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THE TERROR WITHIN

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The Terror Within

A THESIS

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS
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ABSTRACT:

The Terror Within illustrates the degree to which people from all walks of life learn how to cope and survive at all costs. The internal struggle for balance in troubled lives is seen in the external circumstances of everyday living. This collection of short stories observes some of the chaotic events which trigger an assortment of emotions—fear, loneliness, insecurity, guilt, hate, affection, love, and happiness. The individuals demonstrate how they deal with or are a part of the horrific problem of rape, murder, abortion, incest, abuse, and neglect through their family and social relationships. The insecure and oftentimes lonely characters wrapped up in these trials are looking for a chance to come out with a better understanding of who they are and how they fit into the enigma of life.

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INTRODUCTION

In every writer's life, there are certain authors that capture the imagination and send it soaring. From early on, I loved to read Grace Livingston Hill's books. A prolific author, she wrote more than seventy-five books. I tried to read each and every one. Some were out of print and I spent years tracking them down. They inspired me with their descriptions of times and places of the early twentieth century. The moral codes within those books gave me a focal point on which to compare my world. Another author which had an enormous impact on my life was Gene Stratton Porter. *A Girl of the Limberlost* and *Freckles* comes to mind. The rich descriptions of landscapes and the simplicity of telling a good moral story held my interest and aroused a desire within me to create my own stories. F. Scott Fitzgerald once said, "Writers aren't exactly people. . . they're a whole lot of people trying to be one person" (qtd. Byrne 249). His quote describes me, growing up. The more I read, the more I saw how different writers revealed the internal struggle going on in a person's life. Raymond Carver's *Cathedral* allowed me to see how one such person could look inside himself and change

As I grew up, scarier stories became a part of my daily reading. When I read *The Tell Tale Heart* by Edgar Allan Poe, I could feel the beating of the heart in the story keeping pace with my own heart. Robin Cook's *Brain* and *Coma* scared me but fascinated me as well. I began to see that not all people were good and some were outright evil in dealing with others. Stephen King's *Christine* let me stretch my imagination to believe there were really cars that were evil. His tale of the evil clown in *It* had me convinced if I leaned too far over the sink, the clown might suck me in. Dean Koontz went even farther in detailing how evil a person could become. Flannery

O'Connor convinced me how even evil can serve a purpose. O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find* and *Good Country People* depicted how good can come from the evil intentions of people. These authors and many more have helped to shape the kind of writer I am.

In giving advice on writing, Anne Lamott quoted Flannery O'Connor as saying, "that anyone who survived childhood has enough material to write for the rest of his or her life" (qtd. Koch 13). Surviving childhood can indeed be an enormous task or adventure in itself.

In compiling my collection of short stories, *The Terror Within*, I realized that all the stories dealt with some form of survival, sometimes against great odds. The people in these stories are common folks who are challenged with some of life's greatest difficulties. They face an internal struggle of terror for balance in their lives which takes a toll on their emotional state. They also face an external struggle of terror to survive through everyday life. Some take on the responsibility of survival for one who is unable to. Others, who are evil, survive at great cost to everyone else. Though they are sometimes unsure of their path, lonely, or lost, these survivors show their ability to come to terms with the existence of their life..

"Final Justice," the first short story I completed for *The Terror Within*, deals with Davie, a lonely boy who survives a disastrous childhood of abuse from his father and neglect from his alcoholic mother. The mother is dependent on him to assume the role of parent, taking care of her when she cannot take care of herself. Davie is in the process of writing a story to please his English teacher—the one person in the world who cares,

when his abusive daddy returns home. The strain of the life Davie is living culminates in him snapping. He rejects reality and becomes a part of the fiction he is writing.

Another story dealing with a young boy is “Lost,” where a slightly brain-damaged Chester strives to please, yet he always does inappropriate things. This story is as much about Chester as it is about his mother Beth Ann and his step-dad Sam. All are locked in their own private hell of loneliness. All are also trapped—Chester by his mind, Beth Ann by the house and lack of real friends, and Sam by his office and his need to succeed. A lack of non-communication on all sides makes each miserable. The crisis for Chester comes when he runs away and has to deal with being lost in the woods. Because of this event, Beth Ann and Sam face the crisis of either coming together to form a stronger marriage or being torn apart forever. This story of a couple with a mentally handi-capped child shows how a family can survive against great odds.

In “Remembered Love,” Patricia is a spoiled child who has been raised by her grandma—the sole care giver in her life. She comes back to visit, with the intent to get more money out of grandma for a drug debt. They have a row and Patricia leaves. Later, she comes back and wanders through each room. Her selfish nature conflicts with the memories she has of what her grandma has done for her, and how her grandma has survived the changes that life has put before her. Patricia carries little guilt inside and thinks how she will change the house when it becomes hers. Patricia’s journey through the house is a need for life to go back to the uncomplicated days of her youth. She tries to justify robbing her grandma and is shocked to learn she is in the hospital.

Another story which deals with an older woman is “The Good Son.” In this story, as caretaker to a diabetic invalid, Sue is alert to the fact that the older woman Joan is

being taken advantage of by those around her, especially Drake, who is her power of attorney. Drake is on the make, and Sue is sure he is stealing large amounts of money from Joan. When she tries to talk with Joan about the problem it upsets her, and she continually tells Sue what a good son he has been to her since her husband died. Sue can see that Joan is helpless to survive and defend herself against Drake, who is so devious. She is frustrated and sets out to prove that Drake is not what he seems. She has her chance when Drake and his family go away for the day and leave the mother-in-law tied to her bed without any care.

The thought that people can be so evil is distressing. The next two stories deal with even darker secrets in families. The first story is “Lillie.” Lillie is losing her grip on reality. She is trapped in a small forgotten town and survives with nothing but the strays she takes in and her dolls. Her dolls become as real as children to her. Lillie has never married and hates men because of an incident that happened when she was young. In her twenties, Lillie had an affair with the fifteen-year-old son of the churches minister of music. The father finds out and removes his family to Florida, but not before raping Lillie. When Lillie learns she is pregnant, she is unable to tell her parents and has an abortion. The years have passed, and Lillie survives in limbo. When Jeremy, her first and only love, returns to Viceroy, he comes with a wife and child. Lillie’s rage is set off when she hears of the child she never had. She sets out to wreak revenge on Jeremy since she can’t get to his daddy.

The next story that deals with a dark family secret is “Divided We Stand.” Five siblings have come together to sort through their parent’s belongings after their tragic death three months earlier. When Paula exclaims, “I don’t know who the hell our parents

really were,” she opens up an exchange with her siblings which quickly becomes heated. The youngest, Nathan, wants the past to stay buried. For Paula, that isn’t possible. Paula has learned through the internet that her daddy served time in prison for attempted murder. She is upset that she never knew. As a child of incest by her daddy, Paula was sent to live her teenage years with a relative in another state to keep the secret from being known. Her daddy escaped additional prison time, and she faced survival in a shattered world. Estranged from her siblings for many years, Paula has trouble reconnecting with people she doesn’t know. Her siblings, forbidden to contact her, forget her and go on with their own private hell under daddy’s rule. Paula, who wants closure for her own life, soon finds out just how cruel her daddy really was. Paula realizes that Nathan has the same cruel streak of their daddy. The story culminates with three of her siblings coming to her rescue when Nathan hits her. Paula realizes it is possible to survive in a dysfunctional family.

The next two stories share a common thread of survival by a different sort. “Shortchanged” involves a man named Jonas, who is used to getting what he wants out of life, whether by fair means or foul. Jonas considers himself to be a ladies man and becomes upset when his hot water tank breaks down. He has a legitimate complaint against his landlady, Mrs. Battles, because the stove keeps going out and there is mold in his bedroom closet. Because he prides himself on having the ladies fawn over him at the Dance Pavilion, he decides to sweet talk his landlord into fixing the hot water tank. When he goes to her home, he accidentally kills her dog after it bites him. After recuperating for two days on whiskey and pain pills, he decides to try again, even though he is miserable because the wound is infected. This time, he finds his Mrs. Battles at

home. She is distraught over the death of her dog Doodles. Jonas never gets the chance to explain why he is there because she demands that he bury her dog. Realizing he is the one who killed the dog, he refuses to stand in the heat of the day and dig the hole. Instead, in anger he jabs the shovel into the ground and comes up with a plan to haul the dog to a ravine. Before he can dump the dog, it explodes on him. After changing clothes and arranging the fake grave, he notices a large amount of water but says nothing to Mrs. Battles. While she is serving him tea and cake, she notices the low water pressure. He is now expected to dig up the dog and rebury it.

The next story which deals with a different sort of survival is “Satan’s Angel.” In this story, Satana is a scarred young man who grew up in a home with a mother addicted to methamphetamine. Left to fend for himself, he becomes a bully and a tyrant to others. After almost killing his mother, he spends the rest of his teenage years in and out of the Juvenile Justice System. Satana’s crimes increase as he gets older—graduating from robbery, to rape and finally murder of a guard as he is being transported to prison. His escape lands him in the country and hiding in an elm tree where he observes two women who are out to pick plums. Jean is the older of the two ladies and owner of the property. Nicole is her pregnant younger friend. After devouring their lunch, he awaits their return. His goal is to rape the younger one and make off with a vehicle. Satana’s instinct is to survive. He does not ever consider the rights of others. Before he can complete the deed, his efforts are aborted by a bull and the one’s tracking him.

The last of the stories in this collection all deal with young women who are trying to survive in their jobs. They each are young and unsure of their abilities, yet they are

proud of their achievements. They encounter a set of circumstances that make their journey in becoming a success uncertain.

In “Swing Shift Crisis,” Mandy deals with the stress of working in the jail and being surrounded by corrupt employees and inmates who accept their fate in life and have no desire to change. Besides the demanding job, Mandy is in an abusive relationship with her boyfriend. As she goes through her duties in taking care of the inmates, she thinks about how she let herself become involved with a man who no longer loves her. A survivor with two impressionable children, Mandy realizes that her life parallels that of the women she locks up. She is a victim. She encounters the abuse of the other guards toward the inmates and herself. When Mandy saves an inmate from an attempted suicide the event jolts her into realizing how precious life is. By the end of her shift, Mandy resolves to change her status from victim back to survivor.

“Shakedown” is another story about an employee of the jail. In this story Sandra is a new recruit fresh out of the academy. She is anxious to please her supervisors by doing the best job she can. Sandra encounters a world totally foreign to her, filled with contraband, filth, and vermin. Sandra, who is naïve, does not have the capacity to understand life as Mandy in “Swing Shift Crisis” does. Sandra only knows she must make a good impression on her superiors. She will do whatever it takes to survive her first day on the job.

In the title story “The Terror Within,” Amanda starts a new job as armed security guard for Cherokee Energy Corporation, a huge business with over a thousand employees on site. She has been hired as one of two assistants to the captain. Graham, her new friend is the other assistant. Amanda is a caring person who has recently divorced from

a man who prefers other men to her. In her private life, she is unsure of her worth as a person. She is attracted to Graham and the feeling is mutual. Her sister's concern for her happiness causes her to take her relationship with Graham a little more slowly, though her sister finally capitulates and welcomes Graham into their home-life. In her public life, she is determined to fulfill her duties to protect the employees. Amanda is distressed to learn that a possible terrorist could be working among them as a newly hired guard. Because she listens to Mohammad's tales of a horrible childhood, she has compassion for him and does not actively pursue getting him fired. But she decides to document what she does know about him. Her actions come too late. A bomb explodes and she is trapped in the rubble, fighting to survive. She hears Graham's feeble call to her telling her of his love. She knows that with his love, she will hang on and survive.

My hope for *The Terror Within* is that it captures my characters' fight for survival in their ordinary everyday lives.

This short story thesis is dedicated to my mother, Evelyn Marie Kobyluk (Dunn), who has been a continuing source of motivation to me. May you look down from above and be proud.

Writing is easy. All you do is stare at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead.

—Gene Fowler (1890-1960)

A detective digs around in the garbage of people's lives. A novelist invents people and then digs around in the garbage.

—Joe Gores

Final Justice

“Davie, Davie, I can’t find my bottle,” Cheryl yelled. The sound carried all the way to his room from the kitchen, where he heard doors being opened and slammed shut

David ignored his mother.

“Come on, Davie. Be a good boy and help me find it,” Cheryl whined.

Would she never shut up, he thought.

“Please, mama needs your help,” Cheryl said, her voice getting closer.

Gritting his teeth, the slim fingers of his right hand reached for the lotion. God, he hated dry skin. Squirting some into the palm of his hand, he made circular motions, soothing the cream onto long tapered hands and up his pale blue-veined thin arms.

“Davie, come here now. Mama needs you.”

David both hated and loved his mom. He typed faster.

A jagged patch of lightning lit up the prairie sky followed by a muffled crack of thunder. Although too far away to do much damage, Slim felt uneasy. The approaching storm made the cows move around too much. They should be ready to bed down for the night, not move about in such a restless manner. Already twelve hours into his day, Slim shifted his tired and aching body in the saddle.

He heard Jack, the other cowhand on guard, singing in a soothing low-key voice in the distance. Across the wide expanse, his form was silhouetted against a rose and

lavender sky that quickly faded to burnt sienna. If anyone could ease the cattle, it was Jack. His voice crooned to the steers like a mother rocking her baby to sleep. Some cattle started to settle down.

Good old Jack, or so he thought, before Jack rocked him with his news today. That bastard confided that he intended to marry Slim's sister, Jennie. Slim had tried for months to find out who Jennie was seeing. He knew it had to be some undesirable because Jennie kept the affair to herself. She was too much like her mama, good-hearted to a fault and couldn't know what a wastrel Jack was. Hell, Jack was always the first to hit the saloon and grab a barmaid when they rode into town. No way was Jack marrying his kid sister.

Slim wanted to kill him when Jack told him he loved Jennie, but stunned, he couldn't say a thing. How could that hobbled, half-toothless cowboy love his sister? What kind of life was she going to have with someone who was out on a drive more than he was home? It wasn't going to happen, not if Slim could stop it.

David's hands paused on the keys. With all the gear he wore, he felt the hot air as it swirled around his room. He thought if he dressed like a cowboy he might write his story better. He went to great lengths to secure the needed items.

David stood. The tanned leather chaps covering his jeans caused rivulets of perspiration to run down his legs. He tossed the hat on his bed and took off the brown suede jacket. The beaded fringe, swaying back and forth, fell in straight lines down from the chest and sleeves, as he placed it on the back of his chair.

To buy the items, he took the money from his mom's purse. With it he bought the jacket, shirt, vest, boots, hat, and bandana from a thrift store in town, telling the clerk he was going to be in a play at school. While the clothes didn't quite match, the smell of the rugged leather inspired him to write. Later, he found the chaps by accident. He saw an old Vietnam vet wearing them and traded him some weed for them. Why the hell a Nam survivor had chaps hadn't interested him at the time, but maybe he could write about him in another story.

"Davie, sugar..."

His mom made every word she spoke sound like the hiss of a snake. He knew it came from her missing front tooth, but still it annoyed him.

"What, what, what do you want?" he asked, yanking open his bedroom door.

Cheryl, her heavy makeup smeared on what was once a beautiful face, almost fell into the room.

"Davie, I can't find my bottle. I need a little sip to steady my nerves. You know your daddy's coming home today."

That hiss again, compliments of David's daddy who had played dentist with his mother's mouth.

"That's why I hid it. You know he'll kill you if he catches you drinking again."

"Please. I can't face him today. I've got the shakes. I gotta calm down. Help me, Davie."

He looked at the miserable excuse he had for a mom. He knew he loved her, but he definitely hated her, too.

Cheryl, once the local beauty queen of Seminole, Oklahoma, now looked more like the wrinkled old hag that dug through the trash bins downtown. Gone were the bright expectant eyes, smooth complexion, glossy hair, and classy taste in wearing the right kind of clothes on a beautiful slim body. Instead, a woman with dull eyes, red nose, greasy hair, and a ragged orange and green striped robe swayed before him. Her feet were encased in green elf boots with jingle bells on the curled toes. The stink emanating from her body smelled stale. As he mused over her ridiculous appearance, she reminded him of a striped garter snake.

He used to think he had a few happy memories of being part of a normal family. Now he wasn't so sure. Reality blurred. Maybe he made the stories up to replace some of the pain in his life.

David sighed. Sensing no way to get rid of her and still get his story done, he retrieved the almost empty bottle from the hall linen closet and handed it over.

Cheryl grabbed for the bottle, and then made motions to give him a slurpy kiss, but he pushed her claw-like hands away, turned her around, and pushed her down the hall.

“Don't overdo it,” David said, knowing she couldn't because he poured out half of the booze and replaced it with water.

“I won't, scout's honor,” Cheryl said holding up her middle finger and then giggling.

“Yeah, right.” David entered his room and slammed the door shut.

She hadn't even noticed his clothes. He had to get out of here or lose his mind. Standing with his back against the door he surveyed his room, not a typical boy's room at

all. No pinups or pennants on the dirty beige wall stared back at him. Also missing, sports equipment, snapshots of girls, dirty clothes piled in heaps on the floor, the latest CD's, and happiness. His eyes took in the lumpy bed with a grey comforter balled up on it, a scarred maple dresser, and a cherry nightstand with a knob missing on the drawer, a bookcase full of books, and a black computer desk with a barely usable computer. One splintered leg of the desk was duct taped to make it stand upright. A loaded gun lay to the right of the computer. He thought, when he got old enough to leave, he would take only his books and computer. The rest was junk.

David crossed to the chair by the computer and sat down. When he hit the space bar, the cursor blinked back at him. He felt confident he had a good start to his story. Since it was due tomorrow, he regretted waiting so long to write it. The only reason he bothered to do the assignment was because of his tenth grade English teacher, Mrs. McCormick. She always told him he showed promise as a writer and that he needed to get his thoughts and feelings down on paper. Sometimes he felt like he had too many feelings, like right now.

He didn't know anything about the West, only what he pulled up on the computer. The assignment was to write a story from one of the many western songs they listened to in class. He selected his off the soundtrack from the old television western *Rawhide*.

Looking at what he wrote, he thought what was missing was the smell that came from being around cows all day. What did fresh cow dung smell like? He recalled with distaste the one time in his childhood that he went home with a classmate. David, uncomfortable because the friend lived on a farm, knew instantly he made a mistake. Being a city kid through and through, he knew nothing about country life and wasn't

sure he ever wanted to learn. There were no cows or horses, just hundreds of squealing, stinking pigs. It hadn't helped that he stepped in some pig manure up to his ankles and ruined his only tennis shoes. After that, he kept to himself. He didn't become a jock, or play in the band, or act like a cowboy, or a geeky nerd. He was a loner. True, he did hang out with a few people every now and then, mostly to smoke pot and forget his life for a while, but there was no one special person in his life he could really talk to.

He sat down and began to type.

Slim needed to quit worrying about Jack and Jennie. A gust of wind almost blew his sweat-stained Stetson off. The dust spiraled up and he could taste the grit in his mouth. As suddenly as the wind came, the whirlwind died down. Up until now, there hadn't been any wind all day. The temperature soared to the high nineties; the sun showed no mercy as it baked everything in its path. A lone buzzard circled overhead for a time, waiting for its chance to pluck the lifeless body of a jackrabbit off the trail. Steam rose from the rotting rabbit as Slim passed by. There was no other sign of life all day.

Slim thought the storm was going to ruin everything. Or was it? So absorbed was he in his thoughts, he didn't hear Jack ride up.

"Need a drink?" Jack asked.

Slim whirled around, going for his gun.

"Damn it. Don't you ever come up on me like that again or I'll shoot you."

"Put the gun away. You'll spook the cows with your craziness," Jack said. "Here, I know you're low on water. Have some of mine."

Damn him. Slim didn't want to be beholden to Jack for anything. But he was thirsty. If it wasn't so hot he would still have plenty of water.

"Don't mind if I do."

David's hands stopped on the keys. He heard a dull thud.

"Damn," he muttered. Getting up, he went in search of what caused the noise.

Cheryl lay on her side on the floor next to her bed. She was asleep, snoring heavily, and still hugging the now empty bottle.

David picked her up and threw her on the bed. He pried the bottle from her scaly cold hands and carried it to his room to be disposed of later. Returning, he ran water in the bathroom sink and wet a washcloth. How many times had he done this for her? He scrubbed the smudged mascara and thick makeup from her face, peeling off the layers of face paint, revealing a somewhat better looking version of his mom. He sprayed lemon scented Lysol over the room, even spraying some on Cheryl. David knew she would sleep like the dead for awhile.

He walked back to his room and threw himself on the bed. Barely missing the hat, he grabbed it, rose slightly and aimed at the trashcan. A dead ringer. He leaned back and rolled towards his wall. Plunging his hand between the bed and wall he pulled his stash free. He smoked a joint to loosen up the tension in his neck and shoulders. Nowadays, his upper body always felt tied in knots.

He must have dozed. It was no longer afternoon. The room lay deep in shadows of the coming night. Hearing a noise, he plunged his weed back into the crevice between his bed and the wall. David jumped up, raced to the window and cracked it open, letting

in the cold air. When he grabbed a can of Lysol, he heard the familiar sound of the kitchen door being wrenched open. Daddy was home.

Christened with the name of Richard Allan Benton, he was known by one and all as Dick. Big and burly, he weighed 350 pounds, the last thirty of which ballooned up and over his midsection like an out of control blimp. This fact didn't bother Dick at all. His thick muscular arms and thundering voice silenced any opposition to remarks made about his physique. He had thick, rope-like fingers that could squeeze a beer can quicker than the blink of an eye. Short in stature and brains, Dick always had to be bigger, meaner and tougher than anyone else. He even thought of himself as quite the ladies man. He never missed an opportunity to tell everyone that it had been he who chose to bed the local beauty queen. His quick as lightening temper got him into enough trouble that he had his own private cell down at the local jail. Anything at all was likely to set him off.

David remained silent. He could hear Dick lumber to the kitchen, and the opening and closing of the fridge. The sound of heavy feet trod by and a few moments later the sound of the TV being turned on. Channels were changed. Then the announcer of a football game could be heard. The belch of the big chair as Dick settled his enormous weight into it, the pop of a can, and then all was quiet, except for the occasional noise coming from the TV.

Maybe if he hurried David could get his story finished. He didn't want to disappoint Mrs. McCormick. She counted on him to show her what he could do.

He again started to type.

Water or not, Jack still wasn't marrying his sister. Not after all the time Slim had spent taking care of her, having the burden of becoming a man thrown too soon upon his young shoulders. He helped his mother to raise Jennie after his father ran off and left them with nothing. He got a job as a hired hand to an old man, who beat him almost every day. Built up rage at all he had had to endure bubbled to the surface.

Jack spoke up, breaking into Slim's thoughts. "I think that storm is going to bypass us. It seems to be moving to the east. The cows should be fine."

"Okay, but what about water for us?" Slim drained the last trickle into his parched mouth.

Dangerous thoughts crept into Slim's skull. Maybe he could talk Jack into riding ahead to a little spring and refilling their canteens. All he had to do was convince him to go. Once he was in front of the cows, Slim could fire a shot and start a stampede himself. Good-bye Jack. Jennie would be safe to marry someone more suited to a lady.

Jack again interrupted his thoughts. "There's a stream close by. Not enough water for all these cows, but its clear water. It'll fill the canteens. Before I go, let's find ourselves a place to bed down for the night."

Jack played right into his hands. Slim could always say later that thunder spooked the cows into a stampede.

"You haven't heard ten words I've said. What's eatin' you?" Jack asked as he scratched his belly.

"What? Yes I 'ave. Let's get moving if were gonna find a place before dark sets in," Slim said, spurring his horse to action.

As they rode, Slim saw not far away a small rocky outcrop that rose up from the desert floor. Perfect. It would be enough protection for him from any plunging hooves of scared cattle, thought Slim.

Slim said, "How about here?" Without waiting for an answer, he jumped down from his very frightened and skittish horse. Not more than a few feet away, a rattlesnake, coiled, was ready to strike.

Slim, forgetting the murderous thoughts he had just had of Jack, implored him with his eyes to do something about the snake.

Jack rode away, knowing no love was lost between the two of them. The way he figured it, any fool knows a gunshot will start a stampede.

David's hands froze. He heard movement.

Dick was coming down the hall. He could hear him pause, then he passed on by, going into the room he shared with Cheryl.

Soon, sickening grunts and squeaking springs made his stomach queasy. He put his headphones on and turned up the volume on his music.

David waited, the story forgotten. He rolled up the sleeves of his pink western shirt. Agitated and gritting his teeth, his hand reached for the lotion. Squirting some into his palm, he smoothed the cream up his thin arms. Circling motions, pouring more and more lotion onto his arms, he continued rubbing in the cream. He was afraid he would become coarse and fat and hairy like his Daddy.

After a long time, he took the earphones off and listened.

"Hey, prick face, come here," Dick yelled.

David trembled and left the safety of his room.

Dick had returned to the worn-out recliner. His shirt was unbuttoned, showing a huge tuft of dark hair spiraling out of the top. He had sweaty boxers on and sat meshed one with the chair. His beefy feet with their toenails loaded with grime were planted on the coffee table.

“Well lookee here. What’ve we got? A queer. Are you a fag? Boy, answer me.”

“No.”

“Well, you sure as hell look like a fag in that getup.”

“I’m not a fag,” David said with hands clenched close by his side.

“I say you are. Fagboy, get me something to eat.”

David turned and without speaking, walked to the kitchen. He grabbed the bread off the counter, opened the fridge, and removed some ham, cheese, mayo, and two beers. He made heaping sandwiches. He put the mayo back in the fridge and dumped the remains of a jar of sour pickles in a bowl. In another bowl he dumped red hot Cajun chips. When he had it all arranged along with plenty of napkins, he carried the tray into the living room and set it on the coffee table.

Dick took one look at the napkins and laughed. He threw them on the floor.

“Napkins are for sissies. Are you a sissy, boy?”

“No.”

“I think you are. Let me see you bow like a girl.”

David stood still.

Cheryl lurched down the hall. She must have found another bottle. The bells on her elf’s boots were rattling.

“Leave him be.”

“You shut your face up or I’ll backhand you,” Dick screamed.

Cheryl wove her way into the living room and sat down heavily on the sagging, red and purple flowered couch.

“I said let me see you bow like a girl. Do it,” Dick threatened.

David trembled. He didn’t know what he meant. He started to lean over.

Wham. A big beefy hand whacked him on the shoulders. Pain tore through him as he fell forward. His face landed on Dick’s feet.

Laughing, Dick said, “While you’re down there, kiss my feet, sissy boy.”

David attempted to rise.

Wham. Another whack on the shoulder. More pain, worse than before.

“Kiss’em or you won’t get up.”

David kissed his feet.

“Now get the hell out of my face, queer boy.”

David scrambled to his feet and ran to his room.

He turned the light out and sat in his chair and fingered Dick’s gun. He had taken it from the closet, cleaned it and then loaded it. The gun seemed to go so well with the rest of his outfit; its shiny surface glistened in the darkening room.

With tears streaming in a silent train down his cheeks, he gritted his teeth.

Agitated, his right hand reached again for the lotion. He hated dry ugly skin. Smearing some into his palm, he felt better as he made circling motions, rubbing in the cream. He vowed he would never ever be like his daddy.

“I’m going to teach that queer boy a lesson he’ll never forget.”

“Leave the boy be.”

David heard thunderous hooves in the hallway. Then the hiss of a snake with rattles shaking. Scared of getting bitten, he knew he had to act quickly. He picked up the gun and fired again and again through his bedroom door, stilling the roar of thunder and the hiss of the snake.

He laid the smoking gun on the table. Mrs. McCormick would be mad because he hadn't put anything in his story about smell. He turned to the computer, and began to type

Balanced on a thick limb of the mammoth elm, Satana awoke to two women's voices intruding upon his sluggish brain. For their sake, he hoped they didn't see him perched in the tree like a brightly colored parrot. He hadn't meant to sleep so long. The red jumpsuit and orange sandals he wore made him feel conspicuous, so he lay very still. The wrinkled older woman carried something boxlike. The road, little more than a path, divided a field of sweet alfalfa on one side, with tall orderly rows of corn on the other. Butterflies—yellows outlined in black, pale whites—flitted over alfalfa blooms, then sailed high above the corn.

The tree's branches swayed in the small breeze. Deeply-veined green leaves spread in every direction, rustling, as the entire canopy sloped downward toward the sandy ground. Inside the umbrella, cool air swirled up from the gnarled trunk to the highest twig. When the air reached the top, the July sun snatched it away and hurled it scorching, back to earth.

"There's the tree, Nicole. I told you when we saw the elm, the plum bushes would be just over that sand dune," Jean explained.

"Thanks for inviting me."

"Think nothing of it. We better rest. Can't wear you out before we start picking."

"Do we take the lunch hamper?" Nicole asked.

"No. I'll put it under the tree. The green briars would rip the basket."

They rested on flat log seats placed there by Jean's husband years ago, unaware they were watched by an escaped felon; unaware he meant them harm.

Satana wanted to overtake the women. Tired of their voices, of being quiet, and perching awkwardly on a branch, he wanted to jump them. He couldn't because pain from his ankle throbbed like a dentist's drill hitting an exposed nerve.

Instead, Satana thought how at twenty-four, he came to be in the middle of nowhere. His given name was Satana Angelino Parker, or SAP, as an unfortunate teenager once called him. He tried to kill the boy. Scared off by sirens, Satana ran home. When he asked his mother why he had a Spanish sounding name when they weren't Spanish, his mother only laughed and called him Satan's Angel. She turned away to inject methamphetamine into her arm, not caring that Satana was devastated by her laughter. Satana—twelve and strong for his age, beat her senseless, because she loved her drugs more than she loved him. Later, his mother turned him in. His teenage years were spent in the juvenile justice system. Invading his thoughts and grating on his shaky nerves, the younger woman spoke.

“What are sand plums and green briars?”

“I forgot you weren't from Oklahoma. It's plums that grow in sand near water, like ponds and rivers. The North Canadian River is close but you can't see it for all the dense undergrowth.”

