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Paradise Twin

By Melissa Marlow

PARADISE TWIN

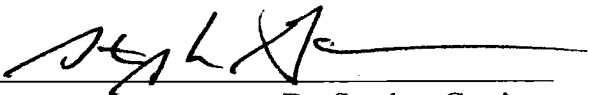
BY MELISSA MARLOW

A THESIS

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BY 
Dr. Constance Squires


Dr. Stephen Garrison


Dr. Matthew Hollrah

Chapter One To Start With

I finish my graveyard shift at the Dolese plant down on Highway 8, and I drive straight home. I stuff my steel-toed boots and work coveralls into the toolbox on the bed of my truck. My clothes underneath are covered with a fine white dust from the quarry. It's the third of the month. If I don't get the lot rent paid by five o'clock, I'll have to pay late fees and face the eviction notice taped to the front door. I can't even afford to pay the lot rent this month, much less any late fees.

I start in my brother Jackson's bedroom at the end of the narrow hall in the single-wide trailer that I share with him and Tweedle. It's one of those old-school type fabricated in the '70s. We live in The Paradise Twin RV and Trailer Park that was once a drive-in movie theater; it now has about fifty trailers squeezed in between where the speaker poles used to be. The lots are separated with narrow gravel-covered roads. The park owner, Old Mr. B, converted the concession stand into a convenience store where he sells bait and beer and whatnot. The marquee still stands, but the ticket booth is long gone. Old Mr. B took that out in a blaze of glory some nineteen years ago when he plowed his pickup right through it. Drinking was involved, as I understand.

"Hell, Jack," I say, entering my brother's room. He lazes around, enjoying sixty-degree air conditioning which blasts out of the window unit in his bedroom. He's passed out on his bed. I kick the bottom of his foot to jar him awake. Since I have to work all night just to pay stuff like the electric bill with no help from him, I intend to disturb his sleep whenever I get the chance.

"What?" he says, groggy and rubbing his eyes. "Cody, you're an ass." He turns toward the wall and covers his head with the extra pillow.

“It doesn’t need to be the arctic in here. What are you a penguin or something?”

No response.

I turn to his dresser and sift through a stack of twenty-dollar bills. “Which ones are good?” I ask. I hold a couple of bills to the light which streams through the rickety plastic blinds. “None of these.”

He throws the extra pillow at my head and says, “Those are for the garage sales. I only got the nine good bills and I’m not done with them yet.”

My reflection in Jackson’s mirror catches my eye and I think I’ve seen a ghost. At work I was sweating my ass off for sixteen hours and the white dust from the gravel quarry stuck to my sweaty skin. It has dried and hardened turning me completely white, making me look like a ghost. There I am...ironically at this moment a very white guy. No claim to fame. No claim to fortune. No history. Just one insignificant white guy in a long line of insignificant white guys (although I am part Cherokee). I get closer to the mirror and pull my bottom eyelids down, my eyes are red and sting from the dust. I bet my ancestors were poor share-croppers in the south somewhere. I’d be proud to know that. To know they worked and sweated and sacrificed. Too many young men my age, not all white either, are all puffed up because they think they are something, but really they are non-descript. No pedigree at all. They have no idea from where they came and much worse, where they are going. I wish I were of some decent...Irish, Jewish, Italian, Black, Catholic, coal miner...something to which I could cling, believe in, and be proud of. I guess after the Civil War the Midwest became a dumping ground for immigrants and we all melded together and became something kind of like my grandma’s stew...questionable ingredients of whatever was hand, never the same dish twice, but hearty and filling.

I admire my reflection for a minute. Damn though, I think, it did make for my devilish good looks, something of a cross between Clint Eastwood and Hugh Jackman, and then add my wit, charm and sense of humor. And modesty.

I give myself a big smile and say, “Go ahead....” I quick draw my cell phone from the hip pocket of my jeans. Yip, I still got it. I blow on my phone and put it back into its holster-pocket. I pick up Jackson’s comb and have second thoughts about using it. I fiddle with the stuff on his dresser for a minute.

I go back to business and I say in my best Clint Eastwood impression, “The rent’s due now, Jack. And, well, punk, you got to ask yourself....”

“No, go ask mom,” he says. “I’ll have money after the g-sales tomorrow. I can pay her back then.”

“I don’t like paying my bills with profits from your phony money.”

“Oh, shut the hell up. I’m trying to sleep here.”

“Well, it’s true. I make an honest day’s wages and want to pay my way with money not taken from babies and widows.”

“Oh, please. I hardly steal from babies and widows. Only rich bitches who think their shit don’t stink and try to sell it at yard sales for more than it’s worth.” He punches his pillow and turns onto his side.

I run a line across a couple of the bills with the felt tip counterfeit-detecting pen that I carry in my shirt pocket just for this occasion. The mark is brown. “That doesn’t help. I liked it better when you were making your own paper,” I say, looking at my brother sprawled across his mattress that rests on the floor with no frame or box springs. He doesn’t move.

I pick up the pillow he threw at me, tuck it under my arm, and quietly move toward his bed. My shadow falls across my brother's face as I stand between the window and his dirty mattress. I stand with my back to the window and for a few moments, I raise my shirt away from my back and soak up some of the arctic blast from the window unit. It's awkward because I still have his stupid pillow tucked under my arm. I notice the shadow of my head is protecting Jackson's closed eye from the bright sunlight coming through the blinds. I tilt my head from side to side and just like a light switch the sunlight is on his face, off his face. On. Off.

He says, "Go the fuck away, you perv."

In one swift motion I unplug the air conditioner, and slam dunk the pillow at his head as I hurdle his bed for the door. I'm laughing, thinking what a great way to start a Friday, as I turn down the hall toward my room to rummage through all the pockets of my jeans piled on the floor. Tweedle's door is closed but I stop and look in even though I know he is with my sister Katie.

"Shit fire," I say, looking into the pits of Tweedle's room. It looks like a scene from Mad Max meets Sesame Street on A&E's *Hoarders* TV show. Oil has leaked from a gas weed eater engine and soaked a big spot into the fuzzy brown carpet. The place reeks of gasoline. I stumble across his room and open the window to let in some fresh air. Random parts are scattered across his floor from Legos[®] to broken automotive and lawn mower parts. On his desk there is a Frankenstein-lawn mower that he's been tinkering with. For a moment I am fairly impressed, Tweedle has such a mechanical mind but no practical use for it. No telling what he would be doing now, if it hadn't been for the accident that cause his brain injury. This can't be healthy, I think but I just shake my head and close the door. It's something I'll have to deal with later; of course, I say that every time I stick my head in there.

I manage to scrape another twenty-two dollars together from jean pockets, the ashtray in Jackson's truck, and the sofa before I head over to my sister Katie's trailer across the gravel road. Add that to the eighteen dollars I borrowed from my supervisor – that makes forty dollars. I hate the first of the month. I always scramble to get the rent money together. I live paycheck to paycheck, and I'm running about a month or two behind. Jackson will have to pay me back this time.

On my way to Katie's, I walk pass the old twin screen that's partially intact. It's like a giant tombstone looming over mobile mausoleums. The epitaph is blank except the word "Rebelution" and the park motto: "*read less, live more*" scrawled in black spray paint about eight feet across the bottom of the screen. At the foot of the screen is the playground. A ghost town of my childhood with remnants of a swing set – rusty chains hanging from the frame like empty nooses on the gallows. And the slide from hell. Not a slide at all, merely a rung-less ladder leading nowhere, a memorial marking the spot of the accident that killed Martin Tweedle and left his twin Mason, my ward and sidekick, with permanently brain damaged. They were only four years old.

When I was a kid, the Paradise was running on summer weekends. I saw all the classics: *The Unforgiven*. *Dances With Wolves*. *Groundhog Day*. Once Mr. B played an old western triple feature – *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* and the other two. Friday night was drive-in movie night for our family. One of Mom's Mr. So-and-Sos would give each of us kids three dollars for the concession. We'd fill up on hotdogs, popcorn, and Coca-Cola and swing like crazy until one of us puked (usually Jackson). I was always the leader of the kids because I was the oldest. Mom reserved Saturday nights for two-stepping at the Starbucks Ballroom. That's

when Jackson, me and Katie would stay the night at our sweet little aunts' house over in Verden and attend Sunday morning services followed by the best dinner in the state.

I'm a creature of habit. I usually stop by Katie's for coffee, a part of my regular routine. I stayed late at work because my supervisor read me my annual performance appraisal, which amounted to bullshit and a three percent hourly raise. They always ask bullshit questions like, "Where do you see yourself in five years?" Like there's a choice or something. If he had asked me that question five years ago I wouldn't have believed that my answer would be, "Sitting next to Tweedle on my sister's couch in the middle of a dumpy trailer park." You know, I haven't been more than eighty miles in any direction from this spot on Katie's couch? I have never even been out of the state. Don't get me wrong, I've had the itch to go. Just leave it all behind and head toward Phoenix, but I'm tethered here. Tweedled here. And I don't mind it too much anymore. My people really need me. Depend on me. When I was younger, I thought I'd shake the dust from this shit-hole town the minute I graduated high school. Children are so naïve.

