get a good look at the damage, but it was a big piece of tree.”

“It’s a blessing it didn’t hit the roof. It could have killed you both.”

Traci looked out the small window at the light rain falling. She shivered and warmed her hands on the teacup. A siren sounded in the distance.

CHAPTER SIX

“Dad!” Steve repeated as Mac sat down in a large puddle.

Mac was close to the truck, almost leaning on the door. Steve watched, helpless, as his father leaned backwards, slowly at first, then faster as gravity overcame inertia. His head banged onto the asphalt. As soon Mac was still, Steve backed the truck away, getting clear and lighting the scene with the headlights. Then he scrambled out of the Dodge and knelt down, his old Boy Scout training coming back to him.

First, check for response—“Dad, can you hear me!” Nothing, but Mac’s chest slowly rose and fell—he was breathing on his own.

“Dad, wake up.” Steve gently ran his hands over his father’s head, feeling the back where it had struck the road—blood, a scalp wound, but no mushy spots on the skull. Steve rinsed his hands in the puddle, dried them on his pants, and clambered into the truck cab to call 9-1-1. The phone’s display read, “Call failed. Retry?”

“Shit.” He tossed the phone onto the dash and got back out.

“Wake up!” Again, nothing. Steve peeled back Mac’s eyelids one at a time and looked at his eyes in the headlight glare—one pupil was wide open, the other a pinpoint— a concussion at least. He remembered one last thing to try—pain. He took his dad’s cold hand and dug his thumbnail into the fingernail bed of the man’s ring finger—still no response. The closest phone was back at Deanna’s, but he couldn’t leave Mac lying in the middle of the road. Steve knew he shouldn’t move him, but he didn’t see what else he could do. He crouched down beside Mac, reached around under the limp arms, and prepared to stand and lift him. A noise caused him to

look back over his shoulder—a police car was driving toward him. He resettled his father and got to his feet, waving both arms. The emergency lights flashed as the officer pulled up.

“What’s the problem? Was there an accident?” It was Fields again.

“It’s my dad,” Steve said. “He fell and hit his head. He’s breathing but not responding.”

Fields went around to the patrol car’s trunk, tore a blanket from a plastic bag, and wrapped it around Mac. “Stay with him. I’ll radio for an ambulance.”

*

Mother and daughter bumped into each other as they reached for the ringing phone.

Deanna picked up the handset. “Hello?”

“Mrs. Bell, it’s Steve.”

“What’s going on? Did you find Mac?”

Traci studied her mother’s face as she spoke.

“We’re at Brandon Regional, in the ER,” Steve said.

“Is Mac all right? Are you?”

“I’m fine, but Dad’s unconscious. I found him at the end of your road, but he passed out before we could talk.”

“Has he been seen yet?”

“They just wheeled him in—a nurse is coming now. I have to go.”

“Do you want us to come?”

“I don’t know... well, maybe, if you don’t mind. I rode in the ambulance and left his truck on the shoulder near your house.”

“Of course, we’ll bring it to the hospital. Where are the keys?”

“In the ashtray. Thanks. I’ve got to go.”

*

The Emergency Department parking lot was nearly empty on this Sunday night. Deanna and Traci found spots and went inside. At the front desk, Deanna fibbed, claiming to be family, and the receptionist buzzed them back. They found Steve in a curtained alcove with Mac. A spaghetti-storm of wires and tubes led to Mac, who lay unconscious as a nurse checked his vital signs. “Tell me again how you found him.”

“Dad came out in the storm to check on me and Traci.” He pointed to her. “We were in my car talking. But he never got to us. When we realized he was missing I went looking for him. He walked maybe a quarter-mile before I found him, but when I got to him he sat down and fainted. And his head banged on the street pretty hard.”

The nurse had them step outside while he did a thorough exam. He had just finished and opened the curtain when a slender young woman in a white coat arrived. Miguel handed her the charts and they spoke quietly. He left and the newcomer scanned the information. Then she looked up and said, “Hello. I’m Dr. Vishnu. Who’s related to . . .” She looked at the paperwork. “Mr. McClatchen?”

“I’m his son Steve. These are our friends, Deanna and Traci.”

Dr. Vishnu shook hands all around. “I’ve ordered some tests. Let me examine your father and then we can talk.” She moved to Mac’s bedside and looked at his head, then the burn on his

foot, and finally at his right hand for some time. She turned to Steve and said, “You said he was out in the thunderstorm, is that right?”

“Yes,” he said, “and there was at least one very close strike.”

Dr. Vishnu said, “So you’ve already guessed your father was injured by lightning. That seems to agree with his injuries.”

“Is he going to be alright?” Steve asked.

“Well, the fact that he was not only alive, but also up and walking after the incident is good news. About a third of lightning victims die within minutes, so he probably didn’t take a direct strike.”

“Traci and I were in my car,” Steve said. “It hit the tree next to me. But we didn’t know Dad was nearby, on the other side.”

Dr. Vishnu said, “Your father was probably struck by the ‘splash,’ or side-flash, which makes sense, looking at his burns. Was he carrying an umbrella?”

“Yes,” Deanna said. “How did you know?”

“Look at his hand,” Dr. Vishnu said, indicating a web of burn lines running from fingers to palm. “We can’t know without more tests, of course, but it looks like the current traveled between his right hand and his right foot— more good news, if that’s the case, because his head and heart probably were not involved.”

“But he won’t wake up,” Steve said. “That’s not good.”

“We’ll do a CT scan as soon as possible to look at the skull and brain, and blood work to check for organ involvement.”

“So we just have to wait and see?” Steve asked.

“For now that’s the best course to take,” Dr. Vishnu said. “Your father appears to be stable. With any head injury the immediate danger is swelling of the brain, and we’ll know more about that very soon.”

Miguel returned accompanied by a technician wheeling a large machine. “We’re going to be busy here for a little while,” Miguel said. “You all might be more comfortable in the waiting room. I’ll find you as soon as we’re through.”

*

The three walked back to the lobby. Traci still held Steve’s arm. Deanna’s eyes were red.

“Mom, are you alright?” Traci asked.

“I’m worried about Mac,” she said. “And I don’t like hospitals. Last time I was here I was getting chemotherapy—not a fun time.”

“I remember, Mom,” Traci said. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to stay, Mrs. Bell.” Steve added. “You’ve done a lot already, and it’s almost midnight.”

“I’ll stay a little longer,” Deanna said. “Maybe they’ll know something soon. Do you two want something to drink? I think they have hot tea in the machine.” Traci and Steve shook their heads, and she wandered down the hall, searching her purse for change. She turned the corner, then went around another and stopped. She leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. After a minute, Deanna fished for a tissue in her bag, wiped her eyes, and trudged on.

*

“She seems confused.” Traci stared at her mother’s back. “Maybe I should go with her.”

“Wait,” Steve said.

Traci paused, looking up into his eyes.

“Your mom may want a minute to herself,” he said. “And I need to tell you something.”

“What is it?” She let go of his arm.

“Thank you for coming here, for being here with me,” he said. “You know, I don’t think I ever stopped loving you.”

“Stop.”

“I can’t, I have to say this,” he said. “You’re so wonderful, and beautiful.”

“Steve, stop talking now,” Traci said. “I mean it. You’re worried about your dad, your car almost got smashed with you in it. You’ve been through a lot tonight—”

“I know, but—”

“Let me finish,” she said. “Remember what I told you at lunch—if you want to try again, we can see how it goes. Tonight I’m here as your friend. And now I’m going to check on Mom.” She gave him a quick hug, turned, and walked away.

As Traci neared the break room, she saw her mother just about to enter and hurried to catch up. “Mom, are you all right?”

Deanna turned in the entryway. Her face was pale, with dark circles beneath red eyes.

“Let’s go find some tea,” Traci took her mother’s arm and led her toward the vending machines.

*

Steve found a seat in the empty waiting room and sat down. The last time he'd been in this hospital was also the last time he'd seen his mother alive—after his parents had been lying to him for over a year. Three years since she'd died and his anger was still right there, ready to boil over. He knew his mom, not his dad, had been behind it. As much as he loved her, he still recognized her ways. He remembered her insistence he stick with guitar lessons long after he'd grown to hate the Nazi teacher they'd chosen for him. That stupid steel string was probably still in his closet where he'd dumped it. He could care less. She'd pushed him in school, too, driven him to take IB sciences because, as she told anyone who would listen, "He was always interested in biology, even dissected a frog when he was six." *C'mon, Mom – that wasn't dissection, that was a first-grader playing with his new pocket knife—and it's vivisection when the critter is still alive.* Steve hadn't been seeking scientific knowledge beyond what a sharp edge did to amphibian flesh. In Boy Scouts, too, she had been there, insisting he earn his Eagle badge—but he'd bailed on that, avoiding meetings surreptitiously and outright lying to her until it was too late to set up his final project. When he finally left for the University of Miami, it was in flight to a refuge of independence. Even if his mother had driven the choice of schools, he didn't care. Anything was acceptable if it provided an escape, and Miami was at least four hours from home.

Steve rested his forehead on his hands, elbows on his knees—the posture he'd learned in church: look like you're praying when you want to be left alone.

"Sir? Excuse me." Miguel was standing over him. "You can go in and see your father again."

"Did he wake up?"

“No, he’s still unconscious. But when he comes to it will help if someone he knows is there.”

Steve followed the nurse back through the security doors. He brushed aside the curtain and entered the area where his father lay. When he saw him there, helpless like the last time he had seen his mother, his breath caught in his chest. Fear, anger, love, and worry all jumbled together until anger won out. Steve banged his hand down on the tray table. “Damn it!”

“Easy,” Miguel said. “Here, have a seat. We’re trying to find your father a room, but it may be a while. The doctor will talk with you as soon as she’s seen the pictures.”

“Thanks,” Steve slid the chair to a spot near the bed, sat down, and looked at his dad. Then he assumed his church pose. Miguel watched him a moment and left.

*

Traci led Deanna to a table in the corner. Only two others were in the break room: a woman crying softly and a man rubbing her back with long, slow, up-and-down strokes. When Deanna was seated, Traci went to the machines and returned with two steaming cardboard cups.

“You remembered right,” she said. “They have hot tea.”

“That’s nice.”

“Something’s bothering you—” Traci cut herself short.

Deanna sipped her tea without speaking. The couple across the room stood. They took a few steps and the woman began crying again. The man put his arm around her and led her from the room.

“Is your tea all right?” Traci asked.

“No, it’s terrible,” she said, laughing a little. “But the coffee here is so much worse.”

Traci laughed quietly, then moved to a chair next to Deanna and put her head on her mom’s shoulder.

“Oh, honey,” Deanna said, stroking Traci’s hair. “What a crazy night this has been.”

“You have no idea.”

“Did something happen?”

“Nothing, everything,” Traci said. “It has been the wackiest night of my life,”

“But not the worst?”

“You were with me the worst night.” Traci shuddered. “Nothing will ever be like the night we ran away.”

“I pray you never go through anything like that again. But it could have been so much worse. We’re both here and healthy, and it’s been twenty years.”

“It doesn’t feel like years sometimes.” Traci hugged Deanna. “Thank you.”

“Hush. Do you want to hear why I’m upset?”

“Only if you want to tell me.”

“It’s nothing really, just me being silly,” Deanna said. “You remember before I got sick I started dating again?”

“You said something about it once while we were waiting for your treatment.”

“Well, one of those dates, the best one, was with Mac. He was sweet, a real gentleman.”

“What happened?”

“He arranged a wonderful evening. Well, except he picked me up in that beat-up truck. To give him credit, though, he had really cleaned it up. We went to that nice Spanish restaurant

down in Ybor City and had a lovely dinner. There was even a violinist going from table to table, playing music.”

“What went wrong?” Traci asked. “Was it your illness?”

“Yes and no,” Deanna said. “It had only been a year since Mac’s wife had passed, and I don’t think he was ready. When he finally called me back, I had found out about the cancer and wasn’t thinking about romance.”

“So why are you upset? Are you in love with him?”

Deanna laughed, choking on her tea. “No, sweetie. It’s been a long time since I’ve been in love—a very long time. Mac had—has—potential. Maybe I’m feeling bad over missed opportunity. That and being in this hospital stinks.”

“Thanks for telling me.” The two sat drinking their tea. After a time, Traci bought a cup of tea for Steve, and she and Deanna headed back to the ER.

*

Head still down, Steve felt someone enter the curtained alcove where he waited next to Mac. He stiffened his resolve to deal with the interruption, and lifted his face. No one was there—he was alone with his dad. Steve looked at the bed to see if anything had changed, but nothing seemed different. He stood and looked out at the nurses’ station. Miguel and another nurse were seated behind the desk at the nurses’ station—no way could they have passed his way and gotten back there in the short time since he’d felt the presence.

Steve returned to his seat and reassumed his head-down position. This time, though, was different. “Uhh, God. It’s me . . .” he said, then shook his head and went silent.

*

Arms around each other and smiling, Deanna and Traci reentered the room. Steve was seated near the bed, head down. Mac lay in the bed. The machines glowed and beeped. Nothing seemed different.

Then Steve lifted his face. He was smiling.

Deanna and Traci looked again at Mac—he was still unconscious. Deanna asked, “Did the doctor give you the test results?”

“No, she hasn’t been back yet.”

“But you’re smiling,” Traci said. “Why?”

“I don’t really know,” he said. “It’s strange. I don’t remember the last time I did this, but I was praying. And now I somehow feel Dad’s going to be alright.”

“Prayer comforts a lot of people,” Deanna said. “It’s gotten me through some tough times.”

“And it’s been a long day,” Traci said. “We’re all exhausted.”

Steve looked from one woman to the other and frowned. Then his expression softened. “I guess it does sound crazy. I can’t explain how I know, I just know. C’mon, if you saw this on one of those TV shows, you’d accept it. Give me the benefit of the doubt.”

Miguel returned and began readying Mac for transport. “We’ve got a room.”

Steve looked at his watch and turned to Traci and Deanna. “It’s nearly one, and you both have to work tomorrow. Why don’t you go home? If anything changes, I’ll call you.”

“We probably should,” Deanna said. “Traci, what’s best? Do you want to take me home or should I stay at your place tonight?”

“If you don’t mind, it makes more sense for you to spend the night with me,” Traci said.

“But, what about clothes?”

“I think I can squeeze into something of yours,” Deanna said. “I should be fine.”

“Thank you both for all your help tonight,” Steve said. “Traci, I don’t have your new cell number...”

They exchanged telephone numbers all around, and the two women left. Steve started to sit, but Miguel stopped him. “If you could wait outside, please,” Miguel said. “Someone will let you know when your dad is settled in his room.”

“Alright.” Steve went back to the ER waiting room. A thin, black man, about sixty years old was sitting in one of the chairs, coughing repeatedly. Along another wall, a young woman was cradling a little girl on her lap, talking quietly to her in Spanish. A man about the same age as the woman was talking with the receptionist. Steve went to an unoccupied corner chair, sat down, and stretched out his feet. He closed his eyes and tried to rest, but his mind was racing.

*

Steve was back at his first college graduation, in the surreal experience of standing in line with a thousand other undergraduates, all searching the massed audience for familiar faces. *No way, it can't be.* But it was. He saw his mom dressed in the brightest orange dress he had ever seen, standing and waving a matching U of M Hurricanes flag over her head. His dad was next to her with a neutral expression on his face until his wife tugged at him and pointed at their son. He smiled in Steve’s direction and gave a little wave, then jerked his thumb toward his wife and

gave an exaggerated shrug. Steve smiled at his dad's acknowledgment of their shared burden and blessing.

Most other visitors were laid back, even proper, although a few gave his mom a run for her money. A young-forties woman in a spandex leopard print outfit had brought a dozen family members, all waving and shouting. Another mom led a group of about twenty, ranging from grandbabies to great-grandparents and all toting tambourines, castanets, and a tiny set of bongos, in a kind of salsa cheer. And a family of good ol' boys—and girls—complete with cowboy hats, was hooting and hollering and waving the school colors.

Looking back down the line, Steve saw the last girl he had dated, *what was her name?* She'd dumped him right before midterms his junior year. *Sheila, that was it.* She glanced toward him and met his eye—then gave him the finger and looked away.

Finally the dean stopped talking, and the line started to move—this would soon be over.

*

"Mr. McClatchen," Miguel said, "wake up."

"What? What is it?" Steve sat abruptly in the waiting room chair.

"Sorry to disturb you—your dad's settled in his room.

"I fell asleep," Steve said. "Was I out long?"

"I don't know," Miguel said. "You came out here about an hour ago."

"Jeez. Did he wake up? What room is he in? "

"I'm sorry, he's still unconscious," Miguel said. "He's in intensive care on the fourth floor: room 1424. Follow the orange floor stripe to the central elevators. It's way past visiting

hours, but the nurses are pretty understanding about emergency patients. Just check in with them."

"Thank you." He left the waiting room and found the orange line stretching away from the ER entryway. It merged with other bright stripes, all diligently guiding visitors in different directions down various halls. The orange one reminded him of the dress his mother had worn to his undergrad commencement five years earlier. He recalled the dream he'd just had and, still thinking about his mother, he began following the line to where Mac awaited. He stopped at the vending machines and bought a soda and some chips then continued on. When Steve got off the elevator, he saw a nurse seated behind the desk. She looked cute, maybe a couple years younger than Steve. She pointed him down the hall and said she'd be caring for Mac for the rest of the shift. The name on her hospital ID was "Angel" and she looked something like a television angel: slim, with short blond hair, blue eyes, and a pretty smile. Steve remembered two things—why he was there and Traci. He returned the nurse's smile, thanked her, and walked down the hallway to his father's hospital room. Inside, Mac lay on the first bed. A wall-mounted fluorescent bounced yellow light off the ceiling. Another patient slept quietly in the second bed.

Steve dragged the hospital chair to the bedside, settled into its cold brown vinyl, and stared at Mac. His head was bandaged. Lying there, seemingly asleep but for the tubes and venue, his dad looked peaceful. His jawline, usually Marlboro-man rigid, was smooth and relaxed. Besides the closed eyes, Mac appeared much as he had for most of Steve's childhood him: unsmiling but content. Steve opened his soda and sipped, enjoying how the sugary citrus flavor cut through the hours-old taste of pepperoni and onions. He started to open the chips, then reconsidered and laid the bag on the end table and sipped again. He looked at his father again,

and wondered what he would do when Mac died, when this last link to his family and past was gone. Steve remembered his prayer and how Traci and Deanna had reacted to his feeling God had answered him. He rested his forehead on the palms of his hands once again.