“And green briars?”

Jean chuckled. “Those are the worst bushes I've ever seen. They grow close to the ground, their limbs covered in sharp thorns like shark's teeth, which rip open your skin if you get too close.”

“I'll watch out for those.”

From above, Satana feasted his eyes on the younger, pregnant blonde. He studied her intently as they continued to talk.

“It’s beautiful and peaceful here,” Nicole gushed.

“I know. I love farm life. Sometimes Oklahoma City seems far away, but the thirty minutes it takes is worth it, rather than listen to jarring city sounds everyday,” Jean responded.

“When Marshall’s unit shipped out from Tinker, I thought I couldn’t survive by myself, especially since my mother-in-law rushed to Kansas to be with her sick daughter. I’m just glad I met you at church”.

“When do you think she’ll be back?” Jean asked.

“Since my sister-in-law had an operation, Marshall’s mother stayed on to watch the three little boys.”

Jean patted Nicole’s arm. “We’ll have a good time today. Has the baby started kicking?”

“No. Marshall hates the thought that he’ll miss out on the pregnancy, the baby’s birth, and holding his child. He wouldn’t have reenlisted if he had known.”

“You’ll make it through. Lord knows I went through hard times when I had mine.

“I suppose. Soon, I’ll be a mom, but Marshall won’t be there,” Nicole replied, crying softly.

“Don’t fret. Everything will work out,” Jean said jumping up. “Let’s pick plums. When we get home we’ll make jam.”

Nicole wiped her eyes and got up. “Listen to those birds singing—no sadness there.”

“Indeed.”

Satana again attempted to blot out their voices by thinking about his past. From the juvenile detention center on, he knew he got meaner and stronger because no one ever dared to mess with him again. Chuckling to himself, Satana couldn't remember the number of robberies he had committed in different states. He took what he wanted when he wanted it. Convicted of the heinous rape of an elderly woman, beating her, robbing her and stealing her car, Satana was still mad because he got caught. Why hadn't he killed her with the hammer when he had the chance? Sentenced and awaiting transfer to McAlester State Prison, he fled the Oklahoma County Jail, killing a guard. Now, he had nothing to lose.

The two women grabbed the battered pails from the hamper.

“Don't worry about the cows bothering you. The bull is different. He doesn't like noise. I don't see him right now so we'll be fine.”

“Okay. They look so cute. I can't imagine them hurting us,” Nicole said.

They're so cute he mimicked the pregnant one silently. Cute, my ass, he thought. After struggling to cross the river, he didn't see the bull until it was almost on him, but he jumped the fence in time. Now, stuck in a tree was the last place he wanted to be.

Satana parted branches and watched, lizard like, as the women crawled through a barbed wire fence. Green briar bushes hugged wires and rotting posts. Others—deceiving sorcerers with many arms—lay in the sand, waiting. The women trudged on, skirting plants with red blooms. He hoped they experienced the same pain he felt earlier when his foot landed in one of the prickly plants. Tiny thorns pricked his foot and remained when his sandal came off as he ran from the river.

For hours, the only animals he saw were thirty-five white-faced red cows. He knew exactly how many, because—bored—he counted them. Being from New Jersey, he had never seen a cow up close. Their curved horns looked dangerous. He could easily kill any human that annoyed him, but these beasts scared him. Barely moving, their long tails flicked flies from their backs once in a while. The chewing never ceased, their teeth grinding together in a perpetual motion making his jaws ache.

Satana ate plums out of hunger, yet, he failed to understand why anyone willingly picked them. For his efforts, he had multiple scratches across his arms and stripes on his ankles still oozing blood. He squawked like a blue jay when the thorns tore his flesh. Everything around this damn place wore horns or thorns.

He untangled himself from the branch and tried jumping down. He felt a rip across his back as the jumpsuit caught on a limb. A sandal dropped off and hit the hamper. Satana fell to the ground hard. As he rolled over, his long, dirty hair hung in his eyes. He pushed it back, grabbing his ankle which throbbed to the tune of his curses.

“Damn, damn, damn. Hope it ain’t broken,” he said out loud.

Satana leaned his back against the tree and pulled the hamper toward him. He replaced the sandal on the pulsating foot. After no food in two days except for the hated plums, the smell that wafted from the hamper made his taste buds water.

Inside, he found delicate cuts of ham between thin slices of homemade bread, juicy dill pickles wrapped in wax paper, a huge chunk of cheddar cheese and two thick slices of apple pie. In one corner were two fruit jars and two cups. One jar contained milk, the other ice water. Between them lay a rolled tea towel. Satana flipped it open. Out clattered forks and a knife. He liked the razor sharp blade.

Positioning himself at an angle behind the elm, he could see when the women returned. Satisfied, he gorged himself on the food. After the milk disappeared in several swigs, he wiped his mouth on his sleeve, belching loudly. He propped the ice water against his swollen ankle. Could have put more ham in the basket, he thought. Still, it tasted better than the plums. His stomach felt better, though his rear end was puckered from the diarrhea the plums gave him.

Satana slapped at red ants traversing his legs as they sought a way up the tree. He ran his hands through a soft carpet of green leaves. All appeared to be connected to the same root system beneath the soil; the leaves were all in sets of three on the tangled vine. Maybe good smokes, he thought. He rolled some, licked the oily edges, and soon had a stack of cigarettes. He placed one in his mouth.

“What’s the use?” he said, spitting it out. “Ain’t got no light and them women don’t look like smokers.”

He had survived the concrete jungle with its pimps, whores and con men, but this country shit was different. First, he had been hunted by tracking dogs and then chased by the stupid bull. Luckily, the river threw the dogs off his scent.

Long before he saw them, he heard the women jabbering away. Why did women always run their mouths? None could ever shut up. They were especially annoying today because he had no alcohol or drugs to mellow him out. Irritated and edgy, he pulled a sturdy limb close. Fun he intended to have, but whether or not he killed them depended upon one of them leading him to her car.

Returning with their pails full of deep orangey-red plums, Nicole said, “Picking is fun, but I’m ready for some water.”

“All this effort will be worth it once you taste the jam.”

Noticing the over-turned hamper, “Jean, I think some animal beat us to the food.”

Satana stepped awkwardly from behind the tree holding the knife and the limb.

“Who you calling an animal?”

“What’s the meaning of this?” Jean demanded.

“Well now, ladies, why don’t you have a seat? I’ll ask the questions.”

Nicole started crying.

“Shut your hole up if you know what’s good for you,” Satana yelled.

Jean rubbed Nicole’s arm. “Honey, it’ll be all right.”

“Ain’t that touching. Get away from her or I’ll brain you.”

Jean let go, and they both sat on the logs.

“What do you want?” Jean asked.

“What did I say? I talk and you keep your trap shut.”

Jean, taking in his red jumpsuit, recognized him. “Let the girl go,” she demanded.

“That’s it bitch. I told you to cap it.” Satana swung the limb in a wide arc, connecting with Jean’s head. She fell motionless to the ground.

Nicole screamed, “You’ve killed her.”

“Shut up. Old bitches like her don’t die that easy.”

Nicole put her head in her hands and sobbed.

“Take your blouse off,” Satana demanded.

“What? No.” Nicole shrank back, half-falling, trying to get away from Satana.

Even with the injured ankle, Satana was fast. He forced the knife to Nicole’s throat and backed her against the elm. “Take off the blouse, bitch. Do it or I cut you.”

Tears obscuring her vision, Nicole shed her blouse as Satana watched.

“For a little thing, you’ve got good jugs on you.”

Nicole flinched as Satana touched her breasts.

“Sit down and keep quiet.”

Nicole sat.

Satana tore her blouse into long strips then flung them at her. “Tie up the old hag. Don’t try anything funny because I won’t have a problem sticking this knife in your gut.”

Quite scared and shaking, Nicole knelt beside Jean and pulled her legs together.

“Hurry the hell up,” Satana yelled.

“I’m trying,” Nicole cried. The feet tied, she moved to Jean’s hands. Crying softly, she bound them.

Satana had trouble focusing. He rubbed his eyes and they stung. Something was affecting his vision. His mouth itched; the more he scratched, the more his lips burned. His foot throbbed.

“Girlie, I think it’s time me and you had us a little fun before the old hag wakes up. Course, maybe you’d get turned on to have her watch.”

Nicole begged, “Please don’t hurt me.”

Satana mimicked, “Please don’t hurt me.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Uh, uh, uh. What did I say? No questions. Get on your knees now or I’ll stick you with the knife.”

Scared for herself and her baby, Nicole obeyed.

As Satana leaned over Nicole, he heard dogs barking across the river.

“Shit.” He placed his weapons beside him. Straining to free himself from the jumpsuit with one hand, he ripped Nicole’s clothing with the other.

Nicole sobbed. “Pleeeeeease don’t. Pleeeeeease.”

The dogs, barking furiously, sounded closer. Satana stopped mauling Nicole. He heard a thundering noise behind him. Satana barely saw the bull as it pawed the ground kicking up a cloud of dust. Charging, his horn caught Satana’s buttocks and flung him skyward.

Nicole who was pushed forward, fell on her side. Sobbing, she gathered the remains of her clothing together.

The tracking dogs and handlers arrived as Satana fell to the earth with a thud. He felt a snap as pain exploded in his back.

The dogs ran to him barking furiously.

Satana couldn’t make his arms move to push the dogs away.

“Get the damn dogs off me,” he managed to ratchet out in a thin voice.

Shortchanged

“Jonas Jackson, if I light that pilot your house’ll blow up,” said the propane truck driver—combination handy-man Sam, as he wrote out the bill for propane.

“But, Sam, there’s no hot water. Girls only like fellows who smell good. I sure as hell can’t smell right if I can’t take a bath.” Jonas always used a lot of cologne, aftershave and hair gel after a shower. All the girls at Dance Pavilion told him they loved his sexy smell.

Old, twisted with arthritis, Sam tucked his arms into his bib overalls like a skinny rooster. He guffawed. “Got you another hot date?” Sam asked, poking Jonas in the side.

“Maybe I do.”

When Jonas failed to say anything else, Sam said, “Lemme show you the problem.” They made their way across the yard, past two derelict cars surrounded by weeds. A wasp, flying out of a pile of rusty junk in the defunct flower bed, dived for Sam’s head. He ducked. “Damn wasps,” Jonas said, as he swatted the wasp from the air with his hat, his boot finishing the job.

They stepped into the kitchen. “Look here, tank ain’t ventilated right. Someone sure has gone and shoved that vent pipe straight in the top of your tank. See that soot all piled up. I betcha that old tank is full of it,” Sam counseled.

Jonas’s red hat—“More Pawn \$’s for You”—lay crushed in one hand as Jonas—frustrated, ran the other through his thinning hair. He kept the ever-increasing bald spot from showing by doing a comb-over. “Come on, Sam. Do me a favor. Light the pilot

this time. You know old Mrs. Battles gives me shit every time something else goes wrong with her crappy house.”

“Can’t do it. With the soot and smell it’ll blow.”

“Hell, at least there’d be plenty of wood chips to build a fire,” Jonas reasoned.

“This here is serious business,” Sam continued.

“You’re damn right, it’s serious business. Ever taken a cold shower?”

“The pilot wouldn’t stay on for your central heat neither, not that you’ll be a needing it yet, anyways.”

Jonas thought to himself, not a chance, with it being a hundred damn degrees outside.

Sam moved over to the stove, shifted from one foot to the other, and peered at the white piles of ash corroded around the burners. “Jonas, about your stove. I sure hate to tell you, but you’ll need to get her replaced, too.”

“You’re telling me I don’t have any hot water, or a stove to cook on?” Jonas asked.

“Yessir, that’s just about it,” responded Sam showing his nicotine-stained teeth.

Jonas felt like throwing himself on the kitchen floor and having a fit, but the curled-up pieces of linoleum might cut his face. He thought his slight 150 pound frame way too handsome to risk a cut from the dirty floor.

“Let me draw you a picture to give your landlady. Thataway, she’ll know what needs done,” Sam suggested.

Jonas handed Sam a wadded up napkin he'd grabbed from the trash. He watched as Sam straightened it, dug a stub of a pencil out of his overalls, licked the end of it, and then, with a concentrated effort, struggled to draw. Jonas fumed. Sam frowned.

Sam, handing the finished sketch to Jonas, said, "I heard she was trying to get this place rented real quick. You're just lucky there wasn't powerful trouble afore now."

"Yeah, lucky me. If I had no electrical or plumbing problems, if I had no broken window in the back bedroom, if I had no mold under the bathroom sink, I'd be set."

"You'd be wise to watch your mold. I heard on *60 Minutes* it was a might dangerous for a body," Sam said.

Jonas watched, all right. With the bathroom wall on the other side of the closet, he worried about the mold coming through and getting on the snakeskin boots he'd won in a poker game. Those boots, his pride and joy, spoke volumes with the ladies.

"I ain't got much work this week. Just call me and I'll come put in your new tank," Sam said as he trailed sand out the kitchen door.

"Thanks. Good night." Thanks for freaking nothing, Jonas said to himself, as he kicked the door shut.

Early the next morning, armed with the napkin from the trash that had Sam's scribbles on it, he dressed in his best wranglers, green, plaid shirt with the pearls on the snaps and his snakeskin boots. As a pawn shop dealer who traded in the cast offs of the rich and not so rich, he felt confident about sweet-talking the tight-fisted Mrs. Battles into replacing the hot water tank. Jonas took a look in the hallway's cracked mirror, liking the spit and polish person staring back at him. He clasped a heavy silver bracelet adorned

with turquoise nuggets on his wrist, adjusted the bolo tie with matching nugget, and admired himself once more in the mirror before strutting out to his '76 Chevy truck. He jumped in, ground the gears as he sped out of the sandy drive, and ran down a rabbit crossing the road. Unable to roll down the driver's side window, he drove fast, cursing both the heat and Mrs. Battles.

Upon arrival at Mrs. Battles' house, his shirt soaked and his temper rising, he threw his body against the door three times before it popped open. After spilling out onto the ground, Jonas picked himself up and looked around to make sure no one had seen him fall. Mrs. Battles sure did have a nice place. No patchy grass filled with sandburs, but lush green turf. The paint on her house was smooth and creamy white, not peeling like his. Even the damn birds seemed happier here, chirping away.

He walked up the manicured drive to her front door. After repeatedly ringing her doorbell, it finally dawned on him she might not be home. Before he could turn to leave, her dog bit him and wouldn't let go. Jonas screamed as he heard the rip in his jeans, felt the burning pain in his leg. Without thinking, he reached down and whacked the dog with a karate chop to the head. When the dog released its clenched jaws, he kicked it half-way across the yard. Its pitiful cries could still be heard as he jumped in the truck, gunned the motor and raced out of the drive. It took five stitches at the ER, a prescription of painkillers, and a stop by the liquor store before he felt better.

For two days Jonas suffered. He felt too out of it to function, except to gobble huge quantities of pain pills and chase them down with whiskey. On the third morning, he decided to call Mrs. Battles before taking on her dog again. When he got her on the phone, she rattled on and on before he got her to agree that she would be home. After

hanging up, he struggled to pull on his next best pair of blue jeans over the gash on his leg. Failing to get the antibiotics and settling for Jack Daniels instead, he knew the red streaks spreading out from the wound spelled trouble. He would make a trip to the pharmacy for the antibiotics, but only after he cornered Mrs. Battles about the hot water tank. The third pain pill of the morning, a shot of Jack Daniels to ease it down, Jonas, then ready, limped to his truck. With no food in his belly, the stale smell of old French fries hit him when he opened the pickup door. The rancid grease made his stomach turn over. With his right hand holding the sack away from him, he chunked it out the passenger side window, when he turned onto the highway.

Once again in her drive, he looked around—no dog. Jonas took a big swig of mouthwash, swished it around to hide the smell of liquor, and then spat it out as he jumped from his truck. Throwing the empty bottle into the bed of the truck, he pulled a ragged bit of tarp over the crushed beer cans and assorted junk. Mrs. Battles didn't like a drinking man. No use buying more trouble.

She came to the door, stepped outside, took one look at him and started bawling like an old cow in heat. Jonas had never received that reaction from a woman before, old or otherwise.

Trying to be charitable, but not really caring, Jonas was unsure of what to do. He blurted out, "What's wrong?"

"I just got home from my sister's and found my little dog dead under the rose bushes."

"You don't say. That's too bad," Jonas said, rubbing his now swollen leg. "What do you think happened to it?"

“I don’t know. But, you must help bury Doodles,” said Mrs. Battles.

“What?”

“My dog. Doodles. I told you when you called.”

Jonas hadn’t listened to her drone on. Like hell he’d bury her dog. All he wanted was hot water and a good soak for his leg, now throbbing like a jackhammer attacking a cement slab. Ice water wouldn’t do: his kojos would freeze off. He pulled the napkin from his shirt pocket.

Before he could say a word, Mrs. Battles grabbed the napkin and blew her nose loudly into it, spraying everything within a five foot radius. “You’re too kind,” she said. Thanks for being so accommodating. When you called, I knew I could count on you to bury Doodles for me.”

Jonas, too stunned to say anything, stood mute. He could only stare at the wet blob of a napkin clutched in Mrs. Battle’s plump hand.

“Get started digging Doodles’ grave.” At the mention of the deceased, she broke out into a loud braying sob, again pawing at the soaked napkin.

“Fuckin’ dog,” Jonas said under his breath.

“What did you say?” Mrs. Battles asked.

“Lincoln Logs. Your dog was long and brown like a Lincoln Log.” Damn, for an old broad, she could still hear pretty well. She could probably track like a coon dog, too, Jonas thought.

“I don’t know about any logs, but my Doodles was the sweetest little Dachshund, always protective of me. Now he’s in doggy heaven.” With the napkin dripping in her

meaty hand, she broke out in a fresh wave of squawks, her face contorted into a blob of quivering jelly.

Jonas thought that explained why the little, log-rolling, brown ball of shit attacked him. Those dogs were known to be territorial and have a bad disposition around strangers. He felt his only hope of ever getting hot water meant he had to appease her and bury the damn dog. Gain her sympathy and he might yet have hot water before winter set in. So much for the description on the napkin, though. Maybe he could remember enough of what Sam said to explain the situation.

Taps rang out on the still, dry air.

“What in the name of Jesus is that?” Mrs. Battles asked as she crossed herself while looking frantically around.

“It’s my cell phone. Sure has got a nice sound to it,” Jonas said. He always did like trumpets. Jonas turned away to answer the phone.

He finished the call and pocketed the cell phone. “Marva Jean is some gal. The quiet ones are. . . .” Jonas stopped talking when he noticed the thundercloud rolling down Mrs. Battle’s forehead.

“Mr. Jackson, are you referring to The Marva Jean Bellamy that works in the mobile library van?” asked Mrs. Battles.

“Yes. Do you know her?”

“She’s my grand niece.”

Hell, he should have known something wasn’t right. The thundercloud had turned black with fury. Any minute he expected to see a tornado come roaring out of her flared

nostrils. “Oh, well, ah, Marva Jean is a straight arrow all the way. She’s even got me to reading books.”

The look Mrs. Battles turned on Jonas would have consumed him had she been a dragon. “You’d best commence to digging, Mr. Jackson. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll stick to the books. Don’t try and corrupt a sweet girl like Marva Jean or you’ll have me to deal with.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jonas said. To himself, she’s sweet all right. He couldn’t wait to get Marva Jean between the sheets again. Every time he plugged her he would think of Mrs. Battles denying him his right to hot water.

Trying to get back on her good side, Jonas said, “Since what we’re doing in burying Diddles is so personal and all, why don’t you call me Jonas? And your first name is?”

Mrs. Battles expelled each word carefully through clenched teeth. “It’s Doodles and my name to you is Mrs. Battles. You should know your place, Mr. Jackson.”

“My place, my place?” Remembering in time before he cut loose with a string of curses that would make an angel blush, he concentrated on the reason for coming to her house. Jonas stuck the shovel into the dirt to keep from hitting Mrs. Battles over the head with it. The thunk of metal hitting something hard made his brain ache and his eyes water. The hot water didn’t matter at the moment. He had to get out of burying her damn dog.

Mrs. Battles pulled an orange and purple crocheted shawl from her shoulders. “Mr. Jackson, help me wrap Doodles up. He loved the softness; this shawl was his favorite.”

Jonas walked over to the cardboard where Doodles lay. The stench was almost unbearable. He held his nose as he lifted the cardboard. Green, bottleneck flies buzzed over the dearly departed. One flew straight for his head. He dropped the cardboard, backed up, and almost fell.

“Mr. Jackson, what is wrong with you?”

Jonas thought, maybe the old witch wouldn't make such a good coon tracker, after all, if she couldn't smell this shit.

“Your dog is kinda ripe. Did you see how bloated he is. If we move him, he's gonna blow.”

“But Mr. Jackson, I can't leave Doodles here. He needs a decent burial. I promised him I would wrap him in my favorite shawl when it came time for his crossing over.”

Crossing over, my ass, Jonas thought. The damn dog had already leaked into the ground. Her rose bushes ought to really put out next year.

“Mr. Jackson, you must help me.”

“Have you got any iced tea?”

“What has iced tea got to do with burying Doodles?” Mrs. Battles asked.

With another lie forming on his lips, Jonas had a plan to end this charade. He thought for a second before he said, “Well, Mrs. Battles, I thought if you wanted me to, I could take care of the burying and you wouldn't have to witness the gory details. Later, you could come out when I got done and say a few words over Diddles—over the dog just like they do for humans. Then you might want to place a rose on his grave.”

“Why, Mr. Jackson, I didn’t know you could be so charitable. I’ll go in and make some tea right now. With that, the over-sized blimp took off.

“Mrs. Battles, one more thing. Once I dig the grave, the dirt will settle. Is that gate to the back pasture locked?”

She stopped and turned around. “No. Why?”

“I thought I would shovel a little extra dirt into my truck to mound up the grave. You know, make it all proper like a regular burial.”

“Help yourself, Mr. Jackson.”

Jonas sure would help himself. He had no intention of standing in this heat and digging a grave in hard clay for a dog that he had killed. Most people don’t get ripped off by me unless they deserved it; only a few of them do. Wheeling and dealing with the public sure took a toll on him. Since he prided himself on giving as good as he got, Jonas couldn’t understand why he got such a raw deal on renting her house. With business so slow right now, he couldn’t walk away. Mrs. Battles had him by the short hairs and he knew it. She either needed to repair his house or he needed to give up and find a way to move on.

Jonas waited until Mrs. Battles had waddled into the house. After peeking into the living room window and determining that she had eased herself into a huge recliner, he knew he would have plenty of time to dispose of the dog his way. Jonas backed his truck up to where the dead dog lay. He lowered the lift on the truck and used the shawl to drag the bloated dog onto the cardboard. Then it became easy to slide the cardboard onto the lift. With that done, he threw the shovel in the back of the truck and headed to the pasture.

He intended to throw the dog out, but a deep gully appeared beyond the first rise. With the truck backed up to the edge, he hopped out to dump the stinking dog. As he attempted to scoop the cardboard into the gully, the dog made a gurgling sound and then exploded, sending a vile smell back into the air as the dog landed at the bottom. He jumped back, but not before the worst of the remains splattered his jeans.

“Damn dog. Cost me two pair of good Wranglers.” He quickly stripped the jeans off and threw them on top of the rotten dog. Then he threw some pieces of junk he had in the truck over that. “Good riddance.”

Always looking ahead, he grabbed an old pair of jeans from the truck and pulled them on. They had come in handy a few times when an unsuspecting husband came home early while he was diddling the little wife, and he had had to make a quick retreat. Jonas straightened the creases out of the legs. He figured Mrs. Battles wouldn't notice anyway. With several huge scoopfuls of loose dirt onto the lift, he then headed back to the house.

The ground, where he struck the shovel earlier, was full of water. A lot of it had drained away from the fake grave. Ignoring the ooze, it didn't take him long to mound up the dirt. Looks good enough, he thought. He knocked on her door a couple of times before Mrs. Battles heard him because she had the volume on the television up so loud. When she came to the door, her blotched face and red eyes told him she had probably been crying really hard. Feeling bad, but only for a fleeting moment, he showed her the grave. After viewing it and saying a long prayer, she placed two American Beauty roses on the mound.

“Thank you, Mr. Jackson, for burying Doodles. Come on in. You can wash up at the sink. I have tea and some fresh lemon cake for you.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” When washing his hands, the water shot out in the sink in short static bursts. He sat, munched on lemon pound cake, and gulped down three glasses of iced tea, before he felt somewhat refreshed from all his effort in getting rid of the problem—her damn dog. Now he believed she owed him, and she might finally replace his hot water tank. Before he could say anything about it, she jumped up when the water started bubbling on the stove. As she attempted to run cool water from the tap to fill the tea jar, the pressure fizzled out and the water stopped.

“Mr. Jackson, you didn’t by chance strike the water pipe when you were digging Doodles’ grave, did you?”

He looked up, his face gray. “Wha...” was all he could mutter.

“You did, didn’t you? I’m going to call Sam the combination man and see if he can run over and check it out. In the meantime, I think you had better dig up Doodles. He’ll have to be moved.”

Unconscious of what he was doing, Jonas half-rose out of his chair, his fork held in his fist, like a knife about to be thrown.

Swing Shift Crisis

Mandy returns from taking the personal clothing of the new inmates to Property where it will be stored until the prisoners are released. She uses the over-sized jail key to open the door to the women's holding unit at the Oklahoma County Jail. Ahead, the hallway wall—dirty, stained, reeking with an odor that is impossible to cleanse, is testimony to the many lives passing through each day. Listening, Mandy hears nothing. Good, she thinks. She desperately needs a quiet night to sort out her personal life, which seems to be going to hell.

She proceeds down the hallway to the staff bathroom on the left. With each step the pain from her bruised rib is killing her. Mandy enters the bathroom and gives a quick look into the chipped mirror. A sad-faced young woman of thirty-one stares back—worry lines cutting deeply into her forehead. She gently touches her right cheek, intent on checking the extra-heavy makeup. The bruises do not show, but the pain lets her know they're there every time she speaks. Pulling a stray wisp of limp brown hair back from her face, she exits. In the glassed-in guard station on her right, she glances at the temperature gage—sixty degrees. Too damn cold, again.

Mandy passes two individual holding cells on the left, the first one empty with an open door, the second with the door closed, the latter currently housing a juvenile who is away at court. She continues past the open dressing area, stops at a large windowed holding cell on the right. She observes seven women awaiting cell assignment. The

women are lying in various positions on the benches surrounding the grimy walls. Most have their arms pulled in the top of the orange shirt they're all required to wear. The women, who can't take the cold, who complain bitterly, who do not understand rules, are quiet for the moment. The peace will not last. Mandy wishes she has a recording to play for all the times she has recited the rules—no blankets in the holding cells.

It's the same every night. As soon as they notice she is back, they will again try her patience. The damn men running this place have no clue to the psyche of a woman. Mandy learns quickly in this job that if the women are warm, they bitch less, they are more passive, and they cause fewer problems. If she had her way, the women would receive the coarse blankets as soon as they were dressed out in orange.

A receiver is off hook on one of the three pay phones in the cell. Mandy doesn't care because the phone is out of order. No amount of reporting the problem has gotten it fixed. The only time it's a hassle is when the cell has a lot of women wanting their three minute phone call to the outside world; then fights break out, because the women are like children who have never learned to take turns. The victor is usually the biggest and meanest of the lot.

Mandy sighs and starts to turn away but turns back when something catches her eye. A huge cockroach, antennae twitching, runs from a hole in the wall to an abandoned bologna sandwich. The woman closest to the cockroach, has her back to Mandy. She is either asleep or indifferent to her surroundings. The cockroach, undeterred, runs over her hand and climbs the half-eaten sandwich, where he stands as lookout. Others, evidently feeling safe, scurry from the hole to other sandwiches and other women. Disgusted, Mandy turns away, having seen enough.

She walks toward the end of the hall to the last single cell on the left. This cell houses only those kept separate from the main population, because of threats to themselves or others, or because the inmate is a material witness in a pending case, or because the inmate needs protection due to being related to someone on staff. Mandy moves a gray rolling cart that stands in front of the door. The cart contains broken orange sandals: sizes eleven, twelve, and thirteen. They are compliments of the male guards who bring supplies from the basement. They refuse to supply the women's area with smaller sandals in case they run low. The women complain every day about the huge sizes.

Mandy peers through the tiny window of the gray metal door. She observes a lone woman sitting on her metal bunk devoid of mattress. Not allowed the orange outfit of the jail, or any underwear, the large black woman is holding her paper gown in front of her sagging breasts, trying to shred it. Unable to book her because of her threats of suicide to Medical, the woman is placed here to calm down. It doesn't appear to be working.

“Quit tearing up your gown. Put it back on.”

The woman reacts by jumping up and slamming herself against the door.

Unprepared for the assault, Mandy jumps back, even though she knows the metal door is protection enough. I can't have her thinking I'm scared of her, she thinks. Mandy immediately thrusts her nose to the window again.

“Put the gown on.”

The woman, yelling obscenities at Mandy crawls under the shelf-like desk, dragging the gown with her. She resembles a snarling gargoyle. She continues to mouth

a mixture of unrecognizable words with obscenities, their sound muted by the heavy door.

‘Great,’ Mandy thinks. I always get the crazy ones on my shift. At least the woman is talking, however crazy she acts.

Mandy pulls a pen from her black shirt and signs the sheet on the door indicating she has observed the suicidal woman moving about. Every fifteen minutes she will repeat this procedure. As far as Mandy is concerned, she isn’t going to make her wear the gown. Soon she will be moved upstairs to the Medical Unit and out of her life.

To return to the guard station, Mandy again has to pass the large holding cell. She sees the women are now up and standing on the benches. They stare at her and beat on the glass as she passes by. The muted voices are once again bitching about the cold. Mandy grabs the keys from her belt and unlocks the cell door. An inmate, peering through the window in the door almost falls upon her.

“Quit beating on the glass and get off the benches.” She waits until they comply.