Katie's double-wide trailer is a real fixer-upper, but by far the nicest in the park. I sit on the brown and gold couch in her living room, which is cluttered with piles of newspapers, empty bottles (beer and formula varieties), toys, and dying houseplants.

"Your trailer's a dump, Katie," I say, making eye contact with Katie's baby girl who is in the high chair scooping up Cheerios with her fists.

Have you ever noticed how the biggest dumps in the universe always have the word "paradise" or "estates" in it, like Paradise Arms Motel? King-size bed. Free HBO. In-Ground Pool. Phone in room. King-sized shit hole.

Katie is in the carport right outside the trailer door, gathering up plastic grocery bags. "Cottage, Cody. Not trailer."

“My mistake,” I say, rolling my eyes. I quietly add to Tweedle who sits beside me on the couch, “I stand corrected. Cottage.”

Tweedle is my sidekick. Dopey to my Doc. Alfred to my Batman. Kemo Sabe to my Lone Ranger. Heigh-ho to my Silver. My constant companion. He likes Friday mornings because he gets to go to Wal-mart with Katie and use his food stamp card that we keep tucked into his Spongebob wallet in his back pocket. He likes to go with her because she lets him buy candy and Fruity Pebbles cereal, unlike me because I rarely let him get candy. It’s bad for his teeth and his digestion.

Tweedle holds a McDonald’s cup between his knees. The condensation makes a wet spot on the inner thighs of his khaki shorts—at least I think it is condensation. He fidgets with his plastic straw, making a squeaking sound as it slides in and out of the cup’s lid. He wears white over-the-calf socks, red high-top Chucks, and a bright yellow Pacman tee shirt. With his gelled hair neatly combed Tweedle leans against his backpack, and looks like he’s ready for the first day of school. He’s twenty-three, but mentally not much older than a four year old. Sometimes I come home to find all the lights on and the refrigerator door standing wide open, when Jackson is supposed to be watching him. He doesn’t know how to work a phone or remote control, which always surprises me because he can take an engine apart in no time flat like a marksman takes apart a rifle.

I nudge him with my elbow and say, “The difference is you can’t put them back together.”

Emotionally Tweedle is like a baby, unable to tell me what he wants or needs. Sometimes I frustrate him to exhaustion or rage. I feel as helpless as he. I reach over, take the

cup, and place it next to his Happy Meal sack on the table saw/coffee table. I grab his backpack, pull down the straps, and say, “Here, little man, let’s get you comfortable.”

He fights me a little, like he thinks I am taking it away from him, but he soon quits resisting. The backpack is heavy. I move it to the floor in front of us and I say, “Whoa, Buddy. What’s in here? Bricks?”

He doesn’t respond. He rarely does. Because of the accident, Tweedle doesn’t understand much and has difficulty speaking and being understood. But in a language that only twins understand, he carries on an imaginary conversation with Martin, his twin brother who died. Tweedle is slapping the air and I assume he pretends he is hitting his brother on the arm or maybe it’s a high five. I wish I could escape into his imaginary world, where only he and Martin live.

I frown at the Happy Meal and say, “Katie, how many times do I have to tell you? Not McDonald’s.”

“It doesn’t hurt anything,” she says. “We don’t go there every time; besides, I got him the fruit this time.”

The empty breakfast biscuit wrapper lays wadded next to the unopened container of fruit. I reach over and pinch Tweedle’s stomach roll. “He’s getting pudgy and it’s getting harder and harder to get him to exercise.”

“Uhhh,” he says, pushing my hand away from his stomach.

It worries me to leave him alone when I work double shifts. Jackson is not much help – Jackson is really just one step above Tweedle in the taking care of one’s self department. When I work a long shift, my mom stops by after she gets off work at the vet clinic and checks in on

Tweedle. She stays until he is secure in his bed. If there is a storm, she'll cart him to her trailer where he sleeps in the bedroom we shared growing up.

“I guess you heard the news?” Katie says on a trip through the living room, carrying grocery bags. “About Angel?”

I don't answer. It is as if I can't answer. My face feels paralyzed.

Katie makes a couple of trips back and forth from the carport to the kitchen, carrying grocery bags. She makes another trip through the living room with bags but just gives me a slant look and doesn't say anything, as if she *really* expects me to respond. She reminds me of when she was a little girl, so determined and always moving with purpose, but kind of impish with a freckled nose, scuffed up knees and a blonde pony-tail pulled high on the crown of her head. And now here she is barely twenty-three-years old trapped with a slob of a no-good husband, Rowdy we call him, and two little toddler kids of her own. Five years ago I wouldn't have pictured her here either. I know I should help her with her groceries, but like I said earlier I just finished a sixteen-hour shift and spent the better part of the night on my feet – crushing big rocks into little rocks at the quarry. Wearing steel-toed boots. In July.

So I just kick back and soak up some of her central air conditioning. Katie and her husband Rowdy bought this “palace” with his worker's comp settlement last spring. It was badly in need of repairs. To start with, he renovated the carport, which took months. Nothing much has progressed since then besides the laminate flooring I laid in the kitchen and the main bath. A thin, worn blanket hangs across the opening to the main bathroom, serving ineptly as a door. The living room and all the bedroom floors are bare plywood sub-flooring. And the master bath doesn't have working plumbing or electricity.

Katie's comes through again and I finally respond, “I did hear mention of that yesterday.”

I focus on Rowdy's table saw. I mean, that is the real reason I stopped by – to borrow his saw to hock it and anything else that isn't nailed down to pay the rent. It's not like he's using it anyway. First he built the carport and then planned to build a shed to store all his tools, while recuperating from his knee surgery (recuperating was what Katie called it. I called it getting shit-faced drunk). The problem was that someone kept stealing his table saw from the carport. He'd chain it to his truck at night and then the next morning he'd go down to Jim's Pawn Shop, the one down on Choctaw, and retrieve it. It's all very suspicious and shady.

"Hey, I'm going to borrow this table saw, if it's okay with you. I came up short for the rent. Again," I say.

Rowdy kept a vigil a couple of nights last October, but the thief was always a no-show. Funny thing was that Rowdy got it back the following morning. That's why I quit dealing with Pickle who owns Jim's Pawn Shop. I mean, how many times would you loan out money only to lose your investment the following morning? Couldn't he figure that table saw was stolen property? It is some sort of scheme and Pickle is involved in it somehow, but I can't for the life of me figure out how he makes any money off it. That is my theory anyway. Of course, the city police are not interested in my theories. They must be involved somehow, too.

"I don't care," Katie says. "It just sits here collecting dust. Rowdy wouldn't even miss it except he uses it as a coffee table and won't have any place to set his beer."

"I get paid Monday. I'll get it back." I have hocked his tools before. I always get them back. She's right, it's not like he will miss it – except that one time when he didn't know I'd borrowed it, and he went down to the pawn shop expecting to get it back at no charge, thinking his regular thief had taken it. It caused quite a ruckus. That's another reason I don't do my business with Pickle.

“So speaking of your loser husband, where is Rowdy?”

“He took Braxton over to his mom’s. To keep him out of his hair while I’m working today.” She stands in the kitchen for a few minutes, wiping the baby’s face, and I have the impression that she wants to say something else, so I just sit there quietly, waiting. Finally, she says, “You okay? About Angel.”

I’m sure that is not what she wanted to say, but is just changing the subject. I don’t know how to respond. “Why wouldn’t I be? It’s not a big deal, except...” I lie, wishing that I could escape down the rabbit hole into Tweedle’s world and hide. “The whole thing is a little far-fetched. Kind of sketchy.”

Sitting in one place for too long, Tweedle begins to get restless, so with the remote control I switch the television on and flip the channel to the Cartoon Network. He doesn’t have a very long attention span since the accident. I hand him the fruit from the Happy Meal and he quickly settles back down.

“What’s far-fetched about it?”

“Just the whole story. She’s pulled something,” I say. Katie and Angel have been friends since junior high school and if anyone would know the truth behind this farce, I think it would be Katie.

Katie reappears through the door. She stops in front of the television putting her hands on her hips. “Can’t you just be happy for her?”

Tweedle fusses at her to move away from the television. “Uhhh.”

I change the subject. “What is all this shit for? Did you buy out the store?”

She shakes her head at me like I’m an idiot. “The homecoming party for Angel...duh.”

I didn’t know there is going to be a big coming home party. It catches me off guard.