"Can I get you anything?" It was Angel, standing in the doorway, light silhouetting her form and shining through the wisps of hair around her face.

His throat tightened and he swallowed hard. "No, nothing, thanks." She stood there a few moments and then left, and Steve put his face down on his hands once more.

*

Daylight woke Steve, as it lit the window he hadn't noticed the night before. His cell phone showed five-thirty a.m. He stood, and the empty soda can rolled from his lap onto the floor. He picked it up and checked the bed. His father still breathed quietly, looking like he might wake at any minute and prepare another breakfast of "food that would just go bad anyway."

Angel came into the room. "You're awake. I tried not to disturb you when I checked on him. Nothing's changed since he was brought in"

"Thanks," Steve said. "Did Dr. Vishnu ever come by? I was expecting to hear about the CT scan and blood work."

"I haven't seen her. Let me look at his chart," Angel looked at the folder. "There's nothing here."

"Could you check?"

"As soon as I finish checking my other patients. I go off shift soon."

Morning had transformed Angel. Her hair had gone from gossamer to over-bleached and frizzy, and her figure, beautifully slender four hours earlier, now appeared gaunt, almost anorexic.

"I'll check downstairs," Steve said. "You look like you've got your hands full."

Angel smiled faintly and busied herself with the machines around Mac. Steve left and walked toward the elevators, wishing for a toothbrush.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Traci and Deanna drove home in silence. The narrow road through the trailer park was eerie at that late hour. There were few streetlights, and most homes were dark. Garden gnomes and pink plastic flamingos stood guard over many yards while whirl-a-gigs and windmills creaked slowly in the night breeze. Traci's yard had only a single plant bed along the front of the home, with large clay pots framing the carport's entry. All were brimful of colorful annuals: several varieties of marigold ranging from bright yellow to deep gold, and nasturtiums cascading over the edges. Motion detectors switched on the floods, lighting their way as they gently closed the car doors.

"There aren't many young people living here, are there?" Deanna said.

"No, management only dropped the over-fifty-five requirement a couple years ago, right before I got here. Families are trickling in, but it's still pretty quiet."

In the second bedroom, Traci turned down the covers on the twin bed and fluffed the pillow. In front of the north-facing window was an easel, and the nearby dresser was piled with sketchpads and paints. A guitar and music stand stood in the corner.

"When did you start painting?" Deanna asked.

"Right after you gave me that lovely house-warming party. Let me get you some things." She went out and returned with pajamas and a towel, gave Deanna a hug, and said goodnight. Once Traci was in her own bed, she took a leather journal and a fountain pen from her bedside drawer, propped herself up on pillows, and began to write. When she had filled most of a page, her head dropped to her chin and the pen slipped across the page, skittered to the edge of the paper and onto the bed sheet beyond, where it left a Rorschach pattern among other similar

blobs. She jerked awake and looked down at the page and the new stain on the bed, then returned her journal to the night stand, lay back down, and slept.

When Traci's alarm went off at 5:30, she jumped out of bed and stumbled to the bathroom, only to bump into Deanna coming out.

"Mom, what?" Traci rubbed her eyes. "Oh, right. I don't do well on five hours' sleep."

Deanna asked, "What would you like for breakfast?"

"I'll have some cereal after I shower," Traci said, "and a piece of fruit for later. When do you need to be at the bakery?"

"I called when I woke up—Brian's fine if I get there by seven-thirty today."

"I've got to be at the service drive by seven. Can I drop you early?" Traci asked.

"That's fine. And don't worry about taking me home later. I'm sure I can get a ride."

*

Steve followed the yellow stripe back to Emergency and asked the receptionist if he could speak with Dr. Vishnu. A few minutes later, she met him in the waiting room.

"Good morning," she said. "I guess you want your father's test results."

"Yes, I thought someone would have come up."

"I planned to check on your father," Dr. Vishnu said, "but we got busy and I couldn't break away. Come back inside."

At the emergency room desk, the doctor turned on a laptop computer and clicked around for a few seconds. An image popped up on the monitor.

"The CT scan shows there's some swelling," she said. "Which we expected from the external exam and how your father hit his head. It's not a great deal, though, so it's unusual his unconsciousness has lasted this long."

"What can we do?"

"Shortly after your father was admitted, we administered a 'coma cocktail.' That's a combination of vitamin B, glucose, and naloxene, which is used to counter the action of many narcotics."

"Narcotics? We had dinner together only an hour or so before this happened. I think I'd have known if he was high on something."

"We're not saying anything," Dr. Vishnu said. "This is standard procedure to help us eliminate possibilities. We also did blood work and started him on an anti-inflammatory."

"For brain swelling?"

"That's right," the doctor said. "We did find one interesting thing, though it's not likely that it caused the coma."

"What's that?"

"We don't often test for drugs or alcohol, but because he arrived unconscious and unresponsive we did."

"Yes?"

And we found significant levels of tetrahydrocannabinol in the blood samples."

"THC?" Steve said. "From pot? You're saying my father was smoking pot?"

"Or ingesting it in some other way. Perhaps not last night, but in the past month and probably more recently."

“Son of a gun, I never would have thought. But you said you don’t think this has any bearing on his coma?”

“From what the scans show and what you’ve said about the circumstances, it’s likely the head traumas and pressure on the brain are the problem,” Dr. Vishnu said. “Your father’s been on an anti-inflammatory for six hours. We can try one more time to wake him chemically.”

"Is that dangerous? If not, let’s try it," Steve said. "He needs to see a neurologist anyway, right?"

"Certainly. I'll order the procedure now, and I can come up and observe at shift end, around seven."

"Thanks," said Steve. "I appreciate all you've done for him. I'll see you then."

The cafeteria across from the vending area had opened. Steve bought scrambled eggs, grits, and biscuits and sausage gravy, and carried the tray back across to the quieter room. He sat next to the windows and ate, watching a variety of bees and butterflies on the flowers outside. He had finished his second cup of coffee and was about to go upstairs, when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Did you get any sleep?" Traci asked.

"Oh, hey, Trace. I got a few hours. What are you doing here?"

"I dropped Mom at the bakery," she said, "and called the dealership. Mike told me to take today off, that he ‘didn’t want to pay overtime,’ so I thought I'd check in on you and your dad. Any news?"

"News?" Steve said, thinking of what he’d learned about Mac’s marijuana use. "The doctor's going to try waking him again before she leaves.”

"When?"

"In a few minutes," Steve said, checking the time on his cell phone. "I was just about to go up."

"Will they let me in, too?"

"I don't think they'll say anything. Thanks for coming back."

"Sure," she said. "There's just one thing—"

"What's that?"

"We need to find you a toothbrush somewhere soon."

He turned to see her grinning. "Thanks a bunch."

"No problem. I'll even buy." She took him by the arm and led him to the elevators

*

The bell on the door tinkled as Deanna entered the front of the bakeshop. She locked the door behind her and stepped through the arched opening into the back room. The temperature difference was severe, even that early in the morning with fans blowing and the rear door open. She looked for Brian and didn't see him, so she grabbed an apron from its hook on the wall, put on a set of oven mitts, and began checking the work in progress. Nothing was quite ready to be pulled out yet, so she went out back to see if he was there. Sure enough, the co-owner of Strawberry Fields Bakeries was standing by the dumpster, smoking, his back to her.

"Hey Brian," she said. "How're you doing this morning?"

The thin, middle-aged man wearing baker's whites jumped and his ponytail bounced.

"Jesus, Dee," he said, coughing. "You scared the shit out of me."

"Turn around," Deanna said, craning her neck to see the back of his pants.

"What? Oh, you're being funny"

"Give me a little of that," she said, taking the joint from him.

"Sure."

The woman inhaled slowly and passed it back to him.

"Rough night?" he asked.

"Crazy night," she said. "It started out fine then went totally weird. First Traci ran into her old high school boyfriend."

"The guy who broke up with her?" Brian asked.

"That's the one," Deanna said. "So, she had lunch with him, and then she invited him to bring pizza to the house for dinner."

"That's not too bad."

"No, but she told him to bring his dad, Mac, too," she added. "I told you about him, remember?"

"That fancy date before you got sick?"

"That's the one."

"You kind of liked him, didn't you?" Brian asked, taking another hit from the joint. "That still doesn't sound too weird."

"No, we all had a nice dinner," Deanna said. She outlined the night's events.

"Wow."

"Yeah, wow," she said. "When did you put those baguettes in?"

"Oh, man, I need to pull them out now," he said, handing her the roach. "Put a clip on this if you want more."

Deanna took an alligator clip from a high window ledge, finished smoking, and returned the clip. It was just seven o'clock. She went to unlock the front door, where the postman was waiting.

"Hey, Jeff, how're you doing?" She gave him a hug.

"Good, but not as good as you," the big man said, making a show of sniffing her hair. "I have to wait until I'm done with work."

"Shit," she said, fluffing her hair. "I hate spraying stuff in my hair."

"Don't worry," the postman told her. "How many customers do you hug? Besides, I only noticed because I knew it might be there. Spend five more minutes in the back and you'll smell like fresh-baked bread."

"I'll get your stuff," Deanna said. She came back from the kitchen and handed Jeff a white bag. "Two hot, buttered Kaiser Rolls. But I haven't started the coffee yet. Sorry."

"No worries," he told her. "I've got a thermos in the truck. See you later."

The bell tinkled as he left, and Deanna went back into the kitchen, fluffing her hair as she went.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Steve and Traci arrived at the room just as Dr. Vishnu approached from the other direction.

"Have you been in to see him yet?" Steve asked.

"No, I was just talking with the nurse," the doctor said. "She'll be here with the treatment in a minute.

The three went into the room. Light streamed in from an east-facing window. The patient in the far bed lay still, breathing quietly, eyes closed. Mac was nearly motionless as well, a day's growth of beard darkening his cheeks, chin, and neck, and circles black under his eyes. A slight stain discolored the bandages on his head.

The day nurse approached, carrying two clear envelopes: one contained a capsule, the other a needle. She rolled a table to the bedside and laid them there. The doctor thanked her, removed the capsule, and squeezed it, crushing an inner glass lining. She briefly waved it near her nose, winced, and then placed it close to Mac's face. His nostrils quivered, and a vague grimace tightened his features. Dr. Vishnu moved it away, waited several seconds, moved it near again, and got another slight response.

Steve held Traci's hand while they watched the doctor work.

She threw the expended ammonia spirits into the wastebasket, unwrapped an alcohol swab, and cleaned an area on the bottom of Mac's left foot. Then she removed the needle from the second envelope, took Mac's foot again, and stuck the needle in the ball of his foot. He jerked and grunted.

"Mr. McClatchen?" Dr. Vishnu said. "Can you hear me?"

"Let me try." Steve leaned in and raised his voice. "Dad! It's Steve, can you hear me?"

Mac's eyelashes fluttered, and then he went limp again.

"Damn it," Steve said.

"Actually, that's good," said Dr. Vishnu. "That's the first response we've seen since he fainted last night. I'll schedule the exam with the neurosurgeon. Hopefully, he'll come out of this on his own soon, once the inflammation goes down."

"Thank you," Steve said, extending his hand.

"Yes, thank you," Traci said.

The doctor shook hands with each of them in turn. "It's good to see this much progress. The day shift will take over now, but here's my card, in case you have questions. I'll check on your father later in the week." She walked away.

Traci hugged Steve's arm. "It's great your dad responded."

Steve pulled his arm loose. She looked at him in surprise. "It is. But do you think you could find me that toothbrush?"

She grinned. "Of course."

*

Brian dragged the rubber floor mats out the front door, and Deanna swept the bakery floor behind him. He returned and hollered toward a small office set off to the side. "How're you doing, honey?"

Geri, a short slim woman in her late forties, leaned back in her chair, which brought most of her out of the cubby. Her long dark hair nearly touched the floor. "Almost done, why?"

"Traci dropped Deanna off this morning. I said I'd give her a lift home."

"That's fine," Geri said. "Just don't dawdle. I really want to put my feet up."

"Your feet *are* up. Besides, you're the boss. You can do what you want."

"It's not the same as relaxing at home, smartass," she said. "And remember, we still need to make a deposit. The drive-thru closes at seven, so no pit-stops. Come right back."

"No problem," Brian said. "Back in half an hour. Love you."

Geri's reply was muffled as she leaned her chair forward and disappeared back into her office.

Brian and Deanna walked out to the edge of the parking lot along Main Street where the company's combination truck and billboard was stationed for maximum visibility. The two got into the vintage 1964 Volkswagen microbus camper that looked like it just drove out of the Beatle's Yellow Submarine movie. The store's name—"Strawberry Fields Baking Company"—was blazoned across the side panels in Warhol style.

Brian reached above the sun visor, took down a pair of rose-colored glasses, and slipped them on.

"You're not really going to drive with those things on, are you?" Deanna said. "Why do you wear them?"

"It's part of the whole image for our bakery, y'know," he said. "I've got to stay in character."

"Well, do me a favor and let's not smoke anything while we're driving. Deal?"

"Never," Brian said. "I make enough mistakes driving when I'm straight. And I promised Geri I wouldn't smoke and drive. Besides, I don't want to risk The Man confiscating this beauty." He patted the painted metal dashboard.

He shifted into reverse and drove off down the road at a sedate three miles under the posted limit.

*

Deputy Fields kept his cruiser at a slow roll driving up the dirt track. He passed a break in the roadside trees, stopped, and then backed in, facing the way he had come. He took out his service pistol, a semi-automatic 9-mm Smith & Wesson. It looked like standard police issue but had been customized to be especially accurate—match grade. He checked that the weapon was loaded with one round chambered and that his two spare magazines were secured on his belt. He was pretty sure the property was empty and knew there were no dogs. He replaced the handgun in its holster and checked his wristwatch, a Luminox—"Requested by and supplied to the U.S. Navy SEALs." It was five minutes before six.

Fields exited the patrol car, closed the door quietly, and walked toward the house. No vehicles were evident. He moved around the side of the house, wary for signs of life.

Behind the house stood a massive garage. It boasted two fourteen-foot tall roll-up doors. To their right stretched a wall with a peeling wood door at the end. Before approaching the door, Fields did a careful circuit around the garage, testing the windows to see if they were locked. They were, and their inside surfaces had been painted black, concealing the interior. As he approached the door, he scanned his surroundings, looking for anything unusual. The wooden

five-panel door looked old and ordinary, its white paint peeling off in patches, revealing the light blue underneath. He examined the lock, a cheap hardware-store padlock in a metal hasp. He took a soft black leather case from his pocket, unrolled it, and chose a tool, a piece of stiff wire with a slight hook on one end and a flat handle on the other. He inserted the wire into the padlock, twisted it a few times, the lock clicked, and he removed it from the hasp. Before turning the knob, he ran his fingers around the doorframe. Satisfied, he opened the door into a tiny room, almost an airlock. He was faced with another door, this one a sturdy metal slab equipped with multiple deadbolts, all in a security frame. His grinding teeth sounded loud in his ears. He turned on a light switch and a single bare bulb glowed in the little room. Fields chose another tool and set to work on the top lock. Ten minutes later he finished with the bottom one and threw open the heavy door on another dark room. He felt around on the wall in the usual place and found a switch. He flicked it on. The unexpected blaze of light startled him and he drew his weapon, trying to shield his eyes with his free hand and see around the shining room. Fields spotted the door in the far wall and holstered his weapon. He went towards the door and tripped on a cluster of thin hoses strapped to the floor. He paused a moment to examine the arrangement then proceeded to the door. He was so relieved there were no locks on this one that he threw the door wide.

In the center of the room was a tall vehicle under a tarp. The rough blue polyester weave did not lie flat, but flowed across numerous bumps and lumps. Still blinking, Fields entered the room and shut the door to block the glare. On a shelf near the door was an old boom box next to a scattering of cassette tapes. A portable electric welder rested along one wall next to a tall mechanics tool box. An overflowing trashcan sat in the far corner by the roll-up door, with a

push broom leaning nearby. Fields sniffed the air and recognized a trace of marijuana smoke. He took a few more steps into the room, bent, and began to lift the edge of the tarp. Then his radio squawked out a blurb of static and unintelligible voice.

“Shit.” He dropped the tarp and keyed the mike clipped to his epaulet. “Fields here.”

The garbled voice spouted from the small speaker again. “. . . are you? Trying . . . reach you . . .”

“Hang on,” he said. “I must be in a blind spot. Let me get clear.” He surveyed the cloth-covered vehicle again. Two narrow tires mounted in painted steel wheels were visible near the floor, and the shape of the thing screamed “van,” but Fields needed to respond. He turned and left the building, closing doors as he went.

A clear voice came from the radio as soon as he exited the building. “Fields, are you there? Do you need backup?”

“I’m here. I’m fine. What is it?”

“Where have you been?” the dispatcher asked. “I’ve been trying to raise you for ten minutes.”

“Sorry, must be in a blind spot. What’s up?”

“We’ve got a domestic dispute—the details should be on your computer. Call me if not.”

“Alright. Fields out.”

The dispatcher spoke again. “Hey, Pete.”

“Yeah?”

“We were starting to worry about you.”

“Sorry, Maryann,” he said. “I’m fine. I just didn’t hear you calling.”

“Coffee later?”

“Sure. Lunch even, if you want.”

“That would be great.”

With that handled, Fields went back inside. This time he used his tactical flashlight to spare his vision. He took one last pass through the interior then went back out. As he stepped back into the vestibule, he failed to notice the small camera mounted in the shadowy corner above the exterior door. He secured the locks on the two doors and hustled out to answer the call.

CHAPTER NINE

Traci returned to Mac's room in a few minutes, grinning and holding something behind her back.

"I found just the right toothbrush," she said.

"I can't wait to see."

"I asked the ICU nurses, and they sent me down a floor. I really hope you like it."

"I'm sure it will be fine. C'mon now, my mouth tastes like—"

"Hush." She put her free hand across his mouth, the other still behind her back. "This toothbrush is G-rated."

She stepped back and handed him a colorful narrow box with a flourish. It bore the picture of a pony with long multi-colored mane and tail.

Steve tore open the package and withdrew a sparkly toothbrush with a bright rainbow covering the handle. "Thanks."

"But wait, there's more," she said, handing him a matching tube of toothpaste. "It's bubble-gum flavor."

"Terrific."

She pouted. "You don't seem very enthusiastic."