“We’re freezing,” an inmate, who is spokesperson for the rest, says, wiping her watery eyes with the back of her hand.

“No blankets in the holding cells, ladies. I’m expecting a phone call from Classification with your cell numbers. All of you will be leaving here shortly,” Mandy says. She shuts and locks the door before any of them can reply. She doesn’t believe what she has just told them because the people who work in Classification routinely are pulled to work on other floors. In fact, that is what is causing the backup today. By the time the women do reach their permanent cells, they are really pissed off and ready to fight.

Mandy turns toward the guard station. Through the wide window she notices the grey, dingy bras, panties, and socks in milk crates turned sideways along the back wall. She hates the idea of sharing her space with this depressing sight. She does laugh, though. Ninety-five percent of the women, once they realize they are required to wear the offending garments, do the same thing. They hold the items away from them as they step across the hall to the dress out area, step in one of three open shower stalls, turn away from Mandy, undress, and proceed to turn the panties wrong-side out before donning them. Open methamphetamine sores around their genitals area notwithstanding, they consider themselves safe from any lurking disease.

The phone rings. Mandy goes inside the stuffy room, her handcuffs pressing into her sore side. She answers and finds out it is her current boyfriend. She looks up and through the glass and notices an inmate at the tiny window of the holding cell door mouthing something to her. She raises her arm to tell her to wait a minute.

Mandy's boyfriend Kyle is busy informing her that he can't be there to pick her up when she gets off work tonight. He is going to play cards at the house of a friend and it wouldn't look right for him to leave in the middle of a good game. He is sorry he had to hit her. She just needs to understand that she shouldn't provoke him to violence. He still loves her and is willing to work on their relationship if she will. He wants her to be outside later and give him some card-playing money and a little extra for gas for her car. Then dial tone.

Choices. That one word comes to mind as Mandy ponders her current situation. She knows she needs to make some changes in her life with regard to her boyfriend. She remembers the first time she met him. He was funny, always ready with a joke, always

an uplifting word for her when she was down. She believed at the time he would be a perfect foil for her usually serious nature. He was also very good with her kids. They liked him a lot. Then he lost his job, got in with the wrong crowd, and started doing drugs. The first time he hit her, she was too stunned to move or say anything. Afterward, he was so contrite, truly sorry for what he'd done. But, as time passed, it became easier for him to take out his frustration and anger on her. The only thing he's ready with now is his fist. His attitude has affected her relationship with her two kids, especially her daughter.

Mandy wonders how she will get home. She then tries to call her teenage daughter's cell. It goes to voice mail. Her sixteen year old daughter Tonda must still be mad because Mandy wants her to pick up her little brother Tyler from football practice. Even though he's twelve and big for his age, Mandy doesn't want him walking home in the dark. Tonda is probably running around again, not home doing her homework like she should. At a loss as to how to curb Tonda's roaming when she's working, Mandy frowns. She suspects that Tonda is taking up with her old drinking gang again. She prays that Tonda isn't doing drugs, and that Kyle isn't providing them to her and her friends.

Something is wrong. Mandy can feel it. It's too quiet. Realizing she is still holding the receiver, she throws it towards the desk and takes off at a run, her jail keys jangling at her waist. As she reaches the end cell, she dreads what she knows she is going to find. Her fears are confirmed when she looks in. The woman is stretched out naked in the middle of the floor, her ears, nose and mouth stuffed with pieces of gown.

Several strips are wound around her neck and tied in a big knot at her throat. The rest is like confetti around her old flabby body, which is not moving.

“Damn, damn, damn,” Mandy screams out loud. She rips the keys from her belt, manages to get the door open, all the while trying to get the front desk on her radio.

“Women’s holding, ASAP, end cell.” She again repeats the message.

Dropping to her knees beside the woman, she tears the wadded up paper from the woman’s ears and nose. The wad in her mouth is huge but she is able to pull it free, too. She uses both hands to rip the gown from her neck. The woman starts to moan just as Mandy hears many feet rushing down the hall. The small cell is soon full of medical personnel, other guards, even the lieutenant. While a nurse takes the woman’s vital signs, Mandy steps clear of the cell. She is no longer needed. The woman will be transported to Medical on the thirteenth floor and watched around the clock. An incident report awaits Mandy’s attention, but first, she goes to the bathroom and throws up, hurting her already aching jaw. She again checks her makeup before leaving.

The lieutenant passes by. He slaps her on the shoulder saying, “Good work, Washington. Bring me that report as soon as you’re done.” The rest of the crew is right behind him with the nurse pushing the woman in a restraining chair. The black woman is silent but alive. Though she is dressed in orange, the uniform will be taken from her as soon as she reaches her new cell. She will be given nothing—no clothes, blanket, or mattress, for seventy-two hours. The jailhouse psychiatrist will visit with her tonight and probably prescribe something to sedate her.

Mandy grabs the broom and dustpan from the bathroom and goes to the end cell, where she sweeps up the debris. She never saved a person’s life before and shakes to

think of how quickly a living breathing person's life can be extinguished forever. She wants to tell the woman that she can live through anything, that nothing is worth committing suicide over, but then thinks maybe she is not the best judge of humanity, after all.

She thinks back to when she was eighteen, how she met the most caring, loving man in the world. He was twenty-six, worked for O G & E and ached for a family. He immediately accepted Tonda like she was his. They had a whirlwind three week courtship and were married. Mandy became pregnant with Tyler right away and when he was born, she thought her life was heaven everyday. Then one day her husband's boss showed up to tell her something terrible had gone wrong and her husband had been electrocuted while repairing a downed line. Spiraling out of control, Mandy considered suicide but knew she couldn't do that to her two kids who depended on her. This woman, when she is able, will probably curse her for stopping the suicide.

Finishing the cleanup, Mandy moves to the big holding cell and opens the door. Strangely, the women who observed the whole thing from their window are silent. There isn't much to say. Mandy states, "She's going to be okay. I'm going to check on your cell status right now." They only stare back, for once mute.

Mandy closes the door and walks stiffly to the guard station, her side throbbing with each step she takes. Classification is already aware of the incident that has just taken place for news travels fast. They also miraculously have the cell numbers she needs. After recording numbers next to the inmate's names in the log, she thanks the man and hangs up. She records them again on the paperwork to be held in Intake and also on the sheet that will accompany them upstairs. Next, she dials the fourth floor

where the women are held and is told they have a fight in progress and it will be a while before they can come get the inmates. Mandy next draws out the incident form from the shelf and proceeds to write down step-by-step exactly what happened earlier. She is still amazed that she found the woman in time. She hopes never to have another encounter like tonight but realizes the futility of such thoughts.

For a time all is quiet. Mandy knows that is the nature of being a detention officer; either it is too busy or too slow. It is for the most part a lonely, solitary job. Right now she has the much needed time to reflect on her own predicament.

She again thinks about Kyle. She tries to convince herself he isn't bad, not really, only when he does drugs. When he isn't using, he seems more like the fun-loving person she first knew, though no one will ever take the place of her husband. Maybe that is the problem. Kyle is never going to measure up to him, no matter how much she wants him to. As far as she can tell, it is the amount of drugs Kyle uses that makes him into the distorted creature she doesn't know. He scares her with his growing need. Nothing seems sacred to him. Things begin to disappear around her house, and she suspects he is hawking them for drug money. His fists keep her from speaking out too much, but she knows that for her and her children's sake she has to somehow sever the tie with him.

Jolted from her thoughts, Mandy hears footsteps and shouting. Two guards are half-carrying an Indian woman who is cursing them at the top of her lungs. One guard is a husky black girl named Trixie who hates whites and thinks everyone but herself is racist; the other is a very short, chunky toad of a man named Clay, who thinks meanness makes up for his lack of height. Normally, it would be two females doing the escort, but jail is again short-handed because the other female guard called in sick.

“Put me down, you fuckers. Put me down.”

They ignore her.

“Put me down. Fuckers. I didn’t do nothing. You crazy bastards, let go of me.”

Mandy steps to the door of the guard station. “I’ve got her.”

“You sure?” Clay asks in an ‘I don’t believe your voice.’

“Yeah, she’s fine,” Mandy replies. She knows these two particular guards have sadistic tendencies. She believes they get off on how many times they can strong-arm an inmate. Without waiting for them to leave, she turns her attention to the inmate.

“Step up here to the door, and I’ll get some information from you,” Mandy says in a respectful tone.”

“I fucking didn’t do nothing fucking wrong.”

“I’m sure you didn’t. I need your name.”

“It’s Susie Yellowbear.”

“Okay, Susie. I see you are wearing blue jeans and a green tee shirt. No bra, right.

“With these small tits, who needs a bra?”

“I see. Are you wearing any panties?”

“Why do you need to know that?”

“Susie, I’m logging all the information on this sheet. It will remain with your personal property until you are released.”

“Okay, no panties.”

“And no shoes either, I see.”

“No, those mothefuckers wouldn’t let me get my shoes. They said I was drunk and trespassing. I ain’t drunk. Now I got no shoes,” Susie said.

“Well, sign this sheet acknowledging I have marked all your belongings down correctly.”

While she labors to sign her name, Mandy, grabs a size 32 bra, small panties, and tube socks from the crates. She hands these to Susie and escorts her across the hall, the smell of rancid mouthwash emanating from the woman’s body. This one is too poor to afford even the cheapest beer, she thinks.

“Go in one of the stalls and take everything off. Put the underwear on. I’ll get you a set of clothes.”

The woman, now completely meek, strips. Her shoulder bones poke out from her thin frame. Scabby half-healed sores dot her thin body. Mandy guesses the bites are from mosquitoes, that she’s a transient that’s been living in the woods, and that she got caught when she lingered too long on someone’s private property. She’ll get clean clothes, a sandwich, and a chance to sleep off her drunk. She’ll return to her world only to be brought in again before the week is out. It is a cycle for which there seems to be no answers.

Mandy dons protective gloves, then hands Susie the orange top and pants which she puts on. She has her drop her personal clothes into a clear bag which she then seals. She leads her to the bin of over-sized shoes and lets her pick what she wants. The tiny woman has trouble walking in the sandals and almost trips. Mandy opens the holding cell.

The woman, before going in says, “Thanks for being nice. You’re not like those other motherfuckers.”

“Take a seat. Ladies, give her some room. I’ll get you a cell as soon as I can.”

Mandy closes and locks the door. She goes to the office and dials her home. After almost giving up on it being answered, Tonda finally picks up. “Yeah,” she says.

“I’m reminding you to pick up your brother from practice. I tried to call earlier. Now you’ll have to hurry. Don’t give me any trouble. I’m having a bad night as it is.”

Silence.

“I may also need you to pick me up after work,” Mandy says and then holds the phone away from her ear. Tonda explodes with some choice words for Mandy’s boyfriend.

“I don’t have time to listen. Be home when I call back later,” Mandy says and hangs up.

With the incident report in one hand and the bag of clothes in the other, Mandy retrieves her purse from under the counter with her foot. Not allowed to have a cell phone on the premises because an inmate with a cell phone could stage a breakout and call in reinforcements, she has taking a chance in bringing hers in tonight. She knows she could be searched during lineup, made to spill the contents of her purse on the table, be written up, and have her cell phone confiscated. She’s thankful she isn’t caught.

Mandy locks the main cell door to women’s holding and heads to the front. She places the report on the lieutenant’s desk, drops the clothes off at Property after making a copy for the inmate’s file and continues out the sally port slider doors. Here, she can

enjoy a smoke and wait for her boyfriend to show up in her car. She has exactly forty-five minutes for dinner, which she is taking early because of him.

After chain-smoking for thirty-seven minutes, she hears her car. With a smug look on his face, he roars into the parking lot, laughing and pretending to hit her. Sometimes, Mandy wishes he would run her over, but not really. She is just tired and not thinking clearly. The car is loaded with his drinking, card-playing buddies. He jumps out, grabs her and whirls her around, hurting her shoulder and side. His buddies are all laughing; already well on their way to being quite drunk.

He takes the money from her hand, frowns. "What's this?" You know this is chickenshit. Where's the rest?"

Mandy can tell by his anger if she doesn't give him more, he will hurt her. She reaches into her purse for her billfold. Before she can get it, he rips the purse from her and grabs all the money from the inner pocket. He throws the purse back at her and says, "You were trying to hold out on me. You know I don't like it when you act that way. I'll take care of you later. Give me a kiss," he says pulling her roughly to him and bending her right arm back. Mandy knows better than to cry out, for he will hurt her more, so she endures his tough mouth on hers. Then he's gone, squealing out of the lot.

Mandy stoops awkwardly to the ground to retrieve some items that have fallen out of her purse. She is aware of pain radiating down from her neck and onto her shoulders. Shooting pain is coursing through her side and her face is throbbing. She wants nothing more than to lie down, but she goes back into the jail, instead.

While she's been outside, another crazy has taken the place of the earlier one. There must be a full moon tonight. Everyone always laughs when they hear this, but no

one at the jail does because there seems to be some kind of truth to the crazies coming out during a full moon. She again signs a sheet on the door after making sure the older white woman is breathing. Maybe this one will be quiet, and she can escape any more problems.

Her radio announces that someone from the fourth floor is on their way down to retrieve the seven women left in holding for a while. Mandy acknowledges the voice and goes to open the cell door. They file out, laughing and talking like they're going on a school picnic, all except Susie, the Indian lady, who is snoring loudly.

"Listen up. Line up on the left." The chatter dies, with everyone watching everyone else.

"I will give you a blanket, toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, towel, sheet, and roll of toilet tissue. You will go from here to the basement, where you will be given a mattress which you will also be expected to carry, so I suggest you roll these items up in your blanket." Mandy waits until they comply.

"Hurry up. Has everybody got a set? All right then. Ladies, good luck and don't come back." They laugh. The outer door to women's holding is opened. The women start their chatter again as they follow a guard from the fourth floor through the slider and to the elevator. Odds are Mandy will see some of these same women again.

Mandy decides to sweep out the big cell while all is quiet. She grabs the broom and dustpan, opens the door, and hears the soft snores of the Indian woman. The cockroaches scatter in ten different directions as she sweeps up pieces of sandwich, toilet paper, and even a Kotex pad someone has thrown into the corner by the stool. She

relocks the door after throwing the trash into a big barrel. The crazy women in the end cell is still quiet, but breathing. Mandy logs the time.

On calling home, she discovers Tonda has picked up Tyler. Tonda's mad because Tyler expects her to fix him something to eat and she refuses to do it. After placating her children, Mandy hangs up, leans back in the chair and wishes she had answers to why her life is in shambles.

Latrisha, the juvenile, returns from court. Mandy allows her to shower and then places her back in her cell.

She complains, "Let me use the phone. I need to call my mama and tell her about court."

Mandy checks the log but sees phone calls aren't allowed today. Normally, Mandy allows Latrisha to use the pay phone in the other big holding cell. Not today. Today doesn't have the feel of a normal day. Besides, the sergeant on duty is a real asshole and Mandy doesn't want to get caught letting the kid call her mom on the wrong day. "I'm sorry. You know I don't care if you call, but I can't have you outside your cell with adults coming and going. You know state law requires you to be separated from all adult inmates. I'm not taking any risks today or losing my job over you. Do you want a tray?"

The young girl acknowledges with a nod. Mandy goes to the phone and orders a warm meal for Latrisha. By law, the County is required to provide two warm meals to juveniles every day. Unlike the adults, juveniles also receive milk with each meal.

Latrisha, who has been incarcerated for almost six months, is still waiting for a bed at the Juvenile Detention Center in Oklahoma City. The facility has only a few of

their eighty beds reserved for females. The institution stays backed up because there aren't enough beds at the prison level for females. This child, who is barely fifteen, already has a kid of her own.

Mandy thinks the chances for this juvenile are not promising. She has learned from conversations with Latrisha that the girl's mother has only recently gotten out of prison for selling drugs. That woman is now watching Latrisha's child. Mandy at least had her parent's reluctant support for her when she got pregnant at fifteen. At the time Mandy had thought they were too hard on her, making her finish school, making her get a job, and making her support herself and her child, but now she knows what they did was right.

Just as Mandy makes it back to her desk, hell breaks loose in the corridor. She jumps up and runs to the door. The same two sadistic guards are again half-carrying, half-dragging a young white female down the hall. She is struggling with them but to no avail. Her long blonde hair is floating out from her body like a golden crown. Mandy can see the girl is drunk or high. She attempts to help and is shoved roughly aside by one of the guards. They take the girl to the first individual cell where they throw her onto the metal bed. She is crying hysterically, snot running down her face and mixing in her hair. Clay puts his knee at an angle across the girl's upper back. Trixie straddles her.

"Are you going to shut up?" Trixie yells.

The girl struggles to roll over. She can't. Clay presses his knee into the girl's back a little harder. Mandy sees they really like the unnecessary pain they are inflicting on the girl.

"Why don't you let up a bit? She's not going anywhere," Mandy says.

Trixie shoots Mandy a hateful look, but gets off the girl. Mandy sees the girl is handcuffed, her wrists twisted painfully to one side. No wonder she is hysterical. The pain must be awful. Clay eases up off the girl's back. She immediately quiets.

“What is she charged with?” Mandy inquires.

“She wouldn't answer when the nurse in Medical tried to question her. She kept yelling she was being mistreated. She got louder, so we took her down. You got a problem with that?” Trixie asks.

“No problem here. What do you intend to do now?” Mandy asks.

“Sergeant Miller wants her in a gown. No paper, though. She said there was a padded gown in the guard station. Go get it.”

Mandy turns and walks out of the cell. It will give her immense satisfaction should she ever decide to kill one or both of the guards. Returning to the cell after locating the green one piece gown, she attempts to put the Velcro together to form the arms. The gown is ripped from her arms by Trixie and thrown at the blonde who's sitting on the side of the bed.

“Put the gown on or we'll put it on you,” says Trixie who has her foot propped on the metal.

This causes a fresh wave of hysterical weeping on the part of the girl. The guards are angry at her and start pulling her clothes off. The girl is beside herself yelling. Mandy knows to interfere now is as dangerous for her as it is for the girl. She will get her chance in a moment to calm the girl down.

Backing out of the cell, she quickly checks on the crazy woman in the end cell. She is moving her leg. Mandy notes the movement on the log and returns to the other cell.

The girl is crying and trying to put the gown on but has her head where an arm should be. The guards forcefully lift her off the bed and carry her out of the cell.

“Where are you taking her?” Mandy asks.

“We’ll need this cell later. She can bunk with the other crazy. With that, Clay uses his key to open the end cell door. Together, they push the young girl in on top of the woman. The woman pushes back. The girl lands on the floor by the cell door, her hair spilling out into the hall. The two guards laugh. Trixie says to Clay, “Did you see what the bitch did to her?” More laughing.

The woman in the cell screams, “Get her outta her. Get the bitch outta here.”

Both guards continue to laugh and start to slam the door shut. Mandy steps up and stops them. “You’re going to shut half of her body in the door.” Mandy quickly stoops and scoots the girl inside the cell. As she does so, she notices blood near the bottom of the door.

“You need to get the nurse in here now. This girl is bleeding.”

The guards look at each other and laugh. “You want Medical, you call them,” Trixie snarls.

Mandy calls. The fat male nurse arrives. She knows he is unhappy because he hates working the swing shift; he believes his wife is cheating on him. To compensate, he makes every inmate’s life as miserable as possible. It is also the worst of all scenarios for Mandy because he is their friend and will always side with them.

Pulling the girl's head back by her hair, he says, "Is this what you brought me back here for?" and laughs. The guards laugh with him. The girl now seems catatonic. The other woman is sitting on her bed eyeing everyone.

The nurse swabs her forehead roughly and literally slaps a bandage to her head, causing her head to bounce against the cement wall. They all laugh again and then leave after slamming the cell door.

As soon as they're gone, Mandy hears the woman tell the young girl she is going to kill her if she doesn't get the hell out of her cell. Mandy opens the door and escorts the girl back to the first cell. She tells her she will be okay. The girl looks up at the sound of a calm voice. She begins to cry softly.

"I will give you some time to yourself. In a few minutes I will check on you again. Try to remain calm and this will soon be over for you."

The girl pulls her feet up on the metal bed and lies quietly. Mandy backs out and shuts and locks the door. She checks on the Indian lady, who is still snoring. Latrisha, the juvenile, who is by now used to lots of yelling, is asleep, too. The woman on the end has quieted down and her leg is moving slightly. Mandy notes the log. She goes to the guard station and gets a sheet for the young girl. After taping it to her door, Mandy returns to her chair. She is mentally drained.

Debating what she should do, she finally makes her decision and dials the lieutenant. He listens as she tells him what has just taken place. Mandy tells him she has moved the girl to the other cell because the woman's threats have put the girl in danger. He agrees that Mandy has acted wisely and thanks her. Mandy hangs up. She is grateful he works the same shift; he seems like someone she can trust to do what is right.

For the next hour she checks on her charges. Everyone is calm. Even the girl is quiet. Mandy unlocks the girl's door.

“Are you feeling better?”

“Yes,” the girl replies.

“Come with me and I will let you make a phone call to your mom.”

The girl follows Mandy to the guard station and waits while Mandy dials the number she gives her.

The girl starts crying as she tries to describe what has happened to her. Whoever is on the other end doesn't sound receptive to the girl. She sinks to the floor, clutching the phone. “You don't understand. They're mean to me here. You have to get me out of here. They're going to kill me.” At this point, the girl breaks down and sobs, still holding the phone. Again she says, “Can you please help me? Please get me out.”

Abruptly, she hands the phone to Mandy and says, “She wants to talk to you.”

Mandy listens, tells the caller she doesn't know the charges because the girl has yet to be booked, and then hangs up. She feels she hasn't helped the girl at all.

Mandy can tell the girl is bitter by what she says. “My own mom and she won't bail me out.”

“Let's get you back to your cell before I get in trouble. Please stay calm and you'll get out of here a lot sooner.”

The girl pads back to the cell; she curls into a fetal position as soon as the door is shut and locked.

Mandy knows it is only a matter of time before the two guards do something to get her hurt. After they find out she sought the lieutenant's okay in moving the girl, she

will not be able to trust them to cover her back should an altercation occur. She does not trust them now or the sergeant on duty, only the lieutenant.

Mandy questions what the jail personnel saw in her that made her acceptable for hiring and wonders if there's something in her that will make her become like them? After all, she has let Kyle continue to beat her. She fears she may convert her pain into torment for the inmates like some of the other guards have done. Mandy despairs at thinking she too is somehow flawed in this respect. She doubts she can deal with the problems at the jail when she does not see a resolution to her personal problems.

She isn't quite sure what to do. One problem looms large now. She realizes she needs help to understand why she continues to let Kyle abuse her. If one day he goes too far and kills her, her two children will not have anyone looking out for them. She needs to get her life back on track. Right now she knows her life isn't much different from those of the women who pass through here each day.

Mandy hears the rattle of keys and looks up at the clock. She realizes her shift is almost over. One last time Mandy passes the doors, checks the occupants, and then gives the keys to the night crew. She steps outside to her world, different.

Divided We Stand

The five siblings were about to finish going through the belongings of William and Margaret, their dead parents. Paula, still reeling from the news that she'd been lied to for years, sat stiffly on the splintered bench of the picnic table. The table, rarely used by her parents, certainly not by her Daddy who believed sitting down meant being lazy, certainly not by them, as children. Paula touched the rough wood, rotting from exposure to the elements, and remembered all the times she helped her mom paint the table and benches with a dark cherry-colored stain. Mom, happier after it had a new coat, always voiced her hope to Paula that a family picnic would be forthcoming, but it never happened. Now that her parents were gone, her siblings' relationships resembled the broken, wobbling shell of the neglected table.

Paula looked at her siblings: Nathan, the youngest, still ran the family farm in Shawnee, where they now congregated. Dwight, second oldest, drove up from Claremore. Billy, the eldest, flew in from Wisconsin, the only one besides her to live in a different state. Beautiful Marjorie, with her blonde hair and fair complexion, drove in from Oklahoma City. All of them led such different lives. Living in Arizona, Paula knew less about the life she was forced to leave behind than any of them.

Realizing the family unit was fragile once the parents were gone, Paula wondered if anything here could make them a family again, at least the family she so often dreamed of in the past few years. Otherwise, she felt the siblings would scatter to the four winds

soon and doubted any of them would ever attempt a closer relationship. Not one of them had been overly friendly to her idea of getting together beyond today. She couldn't really blame them for she was separated from them for so many years, she must seem a stranger.

Seeing their parents' belongings strung out over the yard, made Paula feel like a lowly thief going through a person's possessions. It was an intimate intrusion into lives which should have privacy. Paula vowed to herself no one would ever go through her things in this way. She would cull things out from time to time. She wondered, why keep fifty plus years of tax records? Why keep every twist tie that ever came on a loaf of bread? Why was it like their deaths all over again to view every spoon, bowl and paper? What was even more difficult to view, was the few pitiful piles each intended to take home. Was this what life came down to?

Glancing up, Paula noticed her older sister Marjorie capturing the attention of Jasper—the old farm dog—petting his proud head. Paula didn't know why she and her only sister were never close. She believed it might be the difference in age, with Marjorie her elder by seven years. Though, maybe age had nothing to do with it. The two looked nothing alike; no one thought they were sisters. Marjorie, tall, well-dressed, and poised, took after their Swedish ancestors, and was the exact opposite of her sister. Paula never figured out why she herself remained under five feet in height, stayed pudgy, with jet black hair. She was a misplaced puzzle piece in the wrong box.

Paula looked at the listing farm house and sticker weeds in most of the yard. Nearby, the broken wooden gate stripped of paint long ago, the decaying rose bushes lining the coarse wooden fence, the cracked sidewalk overgrown with grass, and the

dilapidated house, from years of misuse. She wondered why Nathan never made any effort to fix the place up. Daddy hadn't. Maybe he was a lot more like daddy than she knew. Her heart heavy, she thought they would probably never all be together again.

Thinking of her parents, Paula remembered the unexpected phone call she received from Marjorie. Their parents, returning from Oklahoma City, were within three and a half miles of the farm, met with a crazed driver who ran a stop sign, crossed over into their lane, and hit them head on at a high rate of speed. Nathan, coming home from the feed store, came upon the wreck. The police told him his parents died instantly upon impact.

Three months after their deaths, the hard job of dissecting the intimate parts of her parents' lives overwhelmed Paula. She was still troubled by their deaths, troubled by the broken sibling relationships, and troubled by many unanswered questions. Paula wanted closure. She needed it to move on with her life.

"I don't know who the hell our parents really were," Paula said. For a moment, silence from the group held the force of a megaton bomb. The charge exploded with lethal force.

"What do you mean by that?" Nathan asked in a hateful way, his face suffused with anger, his body rigid.

This Nathan was someone Paula didn't know. She held fond memories of Nathan as a cheerful child. His general good nature arose from being the baby of the family. Today, though, she saw a different side of him with his unexpected outburst.

"Why was I left out of the loop about Daddy trying to kill his brother Fred?"

The wind blew some papers off the picnic table. Marjorie jumped up to retrieve them, but not a word was said by anyone.

“Okay, from the looks on your faces, I would guess all of you have known for years. I’ve only known a week and had to find out on the Internet.”

Nathan spoke up. “Daddy told me Fred tried to kill him first. That’s all that matters.”

“Paula, what was on the Internet?” Billy asked.

“I’m telling you, surfing the net I came across the court document that showed the details of the whole trial.”

“But what did it say?” Billy asked again.

Paula sensed that Billy wanted to find out exactly what she knew before he said anything more. He was still as she remembered him—cautious, controlled and centered. A perfect blond, with wide shaped white teeth, he still carried himself with confidence, proud of his Swedish heritage. The years had been kind to him.

“The document said that Daddy supposedly followed Fred into the field and battered him with his fists. The neighbors testified that they were in the field across the road. They heard yelling and then Fred begging Daddy to stop. He didn’t, so they went home and called the police. By the time the police got to the farm, Fred made his way back to the house, where he passed out. He . . .”

“Why do you need to hear this trash?” Nathan yelled.

“Let her finish,” Billy said.

“Daddy, still wearing clothes covered in Fred’s blood, was arrested for attempted murder. He got ten years in the state pen.”

“They appealed,” Nathan said in a mean hard voice.

Paula said, “I know. I saw details of the appeal, too.”

“Did it say anything about why the neighbors didn’t try to help Fred first?”

Marjorie asked.

“They were scared of Daddy and what he might do to them.”

“That had to be why the neighbors all hated our family. They told their kids about Daddy. They kept the hatred going without giving us a chance,” Marjorie said.

“Who put that information online?” Paula asked.

“Probably some neighbor who’s got it in for Nathan,” Dwight said.

“We were persecuted for something we had no control over,” Billy added.

“My point exactly! So, why not tell all of us earlier so we could understand what was happening to us?” Paula asked.

“Maybe they thought they were doing the right thing by us in distancing themselves from what happened,” Marjorie ventured. “Mom told me she had to rely on her family to help while Daddy was gone. I don’t think she ever got over feeling ashamed of what he did.”

“How much time did Daddy serve?” Paula asked.

Dwight spoke up, “Five years. He got out early for good behavior and time already served while waiting for trial.”

“Why did Fred live with them in the first place?”

Dwight again answered Paula, “After getting home from WWII he had no other place to go. The war messed with Fred’s mind and he. . .”

“Fred was a no good bum. I refuse to sit here and hear you crap about our parents. They were the best parents anyone could have,” Nathan yelled. He rose, rage filling his eyes. His hands shook.

Paula, two years older, was shocked to discover this side of Nathan. In the few phone conversations she had with Marjorie during the last three months, Paula usually took Nathan’s side in their discussions of family. She was never able to understand Marjorie’s bitterness toward Nathan. Marjorie only began speaking to Paula after years of silence, neglectful years that even now threatened their fragile talks. Marjorie told Paula she exchanged letters and visits with Billy and Dwight for years. It hurt Paula to know that her sister corresponded with two of her brothers and yet had nothing to do with her. Could this be why Marjorie didn’t want anything to do with Nathan?