Katie carries the last of the bags from the car and sets them on the counter in the kitchen. “The whole park is jumping today, everybody’s trying to get money together before Old Mr. B starts evictions. Half the park will be homeless in three days.”

She unpacks groceries and throws a bag of sunflower seeds to me. I turn the bag around in my hands before tearing a small opening in the top of the bag and discarding the piece of plastic into a large amber glass ashtray on the coffee-table-saw.

“One step farther down the food chain,” I say.

“Are you going to be able to get yours covered?” Katie says. “I’ve got a little stash I’m keeping from Rowdy.”

“I think so,” I say. “Mom’s going to bail us out this month.”

“What about Jackson?”

“Well, if you consider sleeping ‘til noon, cranking his air conditioner at full blast and running up the electric bill, then, yeah, he’s doing a right bang up job.”

“I figured.” Katie stacks canned goods in the cabinets. “It really could be worse. You could be like Shirley.” She pauses, cocks her head to look at me, and smiles slyly. “Or Hank.”

I take a handful of seeds and load them into my mouth. “It’s not Shirley that has to worry. It’s her daughter Vicki. She’s three days shy of being homeless.”

“True. At least we got each other,” Katie says. “And mom. It’s not like it would ever go that far for us.

“Some folks don’t have many options. They can’t stay with their parents.” I spit the empty sunflower seed hulls into the ashtray. “Hell, most folks around here haven’t even met their real dads, and their moms live three trailers down with their third stepfather who hasn’t worked since the Civil War or something.”

“Hank’s her third?”

I take another handful of seeds. “No. Fourth, I think. The trucker who is Vicki’s father, that biker/freak from Hobart, some convict she met online, and then Hank.”

I clear my throat loudly to gain Katie’s undivided attention. I motion to the Mr. Coffee. She just stands there staring at me before turning to finish putting up the groceries.

She dumps a couple of scoops of sugar into my mug and fills it with equal part coffee and milk. Katie is so used to serving coffee she does it instinctively, besides I’m too comfortable on the couch to get it myself. She empties two cans of Dr. Pepper into her large 7-Eleven Big Gulp cup. She plops down in the red recliner and dangles her legs over the arm of the chair, letting her flip-flops drop to the floor.

“So what are you going to do now?” she asks, before taking a big gulp of DP. It’s my cue – her polite way of telling me she is ready to go home, or, in this case, that she is ready for me to go home. It’s part of a secret code we devised when we were kids.

I take a swig of coffee and make a loud swallowing noise for dramatic effect. Tweedle snickers a little. I stare off past him, squinting and pretending I can see through the plastic stapled to the window frame, which covers the broken living room window. I can make out the large looming screen. I am trying to think of what Jesus or John Wayne would do and I give my stock secret-code response, “Same thing I always do.”

Chapter Two Secondly

You know, you start at one point, sometime when you're a kid and all warm in your bed and to drown out the hollering by your mom and your current stepdad, you start thinking about how it's going to be when you're a man and can run things your own way and how sweet it'll be. It's going to be this way or that way, well, maybe not *this* way. Anywho, you get a crappy job working at McDonald's sweeping the floors and carrying out the garbage, and they feed you full of all that American McDream crap about how after you graduate from high school you can go to the Vo-tech and learn a trade and get a good job.

That's what happened to Jackson.

So he enrolled in this Offset Printing I and II at the Vo-Tech several years back when he was a kid in high school. Naturally, he needed transportation. And, naturally, that's me. It kind of worked out timing wise because Tweedle had physical therapy appointments three mornings a week. So it was convenient that I dropped him off on the way; then he'd go to the community center in the afternoon with my mom. She volunteers with the elderly lunch program and helps the old folks play bridge and whatnot, and she'd let Tweedle push the food cart around or he'd get to ride shotgun for the Meals-On-Wheels program.

So I'd drive Jackson to the Vo-tech and wait in the truck for him—no sense spending the gas and time driving back and forth; besides I only had to wait a couple hours and that gave me time to myself and my thoughts. But after a month or so, I got kind of bored of thinking and working Sudoku puzzles on my phone; so I wandered into the Vo-tech lobby and struck up a conversation with Crystal who worked at the receptionist desk. Crystal graduated one year ahead of me in school. She was on the skinny side in high school and wasn't really worth

gawking at, but since then she's become a baby factory and developed curves in all the right places. I found a good vantage point from which to appreciate the view. It was a nice view.

I started skimming through the course catalog and she tried to sell me on the only class available during my wait time – a keyboarding class, which I didn't really think I needed because I had taken keyboarding back in middle school. But Crystal sold me on the idea because she said it was "Advanced" and I would learn software applications like Microsoft Word and Excel. I had my mind set on taking a manly class like Heating and Air Conditioning, but then I decided, "What the hell? It beats waiting in the truck."

Crystal and I got to talking about the guys at the plant down where I work; the Dolese Plant, the gravel pit place down on Highway 8, I mentioned it earlier. You think you got it pretty rough until you look at someone like Joe Clark. Here's a guy who sweats his ass off for twelve bucks an hour, which wasn't too bad just for him. He didn't have much overhead, but then he gets married and has fourteen hundred kids. And I guess that'd be all right, too, except something always happens. Like your wife needs an operation and her insurance lapsed. You got three kids in diapers and your wife ends up sicker than shit and dies, leaving the poor bastard to raise all those kids by himself and owing more money on doctor and hospital bills than he'll earn in his lifetime. He's just one step further down the food chain.

That's what I was going to tell you to start with—about how when that "something" does happen, it comes down on you like a ton of bricks and you're one step closer to being homeless and in most cases around here, you are only one step away to start with. I don't like that feeling. Like I was telling Katie, these people don't have many options. Oh, sure, there are folks like Wade and Wanda who are here for the fishing. They're up early every morning, wandering around the banks of the Washita setting up and checking trotlines. But even they're on a fixed

budget. For all intents and purposes they're married, but without the legal paper. She won't marry him because she'd have to give up her dead second husband's social security. I feel for old Wade. You know it's sad when your government keeps you from making an honest woman of your woman.

Oh, yeah, I was telling you about moving down the food chain. That's one of the theories I'm working on—Reverse Evolution. It doesn't have so much to do with evolution as it has to do with reincarnation. I don't dispute the existence of God or anything, but I also don't dispute the possibility of evolution, reincarnation or any other crazy thing that man or God can concoct.

I write all this shit down and make it into little stories, flash fiction they call it, which my mom's calls ditties; so I don't let her read them anymore. But I have sent some to online journals and gotten some very encouraging rejections. I have tiny scraps of paper around my room and crumpled up in my pants' pockets that I'll do something with someday. Writing is a lot like watching a movie for me, an escape.

Anyway I was saying, the way I figure, we're all born at one time or another. It just so happens some of us have lived before. I myself have only had this one existence; I know this for a fact because I was on anesthesia when I had my appendix removed on my twenty-first birthday and had a get down to Jesus before I conked out. I mean I prayed like a mother fucker. The feeling I had when I woke up had to be how it feels to come into this world. It was as if for a short period of time during the surgery I no longer existed; I was dead to the world and it was dead to me. I hadn't been out of my body hovering over any operating tables or watching my mom cry in the waiting room. I don't know how to describe what it was like waking up, but for one split second I thought I could actually remember my own birth. Crazy, huh?

It was my birthday after all; so it got me thinking about where I'd been and where I might end up. I figure in my next life I will be reincarnated in such a way that I will have to face certain truths. Like, say you didn't have much tolerance for people who are dull or bald. All that means is that in your next life you'll be a boring-ass bald man. And so on and so on. Not all people are people for long; they reverse into cows, squirrels, etcetera, until they finally get it. You know, that it's not all about them. I feel sorry for the poor bastard cows and pigs; they don't stand a chance. But then when they do get it, they get to be in a hive or colony or some perfect society. Then they move on to the next layer and come back as ghosts or angels or whatever comes after. In my next reverse life, I think I'd like to come back as a wolf.

My neighbor, Marjorie, who works as a cocktail waitress at the Indian Casino over in Anadarko, is into astrology, horoscopes, and animal totems. She's kind of a hippie chick. We had breakfast together one Saturday morning after her shift ended at four a.m., and I had pulled an all-nighter at the casino playing the penny machines. We sat in a booth at the Denny's Restaurant, and she reached across the table and held my hands palms up. Her black acrylic fingernails had glittery stars shooting out the tips.

She was studying my palms and tracing the lines with her fingertip and she said, "You have to learn to listen to your power animal."

It made me chuckle because I thought of the scene in *Fight Club* where the power animal was a penguin. I thought I'd never have a stupid power animal like that. I want a wolf, like I said before.

She said, "Make a clearing in your mind that will attract your animal counterpart."

I closed my eyes. I avoided a cold, icy cave; we all know what power creature that would conjure up; instead, I made the clearing deep in a damp forest, moonlit and foggy.