"It can't make my mouth taste worse than it already does. I'll be back in a minute."

He walked down the hall to the public restroom. Traci sat down in the chair next to the bed. She looked at Mac, watched his chest rise, and fall, and rise again. The shadows in the room shifted as a cloud blocked the sunlight coming in the window. She looked down the hall in the

direction Steve had gone and spoke to Mac's still form. "Mac, you probably can't hear me, but I've heard sometimes it's good to talk to people who are... unconscious."

His chest rose and fell. A movement outside the window caught Traci's eye. A mockingbird clung to the crosspiece, flapping to keep its perch. The creature tapped the pane a few times, perhaps in search of an unseen insect. It flapped once more then let go and dropped from sight. She looked back at Mac and said, "Here goes. I don't think you know what happened between Steve and me a few years ago, when he went down to college. He said it wasn't fair to tie me down while he was away, but what he really wanted was to check out the girls at UM." She saw Steve approaching down the hall. "Anyway, we'll see what happens this time around. I hope you'll stick around for it. He may need a talking to."

Steve reentered the room. Traci leaned down, told Mac, "I'll talk with you more later," and then gave him a peck on the cheek. She and Steve both looked down at Mac.

"Maybe you have to kiss him on the lips for him to wake up," Steve said.

"More likely it only works with kisses from virgins."

"Could be. Anyhow, thank you for the toothbrush. I'll treasure it always."

"Good. You ought to," she said. "I'm going to head out. Even though Mike told me to take today off, I want to swing by the dealership. I don't want them to think they can do without me."

"Thanks for coming by. I'm going home to shower. I hope he'll be all right."

"They're taking good care of him here. You need to look after yourself, too," she said.

"Go home, take a shower, maybe a nap, and come back when you're refreshed."

"You're right," Steve said. "I'm exhausted."

Traci gave him a hug, and held him longer than she had in the just over twenty-four hours since their reunion.

Surprised, Steve returned the hug and the two took the elevator down. Steve went with Traci to the main entrance. They hugged once more and he watched her walk out to her car.

*

Traci got into her blue two-door and headed to the dealership thinking, *What the hell am I doing?* Hugging Steve had felt like the right thing to do, as had her one-sided conversation with his unconscious father, but why? She'd meant everything she'd told Steve in the car the night before, during the storm. With all the commotion of Mac's injury, it just now occurred to her how close she and Steve had come to being hurt badly or even killed. The large chunk of tree coming down on the front of his car had been shocking, but she had already been so drained by their argument that somehow it hadn't quite cut through her mental haze. Now her hands were trembling. She wondered if she was suffering some kind of post-traumatic thing. She pulled her car over to the trouble lane and put the transmission in Park. She said, "I don't have time for this crap!" Mike was being very understanding, but friendship would only go so far. She put her foot on the brake and shifted back into drive, but she couldn't take her foot off the brake. She started to shake, all over. "Damn you, Steve! Why didn't you just stay gone?" She glanced in her side mirror and then pressed down hard on the gas pedal. The tires spun in loose gravel then caught, and she accelerated into the slow lane. She pulled tissues from a box in the center console, blew her nose, and threw the wadded mess on the floor. Approaching the dealership, she moved the rearview mirror to see herself. Eyes red and puffy: check. Makeup smeared: double check. Just

perfect. She grabbed more tissues and pawed at her face, wiping away as much mess as she could. Pasting on her "Welcome-to-Gator-Ford" smile, she drove around to the employee parking area in back. She stepped from her vehicle and walked deliberately to the service drive. Mike saw her through the window and shrugged, both hands with palms upward, questioning her presence. She waved at him and broadened her smile, but went straight to her booth. Only two cars were in the drive. Traci pulled the list of dormant accounts from under her keyboard and looked to see where she'd left off.

*

Daylight blazed outside the hospital's main entrance, and Steve had no idea where he was in relation to where he'd come in the night before, no idea where the truck was parked. He turned around and went back inside, stopping at the information desk to get help.

"Happens all the time," the volunteer said. "Just follow the blue line to the main elevators then take the orange one back to emergency." Soon Steve was back on familiar ground. He walked back out into the daylight, and found his way to the pickup truck.

Steve sat down behind the steering wheel and went to take the key from his pocket—nothing. He felt in all his pockets, trying to remember last night's events. He checked the ashtray, under the floor mats, and above the visors—nothing. He couldn't recall if the key had ever come into his hands after Traci and Deanna arrived the night before. He put his head down on the steering wheel and closed his eyes, gently at first, then tighter and tighter, until he was squeezing them closed. His searching had turned up his own key ring, with the keys to his Miami apartment and his now useless LTD. He pounded once on the wheel, and the horn blew, startling him—

when had his dad fixed that? Again thinking about Mac upstairs unconscious, and about his own stupid car with that tree across its hood, and about Traci hugging him like that, Steve wrapped his arms around the wheel again, wishing she was still there. Steve shook his head and closed his eyes, then pressed them, rubbed them hard with thumb and forefinger. He thought about Mac upstairs, and his Mom, and his childhood growing up amidst the Central Florida orange groves. He caught movement in the corner of his eye—a hospital security guard was approaching. Steve cranked down the window.

"Yes?"

"Is everything all right, sir? I heard your horn blow."

"Depends on what you call alright. I've been here all night, my dad's upstairs in a coma, my car's been crushed by a tree, and I can't find the key to this stupid truck. Other than that, I'm doing fine."

"Do you have someone you can call, sir? An auto club? I can get you the number of an emergency service," the guard offered. "You can use a telephone inside."

"Thank you," Steve said. "I do have a service I can call. I'm just so tired I wasn't thinking."

"Do you need anything else, sir?" the guard asked.

"I don't think so. I've got a cell phone." Steve showed the guard. "I'll be fine."

"Very good, sir. If you need anything else, I'll be right inside."

"Thank you."

The guard walked back to the building. Before he entered the automatic doors he glanced back over his shoulder at Steve. Then he passed through into the emergency department.

Steve scrolled through the numbers on his cell, looking for the number of the auto club, and then remembered he had called from his dad's kitchen phone. "Shit." He pounded once on the wheel again, careful this time to avoid the horn. He looked through his wallet to see if by some miracle he had actually kept the auto club card. No, he remembered laying it down on the counter next to the new telephone. He kept looking through his wallet, for no particular reason now, but because he didn't know what else to do and didn't want to go back into the hospital. He found a card he didn't recognize at first—Manuel's Transmission—the tow-truck driver's brother. Maybe he could help.

*

The list of customers she'd been calling was where she'd left it, half under her keyboard. She looked down the rows of names, trying to sort out where she'd stopped. She noticed tiny tic marks next to each name she'd failed to reach and the bold lines she'd drawn under the ones who had answered. She picked up the phone and was about to try the next number, when the door to her booth slid open.

"Jesus, Mike, you scared me."

"Sorry. Any news on Steve's dad?"

"A little," Traci said. "He responded to being stuck with a needle this morning. The doctor said it's a good sign."

"That's great news," Mike said. "How about you? Are you alright?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, you usually stop in and say 'Hi,' but you blew past the office today. And, now that I see you close up, you look like crap."

"Gee, thanks."

"Don't mention it," Mike said. "Did you forget? I said to take today off. What's going on?"

"It's been a crazy twenty-four hours," she said. "I half wish Steve had never come back."

"That bad?"

Traci thought about the past day. "Not really, I guess. But I'm trying to go slow, and my old feelings are pulling me like a crazy rip tide. He and I had a good thing before he went to college."

"So?"

"So I don't know who he is anymore," she said. "I've changed plenty. I'm sure he has too. And he *dumped* me. When I think of that I get scared and pissed off at him all over again."

"Listen," Mike said. "You're smart. And you make good decisions. Trust yourself."

"Thanks. Like I said, it's been a busy day."

"So tell me again, why are you here on your day off?"

Traci looked down. "I don't want you to think you could do without me."

He laughed. "You're doing fine. Now go home." He walked back to his office across the service drive.

Traci clenched the clipboard in her hand and stared at the list until the fear dulled. She picked up the handset and dialed the next number on her list.

CHAPTER TEN

"Manny's Auto."

"My name is Steve McClatchen. Your brother, José, gave me a tow yesterday."

"You want to talk to him?" Manuel asked, in accented English. "He's in his truck."

"That would be great." Steve said. "Thank you."

A minute later José was speaking. "Yell-low."

"Hey, this is Steve, from yesterday morning. You towed my LTD."

"Sure, what's the matter?" José said. "Did it die again?"

"No, I mean yes, but that's not why I'm calling. I've got my dad's truck, but I can't find the key. And I don't have the number for the auto club with me."

"Doesn't your dad have a spare?"

"It's a long story. I'm stuck at Brandon Regional in the Emergency Department parking lot. Can you help me?"

"Yes, no problem. But tell me something. Is this an old red and white Dodge pickup?"

"That's it. How did you know?"

"I picked your car up yesterday right near his drive, and you've got the same name."

"Right. Can you come help me out?" Steve asked again.

"One second, let me talk with my brother."

Steve heard a faint conversation in Spanish, and then José came back on the line.

"Steve? My brother has done work on that truck. There should be a spare key stuck behind the license plate. Do you want me to hold on while you check?"

“I’m looking right now.” Steve got out and walked around to the back of the vehicle. “You’re right, there’s a little box here, and from the sound of it there’s a key inside. Let me check and make sure.”

A moment later, the sound and fumes of the motor filled the air.

“Thanks a lot, José. I owe you.”

“No problem. Hey, how’s your dad anyway?”

Steve hesitated, and then told him the story.

José said, “Man, that’s tough. Can we do anything for you? I mean we’ll pray for Mac, but do you need anything else?”

Steve thought for a second. “Do you want to see if anything can be done with my car? I mean, see if it can be fixed?”

“Sure, happy to help,” José said. “Do you want to meet me there now?”

“I guess so,” Steve said. “I’m exhausted, but I better do it now. It’s at Deanna Bell’s place, off Skewlee Road. I can give you directions.”

*

As the Volkswagen bus clattered into Deanna’s shaded drive, Brian took off the rose-colored glasses.

He said, “Didn’t you tell me about a real bummer, something about a tree crushing a cool old car last night? Where’s it at?”

“You’re right,” Deanna said. “It’s gone. Maybe Steve had it towed. But remember, that was the smallest part of the problem. Mac’s still in the hospital.” She paused. “Brian, why don’t you drop the hippie-speak? It really doesn’t suit.”

“Oh, you want twenty-first century? Dude, it sucks big time that your BFF’s in the hospital.”

She laughed. “He’s not my best friend, but you’re right. That’s a little better. Thanks for the ride home.”

“Groovy,” he said, holding his hand up with the pointer and middle fingers in a “V.” “Peace.”

Shaking her head and smiling, Deanna opened the door and went in. She walked to her sofa, kicked off her running shoes, and stretched out. She rolled over far enough to snag the remote from the coffee table, and pressed *Play*. The quiet sounds of a Mozart concerto rolled out of tiny speakers mounted in the corners of her living room, and she lay back and closed her eyes. Deanna felt the tension of the recent events begin to ebb, and she worked through a series of relaxation exercises, first tightening and relaxing the muscles in her feet, then working her way up, and ending with a face stretching "silent scream." She looked at the clock on the mantle—six-fifteen. Maybe Traci was off by now. She started to reach for her phone, but reconsidered. She lay still another minute, then got up with a groan and went into the kitchen to see what she had in the fridge. A little of this, and a little of that, and pretty soon you've got a mess. God, how she'd enjoyed last night's pizza. This healthy living might just kill her. Deanna measured a cup of brown rice into her little rice cooker, added water to the line, and clicked the switch. She spritzed olive oil into a pan and spooned in some minced garlic. While it sizzled, she sliced

veggies and threw them in—onion, yellow squash, a few limp carrots, and an overripe tomato. She stirred it a couple times, covered it, and turned off the heat. When the rice cooker binged, she dumped some on a plate, added about half the veggies, and carried it to the living room. She switched off the music and turned on the television news with the volume near zero. Eating dinner alone had become something of a ritual. Usually she used the time to read, but she'd finished her latest book, a memoir, and hadn't yet gotten another. As she chewed her food, she thought about her date with Mac over a year before. He really was a nice guy—quirky, sure, but thoughtful and chivalrous in a nice old-fashioned sort of way.

Now he was in a coma in the hospital. She picked up her phone and started to dial the familiar number of Brandon Regional, then remembered: *The Privacy Act—they won't tell me anything*. She put down the handset and went for her shoes.

*

Steve drove directly to Deanna's home, and parked far from his car.

After a short time, he heard a motor and the tow truck came bouncing down Deanna's drive. Jose got out, and together they surveyed the damaged car.

"Wow," José said. "You were really lucky."

"What do you mean?"

"You were inside this car when *that* fell?" José asked, pointing at the branch. "If it hit a few feet back it could have messed you up bad."

"I guess you're right," Steve said. "I just don't feel very lucky. I spent seven hundred dollars on that wreck yesterday and my dad's in the hospital."

"Right," José said. "Let's see if we get this thing off without a chainsaw."

The two men stationed themselves on either side. The branch was about fifteen feet long and tapered from a foot wide down to just twigs and leaves. José went to the thick end, leaving Steve to negotiate the twisted mess on the other side of his car. When José bent his knees to get under his piece, his tattooed arms bulged. "On three," he said. "Uno, dos, tres . . ." He pressed upward.

"Don't make me laugh," Steve said, as the two lifted together. The stub of a broken branch that had pierced the hood got stuck, so the process was anything but smooth. But they managed to drag the branch forwards past the front bumper.

José started another count. "Uno, dos—"

"Jesus, man," Steve said. "Just throw it." They swung the limb away from the car. It crashed into the brush. "That was too much for a morning workout."

José said. "You should try taking out a VW engine some time."

"No thanks," Steve said. "What do you think?"

The two looked at the car. The windshield had two long cracks running in a "V" from bottom to top. The hood and front fenders were dented from wheel to wheel. José went around to the driver's door, opened it, and pulled the hood release. There was a click, but nothing more, and when he went to the front to undo the safety latch, the hood would not lift.

"Try the passenger door," José said. It opened fine "You really were lucky. Besides not being killed, I mean. It looks like only the front up here is damaged. These cars are built like tanks: real steel, not plastic."

"Can you tow it?"

"I'll want to keep the front end off the ground," José said. "But yes. Do you want me to take it to the dealership?"

Steve looked at José. "No, not if your brother can fix it. You know if you'd told me he'd worked on my dad's truck I would've given him the business yesterday morning." *And I wouldn't have met Traci again, and Dad wouldn't be in a coma right now.*

"No worries, man," José said. "*Que sera, sera.* I didn't make the connection between you guys until you called about the key. I only helped your dad once, a couple years ago. But Manny's done plenty of work on this baby."

"Do you need anything else from me?"

"Just sign this form for the auto club and I'll take care of the rest," José said. "I clocked the mileage on the way out here, so it's already filled in. Write your cell number down and my brother can call you with an estimate, but it may not be until tomorrow—he's jammed up right now."

"That's fine. Thanks again," Steve said. "I need a shower before I go back to the hospital. And maybe a nap."

*

"Traci, why are you still here?" Mike asked.

She froze, her fingers on the dial. Tension crept up her neck and down her arm, she turned to him.

"Geez, woman," Mike said, seeing the look on her face. "What is the matter? I'm just saying go home for the day. I told you to take a day off—you came in Saturday and Sunday and the other service writers each only worked one day. What's going on?"

"I'm sorry, Mike." Traci looked around at the near-empty service drive. "I don't know if I can talk about it here."

"Fine," he said. "If you *want* to talk about it, we can go somewhere else. The place can do without me this evening. I worked both days, too."

"What about your family?"

"I'll give Joan a call. Let's go get a couple beers."

"I guess," Traci said.

"Great, I'll see you at Brewsters in ten minutes. I've got a couple things to tie up."

"Alright," Traci said.

She stuck the list back under her keyboard, straightened up her workspace, and went to her car. She started the engine, took a couple deep breaths, then carefully looked around and backed out of her parking space. She drove exactly the speed limit in the right lane of the highway all the way to the sports bar. The place was near empty. A server greeted her and led her to a table. Traci ordered sweet tea and chips so she'd have something on her stomach. As the server brought her snack, Mike walked in.

"Just iced tea?" Mike asked. "I thought you needed to de-stress after today."

"I didn't have lunch, and I don't like to drink on an empty stomach."

The server took Mike's order then returned with a mug a minute later. Traci ate chips and sipped her tea and stared at one of the TVs. Mike drained half his beer. "So what's going on? You seem really nervous today, not yourself at all."

"It's a long story," she said, "but I'll keep it short."

The two spoke quietly together. The restaurant began to fill, until Traci found herself almost shouting. "Plus, I was almost killed last night with that stupid tree and everything. And I'm still mixed up about Steve."

"That's understandable," Mike said. "You want that beer now?"

"I'll take a rain check. I want to see how Mac's doing."

"Sounds good," Mike said. "And listen—I've got tomorrow covered. The GM wants a new schedule to cover weekends regularly . . . with *no* overtime. So, take the day off."

Tracy took a deep breath. "All right. Give my love to Joan and your boys."

"Of course. When things settle down, we'll have you and your mom over for dinner. Steve, too, if you want."

"We'll see how the Steve part goes," Traci said. "But Mom and I would love that."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The truck bumped down the dirt road, splashing through the mud puddles left over from the previous night's rain. Steve noticed tire tracks leading off the road into a flattened patch of scrub and wondered if someone had made a wrong turn onto their private road. He got out, slammed the truck door, and then went back to fetch his new toothbrush. He stuck it in his shirt pocket, thinking of Traci as he walked to the house. He noticed another set of marks in the mud, boot prints this time. They led to the front door then around behind the house. He started to follow them but remembered his dad's "better safe than sorry" lesson about living in the woods. Steve went back to the truck and looked behind the seat. Sure enough, the old Sears .410 single-shot shotgun—the one Mac called a snake gun—was there in its tattered sleeve, along with a plastic bag holding a half-dozen yellow shells. He put one in the gun and stowed the rest in his back pocket then went back to the front door and tried it, making sure it was locked. Steve followed the footprints toward the back yard. He checked each entrance—someone had definitely been there, and not long before—the footprints hadn't yet filled with water from the soggy ground. He stared at the wooden door of the garage, the peeling paint, and wondered when Mac had last let him inside the structure. Anyway, the padlock looked undisturbed. Following the trail, he saw where the visitor—intruder, really—had stopped at each garage window, presumably looking for a way in.