Paula decided she didn’t really know this Nathan, who was quick to break out in a torrent of angry words. He never married, and still lived on the family farm. She was beginning to see that he was a lot like Daddy, dealing with problems by using uncontrollable anger and by overriding everyone else’s opinions.

“No one said anything bad about Mom and Daddy. Give Paula a break. She just found out,” Marjorie said.

Dwight, with his twisted sense of humor, laughed. Yet, he said nothing more. Younger than Billy by two years, Dwight—rail thin, had more brown hair than blond. Paula thought he took after Mom’s side of the family more.

Billy looked at Nathan and said in a calm voice, “We’re just trying to work out some problems . . .”

Nathan shook his fists and looked with hatred at Paula, then Marjorie. "I won't stand here and listen to this any more."

"Calm down. No one is trying to stir up trouble," Billy replied.

"All of you knew. Why didn't anyone tell me?" Paula asked, wondering why Nathan focused all his rage at her and Marjorie. Daddy did the same thing, finding fault with them, never believing girls counted much in life.

"I say we forget it. Nothing will come from dragging our family name down in the mud," Nathan shouted.

"I don't care. You didn't find out about your family like I did. It's like finding out you were adopted," Paula said.

"You were adopted," Dwight said.

"What?" Paula gasped.

Laughing, Dwight said, "It's a joke, Paula."

"Well, brother, you're not funny," Paula cried.

Quiet descended on the picnic table. Everyone retreated to their own thoughts. Paula didn't think she could stand another minute of silence. She looked up and noticed Billy struggling to speak.

"I for one am tired of all the lies. I'll tell you some about Daddy. After he came home from prison, he was meaner than ever; he used to beat me a lot. One time I didn't shut the gate and the cows got out. Daddy grabbed a scoop shovel and hit me on the shoulders with it. I finally wrenched it from him, threw the shovel behind the barn, and then took off running," Billy said, crying softly.

Paula reached across to Billy and patted his arm. "I'm so sorry. I never knew."

Marjorie spoke up. “I remember it. Feeding the chickens, I heard Billy screaming. Daddy wouldn’t quit hitting him. I started screaming, too. After that day, Daddy treated Billy like a leper or something, riding him about stupid things.”

“When Mom found out, she stopped Daddy from disciplining us. Remember, she wouldn’t let him whip us when we did something wrong, but she couldn’t be there all the time either,” Billy said, still crying.

Paula, in all her thirty-four years, never saw Billy cry before. It moved her to think he too kept his hurts inside with no one to talk to. She remembered Daddy getting mad a lot. Too little to get away from the constant fighting, she usually ran to the river with her dog. She stayed until enough time had passed and it felt safe to come back home. Her dog—her confidant and only companion—never gave her anything but unconditional love. Everyone else, wrapped up in their world, never missed her much unless she failed to do some chore.

“You’re right, Billy. I remember Mom saying she whipped us because Daddy would have killed us,” Marjorie added.

Dwight said, “Don’t forget, Dad beat me, too, every chance he got. You remember how much hell I raised in school? I couldn’t do anything right at home so I took out my anger on the school kids.” He paused and then went on. “Why do you think I left home and got married at seventeen? Did I escape? No, all I did was trade one hell for another.”

“I’ve heard enough of this talk. Daddy was the best dad. He and mom did without all their lives to provide for us. Why are you trying to rehash something which doesn’t need being rehashed?” Nathan asked.

“All I’m trying to do is understand. Billy, you and Dwight knew for years. Marjorie, you told me you knew for a long time, too. And Nathan, even though you’re younger than me, you also knew. Why was I left out?” Paula asked.

“What difference does it make? Let it go,” Nathan bellowed.

“You really don’t get it. We could’ve come together and been there for each other, stronger for it. As it is, we’ve lived very lonely and separate lives,” Paula said, looking at Nathan.

Nathan glared at Paula. “That’s crap. Who’s lonely?”

“I think we all are. When did we ever play together, or play at all? We never had a childhood,” Paula responded.

“I know I didn’t,” Billy said. “Daddy worked me like a slave, always ready with his fists.”

“You didn’t get hit any more than I did. Anybody remember the time I jumped on the milk cow and rode her around the lot. Daddy almost broke my back he hit me so hard with a log he picked up,” Dwight said.

Marjorie piped up. “What about the time Daddy caught you with a beer your buddy gave you? Daddy meant to kill you, before Mom stopped him with a . . .”

“Shut up, Marjorie. Just shut up,” Nathan yelled, his face turning a mottled red.

Paula looked at Dwight who said nothing, his face blank. Paula, unable to read his thoughts, wondered about the pain he was carrying inside. She turned to Marjorie.

“How did Mom stop Daddy?”

Silence, long and deep, surrounded the table.

“How did Mom stop Daddy?” Paula asked, biting off each word separately in a hoarse voice.

“Marjorie, looking to Paula like she was unsure of herself, gazed at Dwight, who refused to meet her eyes. Then, turning to Billy, who finally nodded, answered, “With this.” Billy lifted a rusty looking hammer from his feet.

Everyone stared. Paula wondered if the rust was really blood.

“Where did you find it?” Dwight asked.

“I came across it under some old clothes in a barrel. I wonder if Mom hid it there.” Billy said.

Paula felt all the air go out of her. She sank lower on the worn bench, put her face in her hands and sobbed, her world falling apart further. Marjorie scooted over and patted Paula on the back a few times awkwardly, then stopped and sat back, letting her cry.

No one spoke for a long time. Nathan’s raspy breathing, which jarred sharply with the chirping of birds singing in the sycamore tree, was the only other sound heard besides Paula crying.

When Paula’s sobs dwindled to a few muffled sniffs, she looked up with a red blotched face and said to no one in particular, “Is that how Daddy got the huge scar on his left arm?”

Billy and Dwight both said, “Yes.”

“I see. It’s one more secret I didn’t know anything about,” Paula said with resignation. “Tell me what happened.”

Paula noticed all eyes turned to Billy. While it seemed Nathan's held only disgust for his siblings, the others appeared to beg Billy to respond.

He started slowly, choosing his words with care. "We were all supposed to be helping make ice cream. Dwight slunk off and I got tired of turning the crank. I complained to Daddy." Billy stopped and turned to Dwight. "I've lived with guilt all these years over the beating you took. I shouldn't have said anything to daddy about the beer. . ."

Dwight, with tears in his eyes, interrupted Billy. "It's okay. We were just kids. I don't blame you."

Billy sighed and bowed his head. His shoulders shook as he cried. Paula, as helpless as the others, waited. After a few moments, Billy wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and went on.

"When Daddy caught Dwight with the beer, he got out the big leather strop and started beating him. He kept hitting him harder and harder. Mom screamed for Daddy to stop. He wouldn't. She tried pulling Daddy off Dwight. When she couldn't get him off, she grabbed the first thing she saw—the hammer Daddy used, chipping ice. She slammed it into Daddy's arm, ripping the flesh to the bone." Billy stopped talking, again overcome with emotion.

"What happened then?" Paula asked into the eerie silence of the summer day.

"I saw everything in slow motion: Dwight crying, his shirt in tatters and blood everywhere, Daddy's arm pumping blood like an oil well, Mom, on the ground over Dwight, keening in a high pitched wail. I ran over, slapped Mom, and told her to help

Dwight. I didn't want to hurt her but I couldn't take the noise," Billy said, turning pleading eyes on Paula.

"It's all right Billy. What did you do then?" Paula asked.

"I think Daddy went into shock. He stood there watching his arm gush blood. I grabbed his arm, put pressure on it, at the same time yelling for Marjorie to grab you."

"Why don't I remember any of it?"

"Paula, you were only a little past two. What made it all so bad, Mom, pregnant with Nathan at the time, almost lost him," Billy said.

Nathan snickered. "That's a real touching story, Billy, but it's all lies. How long did it take you to make it up?"

Paula and the others watched as Billy turned with pain-filled eyes to his youngest brother. "Everything I've said is true, Nathan. Why would I lie?"

"You're a damn liar," Nathan shouted. "Daddy told me his arm got caught in the hay baler. He pulled his arm out just in time before the baler sucked his body in. Daddy wouldn't lie."

"Billy's telling the truth. I have the scars on my back to prove it," Dwight said.

"You're lying, too. Daddy always told me you were worthless, always hanging around hoodlums and thugs. He warned me about you."

Dwight slumped down on the bench, defeat in his eyes.

"What in the hell is wrong with you, Nathan?" Marjorie yelled.

"I'm not going to let one of you sorry people talk about Daddy like you're doing."

"Is that all we are to you, Nathan?" Billy asked.

Nathan didn't answer Billy. He stood with his hands on his hips, glaring at all of his siblings. When he did open his mouth, he unleashed all his fury on Paula, shaking his fist in her face. "If you hadn't brought all this up, we could be done by now, but you had to rile everybody up, getting them to tell you their lies."

Although in shock at Nathan's behavior, Paula noticed how he resembled his older brother Billy, though shorter and younger by fifteen years. He carried excess weight around his mid-section like Daddy. He's just like Daddy now, Paula thought.

Marjorie, her eyes flashing at Nathan, said, "Nobody lied. You either weren't born when a lot of this happened or you were too little to remember."

"I know what I know and all of you are lying."

Marjorie shook her head. She turned, facing Paula. "After the hammer incident, both Mom and Daddy changed. They hated each other, but they didn't divorce because of us."

Dwight cut in, "Even though they fought all the time, it made it easier for us. We didn't get beaten as often."

Nathan exploded with venom. "Daddy was right. He told me you would try something like this if any of you got the chance. He knew you would spread lies about him and you have."

Paula jumped up and yelled, "Have you ever taken a good hard look at yourself, Nathan? You're acting just like Daddy, using anger and hateful words to put everyone around you down. Can't you see what you're doing?"

"How dare you talk to me that way? You're nothing but a cheap whore. Daddy told me how you came on to him all the time."

“I’ve got news for you, Nathan. You have no idea of what the truth really is about Daddy. None of you do. Daddy raped me, the first time when I turned thirteen,” Paula stopped, sobbing.

A collective gasp rose from the table.

“You’re lying, you bitch,” screamed Nathan.

“I’m not,” Paula said, crying harder.

Madder than Paula ever saw him, Billy turned to Nathan and said, “Shut up.”

Nathan, ready to challenge Billy, thought better of it and glared at him instead.

Marjorie started to rise and go to her sister.

Paula, choking back sobs said, “No, let me finish. I’ve carried it inside me for too long. Daddy would wait until Mom had some school event to go to. I begged, cried, and pleaded with her to let me go with her, but Daddy told her he needed help at home. Since I didn’t have a part in any school events because of my extreme shyness, I stayed with him. He told me I wasn’t his child. When I tried to get him to talk to me, he would laugh and say talking wasn’t what he wanted.”

Billy interrupted Paula with, “Were he alive, I would kill him for you.”

Raising swollen eyes to Billy, Paula said, “Maybe at one time I wished him dead. But, you see, I got help. I finally forgave him and now I can’t tell him so.”

“This is touching.” Nathan said with a sneer. “I’ve heard all the lies I’m going to listen to.”

“Shut up, Nathan, and let her finish,” Dwight yelled.

Paula said, “When Mom found out, she blamed herself. She told me she quit sleeping with him. Then she begged me not to say anything, telling me if I didn’t, she

would send me away to live with her cousin. I've spent my whole life in a black void because of Daddy. I've tried many times to forgive both of them for what they did to me. One day I met a man strolling through a park who saw me crying. He asked if he could help."

"Weren't you afraid to talk to men?" Marjorie asked, interrupting.

"I was so overcome with all the torment of my life I broke down and told him everything. You see, I was considering suicide. This nice angel-man, didn't try to take advantage of me. He sat down and talked to me for a long time. Then he took me to a place where I could get the right kind of help. I've made progress over the last few years and been able to make some sense of my life. My doctor said I should try and make contact with you. Besides that, I missed you all."

"Paula, we didn't know," Marjorie cried. "Mom told us you had a nervous breakdown. One day you were here and the next you were gone. She threatened every one of us not to contact you. She said if we tried to communicate with you, you wouldn't get better. We couldn't write, or call, or anything. I guess she thought you might tell us the truth and Daddy would go back to prison for good. Besides, I know I hated you because you got out and the rest of us didn't."

"It's true," Billy and Dwight chimed in.

"Mom hated Daddy but she couldn't raise us without his help. I used to hate you so much Paula. After you left, I couldn't do anything without Mom being right there. I got so tired of her forcing herself into my business. I thought I'd go crazy. Now I see she was shadowing me to protect me from Daddy," Marjorie said.

“Paula, we used to wonder about you at first, and then when Mom and Daddy never ever answered any of our questions about you, we gave up and quit asking,”

Dwight added.

“Even though Mom watched me liked a hawk, why didn’t he bother me?”

Marjorie asked.

“Think about it, Marjorie. You were outspoken, aggressive, and not timid at all. Daddy also considered you his child. On the other hand, I kept to myself, shy, never talked much. When Daddy looked at me he saw a stranger,” Paula explained.

Marjorie cried, “I am so sorry I . . .”

Nathan’s hand shot out and connected with Paula’s cheek. The force of the slap sent her to the ground. Billy and Dwight jumped the table at the same time and pushed Nathan down, not letting him up. Marjorie also jumped up and went to Paula, kneeling in front of her, protecting her from any more blows. The slap left a deep hand print on her cheek.

“Honey, are you all right?” Marjorie asked.

“I’m okay. Help me up.”

“Get off me, you bastards. Get off me now,” Nathan yelled, squirming against his brothers.

“We’ll let you up, but you’re going to sit down on that bench and shut up,” Billy cautioned. Both he and Dwight got up but stood on either side of Nathan as he struggled to rise. He sat down heavily on the bench.

“Are you okay, Sis?” Dwight asked.

“I’ve never been better,” Paula answered with a shaky half sob, half laugh. Feeling dirty and ashamed for years, she thought no one cared. Her sister and brother’s willingness to protect her helped ease some of the pain she carried for so long. Daddy, cruel to the end, left his mark on Nathan.

“Daddy told me this day would come,” Nathan said, sitting sandwiched between his guards. I gave up my life to stay here and farm when Daddy no longer could. He talked to me all the time. He told me the truth about everything and also what people would say. All of you are liars.”

Billy turned to face Nathan. “Can’t you see how he twisted the truth to meet his needs? He knew he couldn’t farm indefinitely, and that you wouldn’t stay if you knew what he was really like, so he brainwashed you, little brother.”

Nathan struggled against his captives.

“Go easy there, brother. We would hate to tie you up, but we will if need be,” Dwight said.

“I bet you didn’t know he left the farm and everything to me.”

“That’s great, Nathan. You’re the one who stayed and farmed it. We don’t need it, do we?” Billy asked the others.

“No,” everyone said in unison.

Nathan had a confused look on his face for a brief moment. Then it passed. “I see what you’re trying to do. Don’t try sucking up to me. I tell you it won’t work. None of you are getting a damn thing.”

Dwight, strangely quiet until now, turned to Nathan and said, “I’ll pray for you, bro.”

“You can go to hell,” Nathan screamed, his face a ghastly purple.

Marjorie said, “You just don’t get it. Money or material things aren’t what we need. Paula’s right. We should all try to get along and become the family we never were allowed to be.”

“I tried being nice to you, letting you take what you wanted and look where it got me. All of you can get the hell out right now.”

One by one they picked up their belongings. As they turned to leave, Paula hung back. Facing Nathan, she saw the veins on his temples were pulsating. She said, “Don’t shut us out by thinking you know the only truth there is to know. Some day you may regret what happened here. Some day you may even want us in your life.”

She turned to follow the others, but turned back and picked up the hammer. “I’m taking it, and I’m going to ask the others if they want to help me bury it. I think they’ll all say yes. What about you, Nathan?”

Nathan turned his back on Paula.

Paula sighed. “I love you, Nathan.” This time she turned and left.

Shakedown

Sandra heard the slider door slam shut and fear grabbed at her gut and threatened to constrict her breathing. While she waited for the next slider to open, she knew she had to get a grip on her tumultuous emotions before she screamed and begged to be let out. As she peered through the next slider that contained hundreds of tiny stress fractures in its clear glass face, she saw only one officer and he quickly disappeared around the corner. Good. She hadn't screamed. Thank goodness she hadn't made a complete fool of herself. She needed this job. When the slider opened, she tried to remember which way led to the elevators that would take her to the basement and the secure side of the jail.

Just yesterday, Sargeant Newton had taken all the new cadets on a tour of the place. They had spent quite some time in front of the elevators with the Sargeant explaining the two identical sets of elevators in the center of the building. A hallway circled the elevators. One direction led to the un-secure side where the office staff worked and the other led to the secure side where all the inmates were kept. Sandra remembered him saying several times that an officer had to know where he or she was at all times. It made sense then, but of course everyone just followed the person in the lead. Now, she realized she was in trouble. No matter which way she looked, everything was exactly alike. There were no identifying marks on anything. She felt she was in a jungle, about to turn the corner into the jaws of a roaring lion. The stench of vomit rose in her throat as she decided to press the talk button near the elevator. She hoped she was right.

A stream of static spewed from the box making her jump. “What floor?”

“Basement, please,” Sandra said.

The elevator doors opened and Sandra stumbled in. The camera near the ceiling of the elevator made her uncomfortable. She knew that Central Control could see her every move. She never wanted to forget the cameras and be caught picking her nose or digging a wedgie. The elevator jumped and then started down. The doors opened and she found most of her fellow cadets standing in groups of twos and threes, waiting to go into lineup in the cafeteria.

“Hey, Sandra, I see you found it,” Jake said.

“I did indeed.” Sandra swallowed the bile and smiled. “Hey, Jake, where’d you get assigned?”

“Medical Security. How about you?”

“I’m in Intake and Receiving.”

“You okay with that? It’s supposed to be the most dangerous place in the jail,” Jake said.

“I couldn’t be happier about the assignment. I didn’t tell anyone during training, but I wanted that job most of all. I figured if I could work there, I could work anywhere.”

A thunderous voice boomed out. “Line up.”

Everyone scrambled to take their position. In the academy, Sandra had been placed in A group, which meant front row. That didn’t change now. She endured the stares of all the brass as they eyed the new cadets.

“Atenhut!” Lt. Cambridge bellowed.

Thirty one cadets, along with all the brass lining the walls, came to attention.

Sandra never saw so much black in one place. It made her dizzy to see all the uniforms, with mostly bald heads peeking from the top, like a group of vultures waiting to peck out the remains of a dead rabbit.

“At ease,” barked the Lieutenant.

With one fluid motion, the group settled into a more comfortable stance.

“On behalf of everyone here at the jail, I want to congratulate all of you on making it through the academy. We need you and we’re glad you’re here. Give yourselves a hand,” barked the Lieutenant.

When the applause died down, Sandra felt better about everything she worked for to get this far.

“Listen up. We are going to do a shakedown of the jail today and tomorrow. We will be going from cell to cell searching for any contraband. After that, all of you will report to the jobs you were assigned. I will appoint each of you to one of these seasoned officers standing behind me. You will stay with that officer at all times. You are not to go into a pod or cell by yourself. All of you are to do exactly what your officer tells you to do. We do not want anyone to get hurt, or worse, killed. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Sandra yelled with the rest of her classmates.

“We will start with the top floor and work our way down. Maintenance has shut the water off on the top three floors so the inmates can’t get online and alert their neighbors or try to flush any contraband,” Lt. Cambridge said.

Sandra heard about the online chat rooms the inmates used to communicate with each other between floors. An inmate would scoop out the water in the commode, then put his head in the bowl and seal his lips around the opening. He would then be able to

yell down to the next floor. The instructors at the academy indicated that an inmate with a red rash around his mouth was one who had been online. An inmate could also send candy bars to a lover, or make payment on a debt owed, by wrapping a string or a strip of sheet called a kite, around the bar and then flushing it down the toilet. If it was meant for the next floor the inmate there could retrieve it or let it go on through the shitter to the next floor.

“Brown, Cassidy, Davidson, you three report to Lt. Kirby. You will be responsible for classifying the contraband that is found and logging and labeling it with the inmate’s name and the cell it was taken from. Depending on what is found, additional charges may be brought against the inmates having contraband and or destroying any County property.”

“Adams, Johnson, Sounder, report to Sgt. Spencer. Booker, Ketchum . . .”

Sandra was mesmerized by the names. Straining so hard to hear hers, she almost missed her name being called.

“Kennedy, Racjowitz, Turner...”

Hey, Sandra thought. That’s me, Racjowitz. God, did he say go with Lt. Gordon? Which one was Gordon? She prayed she wouldn’t puke. Sandra zoned out to the cadence of the names being called.

“Anyone’s name I didn’t call?” Lt. Cambridge asked.

When no one answered, he said, “Okay, remember to stay with your officer at all times. We’ll meet back here at 1600 hours. Let’s come to attention and sound off.”

With adrenaline racing, Sandra snapped to attention. “Teamwork,” she yelled along with the others.

As the group broke rank, everyone tried to find the officer to whom they were assigned. Sandra caught up with Randy Turner who was in her group. “Randy, you know who Lt. Gordon is?”

“Yeah, follow me,” Randy said. Andrew Kennedy, the third member of the group was already at Lt. Gordon’s side when they managed to catch a break in the horde of officers and reach him.

Lt. Gordon looked like a giant red cedar, the trunk massive and the bark rough. He sported a black and white bandana over his bald head. His graying mustache curled in at the edges, softening the squareness of a head planted like a stump on solid ground. As his enormous paw gripped her hand, Sandra thought most inmates probably went out of their way to steer clear of him. She was glad to be in his group, even though she was equally sure her hand would be useless for the rest of her life.

“Glad to meet you all,” Lt. Gordon said. “Here is what we’ll do. When we reach the dayroom, if it’s a men’s pod, Kennedy and Turner will go in and retrieve the prisoners. They will handcuff them and bring them outside their cell facing them away from the door. Racjowitz, you’ll guard them and keep them from looking into their cell. It will be reversed when we get to a women’s pod. Racjowitz will go in and handcuff the ladies, bring them out, and then one of you men can help her search the cell while the other one guards the prisoners. Any questions?”

“Okay, let’s go.”

The elevator didn’t look quite so menacing this time. A pervasive sense of excitement and fear tinged the air. Everyone tried to talk at once. Radios were turned on, and as prearranged, all radios were tuned to channel three so the inmates couldn’t hear

the communication like the regular radio traffic coming from channel one.

“What’s your twenty?” asked the voice on Lt. Cambridge’s radio.

“We’re at the basement elevator ready to move.”

“Copy. I have the carts with the gloves, ice water for the troops, and other supplies waiting outside the pod on twelve.” said the voice.

“Copy, thanks.”

Lt. Gordon pushed the button for an elevator.

“What floor?” the voice in the box on the wall blared.

“We need two elevators to take us to twelve,” Lt. Gordon said.

An elevator door opened, and Sandra and some of her fellow cadets piled in.

Sandra walked to the back of the freight elevator.

“Come on, come on, we can do better than this,” Sgt Cook said as he and Sgt. Blakely pushed onto the already crowded elevator.

“Hurry up. Get in, we can get about ten more in here,” Sgt Blakely said. He laughed, while pushing his body against the wall of flesh behind him. Sandra was squeezed against Randy’s back in the most indecent way. She had somebody’s elbow shoved in her side and someone else stepped on her right foot, grinding it into the floor. Her first day on the job and here she was, going to die of suffocation or claustrophobia without ever making it to the trenches, just like Scarlett O’Hara’s first husband.

When the elevator ground to a halt and the doors opened, everyone tried to exit at once, arms splaying outward, like a giant octopus bursting up from the deep.

Sandra didn’t know if she had the same body parts she went in with. Running her hands down over her uniform, she realized her shirt had started to come out of her

waistband. Shoving it back in, she tried to keep sight of Lt. Gordon as the group filled the hallway.

“Let’s stop and wait for the rest. Everyone move back out of the way so the others can have some room,” Lt. Cambridge said.

The other elevator opened and a twin octopus erupted from its bowels.

“Here’s the plan. We will converge on A pod all at once with some of you entering through the dayroom slider, and the rest through the fire doors. Half of you will take the bottom tier, while the other half takes the top. It’s going to get crazy in there. There are a hundred and forty three inmates in this pod. As soon as we finish here, we will move to pod B, C, and D, and then break for lunch. These inmates have been on lockdown for two days so they are going to be pissed.” Lt Gordon said.

Speaking into his radio, Lt. Cambridge said, “Central, I need you to override the fire doors and the dayroom and hall sliders on twelve Alpha.”

“Copy.”

The group surged forward, propelled by an inner need to conquer. Pushing into the dayroom, the classification group set up at one of the thirteen bolted down tables that occupied the center of the open space. Each table came equipped with four swivel chairs which were also bolted to the floor. The open metal stairway to the top tier sat just left of the dayroom slider. There were twenty five cells on each tier with cell number three open and unused except for a bathroom when one of the tiers was out for recreation. The pod office was an oval, elevated room which faced the tiers. The upper half was all glass and was well out of the reach of the inmates. The office housed the controls for electronically opening and closing the cells. An intercom also allowed officers to

communicate to one or all the cells at the same time.

Sandra charged forward, grabbed a handful of gloves off the cart and sped up the stairs with her group. She quickly donned a pair, stuffing the spares in her pants leg pocket.

One of the sergeants manually opened a couple of cells with huge jail keys. Inmates were appearing at several of the other cell doors, eyes big with fright at all the commotion of the fifty plus officers.

While Randy and Andrew waited outside, Sandra went inside yelling, "Face the back. Face the back and don't move. Put your hands behind your back and..."

"What the hell is going on? I dinna' do nothing," one female said.

"Turn around and face the back. You'll find out soon enough what's going on," Sandra said. First, on making sure both women were dressed, she then gave the okay for Turner to enter. She placed the cuffs on the one nearest the bunk and backed her out of the cell. Turner brought the other inmate out and left her with Kennedy.

"All right then, let's get to it," Turner said.

"I bet I find a weapon before you do," Sandra said getting into the game.

"Ha, no way," Turner quipped.

"This has to be the nastiest garbage I've ever seen. I thought I was a bad housekeeper but I can't believe what I'm seeing," Sandra said.

Styrofoam soup cups stacked about sixteen high were on the small metal shelf that acted as a table. All were stained red inside with what looked like the remains of vegetable beef soup and grease. To the side, one cup was filled with tiny tubes of toothpaste. Another with two inch stubs of pencils. Rolls of toilet paper filled one of the

three open cubbyholes under the metal table. Books, more stubby pencils, trash, pads, and pressed candy wrappers filled the other two shelves. Stacks of commissary items were stacked in two piles on the floor in the space between the bunk and the block wall. In the mess, Sandra could see more unopened soup cups, Koolaid packets, crackers, candy bars, and what looked like coffee in a baggie.

Sandra hesitated. She really didn't know what to touch or not touch.

Lt. Gordon stepped inside. "Don't be afraid to get your hands dirty. That's why we have the gloves. They'll protect you. Each inmate is allowed to have a packet of personal belongings such as court papers and letters from home. They can have five envelopes, each with a single sheet of paper, five books not counting the Bible, a mat, sheet, blanket, one roll of toilet paper a piece, pads, toothbrush, toothpaste, and two or three pencils. If they're Catholic, they are allowed a rosary, but only one issued by the jail. Anything homemade is contraband. Kick it out and the orderlies will pick it up."

"Lt. Gordon, what about pictures?" Sandra asked.

"They are allowed five and no more."

"What exactly are we looking for?" Sandra asked.

"Anything that could be used as a weapon. They will take the blades out of their razors and hide them to be used later in a makeshift knife. Make sure you look in their books, especially the Bibles. And take the cardboard outer wrappers off the plastic soup cups. They have been known to hide blades under the flaps."

"Okay."

"Turner, don't just lift the mat and look under it. Pull it off the bunk and strip the sheet. Any cuts in the vinyl mat means they probably hid something inside. Look

through all their papers. You wouldn't believe the contraband that gets smuggled in here. If you find any drawings or stencils, there's a good chance a homemade tattoo gun will be found. Oh, and run your hand along the edges of the bunks," Lt. Gordon said.

"Right, sir."

Lt. Gordon stepped out and Sandra asked Randy, "Have you ever in your life seen such filth? I would probably just die if I ever got stuck in here. Hell, there's no way. I would head for Canada or Mexico."

Randy laughed and said, "Sure you would. Uh, we have visitors."

"What do you mean?"

"Look."

"Oh, shit, shit. I can't believe I went through the academy for this," Sandra yelled.

Two cockroaches came out and were sitting with antennas touching on top of the baggie of coffee. Sandra kicked the baggie through the door with her foot.

Randy's laugh echoed in the cell as he went back to his search.

Sandra, Randy, and Andrew moved from cell to cell, quickly learning where to look for contraband. The twelfth floor done, everyone moved to ten. Sandra was told that the inmates were only housed on every other floor, with the floors in between full of pipes and electrical conduit. She was glad they could skip floors because it made it seem like they were really making progress.

The corridor soon grew crowded with inmates lined up against the walls, the officers watching them, and all manner of debris being pushed from the cells by the other groups. Extra rolls of toilet paper came flying out of the cells, hitting the railing and landing in the squalid mess on the floor, only to be picked up and brushed off by the

orderlies, who soon filled a rolling bin down below with the one-eyed once-white orbs. These rolls would be passed out later to any inmate running low on wipes. The thought made Sandra's skin crawl.

She didn't care what Randy said. She would definitely pick Canada or Mexico before ever coming here as an inmate. Sandra thought it bad enough that she picked a job behind locked doors since she was so claustrophobic. In the classroom she had excelled. In custody and control training, she had again done well. But the actual jail was so different than what she expected. She didn't know if what was compelling her to compete for this job was a deep-seated fear of failing. Maybe it was just another test, throwing them all into the middle of chaos, so they could experience the worst the jail had to offer.

A little while later, Lt. Cambridge said, "Listen up. If everyone is clear here, let's break for lunch. We'll meet back on the eighth floor near the elevators."