Marjorie's hands were warm and I felt an electrical charge as she traced my palm with her fingernail. She squeezed my hand gently. "You share traits with your animal counterpart. I see loyalty, generosity, and compassion."

The night's air was cold and I sat stiffly in the booth. The moon and stars shot out of the ends of Marjorie's fingers into my palms and raced to the back of my neck where the hair stood on end. I was in the forest and breathing rapidly through my mouth. It was so real that I imagined the foggy breath escaping my lungs could be seen by those surrounding us in Denny's. I said, "Like a wolf?"

She gently squeezed my hand again. "Yes, a wolf. Just like a wolf."

The forest became real to me. It came alive. I could feel the hunter stalking his prey; the animal was running and puffs of foggy breath were forced from that poor dumb animal's nostril.

Okay, I'm getting off track a little, but bear with me. I want to talk a little bit about the big bad wolf. Everybody sits around feeling all worried about those three little pigs, but what about the wolf? Here's a guy that's probably making his last ditch effort to survive. He probably has gone for days without a meal. He may have five little hungry wolf mouths to feed at home. What would be so wrong if he ate one of those dumb-ass pigs? I mean, who would build a house out of sticks anyway? Although I do know an old guy from Medicine Park who built a little shack out of ammo boxes one time...that's another story entirely and would really get us off track. Anyway, the wolf would be doing the smart pig, who built his house of brick a favor, right? How long had the third pig been picking up the pieces and straightening up the messes his pig brothers had gotten themselves into? He'd be killing two pigs with one bird.

Then it hit me, just like it did Tyler Durden in *Fight Club*. My eyes flung open. The realization of my power animal sunk in. I'm not coming back as a wolf. I'm not a wolf at all.

I'm the third little pig. I'm the little brick pig. It's better to face it now because if I don't, I'm destined to be a dumb-ass pig in my reverse life.

I got to spending more and more time with Marjorie after Angel took off for California without me. She's pretty to look at. She makes a wicked tequila sunrise and is a good listener. And pretty to look at. Anyway, she is somewhat of a hippie like I mentioned before and she has a lot of freaky superstitions and she got me thinking about numerology. I don't go in for the whole study, any more than I entirely believe that aliens were time travelers who landed in Egypt and built the pyramids. But it did get me thinking.

One night in her little travel trailer while watching TV, I realized that significant events do occur in threes: what I call The Law of Threes. So we're watching *Beetlejuice* on television, and when Geena Davis repeated his name three times I had a sort of déjà vu and began telling Marjorie about one time when I was in a long line at the Wal-mart store and said out loud, "Shit, I forgot the eggs." The old gentleman behind me said he didn't mind saving my place in line if I wanted to run over and grab a carton, which I did. And he saved my spot just as he had promised. I thanked him and then he told me how if you repeat something three times you'll always remember it. He actually said you had to repeat it three times and then spit.

"What if you spit first?" I asked him.

He answered, very dignified, "It does not have the same affect. You must spit after." (I had never tested his theory because my sweet little aunts would never approve of me spitting.)

Marjorie said, "It's not quite right. You have to *spit* three times." She was sitting in the compact kitchen sifting through a magazine at the small table which folded down and out of the way when not in use. Katie would not say that Marjorie lives in a small crappy travel trailer that her estranged husband unhooked in the middle of the night while she slept before he drove off in

his Dodge pick-up never to be seen or heard from again. Katie would say Marjorie is spacially challenged.

Marjorie looked up from the magazine and made scary eyes and wild arm movements at me. “It’s to scare off evil spirits or the evil eye.” She went back to her magazine. “It’s a Jewish thing.”

“You have to spit?”

“Well, you can make a spitting sound if you can’t actually spit at the time. But I believe they prefer actual spitting.”

I took another drink from my bottle of Budweiser. I looked at Marjorie out of the corner of my eye. I was skeptical. I made a spitting sound in my mind.

Pooey. Pooey. Pooey.

Chapter Three The Law of Threes

There are three types of people: those who make a bad situation, those who make the best of a bad situation, and those who make the most of a bad situation. The Law of Threes just like in *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*.

On rent day I am all three. I hock the tools, stop by mom's for ninety dollars cash, sell some scrap metal and aluminum cans at Massey's Metal down on Highway 81, and head down to Old Mr. B's with barely enough money and time to pay the lot rent. But, once again, I manage. When I get paid Monday I'll be doing the reverse on a few of those tasks: get Rowdy's tools back, and pay mom with four dollars in interest. She thinks she's such a businesswoman.

Usually on the first three days of the month Old Mr. B is patrolling the front of the store. As I walk down the gravel road from my trailer to the convenience store, I figure he'll be pacing back and forth on the porch of the concession/convenience store, toting on his right shoulder an empty shotgun relic that belonged to his grandpa, and stomping up a storm in his brown cowboy boots. He wears a filthy terry-cloth robe, I think the pattern is yellow stars on a field of dark blue, but it's hard to tell through the stains of barbecue sauce, grease, food, and plain old red Oklahoma dirt. No pants. Just the robe, white v-neck tee shirt and the cowboy boots.

It's like his three-day vigil builds up as the hours tick by and there is a chance that someone will not make the deadline. As soon as the deadline arrives, mothers, get your babies off the sidewalks because he is in his truck, driving through the park like a maniac, and slapping eviction notices on doors left and right. If his gun were loaded, I'm sure he'd be shooting it wildly in the air and shouting. Don't get me wrong though; he's equally glad to see you arrive

on time. Maybe even a little relieved. And he always scolds me, “Don’t cut it so close next month, son.”

Today is different. No Old Mr. B to greet me.

I open the screen door and step inside the store. It is cold and dark inside, like an icy cave. The cold source is an old window unit the size of a Buick that drips water and rattles so loudly, even Mr. Hopper is bound to hear it and he’s lost eighty percent of his hearing in his good ear. There’s a crowd gathered in the back room behind the long counter and I stand next to Ida Mae and rubberneck to try and see what the attraction is and I whisper, “What’s going on? Someone have a heart attack?”

“No,” she oozes. “It’s Angel.”

Not Angel. Not here. Not now.

I didn’t think she was supposed to be here until next week. I look around at the crowd...they are waiting for a reaction from me. Something just doesn’t add up where this supposed screenplay of Angel’s is concerned. I think Angel’s a big phony but I haven’t figured out what she is to gain from duping these square cornbread and pinto bean folks? I’m torn...could LA have changed her that much? The blood inside me runs cold; it is colder inside my veins than in the icy cave in which I stand. And then my heart starts pumping and sweat begins to pour from my body. I feel my heart thumping and think that everyone in the room, including Mr. Hopper, can hear it beating over the noisy window air-conditioning unit. *So this is what a panic attack feels like I say to myself. So this is what it’s like to die.*

To gain my composure, I whisper “Angel Eyes” in my best Clint Eastwood impression, squinting a little at an imaginary sun and wishing I had an unlit cigar dangling from the corner of my mouth. The theme song fades in, you know the one. I slowly begin backing away from the

counter. I figure I can back all the way out of the store and continue walking backward in a straight line, eventually winding up at the bottom of the Washita River. Seems reasonable and I begin looking forward to a cool swim. Or drowning. Whatever the case may be.

She's "the bad" I remind myself.

"Oh, my boy, my boy!" Old Mr. B spots me. He makes his way from the back room toward me extending both hands to shake mine. "It's a proud day for us all."

It feels like I am still walking backward, but his words have frozen me in my tracks. It becomes clear to me he has received news of Angel and I am relieved that she is not actually back in town. I really need time to prepare and wrap my head around seeing her again. "It's real good, Mr. B," I lie, literally through my smiling teeth. I don't want him to explain anything to me in front of this mob of people, especially if the sentence starts with "Our little Angel. Our sweet little Angel."

I can't stop smiling; I try to stop, but no...it is definitely frozen onto my face. I expect frostbite to set in; that will wipe this stupid smile off my face. Everyone in the room is smiling back at me. I am the center of the trailer park universe. My eyes dart back and forth hoping to find an escape route or a place to hide, but no body part will move (except my stupid heart thumping away like a moron in my chest). I begin breathing through my teeth. I'm huffing and puffing trying to keep from hyperventilating. These people are my people. They don't mean me any harm. But just the same, I'd rather be in the dark forest, hiding quietly with my pig brothers in the house of bricks.

"Our sweet little Angel. And it's such good news." The audience coos appropriately. "She's bringing the movies back to Paradise."

I can't help but notice that Old Mr. B is wearing a button-up blue denim shirt. The shirt has dust lines around the creases where it has been folded, obviously tucked away in a forgotten bureau drawer just waiting for the right occasion to make an appearance. It's buttoned all the way and tight around his scruffy-bearded neck. His hair is combed in an animated part down the middle and slicked down on both sides. And he's wearing trousers. I haven't seen him wear pants since Martin's funeral.