Steve returned to the front door and let himself in. He unloaded the shotgun and leaned it against the cartons stacked near the entry. In the kitchen, he was pleasantly surprised to find most of a six-pack of beer in the fridge. He pulled out a can, opened it and took a long drink, and continued rummaging. He found a block of cheddar in the cheese drawer and a box of crackers in

the cupboard. He grabbed another beer, then carried his treasures back to the living room and sat down in the recliner. Steve turned on the television and switched away from the shopping channel, clicking till he found an old Western. He drank the first beer and ate some of the food. He finished the second beer and considered getting another, but stayed where he was, reclining, resting, watching cowboys and Indians riding around the screen. His head craned back until his neck rested on the coverlet his mother had crocheted when he was a kid. His face pointed up at the ceiling and he closed his eyes, listening to the TV. He thought about the shower he had promised himself, but decided to rest a few more minutes. His eyes opened briefly and closed again. A soft snore escaped his lips.

He woke confused, unsure where he was. The sky outside was fast darkening, at least as far as he could tell with newspaper covered windows. He was home, no, at his parents' house. What time was it? He fished his cell phone from his pocket and opened it. The screen flashed a battery shape with a skinny red band within then went fully dark. Steve's Boy Scout training had prompted him to bring the charger, but it was in his car. And the car was parked at the repair shop. He went into the kitchen—the microwave clock read six-fifty-five. If that was right, he'd slept nine hours and hadn't checked on his dad all day.

"Shit," he said to himself. "Shit, shit, shit." Steve went back to the living room, pausing only long enough to clean up his food and beer can. Then he hurried back to take a quick shower. He brushed his teeth again with his special toothbrush. He was torn between thinking about Traci and trying not to gag on the bubble gum toothpaste. He dashed naked into his old room, threw on some fresh clothes, and headed out the door. He started to lock up but remembered the shotgun. After stowing it behind the truck seat, he drove back to Brandon Regional.

*

Deanna got to the hospital a little after six. She breezed past the nurses' desk on the fourth floor and went into Mac's room. He was where she'd left him. Lights still blinked, tubes and wires were connected, and the regular beeping continued. Unsure exactly why she had come and what to do, Deanna sat in the chair and wished she had stopped by the library to trade out books. She rummaged through her purse, and found paper and pen, but nothing to read. On a whim, she opened the drawer of the end table and found a Gideon's Bible. She opened it, turned to Psalms, and read silently. After a couple minutes she put it down.

"Mac, you probably can't hear me, and I likely wouldn't say any of this if I thought you could." Deanna looked at the unconscious patient in the other bed. "When you didn't call back after our date, I was hurt, at least at first. But after we bumped into each other later, I realized you just weren't ready, you were still grieving." She looked again at the still form in the bed. Mac's chest rose and fell. The machines beeped, the lights blinked. "I want to tell you I had a nice time. I know I said 'thank you' that night, but I want to say it again—thank you, you're a sweet man." Deanna drifted back to that evening, thinking about his thoughtfulness—the flowers he'd brought from his garden, the paella he'd ordered before they arrived, and the songs he'd asked the musicians to play. She re-opened the Bible and read a psalm aloud. "The Lord is my shepherd . . ." A few words into the passage, she noticed movement in the doorway. Traci was standing there.

"How long have you been there?"

"A while," Traci said. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop. At first I thought Mac had woken up because of how you were talking. Then I felt bad for listening—I almost snuck away so I could come back and make noise, but I felt like I'd be lying if I did that."

"Don't worry about it. What did you hear?"

"I heard you tell him... you sounded so lonely, Mom, like you never felt loved."

"Traci, you know that's not true."

"Sure, you know I love you. But that's not the same as being 'in love,' is it?"

"No," Deanna said. "Of course not. But I'm fine. Let's change the subject. Did you talk with Steve today? I haven't seen him yet."

"No," Traci said. "He didn't call me. And I didn't call him."

"It's strange he's not here and we haven't heard anything."

"I'm sure he'll come soon," Traci said. "Do you think I should call him?"

"Might as well."

The phone rang away until voice mail answered and Traci left a message.

Deanna asked, "Did you have dinner?"

"Kind of—I ate chips and had an iced tea."

"Yum. Do you want something else?"

"Maybe a salad. Will you come with me?"

"I'll even buy."

Before going, Deanna leaned over Mac and kissed him on the forehead, then the two left in search of food and comfort.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The first thing Mac noticed was a beeping sound. It reminded him of the anemic noise his cordless telephone had made after he'd poured "just a few drops" of coffee into the mouthpiece. The thing certainly had deserved it, with its annoying interruptions to his work.

He lay there, eyes closed, listening to the beep. He felt no pain and no immediate need to change position or even open his eyes. How he had gotten here, and where exactly "here" was, all seemed unimportant. Even the regular beeping, which should have been irritating, was somehow soothing.

Something changed—someone had come near, was speaking softly. Words flowed over him, weaving in and out of the persistent beep. Their meaning didn't matter, but the sounds, the patterns, relaxed him. He drifted away again.

He became aware of the beeping again, but the voice was gone. Susan? Why did that name come to him right then? He wasn't sure how he knew, or even who Susan was, but the voice wasn't hers. He thought about opening his eyes but felt too relaxed to bother. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt this calm. Maybe back when he and Susan had first been married, after he'd returned from the war. They'd honeymooned in a small cottage on Captiva Island with terrazzo floors and a gas fireplace. He remembered making love with her early one morning, then showering together and going out to the beach for an early morning picnic. The pastries and fruit they'd brought, coupled with the wind, the waves, and post-sex bliss had drawn them both into a nap. This was something like that, but no sunburn, no rain showers, just that beeping, beeping. Maybe he should open his eyes after all.

Mac sat up in bed. The room was dark, although the window coverings open—night. Another bed to his right held a person connected to machines. The light from the hallway showed Mac that he, too, wore sensors and an IV line. He thought about that and decided he didn't like it. Carefully he removed the connections. He bled a little when he removed the IV but applied pressure for a minute, and used a piece of the old tape to patch himself. Pulling one wire loose changed the beep to a loud, steady tone. He got up, found the offending box, and pushed buttons until it shut up, and sat back down. Then he realized he was nearly naked, wearing only a hospital gown—that's where he was. He'd always hated hospitals, hated their smells, everything about them. He stood again, one hand on the rail while he got his balance. Mac went to the dresser and explored the drawers. He found another gown and slipped it on backwards, so it blocked the unfriendly draft up his rear. His neighbor was still sleeping, and bandages wrapped much of his head. Unconsciously, Mac brought a hand up to his head, and found he was similarly dressed. He unwrapped and removed the bandages one at a time and checked for bleeding. Then he searched his neighbor's dresser. This held a large plastic bag with a change of clothes—civvies. The shirt and slacks looked like they would fit him with some extra room. He slipped on the pants, shed the gowns, and put on the shirt. It smelled a little of sweat. Not bad, just different, someone else's clothes. He found socks and slipped them on his feet, but there weren't any shoes around. It would have to do. Mac looked both ways down the hall. To the right, a woman, a nurse, was walking away from him. To the left he saw a nurses' station, and no one was visible behind the counter-height wall. He went that way, away from the person, walking steadily, face forward. As he passed the station, he glimpsed a man dressed in scrubs working on some files behind the desk. The man didn't look up and Mac continued down the hall and through the

double doors. On the other side he saw a wall-mounted sign. It displayed the words “Intensive Care” with an arrow pointing the way he had come. Another arrow pointing the direction he was going indicated “Elevators.” He kept walking, entered an elevator car, and pressed the button marked “Lobby.”

*

Deanna and Traci made their way down to the hospital cafeteria arm in arm. Taking trays, they separated, mother getting a bowl of minestrone soup, daughter building a salad, and met up again at the iced tea decanter. Deanna paid for their meals, and they went across to the seating area. A corner table was free, where both could see the flower garden outside.

"There are lights on tonight," Traci said. "Isn't it pretty?"

"Lovely."

They took their seats, and Deanna bowed her head and closed her eyes for a moment.

When she'd finished, Traci said, "When did you start praying before meals again? We haven't done that since I was little. Since before, you know."

"I've been feeling grateful," Deanna said, "since the cancer went into remission. I don't always remember to do it, but I'm glad when I do."

"Okay," Traci said, beginning on her salad. The two ate in silence for several minutes. "I guess I believe in God, but there's so much I don't understand. Like, when you got sick I was pretty angry at Him."

"Do you remember," Deanna asked, "when you were little?"

"I think so. The pastor wouldn't let me get baptized, not at first anyways."

"You're right," Deanna said. "He didn't think you were old enough to understand. He wanted to make sure you were doing it for the right reasons."

"I must have convinced him, 'cause I remember getting dunked," Traci added. "It was at the beach."

"That's right," Deanna laughed. "You got dunked in the ocean, sweetie. It was a nice warm day in June, just after your sixth birthday."

They went back to eating, with occasional glances at the flower garden outside. They finished and carried the trays to the cleanup area. The two stepped out into the hallway and almost bumped into Steve as he was hurrying past toward the elevators.

"Oh, Steve, there you are," Traci said. "I tried to call you."

"Your car is gone from my driveway," Deanna asked. "Did you have it towed?"

Steve looked from one to the other. "Yes, my cell phone died, and the charger's in the car, which is at Manuel's Auto Repair. Have you been up to see Dad? How is he?"

Deanna said, "I was in his room about an hour ago. Nothing had changed as far as I could see, but I didn't talk to the nurse."

"Where have you been?" Traci asked.

"I went home to shower and made the mistake of sitting down and stretching out in the recliner. I fell asleep. I need to go check on Dad."

"You don't mind if we come along?" Deanna asked. "Maybe the doctor will have some news."

"Come on. You guys have been better to him than I have," Steve said. "And I don't even have to be at work."

The three walked the blue line to the elevators and entered a car waiting there. Steve pressed the button and the doors closed.

*

After Brian dropped Deanna off, he drove the van down the long wooded drive, watching the patterns of afternoon light travel across the dashboard and down onto the now-empty passenger seat. The VW bumped in and out of ruts as his attention wandered. He rummaged in a CD holder connected to the visor, pulled out a Moody Blues disc, and inserted it into the only visible piece of modern technology. As the sounds swelled, Brian reconsidered his promise to Geri. Why shouldn't he smoke a little dope in the van? Just because it was company property? That made no sense at all. If he was pulled over, there would be no evidence—all he had was one joint.

He left the skinny cigarette in his hip pocket anyway. He could tough it out until later. Thinking of home, and getting high, he started to feel hungry. He was driving a cautious three miles under the limit, heading toward their house. He slowed further, took out his phone, and scrolled to Alfonso's telephone number. Geri worked so hard—she deserved a pizza.

*

Geri's cell phone buzzed at six-forty-five, showing a voice mail message from Brian. But when she tried to listen nothing was recorded. If Brian didn't get back soon, she wouldn't be able to make the deposit. She hated carrying cash, and she had Saturday's receipts plus today's money from a couple of very welcome large lunch orders. The blue zippered pouch held almost a

thousand dollars in small bills, which would go in with no holds, would be available to write checks on immediately. None of the bills were late, but Geri wanted to take the discounts. She frowned and dialed Brian's number. The call went straight to voice mail. She pressed "End" and redialed.

This time Brian answered. "Hi honey. What's going on?"

Controlling her impatience, she said, "I told you I need to make the deposit tonight. Where are you?"

Her orders came back to him in a rush. "Don't worry, I'm close. I'll be there any minute." He slowed, checked his mirrors, and turned the bus around, back toward town.

"Why did you call? There was no voice message."

"You've been working so hard," he said. "I called Alfonso's for pizza, so you won't have to cook dinner."

"Brian." Her voice was tight. "You *know* we're saving money. Remember, business has been slow and we're trying to get ahead. Besides, I took a casserole out of the freezer this morning. All I have to do is stick it in the oven."

"Wow, I forgot. I'm sorry."

"Where are you right now?"

He tried to think where he should be if he were coming directly from Deanna's, but couldn't figure it out. Better confess all.

"Honey, I forgot and started to drive home. I'm a few minutes away on Wheeler Road."

"You forgot!" Geri said. "You mean you got stoned and forgot about me *again*."

"No, I didn't smoke anything," he said, glad now that he hadn't. "I promise. My stash is right here in my pocket."

"I thought we agreed you weren't going to carry anything in the company van," she said. "The police can confiscate the truck if they say it's involved in a drug crime."

"It's only one joint," he said. "I can swallow it if I get pulled over. I really didn't smoke at all tonight. I just took Dee home and started thinking about you and dinner. Anyway, I'm real close." He passed the billboard for their bakery at the entrance to town—'Strawberry Fields Bakery Co.—the flavor takes you back'. "I'm at our sign, maybe two minutes away."

"The way you drive you'll never get here in time. They close in eleven minutes," Geri said. "I'll walk. It's just a couple of blocks. Meet me there." Geri grabbed the bank envelope and crammed it in her bag. Then she opened the drawer and removed a small blue steel revolver and added it to her purse. She stepped out the door and looked both ways—she saw no one near. She locked the door and walked briskly toward the bank, two long blocks away.

*

Brian pressed down on the accelerator of the psychedelic bakery truck, increasing his speed to five miles over the limit. He was on Main Street now. The bakery was a block ahead on his left, and the bank was two blocks past that. Looking for Geri as he drove, he nearly missed the light changing to red but managed to slide the microbus to a halt. He looked around again, but saw no sign of her. A horn honked behind him, loud and impatient, and he released the clutch too fast, stalling the van. He restarted the motor and accelerated through the light. He signaled and turned left into the bank parking lot, but still didn't see Geri. He drove around the building—

nothing. He parked in front and went up to the door. It was locked, the curtains were drawn, and no one responded to his knocking. Brian's worry increased and he got back into the van. The bank's sign showed seven minutes past seven. He maneuvered the van through the first drive-thru lane, but the blinds were already closed there, too. He kept looking for Geri as he drove through the connected parking lots back toward the bakery, but he didn't see her. He pulled into a spot at the curb. The store's interior lights were off. The neon sign glowed—"CLOSED."

Brian took out his cell phone and called her number. Her voice mail answered and he said, "It's me. I'm trying to find you—"

A loud banging on his door interrupted him. It was Geri, her face red.

He opened his door. "Honey, I was so worried—"

"Stop talking," Geri said. "Enough is enough. You drove around the bank twice, with me waving and hollering behind you. I broke a heel chasing you, and then you went to the front door of a closed financial institution and banged on the door."

"I was trying to find you—" Brian said.

"Banging on a bank door after they're closed is foolish," Geri said. "But doing it when you have pot in your pocket is plain stupid. Somehow, somewhere, you need to get some common sense. Move over, I'm driving home."

Brian climbed across into the passenger seat and Geri took the wheel. The broken heel on her shoe was a problem, so she kicked off both shoes, started the van, and made the drive home. She did not say a word for the entire drive. Brian sneaked glances at her, but did not speak either. She pulled up in front of their home and parked next to her late model VW beetle.

“Stay there. Don’t come in,” she said, retrieving her shoes. “I’ll get you some clothes. You can sleep in the camper or get a hotel—I don’t care. Tomorrow you find a counselor, because I can’t live like this anymore. Do you understand?”

“What about baking?” Brian said. “Do you want me to come in tomorrow?”

“Work is work,” Geri said. “Do your job and you’ll get your paycheck like always. But if you keep messing up, we’re selling the shop. And the house. And you and I will be done. Do you understand??”

Brian just stared at her as she clambered out of the van, leaving it running. She walked around to the passenger window, where he sat speechless. She tapped on the window, but he made no move to open it.

She opened the door and asked, “Are you all right?”

“I guess.”

She reached in and put her hand on his arm—he didn’t respond.

“Listen,” Geri said. “I still love you, but things haven’t been fair to me for a long time.

“What do you mean?” A whining tone crept into his voice.

“I run the business and I run the house. You come to work and bake. At home you mow the lawn and do some small projects if I nag you. I do the lion’s share, and I can’t count on you because you’re stoned all the time.”

She looked at his face for signs of understanding. His sad eyes stared back.

Geri tried once more to get through. “I love you, Brian. You need to get help.”

“Love you, too,” he mumbled.

She walked with her shoes in hand to the front door, fumbled with her keys, dropped them and her purse, and threw down the shoes. She finally got the door to cooperate and went in.

Brian waited in the passenger seat, his door still open, and watched the house. After a minute he put his hand on his back pocket, fingering the cigarette case, but he didn't take it out. The front door opened, and Geri came out carrying their small travel suitcase.

"Here's your toothbrush and clothes for a couple days. I'll see you at work tomorrow morning." He stayed where he was for a moment then moved across to the driver's seat, but just sat there staring out the windscreen. Eventually Geri shook her head. "See you in the morning." She turned and walked back to the house. She put her hand on the doorknob and turned to look back at Brian.

His eyes met hers, and his voice carried clearly across to her. "But, what about the pizza?"

She went in and closed the door.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mac stepped from the elevator into the hubbub of the hospital's lobby just as visiting hours were ending. He joined a stream of people walking toward the front door. Some were talking and laughing, one woman was crying quietly, supported by a short, bearded man. Mac's stocking feet went unnoticed as he walked deliberately out the front door of the hospital. He followed the crying woman for no particular reason except maybe that he wished he could say something to make her feel better. She and the man got into a decent-looking blue Chevy pickup truck, backed out, and drove away. She looked up briefly at him as they passed, making eye contact, then they were gone, and Mac was standing alone in the emptying parking lot. Unsure of where he was and where home was, but certain he wanted to get away from there, he followed the truck's route, turning right where the hospital's main entrance met the street. The sidewalk ended at the edge of the hospital's property, which gave both relief and aggravation to Mac's feet—the soft grass was punctuated with rocky patches, broken bottles, and construction debris. He had to watch every step. Years of wearing work boots had removed the calluses he'd had as a youngster, running barefoot in Central Florida orange groves.

From over his left shoulder, a loud popping noise approached fast. Reacting without thought, Mac dove to the ground and rolled around to face the danger, wishing for a weapon. But the enemy was not the threat he had imagined. A colorful Volkswagen camper van pulled onto the shoulder next to him. Staring out of the window was a bespectacled, pony-tailed man, another refugee from the era when Mac served in the United States Marines.