When she was filing out of the dayroom slider, Sandra's uniform no longer looked very professional, but neither did anyone else's. White powder stained the areas on her pants where she stowed the extra gloves. There was also powder on her shoulders where she pushed her long black hair out of her eyes many times over the last few hours. Her belt, complete with handcuffs, keys, radio and other paraphernalia, felt as heavy as an anchor tied to a drowning man. A river of perspiration trickled down into the small of her back and wet the area behind the belt, making her miserable. Surely, this job couldn't be so punishing every day.

Sandra began to think what it would be like to be an inmate in one of these cells. She wouldn't want people going through her stuff. It would make her mad not to have

any rights. Even if she kept to herself, how would she prevail if her cellmates were mean, or dirty, or ganged up on her? What if she had to share a cell with someone who hoarded junk that bred bugs? Could she stay sane? How did these inmates keep their sanity? Did she have a need to punish herself? Is that why she took this job? All these questions were swirling around in her head. Time. Sandra needed time to sort through everything.

“Randy spoke up. Hey, are you listening? I just said with those last three sharps I found in that Bible, I’m ahead of you by two.”

“Whatever. I heard Sarge say that someone stole a metal strip off the microwave cart on eight and that it’s probably been filed into a shank. I’m going to be the one to find it.”

“Am I to take that as a bet?”

“Sure,” Sandra said. At this point she was wishing she could go home and submerge herself in a tub of bubble bath, and maybe some Clorox and oven degreaser. Sandra didn’t think she would ever feel clean again. A glance at her watch told her it was 1330 hours. They had been at it for hours. No wonder she felt so exhausted. With the eighth floor being a single tier, maybe there was hope that she wouldn’t get off too much later than 1600 hours.

One of the perks of working for the jail was free food from the cafeteria for all employees. Officers could eat as much as they wanted. But, it was also the same food served to the inmates. After viewing all the nauseating garbage the inmates kept in their cells, Sandra opted for cottage cheese. At least it came out of a carton.

The cafeteria was abuzz with talk of the contraband which had been found. The

evidence box had grown to two boxes and there was a chance of a third one from the eighth floor because of all the hard asses housed there. They were known as the gladiators because they liked to fight so much. Small shanks, razors or sharps, drawings, stencils, a few suspicious pills, some weed, a huge amount of money, homemade crosses by the handfuls, rosaries, gang related materials, gun magazines, clubs made out of tightly rolled newspapers, and cigarettes were most of the items found. What they didn't find, was the tattoo gun and the possible shank from the microwave table.

Sandra could barely move from the chair in the cafeteria. It felt as if all her limbs suddenly stopped functioning and become atrophied. As she lugged her wearied body to the elevator she thought back to a mere few hours ago and wondered how she could have ever thought she was lost. She felt like she had been entombed in this cave for centuries and was as old as the pharaohs. She knew she must smell like one, too.

As soon as they entered the dayroom, stools could be heard being flushed all over the place, which was only going to fill up the commodes, since the water had been turned off. It was a good indication there was plenty of contraband to be found. Sandra forgot her tiredness as a new surge of adrenaline kicked in.

The inmate in the first cell she and her fellow cadets went to was inhabited by a lone inmate who constantly threatened to kill a guard. Sandra waited outside the door while the others went in. She heard, "Get down on the floor." That was enough for her. She rushed in. Andrew and Randy were struggling with a huge man with arms like tree trunks. They were fighting to get his arms behind him.

"I'll kill you bastards," the inmate screamed.

"Give me your handcuffs, Sandra," Randy yelled. "He knocked mine to the

floor.”

“You bastards. I shoulda killed you,” the inmate screamed as his massive arms were pulled to his back.

Sandra held them out to Randy as Andrew placed his on one of the inmate’s wrist and Randy snapped her set on the other wrist. The man was so muscular one pair wouldn’t work. Sandra thought how fast it all happened. Their custody and control training was already paying off.

The Lieutenant and some other guards came running. “You have it under control?”

“Yes, sir,” Sandra replied for them all.

“Let’s handcuff him to the railing while his cell is searched. Randy and Andrew hauled the inmate to his feet and took him out. The inmate would soon face additional charges for assault.

Right next to where the inmate had lain only moments before, Sandra found a handle barely concealed under his mattress. She pulled out a butcher knife with a blade about four inches wide at the deepest part and eight to ten inches long. The inmate had vowed to kill the next officer who walked in his cell. He probably hadn’t figured on a shakedown and had no place to hide the weapon. No wonder he fought. If he had gone for the weapon, Andrew or Randy would probably be dead now.

“Lt. Gordon, could you come here, please?” Sandra asked.

“Sure what’ve you got?”

Sandra showed him the knife.

“I’ll take this and log it in. We were alerted that we might find something like

this today. I want everything in his cell taken out. A couple of you guys come and help her. Good work, troops.”

Sandra turned back to her job with more assurance of what she was doing was right. Later Randy and Sandra came across another interesting find. Sandra found the Lieutenant before they moved anything.

“What’d you guys find now?”

“I’m not sure. When I lifted this mat, there were all these lids off the toothpaste filled with different colors of sticky stuff,” Randy said.

“You’ve just found the stuff they use in the tattoo guns. They mix toothpaste and Koolaid from the commissary. That and a rebuilt ink pen is the County’s version of your basic tattoo artist’s tools. Did you find the gun?”

“No, only these lids,” Sandra said.

“Well, keep looking. Once again, good work.”

“Thanks,” Randy and Sandra said to the Lieutenant’s back as he left the cell.

In the next cell, one entire wall was plastered with half-naked pinups. After laughing and congratulating him on his choices, Andrew and Randy let the lone inmate of the cell peel away the women of his life from the celery green wall.

Sandra left them to it and moved to the last cell on the tier. The three inmates were all at court. As she poked through the stench, she couldn’t understand why the mat was so heavy. It was lying in the third bunk, which was a hardened plastic bed, commonly referred to as a boat. Each inmate had to have a bed to sleep in. Because the cells were equipped with only two metal bunk beds, the boats were used so that a third inmate could be kept in the same cell. The mat was so heavy she couldn’t lift it out of the

boat.

“Andrew, could you or Randy come and help me a moment?”

Randy, after peering under the mat said, “I think I see what the problem is.” He let the mat fall back into the boat. “Lift the edge of the mat on your end and you’ll see what I mean.”

Sandra lifted the soggy mat and almost gagged. “This inmate must have pissed a thousand times in his bed. Oh my! I can see maggots moving around in the brown liquid under the mat.”

Randy started humming, “Splish splash, I was taking a bath...”

“You know what Randy, you’re not a bit funny. You can get an orderly to help you get this out of here,” Sandra said as she stomped out of the cell.

She was sick of rotted underwear, the stench of piss, and cockroaches. She had seen enough trash to fill endless dumpsters. Never again would she be able to buy cheap toilet tissue that had been recycled. After this, it was Charmin all the way.

Nagged all day by the creepy sensation that something was walking around on her scalp, she didn’t dare scratch it. Scared that a staph infection was looming in her future, she had worn three sets of gloves each time, and cringed when she forgot and wiped perspiration from her brow.

Sandra had been trained well. The officers at the academy taught her by the book on how to do her job, though she wasn’t prepared for the reality of the jail. These people were so totally different than anyone she had ever known. Sitting in a classroom was one way of learning, but she realized being thrown into the jail environment was the best way to gain the experience needed to do the job and stay alive. She knew she still had to get

through another day of initiation before being accepted as an officer and allowed to dump the lowly title of cadet. As she called for an elevator, she stood proud, knowing she not only survived her first day but did well. Her trepidation at taking this job was gone. In its place she found respect for herself and courage to succeed.

Lost

The birthday party was for Chester's sometime friend, Bobby, who turned eight today. Chester, also eight, and his mom arrived late, because as usual Chester couldn't find his shoes. By the time his mom, Beth Ann, located the shoes in the doghouse, everyone was already at the party. As they walked in, the birthday boy was getting ready to open his first present.

Chester yelled, "Wait." He wanted to show them all a trick he saw Walt the Magician do on the cartoon channel. This was going to be his special present to Bobby. It would make up for all the times something had gone wrong in the past when they played together. Chester held his hands high in the air and yelled "AbbaCadabba" just like Walt did many times. Everyone got really quiet and some of the moms smiled. Then Chester attempted to pull the tablecloth out from under the cake, ice cream, punch and presents. The cake toppled forward onto the floor. The presents went flying and were lathered in bowls of strawberry ice cream and dripping in fruit punch as the paper cups sloshed about on the table. The punch bowl crashed to the floor and a red river stained the linoleum as it ran under chair legs and children's feet.

Chester, sure the trick would work this time, practiced earlier, while his mom took a shower. Twice he broke his mom's plates but the tablecloth slid out with a swirl. With no more time for any more practice, he hid the broken dishes in the dish washer. He hadn't worried too much because he thought his mom would be proud of him when she saw that he finally did something right.

Chester didn't think it was so bad, slipping and sliding through the gooey mess but no one else seemed to be having any fun. The other kids all cried. When he saw their mothers coming toward him with frightful looks on their faces, he took off running. He didn't know where he was going but he had to get away. He raced out of the house, slamming the screen door as he ran. He headed for the woods.

"Stop, Chester," Beth Ann yelled as she raced after him.

Chester didn't stop. He would have gotten away if he hadn't tripped on a rock, knocking the wind out of him.

Beth Ann caught up to Chester. "What in the world were you trying to do? Why did you have to ruin the party for everyone? Sometimes, I wish you'd died at birth." She grabbed his shirt and yanked him up. She whipped him hard on the backside but he was turning so much that she hit his legs and back, too. Chester was scared. His mom never ever said before she wished he had died. She always told him he was special and she loved him. He twisted and tried to escape her grip but couldn't.

She hit him anywhere she could and when Chester cried out loudly, she hit him some more. She knew she was out of control but couldn't stop. Anytime she took Chester anywhere, there was always a disaster. This one time she wanted to be like the other moms and have a normal afternoon with a child who didn't turn everything into a circus.

The other moms caught up to them and the birthday boy's mom pulled Beth Ann off Chester. "Stop, Beth Ann, before you kill him. It's okay. I know he didn't mean it. Maybe it'd be better if you took him home."

Ashamed of herself for beating Chester and for being humiliated once again, Beth Ann grabbed Chester by the wrist in a hold he knew he couldn't break and said in a hard voice, "Let's go."

Frightened, he knew better than to say anything. Chester knew he did a lot of things which got him into trouble. His mom might stay mad at him for a while, but he never saw her angry like this before.

As Chester's mom pulled into the driveway, he sat all hunched up clutching the arm rest. He could feel his mom's anger. Chester, not sure why she hadn't talked to him on the ride home or why she was so upset with him, needed a hug. He missed his mom telling him what a good boy he was and hugging him a lot like she usually did. She was probably still mad because he ran through the gooey cake when it hit the floor. Chester knew not to run in the house, but at the time, it felt like skating, not running.

Furious with Chester, Beth Ann turned to look at him as she turned the car off. "Young man, I want you to go in the house and go straight to your room. Take off those grimy clothes. I don't want to see or hear from you again until Sam gets home."

Chester reached over with outstretched arms for a hug, but Beth Ann turned away. Through clenched lips she said, "Go to your room now, or I'll whip you again."

Chester dropped his arms and started crying. He opened the car door and raced into the house, slamming the screen door, glad he slammed it. Chester raced for his room and slammed that door, too. Going straight to his window, he opened it enough to slip out. He hit the ground hard and cried out. After waiting a moment just to be safe, he crept along the tall hedge which separated his house from the elderly lady's next door. She couldn't see very well and rarely ever came outside. Following the hedge for a few

more feet, he came to a big elm tree and a fence. The elm's branches swept the ground, and he soon found one that allowed him to scurry up far enough so he could drop to the other side. He then dashed down a steep hill and into the woods, headed for his secret hideaway.

*

Meanwhile, Beth Ann called Chester's step-dad Sam and told him what Chester did. She heard him promise once again that he would try to come home early and talk with Chester. Slamming the phone down, Beth Ann thought this would be just another promise broken.

Both scared and furious he was having an affair with his secretary, she walked into the kitchen and grabbed a tall glass from the shelf. After fumbling under the kitchen sink, she soon found the bottle. The amber liquid filled the glass. Hiding the bottle behind the drain cleaner, she took the glass into the living room and turned on the TV. Nothing worth watching was on this time of day, but soaps, which she hated. She hit the off button and threw the remote across the room where it shattered a vase. Not bothering to look up, Beth Ann sank to the celery green couch. With head bent she sobbed.

Beth Ann screamed to the still house, "Why does everything always have to go wrong with my life?" Cold silence was her only answer. Wrenching sobs, then more silence. "Is this a preview of my life to come?" she asked. Between fits of sobbing and staring blankly at the darkened TV, Beth Ann fell into a troubled sleep.

Beth Ann sat up. She looked at the glass, which was over half empty. Not remembering having taken a drink, she realized most of the contents sloshed out and soaked the carpet at her feet.

She stood. She couldn't bear another minute of this lonely house. Sam would be home soon if he didn't call again to say he was working overtime. Angry at Sam for never being there to help her with Chester, she drained the glass. The Wild Turkey burned as it made its way into her empty stomach. She should be thinking about dinner for Sam and Chester, but she couldn't muster the energy or desire to move.

Frustrated when she looked at the empty glass, it took the same path as the remote. Beth Ann was tired of caring for Chester. Forced into labor early because of trauma from a car wreck in which her husband died, Beth Ann delivered a child with the umbilical cord wrapped too tightly around his neck. The doctor removed the cord, but not before some slight damage to Chester's brain occurred.

"I tried to do right by him," she said half to herself as she stood in the empty, cheerless room. "Sam, damn you, why are you always at work when the disasters happen with Chester?" She felt he never understood her humiliation and how desperately she wanted to fit in with the other young mothers. Maybe he wasn't having an affair at all and he only stayed away for hours on end because he didn't know what to do with Chester either.

Lately, Beth Ann was thinking about leaving. She knew this kind of thinking was wrong. She loved Chester and she loved Sam, but she felt like she was cracking up. She no longer thought of herself as a good mother. She must not be a good enough wife to Sam, or he wouldn't stay away so late each night. She thought drinking would help ease her loneliness. All it did was add to her depression. Exhausted and unable to shed another tear, she flopped onto the couch and drifted into an uneasy sleep.

Sam hung up the phone after talking to Beth Ann. He suspected she was drinking again, but he couldn't be sure until he got home. Whenever he tried to confront her about the drinking, she got angry and denied it, so, like a fool, he hadn't said anymore. Now, it looked like it was getting out of control.

Because he knew Beth Ann had more than she could handle taking care of Chester, Sam hadn't troubled her with his problems. He could see keeping the project to himself damaged his relationship with Beth Ann. Maybe tonight he really would have some good news for her. All the long hours away from the two people he loved most might finally be coming to an end. The project he worked on these past long months ended with the presentation he gave to a group of enthusiastic investors. While they stepped out to consult with their home office, all he could do was wait and hope he convinced them with his ideas.

"It has to go through," Sam said to the stark white walls of his office. The silence—companion to him for these months—no longer comforted him. He wanted to rush home to Beth Ann and Chester, but here he sat in the office that now equaled a prison. True, no bars lined the big picture window, but the distraction of the outdoors caused him to close the blinds on the world while he worked on the project.

"I can't take much more of this place. I've got to get away or I'm going to go mad," he shouted to the room piled high with maps and documents. A thin sliver of light slipped through a bent slat in the blinds. Dust motes appeared to dance in the light as they made their way to the other side of the silent room. Sam paced back and forth through the shaft of light, immersed in his thoughts, as he waited for word from the investors.

*

As Chester walked toward his hideaway, he thought about the pretty rainbow he painted on his stepsister's bedroom wall. It sure got him into a lot of trouble and he still didn't know why. His mom, and stepsister who was on break from college, went shopping, leaving him with Sam. Sam promised as soon as the football game was over he would play with Chester.

"Is it over yet?" Chester asked once again.

"Go play and don't ask again. I'll tell you when it's over. Now leave me alone," Sam said, his eyes riveted to the screen.

Chester wandered into the bedroom of his stepsister. He saw lots of bottles on her dresser, each one a different color. Some had shiny specks in them—red, blue, orange, green. He decided while he waited, he'd paint her a pretty picture by her dresser. He scooted the small stool over to the edge of the dresser and opened the first bottle. The smell was awful but the color pretty. He soon had a swath of colors on the wall. Some were a little smeared where they blended with the next one. The rainbow wasn't nearly as big as he wanted it because the colors didn't last long, but he still thought it beautiful.

Sam never did get around to playing with him. Chester's mom and stepsister returned home to pick up a pair of shoes they forgot and found Chester surveying his rainbow. He couldn't understand why they kept yelling about nail polish and how it would never come off the wall. He didn't know what nail polish was and couldn't understand why they wanted to remove his rainbow when he spent so much time painting it in the first place.

Sam whipped Chester after his stepsister yelled at her dad for her lost nail polish. She quieted down when Sam said he would buy her more.

Chester was looking down at his tennis shoes. He concentrated so hard, he didn't notice the animal until it stuck its nose into the back of his knee. Jerking around, Chester saw his dog.

“Oh, it's you, Rusty. Did you come to keep me company?”

Rusty, with fur the texture of a shaggy sheep, and color the same as rusted baling wire, wagged his tail. He whined and licked at the cake and ice cream coating Chester's clothes. Chester turned several times so Rusty could lick the goo off.

“You're my pal and the best dog ever.”

Together they headed down the trail. Chester's stubby little legs with their awkward steps gave Rusty time to nose into the bushes, chase a butterfly, and still be close enough to his master. “Rusty, it's taking a long time to get there.” Chester said. He didn't worry too much, though, now that Rusty showed up to keep him company.

Chester, tired of walking, stopped and looked around. It was starting to get dark. He should be at his hideaway by now. The wet clothes were stiff and stuck to his skin in places. He wished he had changed into something else. The shorts and tank top were not very much protection against the cool evening air. Chester felt hungry. He didn't get to eat any cake or ice cream. His empty stomach rumbled. Too tired and hungry to go any farther, Chester sat down in the leaves next to a tall oak tree. As Chester cried, Rusty curled up next to him. With tears smearing his dirt-stained face, Chester fell asleep with his arms around Rusty.

Sam arrived home to find the broken glass and vase in the corner. He stepped on the remote as he knelt to examine the pieces. As he rose, he noticed a thin brown spot on the wall. Actually, he smelled it first. Looking over to where Beth Ann snored on the couch, he picked up a piece of the glass. With a frown, he quickly determined why she was asleep again in the middle of the day.

He knew he neglected Beth Ann and Chester, but he worked really hard so he could give them nice things. Now, he could do a lot more. Affording someone to help take care of Chester wouldn't be a problem anymore. Beth Ann would have the break she needed. Maybe she could make friends with some of the other women around town.

His feet crunched glass so he took his shoes off and walked over to the couch. "Beth Ann, wake up," he said as he shook her.

A big snore escaped her parted lips. Her blonde hair—plastered to her face where she had been pressed into the cushion also hung in limp swirls off the couch.. Sam pulled her up to a sitting position.

"Wake up. I have good news."

"Whaa you say?" Beth Ann said with her eyes still closed.

Leaving her sitting on the couch, Sam went into the bathroom and grabbed a washcloth and brought it back dripping with cold water. He applied the washcloth to Beth Ann's face.

Sputtering, she said as her eyes popped open, "What're doing to me?"

Sam grabbed her arms and pulled her up. "Come on, get in the shower. Find your prettiest dress and get dolled up. I'm taking you and Chester to celebrate. I've got great news."

After Sam convinced Beth Ann to get in the shower, he cleaned up the broken glass. He decided Beth Ann might like a fresh cup of coffee so he padded into the kitchen in his stocking feet to make a pot. Turning on the small TV, he leaned against the counter and watched a little of the early evening news while the coffee brewed. When the news anchor relayed yet another shooting, he had enough. Off went the TV. A celebration was in order and he wouldn't let anything depress him tonight.

Knowing it would take Beth Ann a while before she'd be ready he decided to put off getting Chester into some clean clothes until the last minute. Letting Chester sleep a little longer would do him good and make their night out much more enjoyable. Excited, Sam couldn't wait to tell Beth Ann he landed a long-term lucrative contract with the investors, insuring them a life of comfort for a long time to come.

Beth Ann came into the living room arrayed in a short black dress, which showed off her long tan legs.

"Wow. You're gorgeous," Sam said. He grabbed Beth Ann and twirled her around as she attempted to put her earrings on.

"Stop it, Sam. You made me drop the back to the earring. Now what am I going to do? Those are the only ones that look good with this dress."

"I'll find it," Sam said, and stopped twirling Beth Ann. "Go get Chester up and dressed while I look for it."

Beth Ann laughed. She saw Sam already down on his knees searching the creamy carpet. She headed to Chester's room. Opening the door, she saw the curtain blowing through the open window. She ran to his bed and tore the blanket off, knowing he wasn't

there but looking anyway. After searching under his bed and in his closet she ran out in the hall and screamed, "He's not here."

"What do you mean he's not here? He has to be." Sam said as he came running.

"When you came home I told you I was mad and made him go to his room. I never thought he would run away," Beth Ann cried.

"Well, come on. Change into jeans and help me find him. I'll grab some flashlights while you're changing."

Together they scoured the front yard, side and back yard. They even woke up the lady next door.

"I'm sorry but I didn't feel well today, so I stayed in bed. I haven't heard a thing," the neighbor said. "I hope you find him."

As the door closed on the woman, Sam turned to Beth Ann and asked, "Did Chester ever go into the woods?"

"I don't think so. He did say something about a hideaway. I didn't pay much attention to him. You know how I'm always finding him in the doghouse with Rusty. I thought that was his hideaway."

As she spoke, they both took off running for the doghouse. It was empty and Rusty gone.

"Now what do we do?" Beth Ann asked.

"You go into the house and see if you can determine what he was wearing and I'm going to look over by the elm tree. Maybe he's hiding there."

Sam took off for the elm calling Chester's name. He could see nothing to indicate that Chester came this way but something urged him on. After climbing the

fence, he continued on, calling over and over for Chester. He even yelled for Rusty, too. Silence greeted him. Once, a hoot owl startled him as it swooped low before taking off.

*

Chester awoke to his name being called. He knew it was Sam looking for him. He started to yell back and then didn't. The whipping he got from Sam last week was still fresh in his mind. He thought maybe Sam would give him another for getting lost. He decided to wait until Sam went away before he got up.

“Rusty, don't bark. Sam will whip me and I already hurt now.”

Rusty, hearing the sound of his name, wagged his tail slightly.

Chester remembered last week when Sam let him watch while he worked on his car. Sam always told him not to touch anything and he never did. Sometimes, Sam let him hand him a wrench. Chester didn't always get the right one, but Sam never seemed to mind. Sam went to get a funnel. Chester, dying to do something nice for Sam, grabbed one of the slippery cans and was pouring the pretty red liquid into the big square hole under the hood when Sam came back. Chester looked up grinning, thinking Sam would be proud of him for not spilling much. Instead, Sam screamed so loud Chester fell off the car. The can went flying into the air, spilling the liquid all over Chester's clothes.

Sam kept yelling, “My radiator, my radiator.”

Then he yanked Chester's arm so hard it still felt sore. He whipped him hard and Chester cried. No, Chester wouldn't let on where he was, even if he was frightened. Sam would go away and later he and Rusty would find their way back home. He would go to sleep in Rusty's doghouse.

Chester waited until he could no longer hear Sam. Then he got up and went in search of his hideaway. He was really hungry and knew there were berries near there he could eat. Rusty, ever faithful, trotted alongside him.

Stumbling into a clearing, Chester could see what looked like his rock where he usually stretched out and let the sun hit his face. The silence of this place was nice. No one could shout at him here. He couldn't believe he found it. He stopped. Where were the pretty purple flowers? Sometimes yellow flowers had grown taller behind the purple ones. Chester talked to the purple flowers, telling them to hurry and grow big, too, but they never got as big as the yellow ones. He wondered why? Maybe this wasn't his hideaway. He didn't see any red berries. Crying, he sank in the soft moss beneath the sweeping branches of an old elm. Rusty once again lay beside him.

*

Not hearing anything after combing the woods for a long time, Sam realized he needed some extra help. Returning home, he was about to run in and call the police when Beth Ann met him at the door.

"You didn't find him? It's all my fault. I didn't hug him when we got home. All he wanted was a hug. He didn't know what he did was wrong. I shouldn't have been so hard on him. Oh, God." Beth Ann started wailing.

"Be quiet. I don't have time to deal with you. If you hadn't been drinking, he might still be here," Sam said.

"How did you know I was drinking?"

“Oh, come on, really. I’ve known for months that you’ve been hitting the bottle. You hide it behind the drain cleaner under the kitchen sink. I thought you would quit, but no, it’s gotten worse,” Sam said.

“Well, if you’d bothered to come home once in a while instead of being God knows where, and helped me with Chester, maybe I wouldn’t have taken to drinking.”

“I was working. I know I haven’t been here as much as you wanted, but I was trying to earn a living to make it better for you and Chester.”

“Yeah, right. Do you expect me to believe that?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

“You were probably out screwing your secretary.”

“I can’t believe you said that.”

“What was I supposed to think? You never ever come home until really late, and all I have is Chester. I need an adult in my life, someone I can talk to.”

“I know I haven’t been here much, but . . .”

“That’s an understatement. You haven’t been here at all,” Beth Ann said.

“Why do you think I came home early tonight? Did you ever wonder what my surprise was?” Sam asked.

“Well, what was it?” She said sharply. Before he could answer, Beth Ann blurted out, “I’m sorry. I’m so tired all the time. I even thought of leaving both of you.”

Sam stared long and hard at Beth Ann. “Later, we’ll talk later. Right now we have to find Chester.”

He picked up the phone and dialed the police. They soon arrived and with a few phone calls, people began showing up to help with the search. They spread out in all

directions, calling for Chester and Rusty. At dusk, a heavy fog set in which made it difficult to see very far. Flashlights were useless. They continued to search but the heavy fog settled around them and muted their voices.

Sam, out with the search party for hours, was exhausted. He thought about the first time he saw Beth Ann. She came out of the grocery store toting a sack and trying to keep a firm grip on a wayward little boy. Sam fell instantly in love. Though he was much older than Beth Ann and had a grown daughter from a previous marriage, he was still willing to love Chester as his own, even though Chester did try him at times. Now, he didn't know what to do. Did Beth Ann love him? He felt she loved Chester even if her actions lately seemed to appear otherwise.

It was decided to come back to the house and see if by chance Chester had made it home. When Sam saw Beth Ann crying, he knew Chester wasn't there. Some of the women were consoling her. Both gladdened and saddened to see the look of real concern on Beth Ann's face, Sam now knew for sure she loved Chester. He hated to see her go through any kind of pain.

When Beth Ann saw the women look beyond her, she stopped and turned around. She ran to Sam. When she grabbed him and they embraced, he thought there might be hope for them, too.

"Have they found Chester?" Beth Ann asked.

His look told her they hadn't. She broke down sobbing. Sam scooped her up and carried her into the house, depositing her on the couch. "I'll be right back."

He went back outside to see what everyone wanted to do. Because of the dense fog, the decision was made to wait until morning to continue searching. Once it burned

off, everyone believed he would be found. The searchers told him they would return early.

After the last vehicle left the drive, Sam and Beth Ann sat beside each other on the couch. Neither said a thing at first. Beth Ann's tears were gone. In their place was fiery sparks of anger blazing from her icy blue eyes.

"None of this would have happened if you had only come home once in a while," she said.

"Now wait a damn minute. I wasn't the one drinking," Sam shouted back. He got up and began to pace. The veins in his temple stood out. Beth Ann had never seen Sam so mad before.

"Drinking is the only friend I've got. The women around here all hate me because Chester is always pulling some stupid stunt."

"It can't be that bad. Maybe they're not as upset about Chester as you are, Beth Ann.

"What about your radiator? Have you forgotten that?" Beth Ann retorted.

"I admit Chester does some crazy things. I'll also admit I got really mad. But Chester doesn't know he's doing things that are bad," Sam said.

"It's always about Chester. What about me?" Beth Ann shouted.

"Beth Ann, are you telling me you blame Chester for the way he is?" Sam asked.

"I don't know what I'm saying. All I know is that I was happily married and expecting my first child, then my husband was dead and Chester wasn't normal."

"Beth Ann, are you trying to tell me you don't love me?"

“Yes, no, I don’t know. I wanted to leave the both of you. I still do. I cannot deal with Chester anymore.”

“Beth Ann, tell me straight out. Do you love me?”

“I love the ‘you’ I married. You’re no longer that person. You’re never here to help me with Chester. You stay so late at that damn office of yours, I’m exhausted and usually asleep when you get home.”

“I won’t have to anymore,” Sam said.

“I don’t believe you. I’ve heard you promise me too many times in the past.”

Sam stopped pacing. “Beth Ann, I mean it. That’s what I wanted to tell you earlier tonight before Chester got lost.”

“You really mean it? I can have help with Chester?” Beth Ann’s eyes softened to a powder blue.

“Yes, I do.” Sam sat down beside Beth Ann and took her hands in his. “But this doesn’t fix us. You accused me of being with my secretary. Don’t ever do that again. My first wife rode me all the time about being unfaithful. I never was until one day I had had enough of her bitching. I finally gave her something legitimate to gripe about.”

“I’m sorry, Sam. I wanted to hurt you the way I feel I’ve been hurt by you always neglecting me.”

“I’m sorry too, Beth Ann. I should have confided in you more and told you more about what I was working on. I was alone for so long after the divorce that I learned to only trust myself.”

“I’d say we both have some adjusting to do in our lives.”

“You’re right. We both do. Can you learn to love me again, Beth Ann?”

“I do love you, Sam. But can you forgive me for being hateful and drinking?”

“I’ve never stopped loving you,” Sam said.

Beth Ann dropped Sam’s hands and jumped up.