I guess you're curious about me and Angel. I'm a man of few words where love is concerned. I loved her. I poured my heart out to her. She ditched me and went to California. Only now to return, rearing her ugly demon head to cut out what is left of my soul. It's ironic that the devil's spawn would be named Angel...it must follow reverse evolution somehow.

Pooey. Pooey. Pooey.

Chapter Four Breaking The Fourth Wall

It's actually cooling down now. The sun will be setting soon. I managed to finagle a twelve-pack of Budweiser from Mr. B; he was in a chipper mood and I made some vague promises to help him around the trailer park doing odd jobs this weekend.

After I paid the rent, I stashed the twelve-pack in the fridge back home. I find Tweedle in his room, and the two of us head down to the Washita. We sit on the bank just under the old pony bridge that was once used by the railroad. I enjoy the beer I brought along and Tweedle takes off his socks and shoes to dig his toes into the thick wet sand. I throw rocks at the old pony bridge, trying to hit the railroad crossing sign. If the rocks make contact, Tweedle says, "Doink."

"Don't get sand in your eyes," I say, brushing the sand from his hands. "Don't rub your eyes." It's a bad habit he has, touching his face and eyes. I think he inherited it from his mother.

So if you haven't figured it out already I am a big fan of westerns, especially those with Clint Eastwood. When I was a kid my Aunt Trixie made me a Poncho out of an old blanket and I used a fat brown crayon nub as a cigar. I practiced drawing my toy pistol from my right hip holster, using Jackson as my unsuspecting target. I was always jealous he is named "Jackson" just like Clint Eastwood's character in *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*. He got the cool name. By the time he was three, he had died a thousand deaths. He was as creative at dying as I was at killing him.

That was about the time Mason Tweedle came to live with us full time, even though he is not a blood relative. We never legally adopted him, but my mom became his court-appointed guardian. Tweedle's mom was a worn-out tacky old broad with a laugh that always deteriorated

into a hacking moist cough. She had a red patch of scaly skin on her forehead that was always flaking and peeling. It must have been itchy because she was constantly picking at it with her long yellowed fingernails. She was never really around much, but after the accident she really went off the deep end. Sometimes she'd take off for days at a time leaving Tweedle alone, when he was in no way able to fend for himself. The collapse of the slide caused severe TBI and effected Mason's speech, motor skills, and cognitive abilities. He was only a baby and progressed well, but even with all the years of occupational therapy he has only managed marginal skills such as using a spoon and turning a doorknob. He's surprisingly dexterous for the severity of the injury. The worst part was how easily he became frustrated and angered when he was little, and his mom didn't handle it well. So my mom started bringing him home and taking care of him. It never felt quite right when he wasn't there. He just belonged with us.

I always worried when his mom did show up to get him. I remember my mom trying to ease my mind by saying, "It's just a matter of time before he'll be with us permanently. Try not to worry."

Her prediction was right, naturally. It started with him spending evenings and weekends and his visits gradually just stretched into longer and longer periods of time, until one day it was permanent. The last time I saw Tweedle's mom she was sitting in her car with the engine running.

I heard her tell my mom, "Giving up the boy is the only decent thing I've ever done for him." Made me hate her and respect her at the same time. Then, I just felt plain sorry for her...she didn't have "enough of herself" for herself much less Tweedle. Then my mom put her hand firmly on my shoulder and squeezed it as we watched Tweedle's mom back out of the

driveway and disappear from his life forever. It wasn't long after that I watched my dad do very near the same thing.

Tweedle is wanting to swim in the river. He's making stroke gestures with his arms. I say, "You wanna swim? Okay, go ahead." I pull his sweaty tee shirt over his head and help him strip down to his Sponge-Bob underwear.

He is careful in the water. There is a very shallow place where the river makes a turn right under the shade of the bridge. It's a spot we know well. It's as safe as the bathtub at home. The main thing is to watch out for snakes. I find a big stick and keep a vigil. He sits on the bottom of the river and the water just barely covers him to his waist.

Tweedle is in his imaginary twin world. To me, it wouldn't be so bad being in his head, a world he's created where he keeps Martin alive and well. That's what I assume anyway. It would be a kind of paradise not to have a care in the world. Not to have to worry about your mom ditching you when you are so helpless and incapable of taking care of yourself. I sometimes wish I could intrude into his mind, break through that fourth wall like they do in the movies when the characters stop and address the audience directly. Like Ferris Bueller or Tyler Durden. I'd like to be able to have a little sidebar with Tweedle. I'd say to him, "You're a royal pain in my ass but I really enjoy the shit out of you. What's it like in here—in this brain trap of yours?" I have pangs of guilt and worries. Now I worry Tweedle is not feeling much fulfillment.

This is really about all there is to my life. Taking care of Tweedle, working at the Dolese Plant, Sundays at my aunts' house. It's all pretty dull, I think, as I chunk a large dirt clod at the water. It's like everything just takes its natural course, unless you do something to break the pattern. I'm pretty sure my pioneering ancestors lived the exact same life as I. Throwing the

same dirt clods at the same water. Stay-putters not willing to intercede to change their destiny. Except my mom, of course, where Tweedle was concerned.

It wasn't long after Tweedle came to live with us that my mom sold the house on Elm Street and moved to the trailer park. It was for economic reasons. I was fifteen and shared a room with Tweedle and Jackson. Growing up in a small economically stunted town in Oklahoma means spending a lot of time outdoors, which was fine by me. The gang of kids I grew up with didn't have the cushiony luxury of playing video games all day, eating chips on the couch, going to a mall, or hanging out at the community pool. But that's not to say we didn't find creative ways to entertain ourselves. We did things the "old school" way: riding our bikes to this same spot under this bridge to fish and swim, or wandering all about unsupervised.

And we played with wood we fashioned into guns. We never played cowboys and Indians because we *were* cowboys and Indians, literally. No one ever said, "Okay, Joe, today you're gonna be the Indian and scalp the cowboy or be killed whichever." That just never occurred to us. To kill or be killed only depended on who had the biggest gun and the fastest draw.

I sit on the bank finishing off my beer and watching Tweedle splashing in the water. I still see him as that chubby healthy four-year-old, before the accident. When we were kids, we weren't good guys. We were all the bad and the ugly...except Tweedle. He was the good.

It's getting dark so I gather up Tweedle's clothes. "Let's head home. Get some food," I say. Food is one word that gets Tweedle's attention.

Once home, it's more of our dull routine. A tuna sandwich and chips. A struggle with Tweedle to shower. I check him good for ticks and dab cream on any mosquito bites. Another

struggle to get him dressed. I make sure he takes his medicine before he settles into his bed. I read him a chainsaw pamphlet about forty-to-one motor oil until he drifts off to sleep.

I flip on the TV (ESPN) as background noise and company, before I fill the kitchen sink with hot water, liquid Joy and dirty dishes. I don't even know where Jackson is...work, Starbucks, who knows. If he were here, we would play Halo until dawn, but I don't want to play by myself. It's boring.

I dabble at my laptop for a while, writing on what I pretend is a novel. But I can't concentrate on my meth-lab characters because in the back of my mind is Angel. It's nagging at me just how it's possible a little girl from bum-fuck Oklahoma goes to California and within five years has written a movie script, sold it, and it's been produced?

I'm gonna pull a CIA move on the computer and Google the shit out of her. Even though Tweedle is sound asleep I call out to him, "Alfred! To the bat cave. Let the Googling begin."

I don't find out too much about her, a mention of her on the Dean's List at UC Irvine and the regular Yellow-pages listing of address and phone number. There's sites about the movie *Starlight 6*, which she supposedly wrote and sold to Hollywood. No mention of her in any of the credits. Only that the movie sucked raw eggs and received less than one-and-a-half rotten tomatoes with an unknown director and actors they must have found living under a bridge. Eventually my Googling turns into YouTube videos of space zombies and I have gotten way off track.

I reach for my bottle of Jack Daniels in the kitchen cabinet above the sink, it has about two shots left. I take a swig straight out of the bottle, and follow it up with a Budweiser from the fridge. I'm not sleepy and I have gotten my second wind. I am antsy, and at a loss as to what to do with myself. I have more Angel research to do, but that can wait until tomorrow. I carry a

beer outside to the saggy wooden deck of my trailer, and sit in the broken plastic patio chair that I retrieved from my neighbor's trashcan. It's only broken a little on the left armrest...it's still sitable. I don't turn on the porch light because I don't want to attract mosquitos and June bugs or disturb Duke, the dog next door.