*

The elevator doors opened, and Steve walked to the nurses' station. A woman was there, behind a large stack of papers, writing notes. Steve stood over her, but she did not look up from her work.

"Excuse me, can you help me?" he asked.

She looked up at him slowly, her eyes narrowing then shifting back to the papers. "Yes?"

"My father, Steve McClatchen, is here. I'm trying to find out how he's doing."

"What room?"

"Fourteen-twenty-four. Right over there."

"That's one of nurse Kowalski's patients. You'll have to see her." She turned back to her paperwork.

"Do you know where she is?"

"Probably somewhere along that stretch of rooms. You can look for her or just press the nurse call button in the room and she'll show up in a few minutes."

Traci and Deanna had been standing behind Steve throughout this exchange. They looked at each other as they turned away, and Traci said to Steve, "She's not very interested in being helpful, was she?"

Before he could answer, the nurse spoke up. "I'm working a double shift because someone called in sick, so I've got to do his paperwork on top of my own."

"And today's the first day I've had off in ten days," Traci said. "And his dad's here in a coma. So you can still take a minute to be helpful."

Steve said, "Relax, Traci. She's just busy. Let's go look in on Dad and press the button to call the other nurse like—" Steve paused to look at the seated nurse's ID badge. "Like Ms. Brown suggested."

The group turned and walked to the room. Deanna entered first.

"Where's Mac?" she asked as Traci and Steve entered the room. "He was here half an hour ago."

"Maybe someone took him for another test," Traci said.

"Push the call button," Steve said. "I'll go see if I can find his nurse."

Traci reached for the corded remote and pressed the button. Steve started to walk out the door, but Deanna stopped him. "Wait, look at this." She pointed.

The dresser drawers on the far side of the room were open, and a hospital gown lay nearby on the floor. The tubes and wires that had recently been connected to Mac now hung free, some on the bed and others on the floor. Bits of tape and a few drops of blood decorated the rumpled sheets.

"Steve," Deanna said. "Something's wrong."

"You're right," he said. "I'll go find his nurse." He walked out of the room, glanced over at the nurses' station where Brown was still working on her stack of papers. A bell sounded and light on a wall mounted panel behind her flashed. Steve turned right, went away from her in search of Nurse Kowalski. He looked into every room he passed, but did not find another nurse. All down the hall and back up the other side, there was only the happy Nurse Brown to help. He approached the desk.

"Nurse Brown."

“Yes, what is it?” She didn’t look up from her papers.”

“Do you know if someone took my father out for tests in the last half hour?” Steve said.

“I don’t know,” Brown said, still working. “I told you, another nurse covers that room—”

“Look at me!” Steve said. She looked up at him and picked up the phone.

“Sir, visiting hours are over,” Brown said, “and you need to keep your voice down. This is Intensive Care. I’m calling security.”

“Good, you need to call security,” Steve said. Traci and Deanna looked out of the room.

“And I want to talk with your boss right now, too. The other nurse is nowhere around and you’re too busy to help.”

The double doors to the ICU opened, and a woman in scrubs approached; she carried a cafeteria tray holding two foam boxes and two cups.

“Here’s dinner, Sandy,” she said. Then she noticed the two facing off. “What’s the problem?”

Steve looked at her ID: Judith Kowalski, RN. “The problem is that half an hour ago my dad was in bed here in a coma and now he’s gone. And your friend here can’t stop working on her paperwork long enough to answer my questions. She says it’s not her job.”

Brown glowered at him. “I’ve called security. I told them he was being disruptive. They should be here any minute.”

Kowalski put the tray down on the desk. She stared at Brown for a long second then turned to Steve. “Where’s your father supposed to be?”

Steve pointed at a nearby door. “There, in 1424. His name’s Steve McClatchen and he was in the first bed.”

She crossed the hall and entered the room, turned on the overhead lights, and looked around. She returned to the desk.

“Sandy, call security back. Oh, never mind, here’s Francois now.”

A slight, dark-skinned man in uniform walked up to the nurses’ station. “What’s the problem?”

Brown said, “This man . . .”

“Not now,” Kowalski cut her off. “Francois, we may have a disoriented patient wandering the building.” She turned to the others. “Can you describe your dad and tell us when you saw him last?”

“He’s about five-nine and medium build,” Steve said, “maybe a hundred-sixty-five pounds. Blue eyes and brown hair—it’s going grey, but he’s got all of it. Oh, and he’s got a tattoo of the Marine Corps emblem with ‘Semper Fi’ on his upper left arm. What do you mean he might be wandering the building?”

“Please calm down, Mr. McClatchen,” Kowalski said. “I’ll explain. First tell me when you last saw him.”

“I was here from about seven until eight,” Deanna said. “Then my daughter got here and we went down for some dinner.

“It was ten till, Mom,” said Traci. “I checked my cell phone to see if the cafeteria would be closed.”

“Francois, please let the rest of security know,” Kowalski said. “If we haven’t found him in ten minutes, call the sheriff’s office.” She turned to Steve. “Please, let’s go talk in the waiting area.” She followed the security guard out through the double doors with Steve, Traci, and

Deanna right behind her. She turned into a seating area in an alcove and motioned to the three to sit down. She wheeled a chair from a small desk and sat across from them.

“When patients awaken from a semi-conscious state,” Kowalski said. “They are often disoriented, sometimes even amnesiac.”

“Amnesiac?” Steve said.

“Suffering from some degree of amnesia, unable to remember who they are, who family members are, things like that.”

“I should have been here,” Steve said. Traci said, “You were here all last night. You couldn’t have known.”

“She’s right,” Kowalski said. “We’ll find him. Anyhow, when someone wakes like this it’s best if someone’s there with them to help them understand what happened, to reassure them. But that isn’t always the case, and on rare occasions patients wake up and become secretive, even paranoid, and may try to sneak out of the hospital. It’s very unusual for people to awaken like this, and I’ve never heard of anyone making it off the floor, much less out of the building.”

“So where’s Dad?”

“I don’t know,” Kowalski said. “But we’re doing all we can to locate him. Our staff and, if necessary, the sheriff’s deputies will view the tapes from the security cameras to see what happened to your father.”

Steve stared at her, his jaw going tight and eyes narrowing. Traci put her hand on his arm. He took a breath and mumbled, “Thank you.”

“Yes, thank you,” Deanna said.

“Your husband will be located, ma’am,” Kowalski said. “I’ve got to go back into the unit. If you all would please wait here I’ll let you know as soon as we find out anything.”

“Got it,” Steve said. “Wait here. Right.”

*

Brian stared at Mac lying prone on the shoulder of the road. "Wow, man. Are you all right? Did you, like, trip on something?"

"I'm fine," Mac said, getting to his feet and brushing himself off. "Thanks." He began walked away, stepping carefully along the edge of the parkway.

"You sure, man?" Brian asked. "Hey, you got no shoes. Do you want a ride somewhere?"

Mac’s eyes travelled the length of the vehicle, taking in the psychedelic advertising on its side panels. Then he looked at Brian again—rose-colored glasses, ponytail, and all—and slowly shook his head from side to side.

"It's cool, man, no worries," Brian said. “Just offering.” He looked in his wing mirror, getting ready to pull onto the road then started to drive away, but stopped again. "Hey."

"Yeah?"

"You like pizza?" Brian held up the large flat box. "I got a great big one. It's way too much for just me. You can have a few slices, if you want."

Mac looked him over again. "What kind?"

"Pepperoni, of course." Brian said. "Is there any other kind?"

"I guess I'll take a slice, thanks," Mac said. “You still offering that ride?"

"Sure, man, no problem. Climb in. I'm Brian."

Brian lifted the pizza from the seat while Mac climbed in and got situated. Mac, meanwhile, was contemplating Brian's proffered name and wondering about the blank place in his mind where his own identity should be. He thought for several seconds, staring into space. Thoughts of the woman in his dream came back to him, and he tried to remember...

"Susan..." Mac said.

"Really, your name's Sue? Like that Johnny Cash song? Wow."

"No, I just remembered something. Give me a second."

"Sure. Here, take this—the bottom of the box shouldn't be too hot," Brian said. "When you're ready you can help yourself."

Balancing the carton on his lap, Mac opened it and looked in -- two slices were missing from the extra-large pie. He pulled free a slice, folded it in half lengthwise, took a bite and closed the carton. Brian pulled back onto the thoroughfare as two patrol cars came blasting up the oncoming lanes toward the hospital. Mac looked at them as they passed and took another bite from his slice.

Brian asked, "So, do you live around here?"

Mac pointed at his mouth, filled with pizza, chewing, and Brian said, "Oh, I get it. You need to finish your pizza. No problem, man. I'll leave you to it."

"You like Moody Blues, man?" Brian asked.

Mac nodded.

"Cool." Brian pressed *Play* on the in-dash CD player and rock blasted from the speakers.

Mac finished his first slice, and was reaching for his second, when Brian said, "You wouldn't know somewhere around here I can park for the night?"

Mac looked at him.

"My wife and I had a fight, so I can't go home. I need to find a place."

Mac took out his second slice, folded it again, and nodded. "Maybe." He took another large bite.

"Cool. Which way?"

Mac swallowed. "Keep going. I'll tell you when to turn."

After a few minutes, they approached Kings Highway. Mac said, "Turn here." He guided Brian back, turn-by-turn, to his homestead and then to the supersized outbuilding behind the house.

"McClatchen Manor?" Brian asked as they passed the mailbox. "Are you McClatchen?"

"That seems right." Mac paused. "Pull up by that left-hand garage door and I'll run out a power cord for you."

"Cool. Thanks a lot," Brian said. "You want another slice?"

"Maybe after a bit." Mac walked to the smallest of the three doors on the garage, searched his pockets for keys, and came up empty. "Just a sec." As he walked to the back door of the house, several lights came on automatically. Mac took the floods in stride, seeming not to notice, but quickened his pace as mosquitos began to gather in a swirl about him. When he reached the porch, Mac grasped a short piece of siding near the door and pulled upwards. The panel slid about an inch and popped away from the house, revealing a small opening. Mac reached in and took out a couple keys. He returned to the garage, where he unlocked the padlock and disappeared inside. Through all of this, Brian watched, munching his third piece of now lukewarm pizza. Moments later, a mail-slot in the wall between the two vehicle doors opened

and the end of an orange extension cord snaked out. Brian put the half-slice down on the metal dash and went over and pulled until he had enough to reach a connector on the side of the bus. Waving away mosquitos, he pulled out a few extra feet of slack then reentered the vehicle. He scrambled inside and turned on the little room air conditioner mounted in the rear window.

Mac reappeared outside the garage, locked the door, and jogged back to the VW. “Do you want something to drink?”

“What do you have?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll go check.” He was gone a few minutes then popped back into the van juggling several bottles and cans. Brian was clearing clutter off the bench seats on either side of a small table and setting out paper plates, a stack of scavenged fast food napkins, and several packets of crushed red pepper. In the center, a lava lamp glowed, its red globs drifting up and then gliding back down.

“I knew something was missing from the pizza,” Brian said, dumping the contents of one of the little envelopes onto a slice. “If you want some hot peppers, there’s plenty.”

“Thanks,” Mac said. He entered and sat down, setting the drinks on the table, and took another slice. He sprinkled hot peppers on top. “I didn’t bring cups or ice.”

“No problem, Thanks again for letting me crash.”

Mac looked around at the now-lighted van interior. Original 1970s posters and memorabilia covered almost every surface but the windows. Two Woodstock tickets in a home-made frame hung on the icebox door. Posters of Jimmy Hendrix, Janice Joplin, and The Who adorned the ceiling. Mounted to one wall, a small glass-fronted box containing Zig Zag rolling

papers, an alligator clip, and a box of matches, bore an etched metal badge: "In Case of Emergency Break Glass."

"You've put a lot of work into this," Mac said.

"I guess we have, over time. Geri and I got it in '72, when it was almost new. The posters came with it 'cause they're glued to the ceiling. But I made this," Brian said, pointing to the emergency box.

"Cute. Does it open?"

"No, it's just for show," Brian looked at Mac. "Why, you smoke?"

"I've been known to take a poke once in a while. I might could find a little bit, if you want."

Brian thought for a few seconds. "I think I'll pass tonight. Geri, that's my wife, she kicked me out tonight 'cause she said she can't count on me, says I'm stoned too much."

"I probably don't need any right now, either."

"You want to watch a movie or listen to some music or something?"

"What've you got?"

Brian opened two cabinet doors opposite the table to display a combo TV and DVD player. "I had to take the face off this cabinet to get this thing in." He pulled free a drawer full of DVDs, and placed it on the table to show Mac the choices: *Magical Mystery Tour*, *Tommy*, *Yellow Submarine*, and more.

"How about this one?" Mac asked.

“One of my favorites. Cool.” Moments later, a large brown dog was “rooby-rooby-rooing” and running away from ghosts. Mac stretched out on the compact banquette, and the two men sat eating cold, spicy pizza and drinking their respective beverages.

Brian noticed Mac’s tattered socks. “Wow, man. Did your feet get cut up?”

“They’re not too bad,” Mac said, looking at them. He removed one stolen sock and held it up, showing several small holes in the bottom. But there were no bad cuts on his feet, just scratches and dirt.

“What happened to your shoes?”

“I don’t know,” Mac said. “I woke up and they were gone.”

Brian looked him over, noticing his patchwork hair cut for the first time. “You’ve got a head injury, too.” He snapped his fingers. “I’ll bet you were mugged. Do you want to call the cops?” He brandished his cell phone.

Mac looked at him for a several seconds; then they both broke up laughing. “Thanks anyway.”

Brian put away the cartoon. “You want to watch something else?”

“Sure. How about this one?” Mac picked up a case with a picture of Peter Fonda riding a chopper, its gas tank painted with the stars and stripes. “This is pretty good.”

“Yeah,” Brian said. “But it’s got a sad ending.”

*

Deputy Fields finished the last bite of his triple bacon-cheeseburger and chased drippings around the foil wrapping with a French fry. After a subdued belch, he spooned the last of his milk shake into his mouth.

Maryann, the police dispatcher, sat across from him. “Thanks for joining me for lunch, Petey.”

“No problem,” he said. “Thanks.” He looked around the restaurant, at the stylized picture of a little red-haired girl in pigtails, at the other customers, almost anywhere but at the chubby uniformed woman across from him.

“Petey,” she said. “Is something wrong?”

“Naw,” he said. “I’m sorry. I’m just thinking about a case.”

“Which one? That armed robbery last week? Too bad the security camera took such bad pictures.”

“No.” Fields looked at a group of teens coming in through the front door. “It’s not really a case, exactly, just something I’ve been working on in my spare time.”

“You’re taking the detective test soon, aren’t you?” Maryann asked. “Is this something to do with that?”

“Not really. I guess I can tell you,” Fields said. “A couple months ago, I pulled over a guy for a rolling stop, and I thought I smelled marijuana when I went up to the vehicle. He was an old dude, in his sixties, and the odor was faint, so I didn’t follow up on it at the time.”

“But it’s still on your mind?”

“Yeah, I did a little homework. This guy hasn’t worked regular in over a year,” Fields said. “And I checked his electric bill.”

“Don’t you need a warrant for that?” Maryann asked.

“I know someone at the power company. I just asked for a peek, informal like. This old guy’s usage is way higher than other homes in the area, over twice as high.”

“What do you think he’s doing?” she said.

“Probably growing pot. He’s got a real big garage.”

“Did you tell Narcotics?”

“You know those guys,” Fields said. “They’ll take all the credit for themselves. I’m hoping this will help me get to detective.”

“Petey, you better watch yourself. You know what the sheriff said about rules of evidence.”

“You don’t get it—those rules are there to cover our butts. He wants to see officers with initiative, not just slaves following procedure all the time.”

“Maybe so,” Maryann said. “Just be careful. Remember those two guys who got suspended last month.”

“Don’t worry.” Fields flashed her a smile. “I’m being very, very careful.”

The radio clipped to his shoulder gave a burst of static then told him to drop everything and get over to Brandon Regional. Maryann gave him a quick hug and a peck on the cheek, and he went screeching out of the parking lot, lights flashing and siren blaring. Even though he zoomed out he found himself stuck behind another deputy heading to the call. Nearly bumper to

bumper, they travelled the mile and a half to the hospital. Both switched off their sirens as they entered the hospital quiet zone a few blocks before the main entrance.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Geri managed to close the door without slamming it, but once inside she threw her purse and keys onto the dining table. Her key ring skittered across the polished wood surface and clattered onto the Spanish tile floor. She stomped as best she could in stocking feet to the kitchen, took the beef stroganoff casserole from the fridge, slung open the oven door, and banged the chafing dish down on the wire shelf. She twisted the temperature knob, kept herself from slamming the oven door, then spun on her heel. Geri marched into their spare bedroom and began pulling things out of the closet: tennis rackets, roller blades, bowling balls. She finally found the suitcase she was hunting and took it to the master bedroom where she loaded it with Brian's clothes and toiletries. Geri zipped shut the carry-on. She started to lift it off the bed then stopped and hugged herself. She stood there a few moments, and then carried it out to Brian.

When she came back in, she grabbed the remote off the breakfast bar, turned on the television and flipped through the channels. Nothing, nothing, nothing was on but depressing noise. She scanned the entertainment spectrum till, frustrated, she threw the remote down on the sofa. The TV switched one more time to a cartoon showing a scruffy longhaired man and a cartoon dog. The two characters climbed into a colorful van and drove off just as Brian started the camper outside, its motor popping and revving into life.

Geri stood watching the screen. "Damn you, Brian." Her voice rose above the television commotion. "You selfish, stupid, pot head."

She smelled something burning and went into the kitchen. A trickle of smoke leaked from the closed oven. She grabbed the handle and cracked open the door. A cloud puffed out, but she didn't see any flames. She closed the oven door again, turned it off, and switched on the

exhaust. After a minute, she went back to the oven and opened the door carefully, all the while watching for fire. Once the fumes had cleared Geri saw the problem: she had left the cover on the casserole dish. The contents had become a blackening, bubbling mess of hydrocarbons and noodles. Charred strings of plastic dripped down the sides of the dish, through and onto the oven racks, and down onto the lower burners. She flipped the door up, letting it slam. Then Geri stretched up and retrieved a half-full bottle of Smirnoff from the cabinet over the stove. She grabbed a tumbler from behind another door, clinked in a few ice cubes, filled the glass, and drank down half. She shuddered, refilled the glass, and carried it with the bottle into the living room.