“Beth Ann, what is it now?” Sam said as his eyes filled with pain.

“Come with me and you’ll see.” Beth Ann almost ran to the kitchen. She pulled the liquor bottle out from under the sink. As she poured the liquid down the drain, she said, “I promise you I’ll never take a drink again. I never enjoyed it anyway.”

Sam grabbed Beth Ann and hugged her tight. They kissed. They kissed again, their kisses becoming deeper and longer.

“What if we don’t find Chester in time?” Beth Ann said her body shuddering in Sam’s after they had returned to the couch.

“We will. He may be scared, but more than likely Rusty is with him. Rusty will protect him.”

Since neither could sleep, they spent the rest of the night talking. Early in the morning, they fell asleep in each other’s arms.

*

Chester woke up to a beautiful morning. The sun was warm on his face, not that he was cold during the night. When he cried, he reached out to Rusty, whose body kept him warm. As Chester looked around him, he didn’t see any berries. He peed behind the big rock and called for Rusty who chased after a squirrel. Together, they set off.

Chester’s throat was scratchy, and he wished he’d let Sam find him even if he did get whipped. It wasn’t fun being lost. He just wanted to go home and eat a peanut butter

sandwich and drink some cold milk. Then he wanted to crawl into his bed and sleep some more.

Up ahead on the trail Chester couldn't believe it. There were tons of red berry bushes. They didn't look exactly like the ones he ate before. But they were red. He ran to the first of the bushes and plucked some and barely chewed them before swallowing. They were bitter. He ate some more, but these were harder to get down knowing they were going to taste awful.

Reaching in yet again for a few more, something flew past him. Then a whole lot of something came at him. One eye started hurting, and then his head and neck. He ran and saw Rusty had already tucked his tail and run down the path. The bees finally quit chasing him and Chester sat down on an old log that began rolling. He was able to plant his feet in the earth and the log stopped. Rusty crept on all fours toward Chester and put his face close to him.

Chester laughed. "It's okay, Rusty. They're gone."

After sitting on the log and petting Rusty for a while, the pain on his head and neck receded, but his thirst was worse than ever. Chester wanted water. "Rusty, let's find some water."

The excited voice of his owner caused Rusty to jump up and bark. He tried to climb into Chester's lap. The log rolled backwards knocking Chester off. He fell. The log rolled over Rusty, catching his collar by a limb which jutted out, dragging him down a steep incline. When he came to rest, he didn't move.

Chester called and called for Rusty, but his dog didn't get up. He tried but couldn't get down the embankment. Chester didn't know what to do. He couldn't leave

him; Rusty was his best buddy. He might never find him again. If Sam looked for him, maybe he would come looking again. Chester started yelling as loud as he could. "I'm here. I'm over here," over and over again.

*

Sam and Beth Ann awoke with a start as they heard the various cars pulling into their drive. Their necks were stiff and their clothes horribly wrinkled. Together, they set out with the others, determined to find Chester. Sam was the first to hear something. Soon others were indicating they heard something, too. Then nothing for a time. Sam again thought he heard something. This time it sounded much closer. Rushing toward the sound Sam and Beth Ann discovered Chester, with tears streaming down his face. Others soon caught up to them.

Beth Ann swept past everyone and swung Chester into her arms. "Mommy loves you so much. I'm sorry I said mean things to you yesterday. I never will again."

Chester, who loved hugs, tried to free himself.

"What's wrong? Mommy means it. She loves you." Beth Ann squeezed Chester harder.

"No, no." Chester kicked to get free.

Beth Ann turned stricken eyes to Sam, pleading with him to do something. The other searchers were shocked into silence.

Sam reached for Chester. "Hey, pal, tell me what's wrong."

Chester pointed at the embankment. "Rusty fell and he won't get up."

Everyone rushed to look. Several people skidded down sideways and unhooked Rusty from the limb just as the dog started to come to.

Someone said, “He’s fine, probably got knocked out from the log on him”

Chester, laughing and crying at once, jumped into Beth Ann’s arms, knocking her to the ground. Everyone laughed.

“I did something good. I stayed with Rusty. I’ll have a hug now.”

The Good Son

Sue caught a glimpse of Drake's retreating back as he hurriedly shut the gate between the yards. Damn the man. He was a forty-five-year-old leach who didn't appear at all grateful for Joan's kindness. Instead, he wanted more. Sue was here to find a way to make him pay for what he was doing to a helpless old woman, but first she needed more proof. She didn't have a formal plan of action yet, but she aimed to do something to stop the thievery. As a clerk to the County District Attorney's Office through the week, Sue saw enough abuse cases to know that she landed herself right in the middle of one. The advice her office gave her was to get as much documentation as she could on Drake's activities. So far, she had little to go on.

She continued to stare out Joan's patio doors at Drake's house, which she could see through the chain link fence of the backyard. When she took the weekend job in Nicoma Park, of caregiver to Joan, a stroke victim, she never thought she would see so many people who took advantage of the rich old woman. Excluding herself, it seemed everyone who worked for Joan tried to gain from the woman's hospitality.

Sue heard the story many times of how Drake volunteered to step in and become Joan's Power of Attorney after her husband died. Drake, a neighbor with a fifteen-year-old handicapped daughter, wormed his way into her affections. Joan, so scared of being alone, welcomed Drake's undue attention to her after so tragic a loss. She just couldn't see that Drake had probably bilked her out of thousands of dollars already. To her, he

was the son she never had.

Sitting at the dining room table, Joan asked, “Sue, would you mind cutting some fresh roses for me? These have wilted.”

“I don’t mind at all.”

“I asked Drake if he would bring some in, but he couldn’t. He said someone was coming over and he needed to get home. When he saw you drive up, he said you wouldn’t mind doing it for me,” Joan said.

“I know how you love your flowers. I’ll cut some of the peach roses. I noticed just now they’ve really opened up since last weekend.”

“Thank you, honey. I know how busy Drake is, and I really shouldn’t bother him.”

“Busy my ass,” Sue said under her breath.

“What dear, what did you say?” questioned Joan.

“Oh, I was wondering if you could see the roses through the glass.”

“No. The girl the agency sent this week said she didn’t have time to bother with such nonsense. I don’t know why she wouldn’t get some for me.”

“Did you say anything to Drake about the temp?”

“No, he only came in for a moment to get some money for cigarettes. He said he was running low.”

“Joan, the temp took care of you, didn’t she?” Sue asked.

Well, she watched TV and ate a lot. She wouldn’t take me out on the patio. She said she wasn’t paid enough to sit out in the hot sun. When I reminded the girl the patio was mostly covered, she wouldn’t answer me.”

“But did she help you to the bathroom?”

“Every time I needed her I would call several times before she came to help me. The only time she acted different was when my granddaughter, Sally, came to take me to the hairdresser.”

“Did you say anything to Sally about how the girl acted?”

“No, the girl is always telling me how she needs the job. I didn’t want to get her fired.”

“Did she at least do the finger pricks to test you for your diabetes?”

“She missed a few times this week, but overall my count didn’t go up much. She did say she didn’t see why she needed to give me my insulin injections and soak my ulcerated foot, when a nurse came three times a week to check on me,” Joan said.

“She should know you can’t be without your insulin and your feet have to be soaked at least twice a day. That makes me so mad.” Sue said, and then stopped. Agitated by the sound of Sue’s raised voice, Joan picked at her gown. Later, thought Sue, Sally would hear about the unprofessional people the agency sent out.

Joan lifted a long, bony arm up to her perfectly coiffed, strawberry red hair and said, “I don’t know what I would do without Drake since my husband died. He was so helpful, so willing to help in any way he could.”

Sue could only nod her head, unwilling to upset Joan anymore by telling her Drake was nothing but a rat.

“He never seems to mind taking me to the bank when my retirement and social security checks come each month. I really don’t know what I would do without him. He’s been like a good son to me,” Joan said.

Yeah, right, thought Sue as she turned away so Joan couldn't see how worried she was. She grabbed the shears from the drawer. When Joan took her nap after dinner, she would call Sally; it was Drake's responsibility to make sure reliable people were showing up. He was to pay bills, buy groceries, and keep an eye on the gardener. Sally, on the other hand, would take Joan to her doctor's appointments and to the beauty salon every two weeks. As Sue looked down at the shears in her hand, she thought how nice it might feel to plunge those shears through Drake's rotten heart.

"Would you like for me to roll you into the yard so you can see all your beautiful roses?" asked Sue.

"No, I'll watch you from here. It seems a bit chilly today," Joan said.

"Are you feeling okay? Do you need me to do anything?"

"No, I'm fine. I'm a bit tired, though. I'll be okay now that you're here," said Joan.

"Well, I'm glad I'm here," Sue said as she leaned over and hugged Joan. The foul odor of urine assailed her nostrils. She stood up. "Why don't I first get you comfortable, then I'll get your roses?"

"You know best, dear."

As she pushed Joan's wheelchair away from the table and through the living room, Sue's eyes were blazing. Joan smelled as if she had been sitting in her own urine for a long time. She wondered why someone as sweet and easy to get along with as Joan, had to suffer. After making sure Joan was clean and in a fresh gown, Sue said, "I'll be right back with the flowers."

Sue opened the patio doors and stepped out to the lingering heat of an early

summer evening. Still warm enough to break a sweat, she picked up the basket for the flowers that always sat on Joan's patio table and headed for the roses. Sue worried about Joan. She never complained of being cold like most elderly people and she never missed an opportunity to go outside. One of Joan's favorite pastimes was sitting on her patio and looking out over her beautiful yard. Did Joan suspect something about Drake? She was such a proud woman, though bound to a wheelchair. She didn't look at all like she was seventy. Something was bothering her and Sue meant to find out what.

The yard was a gardener's delight. Roses of every color—pinks, white, reds, orange, even a light blue—bordered the back fence, climbing on mini trellises throughout the yard, and trailing up the side of the house where the brick fireplace jutted out. Gnomes, flutter wheels, a cement donkey pulling a cart of pink roses and various other ornaments filled the gaps between the rose bushes. Yellow butterflies flitted from rose to rose. The roses perfumed the air with their individual scents. Sue knew Joan's favorite was the Oklahoma Rose, so she cut a few. The big showy flower, deep red in color, would make a nice center with the peach roses surrounding them. Sue fancied maybe Joan's roses were a little bigger than anyone else's. She moved to the back fence and clipped a few small white buds of a miniature rose, before turning to cut the light peach-colored roses. She leaned in to breathe in the deep pungent smell. After a forty hour week at her other job, coming here seemed like a vacation in paradise.

Drake's little girl Tessa came outside and over to the fence. Sweet and shy, she had the mind of a seven year old. She didn't talk much but loved to come and see Joan when Sue was there. Sue always painted her nails for her when she painted Joan's. The little girl had a severe case of Downs and Sue was sure from the looks of her matted

black hair she didn't get too much love from Drake or anyone else in her house.

"Hi, honey. How are you?" Sue asked.

"Fine."

"Would you like a rose?"

"Uh-huh."

Sue handed her a red rose from the basket, knowing it was her favorite color.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw a commotion in Drake's yard. Because Joan's house set angled on the corner, Sue could see not only Drake's backyard but the driveway as well. Knowing she was being overtly rude by staring, she looked anyway. Drake had a brand new houseboat sitting on a huge trailer which took up most of his short drive. Drake's two older sons by a former marriage, pulled up in a beat up blue Maverick. The car belched as it died, a plume of black smoke shooting from the exhaust. The rusted passenger door looked like someone took an aerosol can of gray primer to it.

"Tessa, get your ass over here and help us carry in the beer," Drake yelled from the front side of the house. The two boys were unloading one suitcase of beer after another from the trunk.

"Gotta go," Tessa said.

Sue watched her go, the rose bobbing up and down in her hand as her chubby body half loped toward the drive. With a tight grip on the shears, tears came to her eyes. How could that monster treat the sweet innocent girl that way? She was like a slave to them. Something needed to happen soon, or Sue would take matters into her own hands.

Sue looked toward the patio doors to see if Joan was watching, but her head was

bent toward her chest. Another nap. After clipping some peach roses to go with the others, Sue hurried back inside.

“Aren’t these the most gorgeous flowers you’ve ever seen? Get a whiff of how good they smell,” Sue said as she arranged the flowers in a vase.

Joan raised her head and her eyes lit up as she took in her beautiful flowers. Before her stroke, Joan was an avid gardener. Now, she relied on a man to mow, trim, and take care of her beauties.

“They’re lovely. Thank you so much for getting them for me. I can sit here at the table and enjoy them. I think I’m feeling better already.”

“Let’s get you into your bath. Afterwards, I’ll fix some dinner. How’s that sound?” Sue asked.

“That’ll be great.

Joan slept peacefully on her bright orange couch after being bathed and fed. Sue noticed lately, Joan took more naps during the day. Maybe her age was catching up with her. She knew she didn’t have much time to make her call before Joan’s show, *Wheel of Fortune*, came on. She never missed it and could always guess the puzzles before the contestants did. The stroke left Joan’s left side weak, hence the wheelchair, but her mind was still razor-sharp. Was Joan so lonely that she overlooked Drake’s faults? Sue knew she had to try and help Joan before all her money was squandered away.

Sue sat at the dining room table and looked around. One thing she knew for sure. When Joan died, someone was going to have a hell of a time getting rid of all the junk. Though the furniture was quite expensive, the walls were cluttered with too many mirrors, fake flowers in sconces, and a hodgepodge of pictures that didn’t go together.

Joan liked wild colors and didn't care if the décor was off. The counter, hutch and table were all overrun with papers, nutcrackers, fake flowers in vases, dolls, candy dishes, and on and on and on, a never ending list of things.

The phone rang. Before it rang a second time Sue lifted the receiver. Hearing Sally's voice on the other end, Sue sighed. She wasted no time in telling her about the weekday help. Sally did her best to take care of Joan's needs, but she lived in Ada. Besides, she had four children of her own to worry about. After being assured by Sally she would take care of the problem, Sue hesitated, loath to apprise Sally of her suspicions about Drake. Maybe she should wait before she said anything, until she had more facts than just her gut instinct to go on.

"Thanks for your help, Sally. I knew I could count on you to take care of the problem with the agency. Joan's show is about to come on and you know how she doesn't like to miss it, so I'll talk to you later. Thanks again."

Joan watched TV for awhile. Sue knew she wasn't ready to go to bed yet, but Sue started feeling the effects of the long day. The double duty of working forty hours through the week and then spending each weekend as an aide to Joan, began to wear her down. Sue needed both jobs to support her, but the strain of being responsible for someone who was being taken advantage of was more than she bargained for. She swore to herself after hurting her back on her last patient, who was bedridden and weighed over 200 pounds, she would find another way to supplement her income. Yet, here she was, unable to give up the job because she became close to Joan, loving her like the grandmother she'd never known. She thought, after hearing stories similar to Joan's in the DA's Office all the time and seeing the havoc it raised among love ones who found

out too late, it would be a pleasure to see Drake get his due.

“Sue, did I ever tell you how my husband died?”

“No,” Sue lied. She knew Joan well enough by now to know when she started talking about her husband, she was feeling depressed. It was better to let her talk.

“We both retired from Tinker Air Force Base. We were making plans for a leisurely trip to New York. He took care of the packing, insisting I sleep late that morning so I would be well rested for the trip. He got up to make us breakfast and said he would call me when it was ready. I wasn’t really sleepy, but I must have drifted off. When I woke up, I sensed something wrong. On checking, I found him dead by the front door from an apparent heart attack. He must have come back from getting the morning paper. I ran screaming down the street for a neighbor. That’s when I met Drake. He came and took care of things. I’ve been so alone since my husband died. I don’t know what I would do without Drake. He’s like the son I never had.” Joan started to cry, her slight shoulders quivering.

Sue jumped up and hugged Joan, holding her for a while until she calmed down.

“Goodness, the news is almost over. Would you like to see if you can sleep now, Joan?”

“Yes, I think I will. Thanks for taking such good care of me.”

“Not a problem. That’s what I’m here for. Let’s see if you can get a few hours sleep. Tomorrow, after breakfast, would you like me to do your nails for you?”

“That would be lovely dear.”

Sue saw Joan soaked part of the chair again. She had diabetes which caused her to go frequently, and sometimes the Depends weren’t enough. It was hard for a woman

as independent as Joan once was, to keep her dignity in tact. Sue tried to minimize the problems this caused, and make Joan feel less embarrassed.

“While you were napping, I put fresh sheets on the bed. Let’s get you changed with a fresh gown. Then you’ll be ready for sweet dreams.”

Joan sat on the bed. Sue whisked the gown off and had another over Joan’s nakedness before the air had time to touch her body much. There were no bras or panties in Joan’s world.

“Okay, lie back on this blue pad and I’ll get you changed.” Joan’s body was weak but she could roll to the side and take some of the pressure off Sue’s back as she moved to change her. Sue could barely imagine the indignity Joan must feel of having someone else clean her bottom. With little effort, Joan was changed, powdered, and tucked in.

“If you need me, I’ll be right next door.”

“Sue, you need your sleep. You could hang a couple of gowns over the headboard like the girl through the week does. I could manage.”

“You mean to tell me she doesn’t get up in the middle of the night to change you?”

“She said she needed her sleep if she had to be up all day with me,” Joan said.

“I don’t care what she said. She’s paid to take care of you. Besides, she’s supposed to nap when you nap. She’s working for you. It’s your money, Joan. What if you fell? Did she think about that?” Sue was working herself into a colossal fit. Breathe slowly, she told herself.

“I love you, Sue,” Joan said.

“I love you too, sweetie. Try and have a good night. If you need me, I want you

to call. You won't try to get up by yourself, will you? Promise me you will call me first."

"I will, if that's what you want."

"It is. Night, Joan."

"Night."

Going to her room Sue was too mad to sleep. How could the agency justify sending such incompetent workers out? This particular agency paid fairly well. If only there was someone left in Joan's family to care about her. Her two great nephews in Kansas were more interested in how much money Joan would be leaving them. She mustn't forget the half-sister of Joan's dead husband, who showed up periodically from Arkansas looking for a handout. She always related some harrowing story and Joan gave her money. Sue knew Joan was a lonely old woman who wanted friends. Sue knew that Joan used her money to buy friends, though Joan would never see it that way. All it got her was a bunch of good for nothing free loaders.

Next morning, Joan was up early. Sue got up three times with her during the night; usually it was more. Joan completely soaked the bed once and everything had to be changed. The washer was running with a full load.

When Sue opened the drapes, she noticed Tessa lugging beer cartons to the dumpster. She dropped a carton and a few bottles fell out. Tessa ran to get them before they rolled down the drive.

Later, while both of them sat at the dining room table, Sue checked Joan's blood sugar. "Your count is up a bit," Sue said, showing Joan the result in the meter.

Joan raised her gown to waist level so Sue could give her the injection in her

stomach. Joan was a trooper. She never complained. That's why it made it so difficult for Sue to broach the next subject to Joan. She deliberately waited until Joan's feet were soaking to mention Drake. She didn't think Joan would get too mad at her if she was getting some relief from the pain in her feet.

"Where did Drake get the money for the big houseboat?" Sue asked.

"Remember when he came over last Saturday and told you he needed to speak to me in private?"

"Yes, I do remember." Sue also knew that Drake usually avoided coming over when she was there so he must really be desperate for more cash.

"Well, he told me not to say anything but he asked me for \$18,000.00. I told him I couldn't give him that much. He got really upset and left. I've been wondering myself how he got the money. He never would tell me what he wanted it for," Joan said.

Sue wondered how much a used houseboat cost. She forced herself to stay calm as she lifted Joan's left foot out of the bath. The ulcer was almost to the bone on her big toe. Patting the foot dry with a towel, she put a fresh padding of gauze before slipping on a fresh white sock.

"Why do you think he might want a boat that big?" Sue asked to gain a little information.

"He did say that his current wife's daughter by another marriage got it in her head she wanted to be married on a houseboat. The daughter thought it would be neat if all but the minister and the witnesses stood onshore and watched the ceremony. Later, of course, the family planned to have a huge party on the boat, allowing anyone who wanted to, to come aboard and celebrate.

“And he needed the money for that? Joan, you didn’t really give him the money, did you?”

“No, but now I wonder how he got it. I know I signed my checks this past week when he took me to the bank, but I didn’t see him get any money out.”

“Maybe he’s forging your name. Though with him being your Power of Attorney, he wouldn’t have to do that, but he would have to justify spending such a large amount.”

Joan started to cry, her shoulders heaving, as loud sobs filled the air. “He wouldn’t do that. He’s been such a good son to me. I just know he wouldn’t do that.”

“Hey, it’s all right. I’m sure he didn’t,” Sue said as she hugged the frail woman. She could kick herself for bringing up any doubt about Drake to Joan. There had to be another way for her to find out about the thief.

The doorbell rang, and then without waiting for Sue to get the door, Terry, Joan’s gardener walked in.

Joan’s face lit up as he came and gave her a hug. “How’s the new riding lawnmower I bought working out?”

“It’s great. My lawnmower broke down so I’ve been using yours to cut lawns this week. I knew you wouldn’t mind.”

“That’s okay. I know you can’t cut lawns without a good mower so you keep it on your truck until you get another one for yourself,” Joan said.

Sue finished with Joan’s other foot, stood up with the foot soaker full of water and said, “I’ll leave you to chat while I get rid of this.” Without waiting for a reply from either of them, she left the room before she said something she knew she would regret.

Just because Terry was an old friend of Joan's husband, he shouldn't take advantage of her. Sue saw the lawnmower in the garage and it was worth every bit of \$1200.00 or more.

When she heard the lawnmower start, she came back into the dining room. Joan was smiling, watching out the patio doors as Terry mowed the backyard.

Drake came over, slipping in the patio doors behind Joan.

Joan became as excited as a teenager.

"How's my girl today?" Drake asked.

"I'm fine. How could I be otherwise? I have my two favorite people with me."

Sue could tell Drake didn't like her answer.

"I wonder if I could speak with you for a moment, Joan"

"Oh, don't mind me. I'll check the washer and I have dishes to do, anyway," Sue said rising. She'd be damned if he thought she was leaving the room for a long time. He could talk or not. She didn't care.

Drake leaned in close to Joan and whispered. Sue couldn't hear what he said. When Sue came back from moving the clothes to the dryer, Joan said, "Get my purse. Drake's truck is on the blink. He needs to rent a van to get his mother-in-law moved in. They sold her home."

Sue did as she was told. When she left the room, she had the satisfaction of seeing Drake give her a hateful look. She knew he was a cheat and a liar. Somehow, she would find a way to stop him.

Joan, who hated change, but loved big bills, peeled several off for Drake.

"Thanks, dear. Well, I gotta go."

“Can’t you stay for a few minutes more?” Joan asked.

“No, I really can’t.” Drake stooped and kissed Joan on the forehead and departed through the patio doors, stuffing the money in his shirt pocket.

Sue noticed Joan’s flushed face and bright eyes. If Joan hadn’t been seventy, Sue could believe that Joan had a crush on Drake.

Terry finished the yard. He came in and collected his pay. Joan didn’t have the right bills so he left with a \$100. Sue knew the change would never make its way back to Joan. Having seen it before, she was sure Terry counted on Joan’s forgetfulness.

After that, the day was fairly quiet with Joan taking two long naps in between a neighbor’s visit and getting her nails done. Sue waited, but Tessa never showed up. The neighbor called first and was kind enough to pick up Joan’s favorite meal from Grandy’s—chicken fried steak. The only other excitement was watching out the patio doors, as Drake moved his mother-in-law in next door.

“I guess he didn’t need to rent a van after all,” Sue informed Joan as they watched the dilapidated Maverick roar into the drive.

Drake pried the passenger door open and hefted the frail woman over his shoulders, shouting at someone to open the front door as he carried her inside. Sue felt sorry for the lady knowing she would be living in a place where she wouldn’t get the proper care.

Sue started to sit down in a dining room chair after cleaning up the remains of dinner, when the chair leg gave way. She caught the table before falling all the way to the floor.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Go out in the garage and get a screwdriver from the big tool chest by the wall. The screw probably came loose from the leg. I kept telling that heavy girl last week to quit rocking the chair, but she wouldn’t listen.

Sue opened the garage door and spotted the tool chest right away. Scooting beside Joan’s big tank of a Cadillac, which took up most of the area, she made her way over to the chest. The lid was up and pushed back. When she peered inside, the chest was completely empty. Sue remembered seeing the chest full of tools. It was either the gardener Terry, or Drake, or both of them. The only tool she found was a small screwdriver on the workbench. It would do.

Sue convinced Joan she could work better with a small screwdriver. She got the chair fixed as *Lawrence Welk* came on TV. Joan was elated when the Irish tenor sang and was content to listen as his rich voice belted out a familiar Irish tune. He was her favorite.

After settling Joan down for the night, Sue came back to draw the drapes on the patio doors, knowing she was no closer to finding out how to catch Drake in his thievery. It worried her he might soon steal all of Joan’s money. She really wasn’t a violent person at all; but the frustration of trying to take care of Joan, who either couldn’t see or refused to see his faults, made the prospect of driving those shears through Drake’s worthless heart sound like a good plan.

Sue hoped for a good night but knew the chances were slim it would happen. Joan’s blood sugar was up and down all day, which meant Joan would need more changes during the night.

“Damn it. Can’t you do anything right? Back it up. Straighten your wheels. Get the hell out of the way and let me do it.”

Sue shot up in bed, slamming her head against the headboard. Was she dreaming? What was going on? She ran to Joan’s door and peeked in. Joan was on her side, sleeping soundly. Sue, up so many times during the night with Joan felt like she just shut her eyes. She went back to her room and looked at the digital clock. Sure enough, she was asleep for only a few minutes.

“If you don’t get your worthless ass over here and help me hook this up, I’m gonna’ kick your teeth in.”

The noise sounded like it was coming from the kitchen. Sue tiptoed down the hall and peered around the corner. Not seeing anyone, she crept to the patio doors. Drake and his sons were hooking the houseboat up to his pickup, which seemed to run fine now. They continued to curse each other as one backed up too fast, bumping the trailer. The other son was loading the boat with beer. She watched until they finally managed to connect the two. Sue went back to bed for a while after checking on Joan, who hadn’t woke up during the fracas outside.

It was quite late in the morning when Sue awoke again feeling very refreshed. The birds were singing outside the bedroom window. Feeling much better after some sleep, she went to check on Joan and found her just waking up.

“How do you feel now you’ve had some sleep?”

“I feel really good. You know, if you don’t mind I think I want to sit out on the patio for awhile,” Joan said.

“I think that’s a great idea.”

Breakfast over and the foot taken care of, Sue pushed Joan outside. She placed a light shawl over Joan's legs. The two women sat watching a little white cottontail run in and out of the rose bushes along the fence. Several of the neighbors kept up a running commentary with Joan on seeing the little rabbit in their yards.

Joan asked, "How do you think the bunny survived in town this long?"

Sue started to answer then asked instead, "Did you hear that noise?"

"Yes, I did. What do you think it is?"

"I don't know, but it sounds like it's coming from Drake's house. I saw them hooking up the boat really early this morning. Who could possibly be in there?"

"You'll have to check it out. Drake and I have keys to each other's houses. We've always watched out for one another.

"Surely, it's not the mother-in-law." Sue said.

"Drake wouldn't leave her there by herself," Joan replied.

"I can't walk in someone's house when they're not home."

A horrible wail rent the air followed by more low groans.

"Okay, okay, I'll go," Sue said looking at Joan.

Sue could almost hear her own heart beating by the time she made her way around to Drake's front door. With the shears in one hand and the keys in the other, she paused. Fear caused her to fumble the keys, dropping them. Her hands shook. She froze. What if someone in the house heard her? Looking around, she noticed the street empty of people as were the driveways. No help for her there. It looked like everyone took the chance to get away and enjoy the sunshine today. Not wanting to leave Joan too long, Sue sucked in a lungful of air for courage and managed to get the door open.

Stepping inside, she heard the moans immediately. They appeared to be coming from the back part of the house. Great, she was going to be murdered in someone's house where she had no business being.

With the shears held in front of her, she looked first in one bedroom and then the other. What she saw in the third one would haunt her forever. On a little twin bed was the mother-in-law in a thin gown, lying in her own feces. Her hands and ankles were tied down. Her nose was free, but from the looks of the red marks on her face, it appeared as if a rag was previously over her mouth. With all the twisting to free herself, she must have worked the rag loose. She let out another low moan, looking right into Sue's eyes as she did so.

Quickly, Sue cut the ties that bound the woman and then put the shears in her back pocket. "You're going to be all right. I'm going to call someone to come and help you," Sue told the distressed woman.

The woman had tears in her eyes as but looked a little less stressed when Sue pulled out her cell phone to call the police. She guessed that Drake didn't want the mother-in-law on the boat, so he left her here. As far as Sue was concerned, Drake just signed his own ticket to prison, for she would make sure the DA's office checked into his handling of Joan's money, too. She knew he wouldn't be getting out anytime soon.

Lillie

Lillie Jackson had rat poison on her mind as she walked down the cracked sidewalk in Viceroy, Tennessee, one day in early June. The tufts of grass, the clumps of dirt, the cement's split seams—all spelled decay. She paused a moment, caught her breath in the still muggy air, and wondered why she hadn't taken the car.

She looked around at the boarded up building closest to her. The Grand Hotel: paint peeling, broken windows, faded lettering and memories. The crumbling building next to it—once a vacuum repair shop, dry cleaners, pizza place, now too was closed. In the next block, the Corner Drug, still in business was the one place in town where a person could hop on a stool and have a sandwich, or fries, or soda, or ice cream—or all four, while waiting on a prescription. Viceroy struggled; Lillie resisted; both still were barely alive. Together, the years were unkind to them; the town, bankrupt since the jeans factory closed down, which took away the people; Lillie, since she gave up on love.

Thirty-eight and considered quite a catch, Lillie evinced no interest in men, except to hate them. She spent the last thirteen years hating two men in particular: Jeremy Palmer, and Jeremy's daddy. As long as she stayed in the company of women, Lillie appeared fine; her guard went down; but if a man came close, she then lost all reasoning power. The hate and rage in her took a toll on her mind. Lillie was going mad.