It's really dark. No moon and the clouds obscure the stars. A light filters through the louver slats on the window of Marjorie's mini-trailer bedroom. She doesn't have a car and usually catches a ride with a bartending coworker, a cowgirl who wears boots with her sundresses. She lives down by the college on State Street. I didn't hear her drive up though; so Marjorie must be off tonight.

I finish my Budweiser and throw the glass bottle into the recycling bin by the porch steps. I go get another beer and return to my broken chair.

There is a crashing sound and loud swearing follows, coming from Marjorie's trailer. Her bedroom window is cranked open. I holler, "You okay?" I can hear rustling but she doesn't respond so I shout, "Marjie?"

"Shit. Shit. Shit."

She doesn't sound good. I'm afraid she's hurt; so I'm out of my chair, hurdling the rickety railing of my deck, and through her door between the second and third shit. I find her in the bedroom. She has pinned herself in the small space between the bed and the wall. She is holding a cardboard box above her head and using the wall to help her balance. That is not the first thing I notice however. She is only in her bra and panties. Bra. And. Panties.

"A little help here," she says. She is standing in an awkward Twister pose. Every school-age boy's dream come true.

Taking the box, which is pretty freaking heavy, I set it on the bed. I want to help her onto the bed, but there's nothing to grab hold of except thighs or bare waist. Naked supple flesh. And bra and panties. I'm groping her with my eyes. She has a tattoo of a shooting star on her hip.

She says, "Don't just stand there gaping...help me. My ankle's stuck and I'm pretty sure it's broken."

I shift into the brick pig mode and push all the covers off the bed and set the mattress on its side against the opposite wall. Now I can see that her foot had slipped between the metal pieces of the frame, her ankle is all puffy and red. It is like a metal bear trap that has snapped onto her ankle. I tell her, "It's okay. Calm down."

I drop to my knees and try to maneuver her foot free. She can't sit down because her foot is twisted behind her and the added pressure would make it worse. She is crying now and getting a little hysterical. She is twisting her foot around trying to free it, but she's only causing the metal to dig into her skin and gash at her flesh. "Get me loose."

"Hold still," I say. "It's going to be okay." I smile up at her. The more upset she gets, the calmer I become.

"It f-ing hurts."

"I know. I know," I say. She is like a trapped rabbit ready to gnaw off its foot. I use all my strength to hold the metal pieces apart. "I need another hand here."

She bends straight from the waist and even though the situation is dire, I can't help but notice my face is about an inch away from two fleshy butt cheeks that peek out from her silky red panties. I stretch the metal pieces apart and she guides her trapped foot out with her left hand. Her foot is free and I release the metal bed frame with a snap.

For a minute I hesitate to pick her up because I don't want to grab the wrong thing, but I slip my arm under her thighs at the knees and grab hold of her waist, carrying her to the living room floor. I am methodical. I get an ice tray from the mini-fridge in the kitchen and empty the cubes into an empty bread bag. I place the ice pack on her ankle, which is red and has an abrasion but no bleeding.

Now I squat beside her. Marjorie's eyes are soft and wet. She's shaking.

"Can you bear to put any weight on it?"

She shakes her head and bites her bottom lip. "I'm such a dumb clumsy idiot."

I need to concentrate, but that's impossible. She is on her back and her bra is more for decoration than functionality. I get back on my feet and grab a robe from a hook on the bathroom door. I put it around her shoulder and help her put her arms through the sleeves. "I think we better go to the hospital."

"No. Just help me to the bedroom."

"I don't know." I'm skeptical. "I think X-rays."

The bedroom is all disheveled. I put the mattress back on the frame and smooth the covers, sheets, and pillows back into place. When I upturned the mattress, the contents of the box scattered on the floor. Books, video games, and trinkets from a long ago childhood.

I carry her back to the bedroom, her hands are clasped around my neck and her touch is so light, it feels like a feather tickling the nape of my neck. I drop her gently onto the bed and elevate her foot with the pillows. Her robe is open and I can see a red mark on the back of her thigh, my handprint. The heart tattoo on her foot is misshapen and looks like a radish. "It's swelling. I think the hospital."

She says, “Let’s give it ‘til morning. I don’t have money for an ER visit.” She is moving the makeshift ice pack around on her ankle.

I go back to the kitchen and rummage around in the drawers and cabinets for drugs. I find Aleve and pour her a glass of water. I return to the bedroom, handing her two Aleve and the water. “Can I ask you what you were doing holding a box of books over your head?”

She swallows the pills and water. “I was putting them in the storage over the bed. I need to Feng shui my shit. It’s bad enough this stupid trailer sets east-west. I thought at least I could minimize the clutter.”

“Next time, just call me. I ‘m literally six feet away.” I begin repacking the box with the scattered books. I lift it to the built-in storage cabinet above her bed.

She says, “I was standing on the edge of the bed and my foot slipped and got caught in the bed frame.”

“I noticed that.” I smile. Although I am remembering the first thing I noticed was her panties. I feel like a twelve-year-old boy who saw his first naked lady. I don’t know why, she isn’t naked, and it’s not like I haven’t seen my share of naked women. But it’s Marjorie. It’s different with her in her red bra and panties. I sit on the edge of the bed, lifting the ice bag to look at her red swollen ankle.

“The AM/PM clinic is open 24 hours,” I suggest.

“If my ankle is broken...I needed it to happen at work. I can’t afford to be lame. To be off work.”

I understand her logic, but it is of no use. “Let’s just go have a little X-ray done...then you’ll know. They will give you some peace of mind, Hydrocodone and three-days-stay-off your-feet-note for work.”

She gives me that trapped rabbit look and I can see how alone and helpless she really is. I can see trust in her eyes. She's a soft delicate rabbit. "Alright," she agrees.

She begins a verbal list to me...I follow her directions, gathering up a tee shirt, a skirt and flip flops. While she gets her clothes on I run back to my trailer to lock up, get my phone charger, and an Ace bandage to wrap her ankle. I stop outside Tweedle's door. He is asleep. He's a very sound sleeper and even though I am hesitant, I decide to leave him be. I'll text my mom so she can look in on him.

I clear the seat of my truck and place a soft pillow on the floorboard for her foot. I leave the passenger door wide open to make the transfer easier for her.

I scoop Marjorie into my arms and deposit her to the passenger seat of my truck. Her hands are still clasped together around my neck. I'm leaning into her a little because she's hasn't let go. I'm very aware that under different circumstances this would lead to something of a sexual nature. There is a strong attraction on my part. My hand touches her thigh and I say, "I'm sorry my AC is on the fritz. I hope you won't be too uncomfortable."

She gently pulls on my neck guiding my face closer to hers. My mouth is dry. Her lips are moist and inviting. She says, "I don't mind the heat. It's the pain I can't stand."

Chapter Five
Five-Star Coffee Is The Commodity We Seek

It's finally Saturday.

It's funny that I live in a pseudo-mobile community which indicates it has the capacity to pack up on a moment's notice and caravan away as a single efficient unit. A tribe of modern-day nomadic gypsies skilled at the art of survival; following the herd, living off the land, and reading the signs of the seasons. Along the way cultural exchanges with other tribes take place at the mouths of rivers or the foothills, where the great hunters trade information and tools to better the others' lives. I watch a lot of the Discovery Channel.

That doesn't happen here at the Paradise Twin. Remember, I live in a trailer park. In Oklahoma. In the Heart of Tornado Alley. We are probably more reminiscent of the Neanderthals. Too stubborn to move on. Or just plain stupid. We are the stay putters, no matter how tough it gets, we're gonna hunker down and weather the storm—only to perish into oblivion when the storm gets too rough. While those who move on look back at us and say, “Poor bastards. Those poor dumb bastards.”

Once a month though, misguided Nomads from other tribes wander upon our private campground with a desire to trade. It's in the dark of night that they start arriving and parking along the stretch of highway just outside our permanent encampment. They lie in wait for the dawn when Old Mr. B opens the gates and allows the foreigners passage into the forbidden city of Paradise Twin. They pull in and park east of the concession/convenience store with their goods and swiftly unpack their wares using flashlights and lanterns, making gestures and an unspoken language.

Tweedle wakes early; he is as excited as if we're going to the State Fair. I pretend that he has disturbed my sleep and I'm a little grouchy, but I've been lying awake smelling Indian fry bread cooking, topped with beans, ground beef, and shredded cheese. To be honest, I haven't slept, except for a few winks in the Grady County ER, where I waited for Marjorie to see a doctor and have X-rays. She has a little hair-line fracture on her foot near her pinky toe. They gave her a boot to help keep it immobilized and sent her home with a pain prescription. There is an ugly black and green bruise on her foot right on her heart tattoo. Could have been worse; could have been her ankle.