On the television, the Three Stooges had replaced Scooby-Doo. Geri sat on the sofa, took another swallow, and leaned back to watch the fun.

*

Fields left his car with its bumper almost touching the other vehicle right in front of the hospital's main entrance. The two entered through the lobby doors side by side. They waved to the candy-striper sitting behind the information desk then walked back to the elevators.

"I could have passed you if we'd had more road," Fields said as the doors slid closed.

"Sure, Petey," Jones said. "Did you read the computer report on the way here?" He pressed the button for the fourth floor.

"I looked at it," Fields said. "Some old guy went missing from his room."

"That's the basic story, but what were the details? Jones asked. "Who was the guy?"

"I didn't notice his name," Fields said. "I figured we'd get all that here. Why?"

"You never know what will turn up in our database, like outstanding warrants or criminal histories."

"There was none of that," Fields said as the elevator bell chimed. "I would have picked up on anything interesting."

As they passed the ICU waiting room, Jones said, "If you'd read more you'd have seen this guy, Steve McClatchen, is a twice-decorated Marine Corp veteran of the Vietnam War— a genuine war hero."

"Did you say *Steve McClatchen*?" Steve turned to face the hall. "That's me."

Traci and Deanna looked at the officers.

"Funny to see you again," Fields said. "You look fine, so I guess we're here about your father."

Jones turned to look at Fields.

"Deputy James Jones." Fields introduced them. "Steve McClatchen, Jr. My big sister had a crush on him when they were in high school together."

Jones took control. "Sir, we're here to investigate your father's disappearance—could you fill us in on what happened? Fields, would you see if hospital security has any video while I talk with Mr. McClatchen?" It wasn't a question. Fields gave Jones a dirty look then went to the nurses' station.

Jones was still talking with Steve and taking notes when Fields came back.

"I'm going downstairs to the security office," he said. "The videos may show something."

"I'll come with you," Jones said.

Steve said, "I'd like to see those tapes."

“We'll let you know if we find anything,” Jones said. “The hospital restricts access for legal reasons.”

The deputies walked to the elevators. As soon as they were out of earshot, Jones said, “You didn't tell me you knew the family, Pete.”

“My *sister* knew him, the younger one, in high school. I met him this afternoon. He was sitting in his car at Baker Creek Park. I asked for ID and ran his plates anyway.”

“There's nothing else?” Jones said. The elevator stopped and the two got off. “What about the missing father?”

“The name *is* familiar. Could be I gave him a ticket or something a few months back. But we're not beer buddies.”

As they approached the security office Jones said, “At least make sure to mention it in your report, all right?”

“Sure,” Fields said, as they opened the door.

Francois was behind the counter. He invited the deputies into a back room arrayed with television monitors and video recorders. Another security guard sat at the console. Francois said, “We've worked backwards from when the patient was reported missing. We think we've been able to follow what happened.”

Piece by piece, the screens displayed Mac's departure from the Intensive Care Unit, his walk from the elevator to the front door, and his standing in the parking lot as the blue Chevy drove past him. Mac was last visible walking in his stocking feet toward the exit, where he disappeared off camera.

Jones said, "It seems clear that no one was forcing him to leave, and I don't see anyone helping him, either."

Fields said, "So we have a man who woke up from a coma, presumably with no wallet or money, who just wandered out of the hospital."

"Go ahead and rerun that part," Jones said. After a minute he pointed at the screen. "That doesn't look like 'wandering' to me. That looks like he knows where he's going."

"At least until this last part," Fields said. "See, he looks both ways before he goes off camera."

"You're right," said Jones.

"I wish we had one more camera showing the front drive," said Fields. "At least then we could see if he turned left or right."

"We've got what we got," Jones said, heading out of the room. "I'm going upstairs to tell the family what's going on. Call dispatch and give them an update."

"All right," Fields said. "Hey, Jones?"

"Yeah?"

"Have we sent anyone out to this guy's house?"

"Good thought," Jones said. "Suggest that to dispatch when you talk with them."

Fields tried calling out on his radio, but reception was bad inside. He walked outside and made the call. After he gave the dispatcher the update he asked, "Do you have anyone close to the house?"

The dispatcher checked the live map. "One car's fairly close, but she's tied up with an accident. You guys are the next closest."

"I don't think Jones needs me here," Fields said. "Do you want me to follow up on the house?"

"That's fine. I'll log you on your way to the address."

"Very good," Fields said, smiling. He walked out to his car, turned on the lights, no siren, and sped down the road to Mac's home.

*

Jones returned to the ICU waiting room and explained the situation to Steve.

"So, he wasn't kidnapped," Steve said. "But we don't know where he is or anything else. Dr. Vishnu said last night Dad might have amnesia, might not know who he is, where he lives, nothing."

"We're sending someone to check at your father's house, sir," Jones said. "In case he makes his way back there. Do you have a number we can use to give you updates?"

Steve gave his cell number, then said, "Wait, my battery's dead."

"Give him mine," Traci said.

Jones wrote it in his notepad and left.

"Listen, why don't you guys go home?" Steve said. "It's almost ten and you've both got to go to work tomorrow."

"Nope," Traci said. "I don't. Mike gave me tomorrow off—I can stay up all night."

Deana gave her a funny look. "Steve, you're right, I should go home. Please call me if you hear anything." Turning to Traci, she said, "Don't really stay up all night, dear." She gave them both hugs, holding Traci a long time. She hugged her again and left.

Traci smiled at Steve and they went back to the waiting room.

*

Mac watched longhaired motorcycle rebels on the small TV screen buying and selling cocaine and smoking pot in their quest for freedom. His stomach rumbled, and he said, "Funny, isn't it?"

"What's that?" Brian said.

"We're not doing anything ourselves, but I'm getting the munchies just from watching these guys smoke on TV."

"Me too," said Brian. "That's weird. What do you have in the house?"

"Nothing really good. Maybe some old cookies."

"You want to get some ice cream?" Brian said. "It's only ten. We can find someplace open."

"Sound's great," Mac said. "Then we can come back and watch the rest of the film. Do you know anyplace that'll have Ben and Jerry's?"

"Maybe." Brian started the motor, and began backing out. "Let's go check it out."

Mac stopped him. "Don't you want to unplug the power first?"

"Wow, you're right. Sorry." He applied the hand brake and, leaving the motor idling, went around and unplugged the cord. He piled it up by the garage door then got back in. They drove off together, the Moody Blues playing at near max volume on the vehicle's sound system. They turned off the dirt drive onto the asphalt, and Brian accelerated up to thirty-two miles an hour—three miles under the limit.

Mac reached over and turned off the music. "Do you always drive so slow?"

"Almost."

"Any special reason?"

Brian scratched his beard and glanced over at Mac. "It's like this. I used to have a little business the authorities frowned upon. And I drove like most people, ten or fifteen over the limit. One day I was carrying some stuff, like a pound, under the back seat of my old car, and this cop came up behind me with lights flashing and siren blasting. I freaked out. I was a little buzzed and paranoid, of course, with what I was carrying. I had this vision of going to prison forever, of losing my wife, the house, everything. I didn't try to run—I pulled over. And he stopped behind me and walked up to the window. He asked for my license and went back to his car and I knew I was dead, I knew I was going to prison. And he came back to the car and wrote me a seventy dollar ticket for driving too fast, and told me to 'have a nice day.'"

"And that's it?" Mac asked.

"Well," Brian said, "not quite."

"What else?"

"While I was waiting for him to finish, thinking he was going to search my car and find my stash, I prayed—and I'm not a church-going guy—I told God if he saved me from jail I would never ever speed again."

"So you're living up to your bargain," Mac said. "I've made my own deals with God."

Brian hesitated. "I guess I can tell you. I was watching in my side mirror when that cop was coming back to my window—and he had his hand on his gun. He got next to me and bumped my arm with his clipboard."

“Yeah?”

“And, well... I pissed myself.”

“For real.”

“Yeah,” Brian said. “Hell, I almost crapped myself, too. I was terrified—I thought I was going to prison.”

“Got it.”

“Now I never carry more than a misdemeanor amount, and only weed, nothing else.”

“Right, got it,” Mac said. He looked out the passenger window at the brush and second growth oaks, at the bush-hogged shoulder, at the Grateful Dead sticker on the dash in front of him, then back out the window.

“I shouldn't have told you,” Brian said. “I knew it. You think I'm a nut job.”

“That's not it. Not at all.”

As the microbus came out of the woods, a police car came flying along the county road toward them. Lights strobing, it turned right, skidding directly into their path, and then veered around them as the officer recovered control. A strange silence swallowed them, broken only by the sounds of their breathing, the patrol car's engine racing, and the gravel pinging off the vehicles. Brian saw the deputy's eyes widen as he zoomed around them, heading back the way they'd come.

“Wow,” Brian said, belatedly pulling over and stopping.

“Wow is right,” Mac said. “Wonder why he's going that way. Not much back there besides my place, some vacant land, and the boat ramp to the lake.”

"Maybe he took a wrong turn. He sure was in a hurry. Wow." Brian drove to the intersection and stopped. He looked at Mac. "Well, if it wasn't my story weirding you out, what was it?"

"I was remembering when I did the same thing as you," Mac said, "and more."

"No way. You really peed yourself?"

"Really did."

"Were you in an accident or something?"

"Not exactly," Mac said, "just Vietnam."

"Wow, man. I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago."

"You don't have to talk about it," Brian said, "if you don't want to. It's cool."

"I wasn't going to talk about it," Mac said. "I was just thinking there's a lot of things worse than peeing your pants, that's all."

"Wow."

Mac turned the music back up and they drove a while longer, listening to Jerry Garcia. When the album ended, Brian took a soft side CD wallet and passed it to Mac. He leafed through, made a selection, and handed it back to Brian, who inserted it without reading the label. A beautiful soprano voice swirled from the speakers.

"Joni," Brian said. "My absolute favorite. I love her almost as much as Geri—shit." He stopped, remembering.

The song was ending as they pulled into a late-night convenience store. An older four-door stood alone at the gas pumps, the nozzle sticking from the tank. Inside the store, no one was

visible behind the counter or in the aisles. As Brian parked, the VW's headlights washed in through the picture window, painting shadows throughout the store. He applied the hand brake and reached to shut the motor.

Mac put his hand on Brian's arm. "Hang on."

"What's up?"

"Something's not right, there's nobody around. Leave the motor running and I'll check it out."

Mac approached the entrance and put his hand on the door handle. Through the glass he saw legs and feet sticking out of the first aisle back. He turned and ran back to the van.

"Get us out of here now. Do you have a phone?"

The van lurched and almost stalled as Brian popped the clutch to back up. He turned the wheel hard, and headed for the exit. "In my pocket."

"Once we're on the road, dig it out and call 9-1-1. Looks like a body on the floor in there."

"Shit," Brian said. The van rocked from side to side as he turned it onto the highway. The motor revved as he left the transmission in second gear while he accelerated and fished for the phone. "You sure you want to call the cops?"

Mac said, "Somebody might need help."

"Why didn't we stay? Maybe we could have helped?"

"And maybe the bad guy was still inside. That involved I don't want to get."

"Right." Driving one-handed, swerving a little, he dialed emergency services. When they answered, he gave his name and told what they'd seen. The operator had him hold, then came back on and said deputies were on the way. She asked his location.

"We're driving away from that store at the maximum legal speed," Brian said. "You've got my number on caller ID, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"We'll stop at the next store," Brian said, "unless there's a dead body there, too."

"Please don't go far. The officers may need to talk to you."

"Sure," Brian said, and hung up. "Jeez, I hate getting involved with the police."

"We didn't do anything," Mac said. "We're not in any trouble."

After a few minutes they pulled into another convenience store. Two people were fueling their cars and more customers could be seen inside."

"You still feel like some ice cream?" Mac asked.

"What I really feel like," Brian said, "is smoking a joint. But we might have to talk to the cops. Not smart."

"You're right, not smart. I hope this place has the good stuff: pistachio." He opened the car door and went inside. Brian looked after him, then turned off the motor and followed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Geri woke up to cartoon characters screaming at each other on the television. She lay on her back looking up through the underside of the glass coffee table at a tumbler, lying on its side in a puddle of clear liquid. Her stomach wrenched into a knot. She rolled over onto her hands and knees and bumped the near-empty bottle. Geri's head drooped and she took a deep breath. The smell of vodka filled her nostrils and her stomach roiled again. Now, moving—moving quickly—became urgent. She clambered to her feet, and stumbled over the bottle, knocking it away. Slapping her hand over her mouth, she lurched toward the kitchen. Just inside the doorway, she vomited, splashing the floor and her feet. She put her hand on the doorframe and remained there, breathing burnt plastic and dinner and hoping she was done being sick. She wondered what she'd done with her shoes, how she'd gotten home, and where Brian was. She looked at the vomit on the floor, looked back at the empty bottle in the living room. The events of the evening came back to Geri, and she picked up her cell phone and dialed Brian's number. His voice mail answered and she spoke.

*

Deputy Fields was approaching his turn at over sixty miles an hour. It looked like the coast was clear for the four-wheel drift turn he planned, but then an old hippy van came pattering out of the woods, heading toward his intersection. Fields power braked, sliding his car onto the other road. He hit a patch of wet sand and skidded, corrected by tapping the gas and twitching the wheel, and made it through almost perfectly—except he was in the incoming lane headed straight at the van. He took his foot off the brake and swerved just enough to miss the other

vehicle. As he blew past, he glimpsed the driver—mid-forties, pony-tailed and wearing strange eyeglasses. The adrenaline flooding the deputy's veins began to dissipate by the time he reached Mac's driveway, an abrupt almost U-turn to the right onto a dirt road. He took great care with this one and soon he was bumping down the new path. He killed his emergency lights and headlights then navigated the track by the dim glow of his parking lights. As he rounded the last bend before the house, he shut those too, and removed his foot from the gas so that by the time he was in the yard he was almost coasting.

No vehicles were in sight, but that meant nothing. McClatchen had left the hospital on foot two hours before. Fields put the car in *Park*, but left it idling. He remembered his earlier radio problems, pressed the Send key on his handheld and spoke: "Radio check."

"Read you ten by ten. Fields, is that you?"

"Affirmative. Just arrived at the McClatchen residence to check on the patient missing from the hospital." He opened the door of the patrol car and stepped out.

"Change of plans. A citizen's on the phone with 911 right now. There's a situation at the Happy Mart. He says there's a body on the floor inside. It may be an armed robbery. Proceed with caution. Other units are on the way but you're closest."

"Ten - four" Fields looked around the yard and noticed a something different from his earlier visit—a heavy-duty electric cord was clumped on the ground near the garage door. He got back in the car, switched on all the lights, revved the motor, and gunned the cruiser through a three-point turn. His pace down the dirt road splattered mud up and down the foliage he passed. When he arrived at the paved road, he barely had time to brake to avoid a truck from one of the local groves. It was rolling along at thirty with a blond-haired kid peering out above the over-

sized steering wheel. He looked no more than twelve years old, and a brown-haired girl about the same age was sitting close to him on the bench seat. Fields read the name—Wannamaker's Citrus—and made a mental note to call the owner at a future date. Then he turned on his siren and raced around the truck that had come to a skewed halt on the shoulder. When he saw the Happy Mart in the distance, he turned off the siren and lights. As he pulled into the parking lot, he unlocked his 12-gauge shotgun from its rack. He saw a brown Buick at the gas pumps. The tip of another car, something small and blue, was just visible beyond the dumpster at the side of the building. Fields threw the transmission into Park, grabbed the shotgun, and ran crouching to the entrance. Nothing moved inside, save for the lazy circuits made by a cardboard beer poster suspended from an air conditioning vent. A pair of legs stuck out of the first aisle. They lay splayed at an unnatural angle in a puddle of blood. A bullet hole starred the window behind the counter. Fields pushed his way in the door and an electronic bell chimed from the back of the store. He went to the body—a stocky white male lay face up with a dark knit ski mask covering his face. His neck and chest looked like chopped meat and shredded sweatshirt. A blue steel revolver lay several feet from his out flung right hand.

“Help. Over here. Please.” Fields leaned across the counter and saw a dark-skinned man propped against the wall, holding a bloody wad of paper towels to his left shoulder. A short-barreled shotgun lay on the floor at his side.

"Are you all right?" Fields asked.

"Do I look all right? I couldn't call 911, couldn't reach my phone—please call an ambulance."

Fields spoke into his radio. "Dispatch, are EMTs on the way? We have a gunshot victim needing assistance."

"Affirmative." Maryann's voice was distorted by static. "Estimate time of arrival in a couple of minutes."

"Thanks." He said to the clerk, "What's your name?"

"Neel Pushwarti."

"Mr. Pushwarti, I'm coming around to your side of the counter, sir. I want to help you while we wait for the ambulance."

"About time."

"Yes, sir." Fields moved around to the end of the counter. He kept the barrel of his shotgun pointed above the wounded man's head. "Please don't make any moves toward the weapon, sir."

"What, take pressure off my wound, and bleed to death? I am not stupid."

"Just following procedure, sir, trying to stay safe. I'm going to reach across you." Fields bent and picked up the clerk's shotgun by its pistol grip, turned in the cramped quarters, and placed it behind himself on the floor. He clicked on the safety of his own weapon, leaned it against the wall, and turned back to the injured man. "Let me see."

"It was bleeding a lot," Pushwarti said. "I am not taking my hand off until the doctor arrives."

"Alright."

"Officer, please," Pushwarti said. "Don't let me die. My wife, my babies... if I pass out, help me. I don't know what they would do."

"The EMTs should be right here," Fields said. "But I'll help if you need it." He indicated the dead man. "Was he alone? Did you see anyone else when he came in?"

"When that car pulled up to the pump," Pushwarti said. "I thought there were two people. But only that one came in."

"What happened?"

He came in and pulled down his mask and shot at the ceiling." Fields followed Pushwarti's eyes and saw a small hole in the ceiling tile. "I hid behind the counter and grabbed my gun. He yelled, "Give me the money," and leaned over the counter with his gun pointed at me.

"Then what happened?"

"I think we shot at the same time, I'm not sure. He disappeared and I was bleeding. A lot. I'm lucky I could reach the paper towels."

"Do you own this store?"

"It's mine and my parents. They helped me buy it and I am paying them back. Is the ambulance here?"

"I'll check." Fields stood. Red flashing lights were just entering the drive. "I think it's here now. I'll be right back."

*

Mac scraped his plastic spoon around the bottom of the ice cream container. "Yum."