Lillie hurried to the drugstore. She opened the door. A blast of cold air hit her, yet she welcomed it. For a minute, Lillie couldn't think why or how she came to be in

the place. Then she remembered. Doc Johnson said for her to get started taking something he called Zanex. He suggested she needed to relax more. Lillie went to the Doc out of fear. She knew she was getting worse, often forgetting things. She didn't want to seem less capable in the eyes of a man, even if he was a doctor. Not believing what he told her, but desperate to try anything, Lillie agreed to try the pills.

Without saying a word, Lillie handed the script to the pharmacist and turned to walk away.

“Nerves acting up?” he asked.

“So-so.” Her thoughts told her he was nothing but a nosy old man. She regretted that she couldn't go on over to Chattanooga to get the prescription filled, because normally she loved the drive. Today, she couldn't stay focused; the thirty-five minute trip was too much.

Lillie walked to the soda counter. Ice cream: chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, cherry jubilee, black walnut, sixteen flavors in all. She thought about having a black walnut ice cream cone while she waited, but settled instead on a root beer. The frosty mug was heavy, the root beer ice cold. Something else troubled Lillie as she sat and sipped on her drink. She tried to remember what else she supposed to do. Rat poison. That was it. She needed it to kill the huge rats in her basement.

After getting her pills, she walked outside to a blast of heat that made her shiver. She stood at the one stoplight in the town, watched it turn green a couple of times and thought how strange heat made her cold. A lone pickup pockmarked with rust, eased through the light. With a tip of his hat to Lillie, the man and his truck labored on down

the street. As it turned green for the third time she remembered. Rat poison. She crossed the street to the Dry Goods Store.

Every time Lillie came into the store, she saw something she missed before. She couldn't imagine why it was called dry goods when old Miss Mae sold a little bit of everything: pots and pans, cloth by the yard and thread by the spool, horse salve and udder balm, fans and heaters, baby clothes and overalls, straw hats and ear muffs, canned food and dog chow, large tubs and soup bowls. The store—three buildings opened into one continual store. The huge old desk where Miss Mae's brother used to conduct business sat centered in the middle building. On it, the ancient cash register with pop up numbers in a little window showing the price, still worked. Lillie remembered to step down to the second room. She found Miss Mae huddled in one of the rockers with a purple crocheted lap rug over her legs.

"Howdy, Miss Mae. I've come for rat poison," Lillie yelled to the half-deaf woman.

"You got more rats?"

"I saw a big one today. The rat scared me half to death. Unfortunately, I didn't have anything to kill it with," Lillie said.

"Well, what was you a doing going down to the basement anyways?" Miss Mae asked.

"I brought up the last of Mama's old fruit jars to the street. There's a fellow going to take them all away for me."

"Well, don't just stand there. Sit a spell and tell me some news," Miss Mae said.

Lillie sat in the other over-sized rocker. “I got rid of Mama’s clothes. The house is clean, and the jars were the last thing I needed to get rid of.”

“Your mama been gone, what ten months, a year?” asked Miss Mae.

“Eighteen months tomorrow.” Lillie leaned her head back and thought about how it was getting harder to be in the house now that both her parents were gone. If she had a friend, if she had a sister, if she had a husband, she wouldn’t be so lonely. Her sanity lay in taking in boarders, runaways, mostly. They always came from the Greyhound bus that made a stop in Viceroy once a week. The drivers all knew of Lillie and would direct the strays to her house. Sometimes one would stay awhile and then the girl would move on. Her newest boarder, Alison Fenway claimed to be from Atlanta. She cooked really good meals. In fact, she wanted to make a peach pie today. Lillie went back down to the basement. She thought she remembered there were still some good jars of peaches. There was only plum jam. That was when she saw the rat. The huge rodent made Lillie scared and angry—and determined.

“Miss Lillie. You done took you a nap,” said Miss Mae, gently shaking her awake. “You kept saying you wanted peaches. I got your poison and your peaches. Want I should put it on your tab?”

Lillie sat up. Her neck felt stiff. She rubbed the drool from the corner of her mouth.

“Yes, that’ll be fine.”

“Mrs. Florence was in earlier and told me you was having the preacher and his wife over to supper,” said Miss Mae.

“Tonight, right after church services. I’ve got to go.”

“Come on back again,” Miss Mae said as Lillie banged the old black screen door.

The sack clutched under her arm, Lillie hurried past the tiny post office with its new coat of paint shining white, past the red-brick bank, and the barber shop with its red and white striped pole out front. Into the next block, she slowed down. She thought about stopping in at Sally’s Beauty Barn, but knew there wasn’t time for a set, not with the way Sally stopped every five seconds to gossip about something. There were more decaying buildings. Across the street at Dill’s Auto Body and Repair Shop, she could see Jimmy, the mechanic’s son, hard at work on a car. Lillie waved and sped on, her purse banging against her shoulder with every step.

At the end of the block, Lillie turned onto Mimosa Street. Here it was a little cooler. Blocking out most of the heat, the branches from the trees in each yard formed a canopy overhead with the trees from the opposite side of the street. Lillie pressed on to the last street before the pavement ran out. Here she turned and walked up the long drive, past the fruit jars sitting by the drive to her house, which sat secluded from anything else. There were no nosy neighbors to deal with. Her two-story white frame with wide windows, wooden porch, and spindle railing, rose out of the dense growth which surrounded it. Lillie could see that the deep carpet of green grass, which led up to the house, needed trimming. Old man Silas Gunter hadn’t shown up today to cut it. Lillie wasn’t the only one to forget things.

The sweet scent of the magnolia blossoms from the trees stole into the house ahead of Lillie. “Here are the peaches, Alison.”

“What took you so long?” Alison asked. “I got worried. You said you would be right back.”

“Oh, I got to talking to Miss Mae,” said Lillie lying. She wasn’t about to tell this girl she fell asleep in the store. “That was a long walk. I’m going to rest on the porch a minute. Get me some iced tea, will you?”

“Right away,” said Alison, going to get the tea.

As Lillie sank down into her own rocker, she first picked up the baby doll that was in the seat and absently started rocking it. She thought about how these girls were always so ready to help out around the house, figuring maybe they were just thankful to have a roof over their heads. This one had been more accommodating than some and stayed a little longer, but now she too was leaving, going back home to make things right with her family. Everyone Lillie knew and liked always left her. Maybe that was why she was not feeling quite right these days.

It got her to thinking about Jeremy Palmer, the source of her deep-seated anger. Lillie, who spent most of her time at the Baptist church, where she was secretary, piano player, and welcoming committee all in one, did her part in helping to procure him as their new pastor. The church lost their pastor a year ago and for a while it looked as though they would never find another willing to pastor a dying town like Viceroy. Jeremy Palmer, twenty-eight and fresh out of seminary, accepted and was at the job for a little over two weeks. Lillie couldn’t believe her good luck. Maybe it wasn’t luck. Maybe he came back to have a connection with the town he once knew as a child. The Palmers were gone now for thirteen years from the town Jeremy grew up in. She would never forget the day they left. Jeremy’s dad abruptly moved the family to Florida after accepting a music director’s job there.

She didn't care how he came to return to Viceroy, only that he was here now. He was finally within her grasp. She was going to make sure he didn't get away again. The cruel surprise for her hadn't been that he had brought along a wife, but a wife and a baby. It was too late for caring anyway. She would have her revenge at long last.

Lillie stood up. Time to take care of the rats. Lillie passed through the kitchen and saw Alison hard at work on the pies. She knew she wouldn't have to worry about her coming into the basement. None of the strays did. They were too scared of the rats. Lillie was still cautious, opening the door, turning on the light, and then shutting and relocking the door behind her. Hearing the little devils scurrying around, she put out all the rat poison. Once that was done, she sat for awhile in another rocker she placed in the basement. Until the rats came, this was Lillie's favorite place in the house. Here no one could judge her.

The dolly she cradled waited for her. "How's mommy's darling?" Lillie asked. Turning her head slightly to listen for the answer, she said, "I know the rats are bad. Mommy is going to get rid of them all. Then we'll have fun. Mommy will have a tea party. You can invite your best friends."

Lillie hugged Clarabelle close to her. She crooned a lullaby as she rocked and rocked. A knock on the basement door startled her.

"Miss Lillie, I finished the pies. I uh I'm ready to leave," Alison said.

"I will be right up," Lillie said.

Lillie laid Clarabelle back in the rocker and put a soft pink blanket over her.

"Mommy will be back soon. Hugs and kisses until then."

Lillie hurried up the stairs. “I’ll take you to the bus station. I have to go to church anyway.”

“Thank you, Miss Lillie. I appreciate all you’ve done for me, but I have to go back and try to make things right with my parents.”

“It’s all right. I’m used to it by now,” Lillie said. She thought Alison looked at her a little strangely, but she couldn’t remember what she had just said.

After dropping off Lillie at the bus station, Lillie drove on to the little Baptist church where she’d gone all her life.

Lillie stuck her head in the door of Jeremy’s office when she noticed him sitting there with his head in his hands.

“What’s wrong?” questioned Lillie.

Jeremy raised troubled eyes to look at the woman, who at one time meant so much to him. “I know I need to hang in there, but maybe I shouldn’t have taken this job. I’m not at all what they want.”

“Nonsense. You know half of these folks are old busybodies. They don’t have anything else to do but gripe about one thing or the other,” Lillie said.

“I know and I should have remembered how they are, but I don’t really believe in the same God as they do.”

Startled, Lillie looked behind her. She didn’t think anyone was within hearing range, but if someone in the congregation were to become displeased with Jeremy and tell him he was no longer needed as pastor, she wouldn’t be able to exact her revenge.

“Don’t ever let any of these people hear you say anything like that. They might take exception to your words.”

“I know and I won’t,” Jeremy said. “The God these people want is only here to deal out punishment for their sins. I know that’s not all...”

“A little fire and brimstone never hurt anybody,” Lillie said with a hard voice.

“I thought you of all people would understand,” Jeremy said as his eyes pleaded with her.

“I do understand,” Lillie said, her tone softer.

“We go back a long way. Don’t you think we should talk about what happened between us?” Jeremy asked.

“Oh, we will, but not now. This isn’t the place. Maybe tonight after dinner, we can all sit around and have a nice long chat about the past,” Lillie said slyly.

Jeremy begged, “I haven’t told Ruth anything about us. Please don’t bring it up tonight.”

“Okay, Jeremy. Now quit worrying and get ready to preach.”

After church, Jeremy and Ruth were delayed by some elders wanting to talk about the next business meeting, so Lillie told them it would give her time to get back home and get the dinner on the table.

As Lillie drove home, she thought how nice it was because the light summer rain cleared the air and made it seem fresher. But she knew it wouldn’t take long for the mugginess to settle back in. Then it would be hotter than ever. At least the birds appeared happy with the shower, the way they were carrying on.

Lillie rushed into the house and went straight to the basement. She checked on Clarabelle and the girls. She almost stepped on a sluggish rat getting to the rocker.

There was another one by the wall. It made her so mad to think they would come near her girls; she got the shovel and bashed their heads in.

After cleaning up and changing her clothes, she barely had time to get supper on the table. This one time she was thankful to a stray. Alison did well, fixing an extra large meal for them to enjoy. If Lillie knew Alison had gone to all that trouble, she would have made her take a box lunch on the bus with her.

Lillie stopped to look in the hall mirror and pull a strand of hair back from her eyes. She could tell her guests arrived from the sound she heard of their car pulling into the drive. She needed to stay focused for a little while longer. If she tried, she knew she could do it.

They sat down to a meal of fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, okra, and corn on the cob.

“I’m stuffed. Your meals are still as grand as ever,” Jeremy said as he leaned back in his chair.

“Alison cooked this one,” Lillie said.

“Where is Alison?” Jeremy asked.

“She left today on the bus, going back home to Atlanta,” Lillie replied.

Ruth spoke up. “I didn’t know you knew Lillie that well when you used to live here. There’s so much difference in your ages. I mean...I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude,” Ruth said blushing a deep red.

“Oh, it’s no problem, Ruth. Jeremy’s dad used to give me piano lessons. I hung around and cooked Jeremy many a meal. Right, Jeremy,” Lillie said.

“Er, that’s right. I thought I told you, Ruth,” Jeremy said.

“Why don’t we all go out and sit a while on the porch? Goodness knows when we’ll have another evening as pleasant as this one is,” Lillie said, proud of herself for deflecting any other comments on the subject. She was determined to have it out with Jeremy but not yet.

They took their mint iced tea out to the porch and each sat in a rocker. For a time, it was enough to sit and bask in the contentment of a beautiful evening. The sky was a dusky blue with the reds and oranges of a beautiful sunset in the making. A slight wind moved through the magnolia trees on the lawn. The soft breeze rattled the wind chime hanging from the porch, where an unconcerned bee flitted from one bloom to another of the lilac bushes edging the railing. The scented purple flowers perfumed the sultry air. Every now and then someone would comment on a matter in the church or another change in the town’s decaying landscape. Jeremy and Ruth would have been shocked to see into Lillie’s black heart.

“Are you ready for pie?” Lillie asked jumping up. “Now, you know I won’t take no for an answer.” Without waiting for their answer Lillie disappeared into the house. When she came back with peach pie loaded with a scoop of vanilla ice cream, and refills on their tea, she thought she noticed Ruth had a strained look on her face.

“After this, we really need to be going,” Ruth said. “Jeremy is going to help me get Rose from the sitter and then he’ll be back to help you with the music for Sunday.”

“Okay, that’ll work,” Lillie said with some satisfaction. It couldn’t be working out any better. She knew Jeremy’s little lie was so he could have it out with her once and for all.

After they left, Lillie waited until she saw their car lights disappear down the long drive. She left the front door ajar and hurried to the basement, stopping by the kitchen long enough to get a big butcher knife. Leaving the basement door open, she hurried down the steps. The nasty rats were moving around again. It made her so mad she grabbed the shovel and bashed them to pieces. How dare they get near her babies? She slammed the shovel down so hard it echoed off the cement floor. Rat gore was on her shoes and getting all over the front of her white blouse. Her hair was hanging down in her face. She didn't realize she'd been screaming.

Jeremy was yelling from the kitchen, "Lillie, where are you? Are you hurt?" He noticed the door open to the basement. Jeremy heard what sounded like crying coming from down below. He took the steps two at a time. Lillie was sitting in a rocker holding a doll in one arm and a knife in the other. The floor was covered in blood and a shovel leaned against an enormous bookcase filled with dolls of every kind. Stuffing was hanging out of a lot of the dolls. They looked like they'd been gnawed on.

"Lillie, what is the meaning of all this?" Jeremy asked.

"I killed all the rats. They were hurting my girls."

"Girls?" Jeremy asked taking a step forward.

"Not so fast," Lillie said as she slashed the air with the knife.

Jeremy backed up a step.

"Why did you have to leave me Jeremy? I loved you with all my heart and you dumped me."

“I did love you, Lillie, but I was a kid. Dad told me if I didn’t go with them to Florida, he would file charges against you for rape, since you were older. I didn’t know if he could or not. You’ve got to believe me. I didn’t want you to go to prison.”

Lillie looked unsure of herself. Then she laughed. “Wanna know what your daddy did to me when he found out about us?”

“What?”

“Your daddy gave me my piano lesson as usual. Then he cornered me as I was leaving and told me if it was good enough for his son he guessed he’d have to try it too. He raped me. Your daddy raped me.”

“You’re lying. Daddy wouldn’t do anything like that.”

“I’m not. I wouldn’t lie. I ended up pregnant and didn’t know whose it was or what to do. You knew how my parents were,” Lillie said crying softly.

“What did you do, Lilly?”

“I couldn’t keep the baby. I couldn’t. I aborted it.”

“Lillie, I’m sorry. I’m truly sorry.”

“How can you be sorry?. You’ve got a wife and baby. I’ve got nothing.”

Standing up, her doll dropped to the floor. She lunged toward Jeremy with the knife outstretched.

Jeremy stepped back.

“Lillie slipped and fell to the floor. The knife plunged deep into her side. She looked up at Jeremy, surprised.

Jeremy sobbed as he dropped to his knees beside Lilly.

“Hang on, Lillie.” He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and dialed the County Sheriff’s Office.

“Jeremy, I still love you,” Lillie said.

Remembered Love

“Patricia, I won’t loan you any more money,” Grandma said.

“But, Grandma, I want it and need it.”

“You still haven’t told me what you want the money for.”

“It’s none of your business. I just need it, that’s all,” Patricia said. There was no way she could tell her grandma the money was for a drug debt.

“I didn’t raise you to have you talk to me that way now. Do you seriously think a bank would loan you any money without knowing the terms?” Grandma said, her voice rising.

“Whatever. The house and money will all be mine when you die anyway. Why not part with some cash when I need it most?” Patricia said heartlessly.

“I will not be spoken to like that. And, lest you forget, I have given you money many times for all your schemes which never seem to come to anything. You’re too much like your father, always drifting from one thing to another, never amounting to anything,” Grandma said.

“You leave my father out of it. I’m tired of hearing how bad he was.” Patricia grabbed her car keys and headed for the door.

“Don’t leave mad.”

“Yeah, right.” Patricia deliberately slammed the door behind her. She headed to her car—grandma’s old Lincoln Town Car. Every time Patricia got in it, she cringed.

She hated it and wanted something sportier, but Grandma wouldn't go for it. At least the leather interior was still plush and the V-8 helped. Patricia gunned the motor because she knew her grandma hated her to. Then she spun out of the drive, fishtailing in a hail of gravel.

Her grandma was old fashioned, so out of date. Patricia was embarrassed to be seen with her. Still mad at not getting her way, she drove in a fury, cutting people off and cursing them when they got in her way. Patricia left Heritage Hills and sped down Harvey to 23rd, stopping at Byran's Liquor Store. After selecting her favorite wine coolers, she added some Wild Turkey for later.

Back in the car, Patricia headed for Interstate 40. She twisted the cap off a wine cooler and drained half of it. She sped up the ramp heading east and cut in front of a semi. Patricia looked in her rearview mirror to see him cursing her. She laughed and finished her wine cooler. As she twisted the cap off the second one, she set the cruise to seventy-five and tried to think of how she was going to get around her grandma. If she stayed gone long enough, her grandma would worry. She always did. Maybe then she would think twice about not giving her the money.

Patricia decided to stop off at Bethel and see her friend Jennifer. Together they slumped at a few bars in Shawnee before Patricia took her home. Not caring that she was drunk and shouldn't be on the road, she headed back to her Grandma's.

She unlocked the door to her grandma's house, walked in through the side entrance known as the parlor room and eased the door shut so as not to make any noise. Stony cold silence greeted her. The only sound was her heart beating fast. She wondered why she bothered to come back at all, especially since she was drunk. Her grandma

would be livid. Yet, this house, where she was raised, was the only real refuge she had. Besides, Patricia still hadn't figured out how to get the money out of her grandma.

As Patricia stood and looked blindly around, the memories of her Grandma came to her, flooding her brain with their vividness. Though she didn't fully remember the first time she entered this house some fourteen years ago, her grandma's telling of it was fresh in her memory. The only survivor of a car wreck which took the lives of her parents and paternal grandparents, she was only five years old. With no one else to care for her, her maternal grandparents lovingly and willingly took on the job.

Patricia realized she hadn't moved. She must be drunker than she thought. She looked around and noticed the forest green and burgundy striped sofas with scrolls of curved dark cherry wood along their backs. A sigh escaped Patricia. The uncomfortable chairs sat much as they had for the past fifty plus years. Grandma, proud of her couches, said they represented her and Grandpa's first major purchase in their newly married life. Later, other items were added. Antique lamps with clear globes adorned dainty little tables with curved feet. The area rug was next, with its rich brown, gold, and burgundy colors.

As Patricia surveyed the room in which she had only rarely been allowed in as a child, she noticed the half-mooned shape of the small waist-high cabinet by the door. Patricia remembered how the cabinet fascinated her with its pie-shaped drawers to either side, each with its own brass pull, and the large deep drawers in the middle. When Grandma couldn't locate Patricia, she always knew where to find her, on the floor with all the little drawers open and crayons stuffed in them. Patricia could still hear her own cries as Grandma swatted her bottom, while gently shooing her out of the room.

With a stagger, Patricia passed from this room into a hallway that formed an L. To the right the hall led to the massive red front door, its oval stained glass center filled with numerous bright flowers. On the outside, a big brass knocker lay. It had been much too high for Patricia's short body to reach without pulling a green metal chair beneath it. Many times Grandma would come to the door expecting someone else, only to find Patricia playing another of her pranks. Patricia remembered how Grandma had her scoot the chair back where it belonged. Then she would grab Patricia and whack her bottom. A small chuckle escaped Patricia, thinking how she must have worn Grandma's hands out in a day's time.

Just to the right was the stairway. It would have to wait for now. Patricia knew she was too drunk to climb the stairs. First, she needed some coffee. Where was her Grandma, anyway? Old people went to bed so early. They missed too much sleeping all the time. Instead, Patricia walked straight ahead across the hardwood floor to the kitchen. Stopping half-way there, she peered into the open bathroom door on her left. A big claw-footed tub dominated the room. The deep tub was draped with a heavy black and white striped material that attached to a circular ring at the top of the ceiling. The massive tub dwarfed the cabinet housing the miniature oval sink. Two small brass sconce lamps on either side of a large beveled mirror, hung on the wrinkled gold-papered wall above the sink. A black oval rug hugged the floor in front of the shiny white commode which sat next to the tiny radiator. The grey monster would hiss and sputter and make more noise than it ever put out heat. Patricia remembered how the cold of the floor would attack her bare feet when she hurried to reach the soft rug each time she entered this room as a child. No matter how much she begged, Grandma never let her

take a bath in this bathroom. She let her use the commode and wash her hands at the sink, but told her the bathroom was strictly for company. Patricia couldn't see the need for a bathroom for guests if she couldn't use it. That would all change when it became hers.

She backed out and turned toward the kitchen. This room shouted with memories of good times and laughter. Barn red paint covered the bit of wall space which showed. A border, with a fruit design edged in forest green surrounded the high ceiling. Stark white counter tops hugged the bottom cabinets, which didn't seem nearly as tall as Patricia remembered them. The upper cabinets with their big doors towered almost to the ceiling, making the room appear even larger than it actually was. A small cry escaped Patricia as she saw Grandma's white metal step stool at the end of the cabinet. It stood waiting for her to unfold and use one more time to reach the box of cookie cutters on the top shelf. Her Grandma never flinched when she heard how many cookies Patricia had volunteered for the next day.

Looking around, the white GE refrigerator stood as a reminder to all the times she had opened the door to sneak something she wasn't supposed to have. The refrigerator was close to the full-sized back pantry where Grandma kept her freezer and extra storage cabinets. To the right of the door was another wall of upper and lower cabinets broken by a huge stainless steel sink in the middle and a wide picture window above. Grandma loved the sun streaming in early in the morning. Patricia could almost hear the walls reverberating with her singing praises to God, a god that Patricia no longer believed in.

Patricia turned on the coffeemaker and grabbed a cup from the ivory cabinet. With her back to the sink to steady her, she surveyed the opposite wall. The white cook

stove with its white enamel surface stood like a silent reminder to all the hearty meals that came out of its jaws. The rich chicken dumplings, baked apple turnovers, thick creamy soups, potato and carrot pot roast, moist chocolate cakes, and homemade pizzas that Patricia asked for, served to remind her how she wished to be little again and get everything she wanted without having to beg for it.

Through the oval doorway by the stove, the gleaming glass of the table top reflected the light shining in the large open window. A slight breeze made the sheer ivory curtains blow inward. Patricia set the coffee cup down on the table and grabbed a candle from the built-in hutch on the opposite wall of the breakfast nook. She lit it and set it on the small table, along with a spoon and a napkin from the drawers.

The hutch, with its many glass doors, revealed old and beautiful pieces of china and glassware. A few times Grandma let her select some choice pieces to set the table as they shared warm molasses cookies and fresh cold milk. As Grandma's busy hands were rarely still, Patricia relished the memories of sitting and talking to her as the birds chirped outside and golden rays of sunshine filtered in along with the sweet scent of lilacs. Those were the days Patricia loved. A small twinge of guilt assailed her foggy brain at the way she treated her grandma now, but she quickly brushed it away.

The long runner rug between table and cabinets led into the formal dining room and beckoned Patricia. It was in this doorway Grandpa collapsed and died of a heart attack three years after her arrival. She missed her Grandpa but knew nothing of the grief Grandma endured. Many times she caught her staring at the spot and crying. Patricia, in her childish way, would try and make her Grandma laugh. Back then, Patricia couldn't understand the level of her Grandma's pain. What she thought about now was

how rich her Grandma was. Patricia knew her Grandma wanted for nothing. Her bills were paid in advance, and she had more money than she would ever need.

She could hear the coffee perking as she entered the rather long and rectangular formal dining room. Bulky gold drapes over crème shears were tied back at all the windows. A cherry wood table which seated twelve comfortably stood on a rose patterned burgundy and gold rug. Colossal gold frames held pictures depicting huge bouquets of colorful flowers. Others showed scenes of young ladies and gentlemen in Victorian dress. When Patricia got this house, the Victorian art would have to go.

Grandma, who had a talent for cooking and being the gracious host, always had plenty of guests at her dinner parties. Patricia remembered thinking her Grandma knew everyone of any importance in the world, or so it seemed at the time. The older Patricia got, the more her Grandma let her share in these events. She especially remembered the writers who came to sample her Grandma's cooking and talk about their latest projects. Her Grandma could hold her own with the best of them for she was very well read and was herself a published poet. Patricia's poetry was too radical for her Grandma's taste. They fought over stupid things like style and elocution, even all-black clothes Patricia insisted on wearing to the parties.

Patricia, melancholy, crossed the length of room, moving through the main arched doorway. Across from the formal dining room was the living area. Glass paned French doors trimmed in cherry opened into a cozy den. It was here amid all the soft couches lined with various pillows in gold and burgundy and the rockers which swallowed her when she was little, that Patricia played, read, and watched movies, all under the guiding eyes of Grandma. Her grandma would get a crackling fire going in the fireplace, pop a

big bowl of popcorn, and then pull the rockers close to the fire, where they would sit and enjoy many a winter's night.

As Patricia sat down in the rocker she always claimed as hers, she was amazed to find that it fit her body. The cold and lifeless ashes in the grate did nothing to lighten her mood as she lingered for a few minutes. When, finally, she pulled her unwilling tired body from the rocker, she didn't bother to put the rocker in its place before leaving the room. She had to get out of this funk she was in.

Turning back to the left, Patricia passed the cherry wood bench stuffed with more of Grandma's colorful pillows and paused to look in the gold-framed mirror above. She did not see the young woman with the soft brown hair, fair complexion, and small, petite body, but saw Grandma with her grey hair, quick smile, and comforting arms, ready to welcome Patricia home again. Then she was gone.

Patricia, on becoming a teenager, fought with her grandma over every little thing. She moved out of the house and into a friend's apartment. Surprisingly, her grandma let her go. It had seemed a great idea at first, doing what she wanted with no one to tell her when to get up. She often slept in, skipping school. That stopped when her grandma told her she wouldn't give her any spending money at all if she didn't get back in school. She never let on to her grandma, but Patricia was glad to return to school because it was boring being in the apartment all day with nothing to do. She also moved back home for a short time.

Having come full circle through these rooms, she was back at the staircase. The railing, which Grandma made her polish as punishment for some mischief she managed to get herself into, still retained the deep color of the dark wood. The curved wooden

steps, on the other hand, showed signs of wear. She remembered the time Grandma caught her descending the railing in a volley of arms and legs. Her Grandma managed to break her fall before she plunged headfirst to the hard floor below. Patricia laughed, thinking how the staircase took on an extra shine that day before she was through polishing it.

The coffee forgotten, Patricia grabbed the railing and started up the staircase. The top floor was laid out in the same manner as the bottom with a spacious L shaped hallway separating the rooms. A large window seat flanked the end of the hall and faced the front side of the house. Two bedrooms on the right were directly over the parlor and den. Across the hall was Grandma's library-office directly above the formal dining room. From the smaller part of the L-shaped hall stood the second floor bath with a large laundry room at the end of the hall.

Patricia would do what her friend Jennifer suggested and search the house for money. She turned and walked down the hall to the laundry room, knowing she would see the creamy walls bordered in magnolia wall paper, the smooth white cabinets and ample workspace for folding clothes, the magnolia screen hiding the washer and dryer, the ironing board set up and waiting on the slightest wrinkle in a garment, and the white rocker. She went with the intent of finding money that her grandma invariably carried in her housedresses. She knew her grandma did laundry today. Maybe it would still be there. Failing to find a dime, Patricia sat in the rocker and put her head in her hands. She was running out of time. If she didn't find some money soon, she knew she would be in big trouble with her dealer. He had already threatened her.

Sitting in the rocker made Patricia think of how her Grandma never took the time to sit down, only when Patricia would reach up her chubby little arms for a hug and a kiss. Patricia remembered Grandma saying she couldn't get any work done for all the times she stopped to amuse her, but her eyes always had a twinkle in them when she said that. Patricia knew her Grandma loved to hold her. She realized now her Grandma got her rest breaks by sitting down and rocking her. Why couldn't she go back to those times when life wasn't so complicated?

She got up to use the bathroom. It held the same black satiny curtains which covered a more modern built-in tub and glass door shower enclosure. The black and white marble sink sat atop black cabinets that extended the length of the room leaving enough space at one end for the white commode. A mirror covered the black and white speckled walls above the sink. Grandma's lavender robe hung on the hook on the back of the door. Patricia grabbed the folds and drew in the smell of Grandma's lilac and talcum powdered scent. Sadly, Patricia thought how her smaller pink one used to hang next to it.