I love flea market Saturday as much as Tweedle does. Saturday is the one day a week that Jackson is up before the sun. He and his counterfeiting partner take their stacks of phony bills into Oklahoma City and go from garage sale to garage sale, using home-made twenty dollar bills to buy one dollar items, and making a nineteen dollar profit. They usually get away with about a thousand dollars a piece. He used to take Tweedle with him garage saling, before I was aware of the counterfeiting. Tweedle came home with lots of weed eater and motor parts and I thought Jackson was helping me out. It makes me sick to my stomach he was only using Tweedle to gain sympathy from the garage sale sellers. I put an end to that once and for all.

I throw on a semi-clean tee shirt, shorts and flip-flops, but I take my time in the bathroom, brushing my teeth and combing my hair. It's torture to Tweedle...me taking my time. It's part of my Saturday morning routine. I can hear him right outside the door and I can't help but smile. I disguise it as "Teaching Tweedle Patience," but I enjoy torturing Tweedle a little, I hate to admit. I fling open the door and he's giggling and slapping the air like his brother is there, and they are slapping each other's hands. "Shall we go, gentlemen?" I say.

I stop on the porch deck of my trailer and look across at Marjorie's window. It's dark and quiet. I hope she is resting. I'll go check on her in a while, bring her some coffee and doughnuts.

I pull a crumpled ten dollar bill out of my pocket that I managed to save back and hand it over to Tweedle. He has his monthly social security disability benefits, which isn't much; but I don't touch that, he may need that sometime. We walk side by side at first, but I need coffee and stop at Katie's. He has learned as much patience as he can this morning and Tweedle runs on ahead of me to the flea market vendors. Katie's door is open as usual and the coffee is freshly brewed, as usual. Katie has her Mr. Coffee machine on a timer to auto-brew precisely at seven-thirty every morning: no freeze-dried instant crap around here.

At work we have a coffee machine that just churns out freshly brewed coffee by the cup. I know I sound like a commercial trying to sell you coffee, but it's actually pretty cool because the machine pumps out like fifty different flavors and no one at the quarry is responsible for starting the coffeemaker or cleaning the coffee pots. It's all provided by Five Star Vending Company and free of charge by our employer. Nice little fringe benefit. We have our priorities straight.

On the rich side of town, there's driveway after driveway full of shiny new Cadillacs. I always see the Cadillac Escalade-likes following one another in the drive-through line at Starbucks. They don't know shit about coffee. When the civilized world ends as we know it, coffee will be the commodity we seek—and bullets. Maybe oranges.

Katie's car's not in the carport. Every Friday night Katie pulls an all-night shift at the Prairie Kitchen, the truck stop on 81 by the turnpike. As far as I can tell there's no one here, so I pour me a cup. I am actually humming like I don't have a care in the world—even after the

convenience store yesterday—you know, being the only one who knows Angel is a lying fraud and coming home as some kind of a laurelled hero. I'm chipper and humming even after being up all night with Marjorie.

But now, I hear stirring in the back bedroom and figure Rowdy woke when the storm door slammed. I'm pouring powdered cream into my favorite 7-11 mug and with my peripheral vision I catch a glimpse of wild blonde hair and naked pudgy legs scampering to the main bathroom. The cream freezes in midair. Time stands still. I expect the earth, moon, and stars to crash into the sun at any moment, because at this exact moment I hear Katie's car sputtering and spitting as it pulls into the carport.

Rowdy bolts from the bedroom, pulling up his boxers. My first instinct is to kill him. He's rubbing his hair with both hands and doing a frantic pacing dance in front of the thin blanket hanging over the bathroom opening. I see myself dragging him down to the playground by his greasy hair and hanging his mangy ass from the gallows. But no, he will not die by my hand. Instead I break into brick pig mode and stop Katie before she even gets out of the car.

I take her by the elbow and begin escorting her across the carport toward my truck.
“Come with me to get my check. It's payday.”

She's instantly annoyed with me. “No, Cody. I just spent twelve hours on my feet. Besides today's Saturday, you don't get paid today.”

I'm in full stealth brick pig mode now. I cannot and will not take no for an answer.

“I'm tired. I need to take my shoes off. I need coffee.”

“Here, drink mine,” I say, pushing my cup at her and spilling it on the hood of her car.

“You know I like black coffee. I don't need all that cream and sugar. What is the matter with you?”

“Let’s go over to the Chickasha Hotel and have some coffee. We haven’t been there in forever; besides, there will be plenty of time for coffee tomorrow,” I tell her, trying not to be too overly excited, but I’m obviously overly excited.

I know she just wants to go inside her quaint little cottage (apparently made of straw) and take off her shoes, but I drag her by the arm toward the nomadic crowd of strangers on a quest to find a present for Aunt Trixie’s birthday tomorrow. A ruse. Not for Rowdy’s sake. Not for the sake of that dumb-ass blonde sleeping with my baby sister’s husband in their marriage bed. But because Katie’s world is not going to crash into the sun for as long as I can prevent it. Not like that. Not on my watch.

Chapter Six
Six-Six-Six

“What about this?” Katie holds some little knickknack at arm’s length to me. Her heart is not really into picking out a birthday present for Aunt Trixie. She’s just going through the motions, trying to make me happy, but nothing is making me very happy right now. The trinket will never do. It is not gaudy enough.

The vendors and flea market tables are set up on the stretch of land in front of the Paradise, between the highway and where the ticket booth used to stand. I’m at the end of a long homemade plywood table filled with old bottles and glassware, and I shake my head “no” at Katie. She puts the knickknack back. After a good hour of searching, we finally settle on a god-awful vase that I know Aunt Trixie will just hate. It’s perfect.

We make our way around the flea market circuit and engage in small talk about the weather, the economy, and the local election. Not with each other, but with the vendors. There are taboo subjects I am not willing to bridge with Katie this early in the day. Mainly Rowdy. But I do want to pick her brain to find out what she really knows about the bogus scheme in which Angel is involved.

We meet up with Tweedle who has purchased a couple of gas-powered Weedeater engines. “Nice, Mason,” Katie says. “Are you fixing Weedeaters now?” She talks to him like he’s three even though he is twenty-three, the same age as she.

Tweedle doesn’t respond. He rarely does. I don’t think he has responded to anyone except me since Martin died. “They’re building something,” I say, as I steer us toward the Indian taco stand. “I think a rocket ship of some kind to go to the moon.”

Katie says, “*He*, you mean. *He* is building a rocket ship. Really, Cody.”

“He. Them. Whatever. It keeps him-them-us-they-she-it busy and off the streets.” I just told her my mentally-challenged roommate is building a rocket ship out of Weedeaters and she’s all caught up in semantics. Typical. I can’t help but think of Tweedle as “them.” To him Martin is still very much alive.

I squeeze four dollars out of Katie to buy the three of us Indian fry bread tacos and we head to the picnic table by the concession/convenience store. Old Mr. B has plastered a giant poster on the front of his building advertising the movie made from *Starlite Six*. Six-Six-Six. There’s a small laminated Polaroid shot of Angel on a beach next to it with a printout from the internet, I think from the movie premier.

I sit with my back to the poster, pretending I didn’t see it. I’ll investigate it after I question Katie. Tweedle takes a seat next to me on the cedar bench. The three of us eat in silence. Katie and I have not been this polite to each other since the day she married Rowdy. It only takes a few minutes before Tweedle takes his Weedeater apart and has his hands covered with grease. He’s eating his Indian taco, too.

Some caregiver I am, I think. “No, Tweedle. Let’s get the wet wipes outta your bag and get your hands cleaned up.”

He obeys with hardly a squawk.

The store seems to be the hub of activity today. Old Mr. B exits the front door and carries a ladder around the corner to behind the store. He traipses to the front again, smiles and waves but is not deterred from his path. He is definitely on a mission.

“Need some help, Mr. B?” I holler, but he can’t hear me because he’s got on giant headphones attached to an antique Sony Walkman. He goes back in and out several times. Katie and I watch from our front row seat as we eat our tacos.

Katie says, “He’s excited about seeing Angel and her movie playing here...”

I stop chewing. I’m looking at her suspiciously. She has to know what is going on here. She’s probably known for a long fucking time and kept it from me. I’m suddenly very pissed off at my sister. I’m violently chewing my tacos now. Ripping them to shreds.

I’ve been thinking about this for a couple days, but all of the sudden reality hits me that Angel will be here any day now and I will actually see her. I wonder where it will happen and what she will say.

I think of *High Plains Drifter* and my mind transforms the entire trailer park; just like in the movie all the buildings and trailers in the Paradise Twin are painted bright red, and checkered tablecloths replace the vendors’ tables just like the barbecue to welcome the outlaws back to Lagos. In giant capital letters the word HELL is spray painted across the outdoor movie screen.

Katie is still chattering as I rejoin reality. I see my little sister just as she was in high school, she and Angel always chattering and giggling to one another. And scheming. They have been best friends since they were in junior high school together. Inseparable, well until Angel skipped out on us.