"Right," Brian said. "Yummy." He seemed distracted.

"Something wrong?"

"We don't have to talk to the cops, do we?"

Mac smiled. "They've got your phone number. If they want a statement, they'll call you."

"I guess," Brian said. He paused. "You know, I've been thinking."

"What?"

"I want to check on my wife, Geri."

"Why not? You got your phone?"

"Yeah, but I was thinking of going home and talking with her."

"If you want," Mac said. "But from what you said, maybe you should call her first."

"I guess that's smart." He took his cell phone from his pocket. "Hey, I've got a message."

He dialed voice mail and listened. "Wow."

"What is it?"

"It's Geri. She said she's really sorry for yelling at me and kicking me out, and she wants me to come back," Brian said. "But she sounds kind of funny."

"Let me hear," said Mac. Brian pressed some keys and handed him the telephone; Mac listened to the message.

"Hey, I hate to break this to you."

"What is it?"

"I think your wife is drunk."

"Wow. She hasn't gotten drunk in ages. Or high."

"Do you want to go home to her?"

"I think so, yeah," Brian said. "But I can drive you home first."

"Thanks, I appreciate that. Do you want to call her?"

Brian started the motor. "I don't think so. Things get messed up by talking on the phone. She said 'come home,' so I'll come home. If she gets upset, I'll play the message back and show her it was her idea."

Mac grinned. "Sounds like a plan. Let's go."

Brian drove down the road toward Mac's house. As they passed the Happy Mart, they saw three sheriff's deputies and two ambulances, one of which was leaving at high speed. A deputy was applying crime scene tape to the entrances. None of the officials looked up as the van passed, and Brian sighed. They got to Mac's without further event.

Brian stopped the van in front of the house. "Do you want the rest of the pizza?"

"You sure you don't want any more?" Mac asked.

"I'm sure, go ahead and take it. And you can borrow 'Easy Rider' if you want to watch the rest."

"I'll take the pizza, but I'll take a rain check on the movie. I'm going to sleep good tonight."

"Cool, me too."

"See you around." Mac closed the car door, and stepped away. Brian backed the van around and drove away. Balancing the pizza box, Mac unlocked and opened the front door. He went in and ran the maze back to his comfortable recliner. He put the pizza on the chair and went into the bathroom. He stared into his reflected eyes and asked, "Alright, now who the hell are you?"

*

Steve and Traci walked with Deanna to the elevator. They watched her get on and watched the doors close. Then they turned to each other. Steve offered Traci his hand, and she took it. They went over to the chairs and sat without saying anything for a minute, then two.

"Thanks for coming here to check on Dad," Steve said.

"Sure. I like him," she said. "He tries to be a grump, but he's really pretty sweet."

"Yeah, he plays the curmudgeon well. But he didn't last night. I wonder . . ."

"What?"

"I think he may be sweet on your mom."

"You know they went on a date about two years ago."

"No way."

"Yep. Mom said he was a real gentleman, took her to the Colombia."

"My dad? That's pretty fancy for him."

"Yes. She said he even put beach towels over those torn up seats in his pickup truck."

"Amazing. What else happened?"

"Mom thinks he got cold feet, that maybe he wasn't ready 'cause it was only a year after your mom died."

"Wow."

"What is it?"

"I'm just having trouble seeing Dad as 'dating' someone."

"Do you mean 'someone' anyone or 'someone' my mom?"

"I mean 'someone' anyone. Your mom is sweet and attractive. It's just weird to think of him dating—I always think of him and Mom as together."

"Gotcha. Like it's always been me and Mom, too. But I hope she finds someone again."

The two were silent together for a minute. Then Steve stood. "I can't just sit here waiting for someone to find Dad. We don't even know if they've checked the house. I need to do something."

"Like what?"

"I'm driving home first," Steve said. "If he's not there, I'm not sure what I'll do."

Traci stood up. "Okay."

"Okay, what?"

"It sounds like a plan. Let's go."

"You want to come?"

"Sure, two heads and all that. I really don't have to work tomorrow," Traci said, hesitating. "Unless you'd rather do this alone?"

"No, absolutely not. I mean, you're welcome to come. I mean I'd appreciate your company. Let's go."

The two boarded an elevator and rode to the first floor. As the doors opened, Steve said, "Do you want to take separate cars?"

"Do you want me to bring my car? Whatever you think is best."

"I don't know," he said. "I guess I'd rather have you with me than be sensible right now."

She took his hand and cuddled closer. "Now you're thinking straight."

They walked to the Dodge, and Steve opened her door offered his arm as she climbed up into the truck. After he got in, she said, "Next time, maybe *you* could put a towel on the seat, too." She picked at the seat foam sticking out of the split seam in the dirty white and red vinyl.

"Sorry," he said. They drove toward the McClatchen home.

After they were on the road about ten minutes, they saw flashing lights on the left side of the road.

"It's at the Happy Mart," Traci said. "I wonder what happened." Three sheriff's cars and an ambulance were out front. The attendants were wheeling out a stretcher holding a blanket-covered form. Yellow crime tape stretched from the corners of the building to the gas pumps.

"Look," Steve said. "That's Petey Fields. He was one of the deputies with us tonight."

"And that's the other one," Traci said. "What was his name?"

"Jones. It seems like they've been too busy to look for Dad. Maybe we will find him at the house." As they drove on, a pair of headlights approached. It was an old VW camper.

Soon they came to the turnoff for his father's home. As they pulled up to the house, he remembered two things. Someone had been scoping out the place earlier that morning and the house was filled with enough crap to stock a K-Mart.

"Traci, since Mom died Dad has become something of a packrat."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll see in a minute. Just remember, this is his place, not mine. I can send you pictures of my place as soon as I'm back in Miami."

"It must be horrible if you're this worried. Now you've got me real curious."

Steve took out his key and realized the door wasn't locked.

"Wait a sec," he said. He returned to the truck and got the snake gun from behind the seat.

"What's that for?"

"I'm sure I locked the door when I left. I was in a hurry, but not that much."

"It could be your dad."

"Sure. But in case it's someone else, stay behind me, please."

"Way behind you."

Once he opened the door, though, the mass of boxes grabbed her attention.

"This is wild," Traci said. She wiped dust from an old Sears box. "Postmarked 1975, and never opened. Whatever's inside is older than I am."

"Shh. Let's make sure the house is empty first. You can 'ooh' and 'aah' over all this junk later."

"Junk?"

"Shh," he said again, putting a finger in front of his lips.

She copied his action, placed her index finger in front of her lips. "Shh, right."

They passed through the dark hallway and arrived at the great room. The tableau was so similar to the day before that Steve did a double take. Then he noted some differences: the new phone on the lamp stand next to the pistol, an open pizza box on the floor, and half a slice propped on his father's chest. His chest was rising and falling regularly. Steve unloaded the shotgun, stuck the shell in his pocket, and leaned the gun against the doorjamb. Finger to lips again, Steve motioned for Traci to wait and tiptoed into the room. Once behind the chair, he reached across the man's chest for the pistol, intending to avoid another gun waving incident.

Instead, Mac grabbed Steve's arm and dragged him over the chair and onto the worn carpet. "What the hell do you mean, sneaking into a man's home? Give me one good reason I shouldn't blow your brains out."

Steve froze, staring at the .45 pointing at his face.

Mac noticed Traci, standing mouth open in the doorway. He pointed the gun in her direction. "Don't you move either, missie—keep your hands where I can see them." She raised her hands halfway into the air.

"Mr. McClatchen, it's me, Traci."

"Dad, what's the matter with you?" Steve asked, from his cramped position on the floor. "You're hurting me."

"Who are you calling 'Dad,' you thief? You come into a man's home and . . ."

"Oww, that really hurts. Let me up," Steve said. "Look at the doorway, next to Traci's leg. It's your old .410? If I was trying to hurt you, I could have done it from the doorway."

"Could be a trick. It's probably not loaded."

"It isn't loaded now, you're right," Steve said. "I took the shell out before I put it down, just like you taught me. The shells are in my back pocket, you can check."

"That's another trick. You must think I'm stupid if you think I'm going to let go and check your pockets."

"You've got your knee in my back, and a match-tuned .45 caliber pistol with a hair trigger stuck under my eyeball. I think you've got the advantage."

For the first time, Mac chuckled. "You might be right, at that. I'm going to let go of your hand, but don't move it too far."

"Just enough for the pain to stop," Steve said. "I promise."

He let go of his son's hand gradually, easing the pressure off until it was at his side. Then he reached down to pat the back pockets. He pulled out a baggie and counted the shells. "Only eleven. You said you unloaded it," he said, brushing his son's face with the pistol.

"I did. Check the pocket again, I just shoved the shell in my pocket.

Mac patted his son's backside again, fished out the last shotgun shell, and said, "So you told the truth about that. Little lady, what did you say your name was?"

"Traci."

"Right. Well, Traci, do me the favor of taking that weapon by the barrel and laying it down on the floor."

She did as instructed.

"Good, good. Now kick it over this way as best you can. Give it a good kick—it may not want to slide on the carpet."

Traci kicked it hard enough to bang the wall behind the recliner. Mac laughed again. "You did great. Now sit down there in the doorway for me." She sat.

"Your turn now," Mac said to his son. "I'm going to take my knee off. Don't move for a few seconds, then slide over and sit next to your friend."

Mac stood and backed away. The barrel of the handgun tracked Steve as he scooted backwards. He bumped into Traci and she took hold of his hand.

Mac moved to his recliner, sat down, and placed the pistol back onto the lamp stand. "Alrighty." He smiled. "Either of you want a slice of cold pizza? It's real good. Pepperoni."

The two looked at him, silent. Traci shook her head.

"No, I guess not. Well, would one of you mind telling me what's going on? Things are a little muddled to me."

Steve started to get up, and Mac put his hand on the pistol. Steve froze.

"You misunderstood me," Mac said. "Don't get up. Just talk. Tell me your story and I'll see if I believe it."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Brian pulled the van into his driveway. The living room lights were all on, as were the kitchen lights, visible off to the right. Geri's car hadn't moved. As he took his key out of the ignition his hand shook. He walked to the entryway, sorted through the keys until he found his house key, and opened the front door.

The smell of burnt plastic and something else greeted him. "Geri, it's me" he called into the house. No answer. He took a few steps inside. Looking into the family room he saw a glass lying on its side on the coffee table. He took a step into the living room, and saw an open bottle half under the sofa.

"Geri, honey, where are you?" He went to the kitchen and almost stepped into a mess. He smelled vomit and shuddered. The kitchen trashcan stood in the middle of the floor with dozens of paper towels distributed around it.

He started to clean up, but instead went toward the back of their home.

"Geri, it's me. Are you okay?"

Their exercise room and guest bedroom were dark and empty, but light flashed from their bedroom in the back. He took the remaining few paces to close the distance, but was unprepared for what he found. A strobe light he had picked up at a garage sale was pulsing from the corner near the French doors. The sound of running water came from the master bathroom. He stuck his head in the door. The lights were off and a dozen candles of various sizes were burning near the whirlpool bath, on the vanity, and on the back of the toilet. A couple had melted through and wax dripped onto the counter and floor. He turned off the jets in the bath and went back into the bedroom.

A mostly-purple paisley spread he remembered giving her in the early days of their relationship was spread on top of the covers. Incense was burning in a dragon censer he'd bought at the flea market ten years earlier. Brian turned on the overhead light and walked to the back of the room to turn off the strobe then saw Geri on the floor next to their bed. She wore a tie-dyed nightie he'd given her for one of their early anniversaries. Her head was cushioned on her forearm, and the nightgown, a short one, had pulled up above her bottom. As he watched, she moved, and a small snore escaped her mouth. Brian exhaled the breath he had been holding since he first saw her on the floor, and tears welled up in his eyes. He moved to her side, and gently shook her shoulder. "Geri? It's me, Brian." Her eyes stayed closed. Brian knelt down next to his wife, and put his arms under her back and knees, then tried to lift her. He was bigger than she was, but not by a lot, and he couldn't move her dead weight. Her eyes fluttered, and then opened.

"Brian. You came home."

"Yes, honey. Thank you for calling me and telling me it was all right."

She closed her eyes again. "I'm glad you came home. I missed you."

"I missed you, too. I'm sorry I've let you down. I'll try to help more."

"You came home." Her eyes opened wide. "I threw up, in the kitchen."

"I saw. Don't worry. I'll take care of it."

"Thank you," she said, throwing her arms around him. "You're so good to me."

His position was awkward bent over her on the floor, but he didn't want to ruin the moment. Soon he heard a gentle snore come from his wife. He untangled himself from her arms, then took a pillow from the bed and placed it under her head. He pulled the bedspread off and

tucked it around her, then went into the bathroom. He blew out the candles, leaving the wax to dry, and opened the tub drain.

In the kitchen, he gathered the towels on the floor, wiping as he went, and stuffed the mess into the trash. He found the disinfectant cleanser under the sink and liberally doused the floor. Then Brian unrolled the rest of the paper towels and cleaned up the mess. Finally, he pulled out the plastic trash liner and, turning his head away, tied it off. He opened the door to the garage started to toss the bag in, then thought better of taking the shortcut. He stuffed the bag into their black plastic garbage can, then returned to the kitchen—good enough for now. He washed his hands in the kitchen sink, dried them on the towel, and then repeated the process with hotter water and more soap. In the living room, he picked up the bottle and glass and sopped up the wet carpet as best he could. Finally, satisfied he had done what he could, he went back to the bedroom and stripped down into his usual sleeping attire—nothing. Brian started to climb into the bed, but instead pulled off the sheet and walked around to the far side. He wrapped it around his shoulders and lay down on the carpet next to the woman he had loved for nearly forty years.

Geri made a snorting sound and cuddled her bottom up to him. Brian put his arms around her, kissed the back of her neck once, twice, and then stretched up to turn off the lamp on the night stand. He lay back down, closed his eyes, and slept.

*

Fields walked over to his fellow deputy, Jimmy Jones. "Do you think you can wrap up the rest of this?"

"I'm not doing your paper work for you, Pete."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it," Fields said. "But this call interrupted me checking on that guy missing from the hospital. I'd like to follow up with dispatch and maybe run out to the house again."

"It's almost eleven," Jones said. "Are you sure you want to go banging doors on rural farmhouses this late at night?"

"You're welcome to come along."

"Thanks, but I haven't eaten dinner yet. You?"

"Had a burger with Maryann earlier."

"Lucky dog. She's cute. I don't understand what she sees in you."

Pete looked at him, serious for a moment. "Me neither, Jimmy. Go figure. We agree on something."

"I'm kidding," Jones told him. "Cut yourself some slack. Go on, check it out. But holler if anything looks funny. I'll be here for a while, and that house is only, what, ten minutes away?"

"About that. Just keep driving east and it's the next place you can turn right, maybe five or six miles down."

"Alright. And call for backup if anything gets weird. It's late and it's already been a crazy night."

"Sure, thanks, Grandma. See you later."

Fields got into his car and drove east. For once, he didn't feel like speeding. He picked up the stuffed Deputy Dawg Maryann had given him at dinner tonight—he couldn't believe she'd remembered his birthday—nobody else ever did.

Fields turned onto the private road. When he came around the final bend before the house, he saw a red and white Dodge pickup in front of the house. The front door was closed, and a slight glow was coming from around the side. The deputy went to the entrance and pressed the doorbell but heard nothing. He gave the door three firm knocks and called, "Hillsborough County Sheriff's Deputy, sorry to disturb you." Still no response. Strange.

Unholstering his weapon, he circled around the house to the right, having déjà vu thoughts of his earlier visit earlier. Around the side of the house he faced a large, newspaper-covered window. On his first trip, it had seemed solid, but now, with light shining from inside, he saw there were a few gaps in the covering. He put his face down next to one but only saw the back of a chair. He went a few feet further and looked in—and was startled. Two of the people from the hospital, Steve and Traci, were sitting on the carpet looking toward the window, seemingly straight at him. Fields saw they were watching someone in the chair, but he couldn't see who it was. Then a hand moved from the arm of the chair into the light of the lamp, and the hand was holding a pistol. The pistol was laid down on the table holding the lamp, and the hand disappeared back into the shadowed chair. Fields backed away slowly from his hiding place, then turned and ran, crouching, back to his car.

Once there, he got on the radio and asked dispatch to have Jones switch to a private channel, then told the other deputy what he'd seen.

"Crap, I just ordered my food," Jones said. "Stay put, I'll be right there."

Seven minutes later he pulled up with all his lights off.

"Go around back," Jones told him around a mouthful of burger. He wiped his hands on his pants. "Just cover that exit. I'll knock on the front door again, louder this time. If no one comes to the door, I'll try the loudspeaker. We'll see what happens."

*

Steve and Traci sat together in the shadow of Mac's confusion. He didn't seem to pose an immediate threat, but that may have been because he was in control. And he couldn't remember his own son, which was difficult for Steve to take in.

Mac had listened to their explanations, had even looked at the burns on the sole of his right foot and hand, but still didn't seem ready to accept their view of things.

"Tell me again why I don't even remember having a son?" he asked.

"I have no idea," Steve said. "Except maybe getting struck by lightning and hitting your head twice has something to do with it. I'm not a doctor. Even when I finish school—if my own father doesn't shoot me first, of course—I'll have a PhD in Biology, not an MD."

Mac laughed. "Well, you sound enough like me to be my son."

"Why don't you just call the hospital and ask the doctors or nurses there?" Traci asked.

"Don't like doctors," Mac said, "or hospitals. Took my tonsils out when I was six. The bastards lied to me then, said it wouldn't hurt, and it hurt like shit."

"You were a kid," Steve said. "They never give children the whole truth. They don't want to scare them."

"Same thing happened when I was wounded in 'Nam," Mac said. "Damn doctors said everything would be fine, they'd just reach in and take the bullet out, easy as pie. They gave me

some anesthetic and stuck a probe in. It hurt so bad I almost jumped out of my skin. They said I must be resistant. Assholes." He turned to Traci. "Excuse me."

"Call the police then," Steve said. "They've got you listed as missing. Won't that prove we're telling the truth?"

"Don't like cops, either," Mac said. "Don't recall why. Maybe 'cause they're always sticking their noses into other folks' affairs. They got no business poking around in my business."

"We're not getting anywhere," Steve said.

"What about photos?" Traci asked. She turned to Mac. "Would you believe us if you saw pictures of you and Steve together? When he was little?"