Growing up, she remembered how she begged and pleaded with Grandma to change the color scheme of the bathroom, but she never would. After one especially ugly encounter, she told her grandma she didn't have the foggiest sense of taste when it came to bathroom décor. Grandma informed her, the bathroom was the last renovation Grandpa did before he died. She wanted to keep it that way to stay close to the memory of him. The color came to Patricia's cheeks as she remembered how ashamed she'd been for hurting her grandma with her unkind words. Still, when she had this house, all would be redone in brighter colors.

Patricia remembered her bedroom differently. As she pushed open the door, she saw the walls passing through a myriad of colors as she was growing up. When Patricia first came to be with her grandparents, Grandma had the room done all in soft yellows and white. She often told Patricia she was her true sunshine. Then the walls changed to girly pink. Everything had to be pink. The rugs, curtains, bedspread, pillows, and teddy bears were various shades of the color Patricia loved best. From there she went through a lime green-purple-orange phase as she turned thirteen. Her grandma put her foot down when it came to painting the room black. Patricia had fumed and fretted for days, but her grandma wouldn't change her mind.

To get even, Patricia dramatically changed her hair color to purple. Her grandma didn't scream or call her names like some of the other kids parents did. She sat down and told Patricia she loved her too much to fight about something as silly as hair. When Patricia didn't get the reaction out of her she expected, she remembered it took some of the fun out of it. In the end, peer pressure ruled over any sane judgment she possessed. She again came home to blend in a little too perfectly with the color scheme of her room. Through it all—the hair, loud music, slumber parties, zits, boyfriends, and homework, Grandma was there pulling for her. Patricia realized Grandma was her biggest fan, and she hadn't known it. There were so many memories flooding Patricia's overly tired brain. Yet, this trip down memory lane wasn't helping her find any money.

Patricia moved down the hall but didn't dare open the door to Grandma's room. Her Grandma might wake up and smell the liquor on her breath. Then there would be another fight. She could see the bedroom in her mind anyway. Her bedroom held the biggest four poster bed she ever saw. Raised high in the air with its mounds of downy

comforters over an extra firm mattress, the bed sat regally in the huge space it occupied. The room had its own marble fireplace, sitting room, and big walk-in closet, but it was the bed Patricia remembered most. Grandma used to lift her up on the smooth rose-colored sheets. The bed felt like a ship on the high seas. She remembered being fearful of falling off. Later, she was delighted to be in such a queenly bed. It was here she talked to Grandma about her boyfriends and the dates she had. It was also here Grandma helped her get ready for her senior prom. How excited she was as she stood and preened in front of the floor-length mirror. How devastated, as she cried on Grandma's shoulder, and related how her date tried to force himself on her. Through the ugliness of it all, Grandma was her staunchest ally. Later, Grandma listened and shared in Patricia's enthusiasm as she planned for college and moving out. She helped her shop and pick out the necessary things needed for a college dorm. Why, oh why, couldn't her grandma help her out now? Patricia was too scared to tell her the mess she had gotten into this time.

Patricia turned and paused by the window seat that had always been her favorite area of the house. It overlooked a front yard filled with huge oak and magnolia trees. In the spring, she remembered cranking open the small paned windows so she could smell the heady fragrance of magnolia blossoms and hear the birds singing. The seat was wide enough for her to sit or recline in it and read her favorite books. Patricia remembered how Grandma would settle her with a picture book while she worked in her office. Many times she would find Patricia asleep among the pillows and carry her to her bed down the hall. As she got older and too heavy to lift, Grandma would wake Patricia with a gentle tap. Patricia could still feel the slight pressure of Grandma's hand when she put her little hand in her grown-up one. Grandma walked her to her room, where she always begged

for a bedtime story. Sometimes Grandma would read from one of Patricia's books, making the characters come alive. Other times she would recite one of her newest poems, or continue another tale of a story she made up.

As Patricia grew and progressed through picture books, counting and number books, nursery rhymes, adventure stories, romance novels, literature and biographies of famous people, she sat ensconced in a riveting world which knew no bounds. Patricia remembered how much Grandma worried she would strain her eyes from all the reading. She made her take short breaks. Grandma played ball on the front lawn or rode bikes in the neighborhood with her. Though Patricia loved the outdoors as much as Grandma, she never missed an opportunity to revel in the thrill of another book which begged to be read.

Why did the memories keep flooding back? It was like she was on a guilt trip or something. All she intended to do was borrow money that would rightfully be hers in a few years, anyway. Maybe she could replace it before her grandma ever found out. Patricia knew her grandma would never understand about the drugs.

She turned to her grandma's office. If she didn't find the money here, she would have to take a chance and go through her grandma's room. Otherwise, she was sunk. As she sat down at the desk of mahogany, reclining back in the leather chair, she closed her eyes and rested. Even though she was able to sense Grandma's presence throughout the house, it was here she felt it the most. Everything about this room spoke of her grandma. Always a planner and organizer, this room was a testament of who her grandma was. It scared her to think she was going to rifle through her personal belongings, but it was now

or never. She wished she had brought the Wild Turkey up with her. It would give her some courage.

Looking up, bookshelves lined the wall behind her and the wall to the left of the desk from floor to ceiling. Every available space on the shelves was filled with books of every kind. On each side of the wall which faced directly in front of the desk, several four-drawer file cabinets filled the space. In the center French doors opened onto a balcony which overlooked the back yard. A brown marble fireplace dominated the center of the fourth wall with more bookshelves on either side. Two rocking recliners in burgundy leather and a couch to match sat in front of the fireplace on a rug of cream, burgundy and green. A mahogany coffee table held some burgundy and cream candles, a book on Chekhov and a statute of a monkey in the pose of "The Thinker" holding a human skull in his hands.

The desk itself was almost free of clutter. A brass lamp, the phone, and her date book were all that rested on the smooth surface. Grandma always told Patricia her mind couldn't function correctly if her desk was messy.

Patricia thought back to how Grandma never minded stopping her work to hold her as she came in for a kiss from a scraped knee. Her way of making Patricia laugh among the tears was to compose silly limericks. Soon, she would forget all about the scrape.

Patricia's resolve to be strong dissipated. She had searched every place she could think of and found nothing but a few coins in the middle drawer of the desk. Leaning her arms forward on the desk and putting her head down on them, she cried. Her body shook

with silent wrenching sobs. When her tears lessened and her sobs turned to sniffles, she pulled a tissue from one of the drawers and dried her eyes and wiped her nose.

The only way she knew how to get rid of her depression was drink. She would get the Wild Turkey from the car. The coffee could wait. She would have a few drinks before she searched her grandma's bedroom.

She made her way down the hall, down the stairs and out through the parlor door. The breeze hit her skin, sending goose pimples rippling up her arms. After retrieving the bottle, she held it close to her as she ran up the steps. It was then she noticed the note taped to the door. The wind had caught it and was flipping a corner up and down. It read: "I'm sorry that I couldn't get a hold of you. Your grandma was taken to St. Anthony's with severe chest pains. I will try to look for your car, but I'm due to leave for Texas with my son." It was signed by her grandma's neighbor.

This had to be a sick joke. She raced in the house, up the stairs, and flung her grandma's door open. The bed was neatly made as always. Patricia slumped against the door. It was true. Guilt hit her then. A hysterical laugh escaped her lips. Here she was intending to rob her grandma and she could be dying in the hospital at this very moment.

What the hell was she supposed to do now? She had to get control of herself. She could not possibly go to the hospital for she had a deep fear of hospitals. Patricia remembered waking up crying in a white room. She didn't know where she was and she hurt so badly. She cried for her momma. Grandma came instead. She never saw her momma and daddy again. No, she couldn't go there.

Racing back down the stairs, she realized she was still clutching the Wild Turkey. She looked at the bottle for a long time. Several times she thought about opening it.

Instead, she set it on the counter and poured herself a large cup of black coffee. She unplugged the coffeepot and headed out the door to the hospital. This time she was careful to shut and lock the door.

The breeze picked up, sending the sheers ever closer to the candle that was forgotten.

The Terror Within

“I’m tired trying to rationalize my relationship with Graham. I think I love him. I know I want to be with him. Nothing you or anyone else can say will change my mind,” Amanda stopped and grinned. “Do I need to stomp my foot like I used to when I was three?”

“If you could see yourself in a mirror right now,” Shirley said.

“Amanda interrupted her sister. “I know you’re the best sister-mom a girl ever had, but he’s special. Graham is everything my ex wasn’t. Who couldn’t love a 6’5” man who has arms like steel and dreamy green eyes? When a lock of dark brown hair falls down on his forehead, I’m ready to melt. His giant hands have both strength and gentleness in them and his smile is quick to spread across his face. Did I mention he has the cutest little behind . . .”

“Okay, all right. I know I’m probably too late but I think it’s a little early after your divorce for you to be trying to connect again so soon,” said Shirley.

“Butt out, okay. Be happy for me, sis. I know he’s the one for me. I only wish I’d met him first.”

Amanda didn’t tell Shirley that no confessions of love passed between her and Graham, yet. She hoped that would change soon for she sensed his deep interest in her.

“He better do right by you, or I’ll come gunning for him. I’m just your much older sister who cares about you getting hurt again.”

“I know, sis.”

“Do you still think about mom and dad a lot, I mean the way they died and all?”

Amanda asked.

“All the time. At least they were together. And we have each other,” Shirley said.

“I know. I always thought I would feel better after the government executed Timothy McVeigh, but it still didn’t bring them back. I still miss them so much every day,” Amanda said.

“I feel the same way. Sometimes, I find myself going to the phone to call mom, and then I remember. It’s like the pain comes back all over again.”

For a time, both sisters were lost in their private worlds, reliving again the terror of losing their parents in the Murrah Bombing.

“Have I always been a pain to you since mom and dad died?” Amanda asked.

“You know you haven’t been. I only worry about you now because you were married so long, five years, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, sis, five years and two months.”

“You took it pretty hard when you got your divorce,” Shirley said.

“Well, you would have too, if your husband decided he preferred a man over you.”

“I did offer to kill him for you,” Shirley said.

“Yes, you did, sis, but somehow I don’t think I could have stood to lose you both.”

“I just want you to be sure of what you’re doing.”

“Once, the blind wife, I won’t be again,” Amanda said. “Sis, do you think if we were able to have kids, my marriage might have lasted?” Amanda asked.

“Don’t even get me started,” Shirley sputtered.

Taking one last look in the mirror to make sure the clasp on her badge was closed and her tie aligned as it should be, Amanda stepped back. She failed to see the beauty in her long, dark hair, her small heart-shaped face, and slender frame. She didn’t see the modern woman who battled for abused women and animal rights in her spare time, or the courageous woman who fought against being considered less than ideal at the hands of people like her ex. All she saw was a 5’7” nondescript and uncertain woman.

“Look, if I don’t leave for work right now, I’m going to be late. I have to get 70 badges ready for the newbies,” Amanda said.

“For what it’s worth, I enjoyed our dinner/movie night. I’m sorry it had to be cut short by you going in early. I won’t say anything more about Graham if you’ll promise me to go slow. I don’t want to see you hurt again. I’m only trying to look out for you,” Shirley said.

“I know. Gotta’ go.”

Flinging open the door to Shirley’s apartment, Amanda ran downstairs. She was almost to her car when an inner voice urged her to go back and tell Shirley she loved her. Knowing if she didn’t hurry, she’d be late and in trouble with the boss. She tried to shrug off the feeling, to no avail; it was useless. Not obeying her inner voice got her into trouble before. Sprinting back upstairs, she yanked open the door, raced in and grabbed Shirley. “I love you, sis. Thanks for always listening to my troubles,” Amanda said.

“Go already and don’t let the new guy Mohammad whatshisname bug you today.”

“Yeah, right. You know he’s on my A-list.”

When Amanda looked back, Shirley was smiling.

*

With the radio tuned to a news channel, Amanda drove to work thinking about her job as an armed security guard for Cherokee Energy. Located in the heart of the newly revitalized Oklahoma City, the relocated corporation centered its headquarters in the skyscraper vacated by Phillips Petroleum. When fully functional, up to fourteen hundred employees would occupy the space at any given time. Right now, eight hundred were already in place. More would be coming in for orientation this week.

The newscaster broke into her thoughts. He was evidently interviewing someone.

“So what you’re saying is these terrorists groups are picking young impressionable men who are willing to die for a cause.”

“Yes, that’s correct. They pick people who are living on the fringes of society. They don’t fit in with others and aren’t usually bright. Believing they will be given 72 virginal hours to attend their every need in paradise, they’re willing to forego relationships, marriage, everything, and become a suicide bomber, because they think committing acts of terrorism will lead to paths of ecstasy.”

Well, that’s all we need, thought Amanda. Having already lost her parents to a domestic terrorist, she hated to think it could happen again by some foreign entity.

Breaking into her thoughts, she heard the newscaster ask, “What group or groups are responsible for recruiting these young men?”

The voice answered, “The Islamic-Jihad is one such group. They especially like

young new converts to Islam because they know these people will have to go over and above everyone else to prove themselves as true Muslims.”

With a click, Amanda turned off the radio. She heard enough. She didn't want to start her day by being depressed over something she had no control.

Amanda thought the building where she worked was safe from most threats. Security was really tight. Access was granted only if the correct badge was scanned and it had to be scanned whether the employee was entering or exiting the building. A picture along with pertinent data about the employee appeared on the monitor. Each time the employee moved from one area of the building to another, the information would again be displayed. If that employee didn't have access to an area, a piercing alarm sounded and someone was instantly dispatched to check it out. On top of that, cameras were mounted throughout the building. A picture of the area could be pulled up and shown alongside the normal areas regularly displayed, should trouble occur.

Amanda knew three things made their security a top priority. The number of employees in the building, the amount of personal data collected for maintaining the accounts of mineral owners, and the fact they were located next door to a new federal building.

Amanda was glad to be a part of the developing job sector that had Oklahoma City expanding in all directions. With another pro basketball team coming to the city, and talk of a pro NFL team settling here, construction of hotels had quadrupled in the past few months. The hotels were going to be a plus when the state of the art convention center was finished. Knowing it meant more jobs and income for the economy, Amanda was thrilled to be a part of the energy flowing through every part of downtown.

Amanda knew her sister had done an excellent job of raising her. What she didn't know was the sense of loss at losing their parents the way they did, and then the loss of her husband through divorce was almost too much. Her new job gave her confidence to come out of her shell. She knew her excellent pay meant she needn't sponge on her sister anymore. She could get her own place soon.

She laughed now at how much she worried about being twenty-five and thinking she wouldn't be job marketable. She wished she hadn't wasted her time worrying. All her hard work in getting that MA in Criminal Justice paid off. She got one of two jobs available as assistant to the Captain. Graham got the other. Evidently, there weren't too many security guards with criminal justice backgrounds applying. Amanda couldn't see the shield she put up to escape all the hurt of being married to a mentally abusing, lunatic for so long. She did know her budding relationship with Graham had a lot to do with her change in attitude toward men. Graham made her feel excited to be alive. She knew she should listen to her sister but it'd been a long time since she was around someone who made her feel as feminine and special as Graham did. Yet, her sister was usually right. Maybe she should tread softly where Graham was concerned. It couldn't hurt to go slow. She forced herself to quit thinking about Graham and think about the job instead.

The only downside she could see to her wonderful job was working with Mohammad. As a recent convert to Islam, his beliefs seemed out of touch with most other Muslims Amanda had known. His comments about how he believed that Osama bin Laden was being misinterpreted by the U. S. Government incensed her fellow veteran officers and frightened her. With the heightened alert regarding all recent terrorist activities, Amanda came close to secretly turning him in to the F.B.I. Then each time she

made up her mind about him, he would tell her something about his dysfunctional upbringing in New York, and she would feel sorry for him. Guilt overrode her best intentions. She thought if she turned him in, she might be ruining an innocent life. The idea she might be considered just another crackpot by the authorities also held her back. Her confidence in herself wasn't that strong. Yet, she was determined no one would ever have to suffer like Shirley and she had. She would stay vigilant and do her part to keep the terror of such an event from happening, even if she had to look silly in turning Mohammad in.

*

“Hello, beautiful,” Graham said as he entered their shared office space.

“Hello, yourself,” said Amanda, trying for a nonchalant attitude. Blushing a deep red and knowing her face was flaming, made her blush more. She must be the only person in the world who still blushed. So much for the resolve to go slow.

“Are you ready to make the first rounds of the day?” Graham asked.

Rounds were not required for them to do, but they both decided to do them periodically throughout the day to keep abreast of any disturbances that might be brewing on the floors. Earlier in the week, they had a hand in stopping an out and out brawl in the mailroom between two guys having a heated discussion about a girl who worked in Documents. They also learned of a woman's fears of her estranged husband, who threatened to show up on the pretense of picking her up for lunch. His real intention was to beat her up for stepping out on him with his best friend.

“I will be in a minute. Let me finish inputting the list of new hires so the front desk will have a record of who's coming in tomorrow.”

“Okay, I have something on my mind and it’s probably better if we discuss it in the privacy of our office.”

“What’s up?” Amanda asked, continuing to type.

“For one thing, some of the other security guards are really getting fed up with Mohammad. As you know, most of them are veterans of one war or another, and they aren’t taking kindly to his remarks about not joining the military because he would be killing his Muslim brothers. He’s been heard referring to a lot of people here as pigs. Oh yeah. He asked one new guard if he knew how to gain access to the administration offices.”

“He hasn’t any business going into administration,” Amanda said.

“Exactly! He knows anything he needs, we can take care of.”

“I too have heard from the troops. You know Jake?”

“Isn’t he our oldest vet, the one who listens to country music and who supposedly sleeps at night sometimes instead of watching the monitors?”

“That’s the one. He came to me last week when you were gone and said he told Mohammad the U. S. ought to blow all the Arabs off the map. I cautioned him that right or wrong Mohammad was entitled to his opinions, not that he needed to be expressing them in the workplace. I told Jake to watch it because he might be the one in trouble with his racial remarks,” Amanda said.

“I think some of the guards have legitimate fears about Mohammad.”

“The trouble is, he hasn’t done anything really wrong, yet. I’ve been mulling it over and over and all we have is a lot of circumstantial evidence. I admit he’s been slow to catch on to the routine around here, but what about John? He hasn’t exactly been the

smartest one they've hired. It's too bad the Captain likes John so much. Otherwise, I'd say something. Anyway, we don't have enough to get rid of Mohammad. Remember our training on firing. It's document, document, document," Amanda said.

"I'm glad he's not carrying a gun. Still, with him having a key to all the electrical and wiring closets gives me the shivers. What if he should blow up..."

"I feel the same way but let's not go there. I've already been documenting everything I hear. I'll see when the Captain deems it enough to get rid of him," Amanda said.

She stood up and her right hand immediately felt for the security that her 9mm Glock gave her. "Let's do rounds."

After each of them checked the batteries in their radios, they exited the security office, which was located to the left of the front desk. They heard the Captain instructing one of the new guards on where the button was to allow people without badges to enter the lobby from the outside. Nudging each other to silence, they stopped to listen.

"See, it's right in front of and to the side of the panic button. Make sure and don't accidentally push the panic button because everyone beyond this locked lobby will go into crisis mode. Major alarms will go off and can't be silenced except by the people in the server room and only after they verify everything is okay up here. The people working here will expect something really bad is happening up front and won't attempt to come out this way. If you do push the wrong button, you might still get the chance to work for McDonald's. Comprene?" the Captain asked.

"Yes, sir," said the shaken, young guard.

Looking up, the Captain grinned sheepishly at Amanda and Graham. The Captain

bellowed, "Making rounds?"

"Yes, sir," Amanda and Graham chorused at the same time.

After they had used their badges to gain access to the interior of the first floor, Amanda and Graham allowed their laughter to escape.

"The Captain is a riot. He's so hard on the new recruits. The ex-Marine is coming out in him. If only they knew he was a big, bald-headed pussycat." Amanda said.

"I know, but they might as well learn it right the first time. They may not get a second chance," Graham said.

Before them, was a maze of cubicles, each complete with its own computer and headphones. A built-in shelf-like desk with two lockable drawers attached beneath completed the office of those on the low end of the pay scale. The cliché, being packed in like sardines, came to Amanda as she surveyed the vast space filled to capacity with people. Her mind couldn't help but conjure up the image of another cliché, sitting ducks. If something bad ever happened, it would be impossible to get many of them safely out of the building. Those on the upper floors were even more vulnerable. She wished her imagination wasn't so pronounced because she could envision pure panic. At least they already practiced a few fire drills. Everything went as expected except people were taking too much time exiting the building. They were conditioned to using their badge and didn't understand the need for a quick exit.

"Amanda, oh, Amanda, where did you go?" Graham asked. "Come back from wherever you are."

"What? Did you say something?" Amanda tried to cover up her internal distress of the destruction she knew could happen in a building this large with the employment of

so many people in such a congested area. Her internal voice nudged at her conscious ever so slightly. Even though the voice served her well in the past, she wasn't taking any chances. She'd been wrong a couple of times and made to feel like a fool. No way was she going to ruin her chances at keeping her present job with spidery fears which had no substance. Not yet, anyway.

“Come back from wherever you are.”

Amanda realized Graham was saying something.

“I was asking if you wanted to split up the rounds. I'll take the north half and you do the south. We can meet back by the elevators. If we do each of these bottom floors this way, it'll go much faster. Then afterward, I'll help you input the data on the new people so we'll be ready to take their pictures and issue badges to them tomorrow,” Graham said.

“Sounds good. See you in a bit.”

*

Once again back in their office they tallied up the problems they encountered.

“Not bad for a first round. One over-flowing toilet in the fourth floor women's restroom, a total of three burned out lights on the first, seventh, and twelfth floor, and one spill by the back dock door. Housekeeping and maintenance will be busy for a while,” Graham said.

“Don't forget the exec on the sixteenth floor who couldn't get his lap drawer open,” Amanda said laughing.

“He was pretty funny. How did he put it? He was “postulating” about how we were going to get his highly confidential material out of the drawer without damaging the

contents. Why didn't he just say guess, or propose, or claim to know. Maintenance told me his confidential material turned out to be the newest edition of *Hustler*," Graham said.

"Well, I declare. I'm just "postulatively" stunned," breathed Amanda in a southern drawl.

"You're beautiful. Have dinner with me tonight," Graham said.

Amanda knew from the heat in her cheeks she was blushing again. All she could get out was, "Yes."

The door burst open and the Captain breezed in.

Graham leaned over and whispered, "I'll pick you up at seven."

*

While getting ready for her date with Graham, Amanda reviewed the previous few hours. It was uneventful except when Mohammad came in. Several of the older guards came to her complaining it was unfair Mohammad had several days of beard growth when they thought the policy clearly stated no facial hair. They were upset because they didn't want Mohammad to get by with it by claiming he was growing it for religious reasons. After promising them she would look into it, they went back to their posts.

Graham left early to run some errands for the Captain. It gave Amanda some breathing room. It was hard to concentrate on her work with him so close.

She made up her mind to do something about Mohammad, but what? She had begun writing down all she knew about him. He was a light-skinned 22 year old black man who was abused and neglected as a child by his prostitute mother. He and his siblings were forced to survive on their own. By age seven, he stayed drunk most of the

time from beer provided by his brothers. By the time he was ten, he joined a gang and pedaled drugs to support his own drug habit. Then, at the age of twenty, he converted to Islam. Originally from New York City, he supposedly came to Oklahoma to stay with a brother who lived at Tenth and Missouri. His brother, according to Mohammad, wasn't treating his common-law wife right. They fought all the time and she told Mohammad he couldn't stay with them any longer. Mohammad told one of the guards he was tired of their lifestyle, saying they lived like pigs. He got into one of the nice new condos on Shartel. What disturbed Amanda was how he was able to pay for it? She knew even the small units were very pricey because she checked them out for herself earlier in the month.

As she did her job, she thought about what else she knew about him. He bragged to have studied Arabic in Jordan. His travels also took him to Syria and Morocco. That seemed to be a lot of traveling for someone so young and poor. Amanda added his social security number to the list and his New York cell phone number.

On the whole, Amanda didn't have anything which couldn't be said about countless other people. Early abuse, drugs, and a religious conversion wasn't enough to oust him. Her inner voice told her there was something else, something she was missing, but what?

*

“Do you like Mexican?” Graham asked.

“Love it.”

“Let's try the new Ted's Escondido in Bricktown. Then maybe we could ride the canal boats over to Meridian and see what's happening.

“Sounds good to me,” Amanda said.

After a leisurely dinner, they strolled down the sidewalk towards the boats. Seeing their reflection in the storefront windows they passed, Amanda couldn't help but think how good they looked together. Being with Graham boosted Amanda's very damaged self esteem. He was so thoughtful of her, unlike her ex who made it a priority to continually berate her worth to whomever would listen.

“Graham, after you left, I made a list of everything I could possibly think of about Mohammad and we really don't have enough to have him fired. Even though his remarks are sometimes out of line, he's done nothing wrong. My inner voice has me so paranoid about this whole mess I printed out a list of what we do know about him and gave a sealed copy to my sister Shirley to keep in case something ever happens.”

“You really feel strongly about his comments to everyone then?” asked Graham.

“I do, but I feel equally adamant about jinxing the poor boy's chances to have a life. What if all he is looking for is the good ole' American Dream and I ruin it by turning him in? You know any chance he'd have at making it in this world would be over.”

“I see what you mean,” said Graham.

“Don't get me wrong. I'm all for people doing their own thing in life. I bet if we took a poll of everyone who worked at Cherokee, most of them would think even though Mohammad is odd he'd be entitled to his own opinions. People aren't scared. First, I don't believe any of them think a terrorist has a reason to blow them up. Second, they don't think a terrorist would strike Oklahoma City at all. These are just ordinary people living ordinary lives,” Amanda said.

“I have to agree with you. Look at how people are already griping about dumping their water bottles before boarding a plane. I want to yell at them and remind them it’s only water. I would also want to ask them if the price of a bottle of water was worth the risk of countless lives.”

“No one wants to be inconvenienced, even if it might truly mean their life was at risk. They’ve already forgotten the destruction of lives of both those killed and the ones left behind after the Murrah bombing and that wasn’t even done at the hands of a foreigner,” Amanda said.

“I know. It’s tragic, but true. Enough of this depressing talk. Let’s have some fun,” Graham said.

*

Three weeks later, another 269 people were processed and cleared to start work at Cherokee. Amanda felt like she went through some test and passed. The captain, pleased with her work, told her she had a raise coming at the end of the month. Knowing there would be a short break of two weeks from the processing of more new hires, she caught up on some of her other duties before the last of the new employees arrived.

Shirley gave up on cautioning Amanda about Graham when she saw how genuinely nice he really was. He’d been to their apartment twice for dinner and reciprocated by inviting both of them to his place for a delicious smoked brisket which he prepared himself. He was an excellent cook and won Shirley over with his desire to include her in their activities.

While they waited for Shirley to return from the bathroom so they could resume their dice game of Farkle, Amanda said to Graham, “Lately, have you noticed

Mohammad keeping to himself a lot. I don't know if that's good or bad."

"At least all the guards aren't ready to kill him anymore," Graham answered.

"That's true. Still, that little inner voice of mine . . ."

Graham interrupted. "You and your inner voice. It's working overtime. Be happy Mohammad settled in and let it go."

"I guess you're right. I don't want to borrow trouble. I have a good job, a new boyfriend, and a raise on the way," Amanda said.

"What's this about a raise?" Graham pretended jealousy as he arched his brow and tried to look mean.

"Oops," said Amanda.

"I'm kidding. I'm getting one, too," Graham said and laughed.

*

"Did you ever wonder about the lives of the people we are sworn to protect?" Amanda asked as they made their rounds, stopping on the top floor for a moment.

"I'm more interested in the life of the person beside me," Graham countered.

"Once again blushing, Amanda said, "It's their cubicles. The company is great about letting them design their area with as many items from home as they want to make them feel comfortable. The small hand-made pictures of kids, the countless knick-knacks of everything from cats and dogs to bizarre snakes and smiling Buddha's, pictures of husbands and wives, new baby pictures, their favorite sports posters, crazy looking lamps, even the wacky off-beat calendars some of them have. They all contribute to make me feel like I am invading something very private."

"They wouldn't bring those items in here if they didn't want people to see them,"

Graham said.

“I know you’re right, but I still feel weird. I think what amazes me most is so many people from so many cultural backgrounds can get along so well in such a tight place. Ordinary, commonplace people going about their lives in peace.”

“Maybe some of those countries that house terrorists should take note and see it’s possible to get along even if one’s culture and religion are different,” Graham said.

At the mention of terrorists, Amanda turned to Graham. She intended to tell him Mohammad called in sick and ask what she should do about it because Mohammad didn’t have any sick time built up yet, but she never got the chance.

An explosive roar sent Amanda hurtling through space. Amanda didn’t think the ripping and grinding noise would ever stop. Her lungs filled with chalky soot, threatening her breathing and making her cry out in panic. She felt something trickling down her nose and into her mouth, but when she tried to brush it aside, she found she couldn’t move her right arm and shoulder. Thinking Graham was playing a joke on her, she tried to jerk her arm away. She instantly felt jackhammers of pain hit her shoulder area. Amanda heard someone scream and realized it came from her. In the next moment, waves of stabbing pain shot through her left hip and traveled like lightning down her leg. The last sound she heard before passing out was Graham screaming her name.

Coming to sometime later, Amanda heard screams and people begging for help. Water and paper and smoke threatened to choke her. A terrible blackness surrounded her. She couldn’t move and every part of her body hurt. It took her a moment to realize the noise she heard earlier was either a tornado or a bomb. How long had she been out? The water, pooling around her, scared her. She didn’t want to die, drowning in the dark.

Summoning all her strength, she too called out, begging for release from her prison.

“Amanda, is that you Amanda?” called a weak voice.

“It’s me, I mean yes. I’m Amanda. Who are you?”

“You mean you don’t recognize your future husband,” the voice said, though weaker than before.

“Graham, oh Graham, I love you,” Amanda said struggling against the pain.

“I love you,” he replied.

Amanda, though she called and called, heard no more. The pain got so bad she passed in and out of consciousness. She told herself she wouldn’t give up. She would hold on, knowing she had Graham’s love.

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