"Maybe," Mac said. "What do you propose?"

"Mom always kept the photo albums in the hall closet," Steve said. "But you've blocked the door with your damn boxes."

"And?"

"There are some pictures in my old room," Steve said. "Getting awards, and playing football and stuff. I know Mom's in some of the photos, 'cause you always loved taking pictures of us. I think you're in some of the pictures, too. At least I hope so."

"I guess we can take a look," Mac said. "You guys lead, and don't go running anywhere."

"Mr. McClatchen?" Traci said.

"Yes?"

"Would you mind if we stopped at the bathroom? I really need to go."

"Of course we can," Mac said. "Just mind you don't climb out any windows, 'cause I'll have to shoot your friend here in the kneecap."

Traci looked at Steve. "Mac, after tonight, I'm almost ready to take you up on that."

Mac laughed. "Let's go."

The two stood and walked back toward the bedrooms. Mac followed, staying well behind. Traci went into the bathroom. After a couple minutes the toilet flushed, and she came out.

"I decided to spare your kneecap," she told Steve.

"Thanks.

The doorbell rang. It rang again, then again.

"Back to the living room. Now," Mac said.

"Son of a bitch," Steve said. "Shit."

"Watch your language, son. There's a lady present." A smirk appeared on Mac's face.

Traci grinned in return. "You've got to admit, there's a certain humorous side to all of this."

Loud knocking and a fainter voice came from the front entry. "Hillsborough County Sheriff. Open the door please."

Mac sat back down in his recliner. "Just take a seat, y'all. We can try again after he goes away."

"Shit," Steve said, returning to his patch of carpet against the living room wall.

Banging came from the front of the house again.

Traci sat next to Steve, covering her mouth with her hand to stifle a giggle.

The three sat in their respective stations again, waiting for the next move.

Steve said. “Now I’ve got to go to the bathroom.”

“You may need to cross your legs a bit.”

“Oh, come on.”

Traci grinned. “Guess you should have gone earlier, Stevie.”

“Stevie?” Mac gave him a strange look.

The doorbell rang again several times, then came loud knocking and the call, “Sheriff’s department.” More knocking.

Mac picked up the .45 again. “Best cross your legs, son.”

“Shit,” Steve said.

“Watch your language.” Mac said.

Steve glared at him.

Now Jones’ voice, amplified by the PA system in the police car, came booming from the front yard. “Attention—this is the Hillsboro County Sheriff’s department. We know someone’s inside. We just need to talk with you. Come to the door or we’ll have to come in.”

“Shit,” Mac said, looking at Steve and Traci.

“Watch your language,” Steve said.

“Smart Alec. Shut up and let me think,” Mac said.

Steve stood. Traci reached and put her hand on his leg. Mac lifted the pistol.

“Dad, this has been fun, but it’s time to clear things up. You need medical attention.”

Steve reached into his pocket. “Here,” he said, taking out his wallet. “I don’t know why I didn’t think of this before.” He tossed his driver’s license at Mac. “I’m going to talk to the police before

they kick in the door. Either shoot me or put the gun down, because they'll be in here any second either way." He turned and walked out of the room, hollering "Hold on, I'm coming!"

Mac watched him leave then said to Traci. "Well, he's got enough balls to be my son, anyhow." He bent to pick up the license then put the .45 down on the side table. Steve came back into the room a minute later, talking with Jones.

Steve asked Mac, "So, are you convinced? Think maybe you should see a doctor?"

Mac looked at Steve, then at the license, and then back at his son. He started to say something when a crash sounded from the kitchen and Fields came through into the living room, weapon drawn.

"Jesus, Fields," Jones said. "Put that away."

At the commotion, Mac had turned and picked up his pistol. He was holding it at his side, pointed down, when Fields burst in.

"He's got a gun!" Fields said. Traci was sitting almost at his feet, her hand over her mouth again—this time in surprise. Steve and Jones were standing together not far from Mac.

"You just smashed in his back door," Jones said, putting his hand on his own pistol. "The gun was on the table when I came in." He turned to Mac. "No need for that, Mr. McClatchen. And I'm sorry about the door—you can submit a bill to the department."

Mac looked from Jones to Fields, whose gun was still pointed straight at him, and back at Jones again.

"Shit," Mac said. "It ain't going to be cheap." He made a show of placing his pistol back on the table and said to Traci. "Excuse me again."

Fields looked from Mac to Jones and back to Mac again. "Sorry," he said and holstered his firearm.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

After a bit more convincing, Mac agreed to go back to Brandon Regional in the morning for some more tests. “But I’m spending tonight in my own bed,” he said. “Thank you very much.”

“Funny,” Steve said. “You remember your bed but not me.” He put his arm around Traci’s shoulders. She put hers around his waist. “I’m going to take Traci home.”

Mac handed back the driver’s license and said, “Relax, ‘Stevie.’ Things may be starting to come back to me a little.”

“Don’t lock the door,” Steve said. “I’ll be back after a bit. You may not remember, but you said I can use my old room again tonight.”

Jones said, “Well, goodnight, folks. I’m going to go finish my dinner, even if it is a cold greasy mess. I don’t even care now.”

Fields said, “I guess I’ll call the hospital and let them know we found Mr. McClatchen.”

“Great idea,” Jones said. “And then you can start on all the paperwork for tonight while I enjoy my cold French fries.”

Mac stood watching from the front doorway, waving away mosquitos, as the Dodge pickup disappeared down the dirt drive followed by the two police cars. He went inside and shut the door then smiled and clicked the deadbolt into place.

The first two vehicles reached the main road, turned left, and drove away. Fields, however, pulled over onto the shoulder and logged into the laptop mounted on an angled shelf in the center of the dash. He accessed the alert on McClatchen’s disappearance and began typing. “Damn it,” he said, grabbing the microphone. “Dispatch, this is Fields.”

“Dispatch here. Go ahead.”

“Be advised the person missing from Brandon Regional has been located. Please contact the hospital and inform them subject Steve McClatchen told officers he will check in with medical staff in the morning.”

“Understood. Anything else?”

“No, except . . . is that you Maryann?”

“Yes, Pete.”

“When you can take a break would you call me on my cell?”

“Will do. Over.”

Fields put the mike back and went back to his record keeping. He had finished the first couple pages when his personal cell phone vibrated.

“Fields.”

“Pete, it’s me,” Maryann said. “What’s going on? You sound funny.”

“It’s this missing person.” Fields explained the final scenario in Mac’s house. “And Jones not only didn’t back me up, but he ignored procedure—this guy McClatchen had a .45. He should be in cuffs in the back of my car.”

“You said Jones was the first one inside, right? He made the call. Let it go.”

“It just irks me, that’s all,” Fields said. “And on top of that Jonesy saddled me with all this paperwork.”

“Petey,” Maryann said. “The shift’s over. That paper work will wait.”

“So?”

“Why don’t you stop worrying about all this and give me a ride home?”

Fields glanced back toward McClatchen Manor, then snapped shut his laptop. “Be there in fifteen minutes.” He flipped on his emergency lights and peeled out.

*

The temperature was finally starting to drop from Sunday’s high of 88 degrees, but the breeze had died down as well, so being packed for two hours along with thousands of other people clogging the Lakewood Drive right of way was fast losing its allure. Except that Steve was with Traci.

She wore a stars-and-stripes cotton halter top, blue jean shorts, and a white cowboy hat, but had opted for sensible white sandals instead of boots.

Traci said, “Tell me again what we’re doing here. Not that I’m not happy to see you.” She wiped her forehead with a bandanna. “But July is a mandatory air-conditioning month.”

Steve stole another glance, trying to keep himself from just plain staring at her. “Like I said, I’ve got no idea. Dad told me where to come and said ‘get here early or miss out.’ He was serious—look.” Steve unfolded a piece of paper. On it was a computer-printed color map of this small section of Brandon with their location marked by a big red “X”. “Dad used a computer AND a printer, so whatever’s he’s up to is important. I’m just glad you could join me.”

“Well, show your appreciation by getting me another bottle of water.” Traci handed him her empty which he stuck in the corner of their cooler.

A collection of trumpets, trombones, and sousaphones sounded a cacophonous blast from several blocks away. Heads turned to peer south and children who’d been sitting got up and stuck their heads under the rope barrier; everyone was ready for things to begin. A shout went up

and the unseen brass section coalesced into the theme from *Rocky*. Soon the first band, the USF Herd of Thunder came leading the charge up the center of the northbound lanes. Its members' green and gold uniforms were already ringed with perspiration, and Steve felt pity for their mascot prancing along the hot asphalt in his costume. The Bulls cheerleaders were better dressed to deal with the heat. As they came abreast of Steve and Traci, she elbowed him in the ribs. "Eyes over here, buddy." He complied, smiling.

Traci said, "If Mac's going to meet us here, he'd better hurry up. This thing's starting."

Steve looked at her and shrugged. "Never know with him."

As parades go, this one was pretty good. The cavalcade continued, with the color guard, the honorary mayor of Brandon, a phalanx of Shriners in miniature clown cars and another doing slow speed maneuvers on full dress motorcycles, all interspersed with an array of high school bands and various business sponsors. It was after a Gasparilla Day krewe rolled by tossing beads and candy from their pirate boat that the tone of the parade shifted.

A quartet of trumpeters in dress uniform, one from each branch of the service, marched slowly past playing taps. Behind them was another foursome, this group in their respective camouflage gear. The Marine, a man in his mid-twenties, walked along proud and erect, one leg his own, the other a prosthetic. Next to him, a soldier of the same age, a woman, rolled along in a wheel chair. The other two carried no visible wounds, but both wore the Purple Heart. The audience lining the streets stood, and began applauding. Then, behind these heroes came an open limousine bearing four women in white. Each held on their laps an American flag folded into a small triangle. On both front fenders of the black car flew a flag: one, the stars and stripes, the

other red-bordered with a single gold star on a white field. The applause grew. Some in the crowd saluted, others put hands over their hearts. More than a few wiped away tears.

A respectable distance behind the Gold Star mothers, an Army Reserve band pounded the pavement while playing a rousing Sousa march.

What followed behind was difficult to take in. The thing had clearly started out as a car, or rather a Vietnam-era Dodge van, complete with the original turquoise paint. Now, however, it resembled the bastard offspring of some post-apocalyptic, Mad Max movie and the World's Greatest Toy Store, with a splash of marbled bowling ball thrown in for good measure. Noise, the angry beating of helicopter rotors, pounded out of two twenty-one inch horns mounted to the roof. The throbbing ebbed and changed until Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* overpowered the aircraft. Also atop the van, arrayed around the speakers were a half dozen squads of original G.I. Joe dolls, all dressed in Army and Marine uniforms of the war in Southeast Asia. On the side of the truck was painted a large flag containing a circle of white on which a man's head in black silhouette bent slightly downwards. Above the circle, letters spelled out "POW MIA" and below was the message "You Are Not Forgotten." Below this flag, painted in foot high characters, was "1,677 Still Missing." As the truck neared, Steve could see that the black swirls that lent the bowling ball appearance were actually names painted in curlicue letters. Glued to the front and sides were dozens of toys, mostly military in nature, from small plastic army men to life-size Mattel Marauder M-16 Rifles. Scattered throughout were other icons of the time. The audio was apparently a loop, because after the Wagnerian sounds diminished there was a brief silence then all the toys started doing their respective things. The plastic guns chattered out "realistic gunfire sounds" and fake flames flashed from their muzzles, a dozen Mickey Mouse alarm clocks all

clanked their tinny chimes together, horns beeped, lights blinked, and sirens wailed. Then the loop of chopper rotors began again.

“Steve, look!” Traci pointed at the driver. “That’s your Dad!”

Steve tried to see through the windshield, wishing she was wrong. Then a hand stuck out of the driver’s window and waved at them wildly. The truck’s horn gave several long blasts.

“Jesus, Dad.” Steve stared in wonderment. “I’ll be back,” he said, then ducked under the rope and jogged to keep pace with Mac.

Both windows were down in the un-air-conditioned truck, but a couple of twelve-volt fans mounted at either end of the metal dash were blowing hot air around. Steve had to shout above their whirring. “What the hell is this?”

Mac wore his 1960s Marine Corps uniform which besides being snug around his middle still fit him. He carried his .45 in a canvas holster on his right hip and was smiling as Steve hadn’t seen in years. “Do you like it?” he hollered. At that moment, the audio choppers above their heads took off again. “I’ll see you after; meet you at Steak and Shake near home.”

“Alright. We’ll be there.” Steve stopped jogging and watched his father drive on. As the stuffmobile passed through the crowd, children jumped up and down waving tiny American flags. Whistles and cheers broke out, as Steve walked back toward Traci. He looked back and saw Mac’s arm waving back and forth in the air above the driver’s window.

APPENDIX A: WRITING LIFE

While getting out of my car on a recent Saturday, I spied one of the neighborhood ten-year-olds behaving oddly, looking skyward and proceeding backwards up his driveway. Left arm outstretched, right crooked with fist next to cheek, he held an imaginary rifle. No one else was in sight, and he either didn't see me behind my ragged screen of bushes or, more likely, didn't care I was there. Faint "pshew, pshew" sounds drifted my way as this small-fry vanquished foes visible only to his active imagination, taking me back to my own awkward childhood. I was a rather skinny, un-athletic child, in every way a bookworm. My mother chastised me regularly for reading under the covers with my Cub Scout flashlight, though she did so only half-heartedly—never was the cry raised, "Wait till your father gets home," as happened for more serious transgressions.

Later, a few months after my thirteenth birthday, when most of my friends were celebrating their bar- and bat-mitzvahs, my parents divorced and shortly thereafter Dad moved a thousand miles away to Lloyd Harbor, New York. Sometime in these confused years I asked him how he had gotten into his line of work. He'd had his own business since before I was born, "Hi-Fi Associates," selling high fidelity audio equipment—phonographs, reel-to-reel tape decks, receivers, and the like. His three-part answer is one of the few things I have consciously carried over into my own life:

"It's something I'm good at and can make a living at," he told the teen-aged me. "It doesn't hurt anyone. And it just might bring some beauty into people's lives."

Looking at the third point first, I've often found myself moved to a place of deep feeling after finishing a chapter, stanza, story, or poem. To be able to do this is a beautiful thing, an amazing ability, to create rage or terror, sadness or joy, to bring tears to someone's eyes or

laughter bursting from the gut. The type of feeling matters far less than their source: the words, mere scratching on paper—or, now, electrons. As long as I can remember, from my earliest flashlight-under-the-covers times reading comics and Beginner Books, I have longed to be able to write well enough to bring readers to such experiences.

My literary childhood flowed from famous lines like *Green Eggs and Ham's* "I do not like green eggs and ham, I do not like them, Sam-I-Am," and the "You are not my mother! You are a SNORT!" of *Are You My Mother?* into the terse "Blam!" and "Pow!" of comic books. My word addiction even brought with it my first unpleasant lesson in economics, when I had to weigh my need for *Sgt. Rock*, *Captain America*, or *Batman* against my desire for sweets—my first allowance of fifteen cents initially allowed me the extravagance of a weekly comic *and* a candy bar, so when the price of comics rose to twelve cents my world was shaken. Words won out, and I made due with penny candies until I gathered enough courage to ask my father for a raise.

As my reading abilities grew, so did my writing. In 1998 I discovered, hidden in Mom's effects, a Publix shopping bag labeled "Ted" containing samples of my early art and writing, including a collection of haiku and tanka I wrote in third or fourth grade. They were nothing magnificent but serve as a reminder of my early efforts.

Somewhere in those elementary school years my reading migrated to then-modern adventures like those of Tom Swift, Jr. who with his crew cut sidekick combined futuristic bits of science like a "flying laboratory" with good old "American ingenuity" to triumph over criminals bent on twisting technology to their own greedy ends. Somewhere in my tween years I began to shift to "true" science fiction by the likes of Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, and Ursula

K. Le Guin, moving from flat characters to those with some more substance. Also in those early years I was introduced to more serious reading via such works as young readers' versions of Shakespeare and the Greek classics.

It is unclear to me whether I can ever fulfill my father's tripartite formula and "make a living" with my writing. His calling to sell electronics that bring people the world of music involved hard goods much more so than does mine to write, especially with the changing nature of publishing. The pen also holds far more power to injure than does the record player. The possibility of hurting others inadvertently, especially those I care for, coupled with my highly fallible memory has guided me to focus on fiction where you "write what you know" but must change names, places, and circumstances if it resembles reality. The imaginary nature of my characters should make the telling of their "truths" more palatable to any readers who think they see themselves in my words. If not, at least I tried.

My "writing life," as this exercise is styled, has now encompassed nearly half a century—something nearly impossible for me to fathom and even harder to admit to myself. The huge gaps of being "too busy for that," of raising a family and fulfilling others' expectations, bring a burden of shame and a demon of disappointment, even self-loathing—distractions from writing. These join a crowd of other internalized hindrances that have accumulated over the years, conversations within that haunt me, making my act of writing just short of miraculous—*you'll never be good enough; who do you think you are? And the more succinct you are shit.*

This baggage makes me a poor judge of my own writing and gives me one of the most important lessons I've learned thus far: I must find trusted judges, friends whose writing I respect, who are willing and able to make the time to read and give honest advice.

What else have I learned? My writing lacks the punch and brevity of Hemingway's, though my love for his writing has influenced my style. I'm enamored by such magical realism as that by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, but as yet haven't figured out how to get there with my own work. Still, the more authors I read, the more my form changes, with my writing self becoming a conglomeration of those I ingest. My "to read" list is growing far faster than I can read, so it's clear I'll never finish reading or developing my writing in the time I have left on earth—not even if I live another half-century.

This project, *Stuffmobile*, was born out of an experiment: my successfully completed second attempt at generating the fifty-thousand-words-in-thirty-days of National Novel Writers' Month. The main impetus for my beginning this was to overcome the powerful tendency I have to over edit during the creation process. The guided pressure of NaNoWriMo helps provide the structure I need to get beyond this counterproductive, undesirable habit and into faster "production writing."

I am nearly done with this degree, this latest piece of my writing life, and my path forward is unclear. I've been remiss in submitting stories and feel ill equipped to market my work—two things I'd hoped would be addressed during the past few years—so I need to learn these things by trial and error, a method I've learned to hate. By American standards I am far from wealthy and need to find some way to support myself and repay the federal government their pound of flesh. I trust that something will come my way, but no matter what I need to make time to write.

APPENDIX B: READING LIST

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