She stops talking abruptly and gives me a long look.

I break the silence and say, “What’s this all about?”

“What’s what all about?” She says flatly. She buries her concentration and gaze into the taco.

“You know what’s what.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.” Katie has never been very good at hiding things from me. Once when she was in high school she told Mom she was staying the night with Angel. I could tell by the way she was biting on her bottom lip that she was lying. I stopped her

dead in her tracks and didn't have to say a word—I just gave her the look where I turn my head to the left and look down on her with my right eye, scrunching my eyebrows and frowning. She didn't go anywhere that night.

There's a lot of silence between us as we finish our tacos. She finally says, "Let's go downtown to the Chickasha Hotel, like you said earlier."

Old Mr. B comes out carrying a paint bucket. I watch him round the corner for the fourteenth time. I decide to have a little fun at Katie's expense since she won't fess up.

"What gives?" I say. Katie is fidgety and picking at what is left of her fry bread. I'm giving her the opportunity to tell me more about Angel, but I kind of figure if she hasn't told me by now—she probably isn't going to.

"Walk me home, Cody. I want to get this gift wrapped for Aunt Trixie's party tomorrow."

"Not quite yet." I'm giving her the look and just starting to enjoy myself and with a careless slip of my tongue, I say, "It may not be safe yet."

"Safe? What's that supposed to mean?" She has wiped the look clean off my face and has turned it on me. She takes a defiant stand with her fists on each hip.

"Well, I was just thinking..." I stammer a little and tug at the tee shirt tag that is sticking me in the back of my neck. A second ago I was feeling pretty cocky. I'm one to be pissed off about keeping secrets. "You probably have talked to Angel and all. Seeings how you two are friends."

She sits back down on the picnic bench and eats a pinch of lettuce left on her paper plate.

"You know, right? You know I knew, right? You're mad, right?"

“I have no idea what you just said. I don’t know. I wish I did know.” I feel the summer heat on my face. I think of Rowdy and that dumb-ass blonde. I see the tables turned and what if she were the one asking me questions about Rowdy. I know now that I have to tell her, but I can’t tell her here. Not right now. Not while she’s eating Indian tacos.

“I just want to know what to expect. I felt like such a jackass yesterday in front of everyone...that I would be the last one to find out that Angel is coming home.” From the store window behind me, I can feel Angel’s eyes from the snapshot staring at the back of my head. She’s probably laughing it up. Making dupes of all her former friends and relations.

“Oh, Cody, I’m sorry. I wanted to tell you. I should have told you.”

“How could you go along with something like that? What hell kind of devil did she turn into?”

Tweedle is tinkering with the torn down engines again. I get up from the table, gather up Tweedle’s trash with mine and throw it all into the dumpster beside the convenience store. Katie follows closely behind me.

“She misses you, Cody. Things could be like they were before. It’s not like you two really broke up or anything. I know she’s still in your heart.”

“She is a back-stabbing fraud.” A tether tightens inside my heart. I walk away toward the back of the store and see Old Mr. B on the ladder. My eyes bulge and I can’t blink because he’s rolling bright red paint onto the cinder block building.

“It’s not like that, Cody. Once you talk to her. You’ll see.” Katie rounds the corner now. We both look at each other and start laughing at the sight of Old Mr. B on that ladder. He can’t hear us but I begin yelling loudly enough that even deaf Mr. Hopper could hear me. “Mr. B, you really shouldn’t be on that ladder.”

Katie is blushing at the sight of Old Mr. B. He is in his robe and cowboy boots. And I mean *just* his robe and cowboy boots. On a ladder, six feet off the ground.

I tug at the back corner of his robe to get his attention. He turns down the volume on his cassette player. I'm looking straight at Katie who is using her hand as a visor so she won't go blind, and I say, "You really shouldn't be on that ladder, Mr. B."

"It's quite safe, my boy."

"No, you don't understand. There are young children and ladies around here." I look up carefully, immediately establishing eye contact with Old Mr. B. "From this angle, you are not exactly decent."

He looks around a little and I can tell he is embarrassed. "I do see your point."

"Why don't you let me take over for a while?" I say.

So after I check on Marjorie, taking her some fry tacos and propping her pillows, I end up here on a ladder painting the concession store bright red for the glorious homecoming of Angel Miles. After painting a while, I help myself to a cold Budweiser from the convenience store. I climb onto the flat-topped tarred roof of the convenience store, twist open the bottle cap, and survey the surrounding landscape. From this vantage point I can see the entire park. The flea market vendors are beginning to pack up their wares into their trailers and pickup trucks as the sun begins to set. I see off in the distance toward the Washita River that a group of young boys are gathering their fishing gear and heading for home along the well-worn path from the east. A little farther along the river banks I see a couple sitting in folding lawn chairs, casting lines into the thick red muddy water. To the east I see all the silver and white metal rooves of the trailers which are weighed down with various tires and glistening in the setting sun. I can see directly

into the window of Katie's trailer. Rowdy is lying on the couch; Katie pauses briefly at the trailer door before leaving to work her twelve-hour shift at the Prairie Kitchen. Dim lights are beginning to glow inside the trailer homes. The scene is centered by the single-remaining twin screen in the distance. I take a swig of beer.

Earlier Old Mr. B had hung around supervising me from the ground a little, but eventually he seemed pleased with my progress and wandered off to tackle another project. Now from here I can see that he erected scaffolding in front of the screen with the intent to paint and restore it to its former glory. A rhythmic squeaking begins as the rusted swing chains begin swaying from a cool summer evening breeze that blows in from the north. The rusty scaffolding looks rickety and unsafe, and blends in very nicely with the playground equipment. The whole thing reminds me of the *High Plains Drifter*; so I'm okay with it. Actually, it is kind of appropriate, I decide. I hold the glass bottle to my cheek to cool myself.

Old Mr. B appears from the storage room under the screen and is dragging his spray painting equipment toward the scaffolding. He's put on some old gray coveralls with the sleeves cut off and blowouts in both the knees. I watch him struggle up the steps of the scaffolding, dragging the sprayer behind him, and for the first time I think about what this homecoming must mean to him. Angel is his niece, after all. He never married or had children of his own. Angel is his pride and joy.

I take another swallow of the beer. I have been so caught up in my own rage and indignation that I have not once considered what it must mean to him to have her home. He took it pretty hard when she went away to California; she was definitely not a stay-putter. He was more unsettled because I didn't go with her—to look after her than he was about her leaving all together. We both soon realized she didn't need looking after; she took care of herself just fine.

He eventually forgave me, I guess. It took him a while though to get past that. He delighted in her success. She was the first in his family to attend college.

I hate to admit that I was proud of her, too, I wish this whole fiasco was legit. Maybe she's not the devil. Maybe there is a fast track for success and she found it. Maybe she's not a back-stabbing fraud. She wouldn't break Old Mr. B's heart. I finish my beer and enjoy my vantage point for another minute. I chuck the empty bottle into the opened dumpster next to the convenience store. Now I climb down the ladder and head over to the scaffolding to give Old Mr. B a hand. I walk along the gravel road between the line of trailers and hear the life happening around me. From one trailer to the next I hear a mother call her kids in for supper. I hear the news blaring from a TV. From a kitchen I smell the aroma of sizzling onions and fried bacon heavy in the air. A couple is arguing with elevated voices. The sounds and smells all meld together and for me, it is sweet. It is my roots, insignificant or not. And I'm not ashamed of where I'm from.

I don't often venture to the playground. It doesn't hold good memories for me. Because of Martin. Because of my childhood. By the time I reach the scaffolding, Old Mr. B has managed to tangle himself and the sprayer together and tied himself to the scaffolding. I hurry up the metal steps and grab hold of the hose and nozzle. "Here, Mr. B, let me give you a hand."

"Oh, my boy, you have a knack of showing up at the right time today," he says and the sentence ends with a pleasant laugh.

"We're just in sync today." I crisscross the hose a few times and he steps back and is now untangled. The sprayer is like a monster at bay between us. "I helped myself to a beer. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. I appreciate your help with the painting. You did a fine job."

“Well, I know you want it to look nice for Angel and all,” I say, rubbing the back of my neck and wondering if this tangled heap of machinery at my feet will even work. It’s leaking water, so that’s a good sign he stored it properly. I fiddle with the nozzle for a minute and see it is not clogged up with old dried-up paint.

He says, “It’s pretty late to start painting tonight, I suppose.”

I look at the sun which is sinking into the mud of the Washita River. “I can help you knock this job out tomorrow afternoon, if you want.”

“That’s fine, my boy. Fine.”

We both stand there a few awkward minutes watching the sun. Now he says, “You know she’ll be here in a few days. She’ll be staying with her mamma.” His words are sharp. And choppy.

This is the first time I have heard the date of her arrival. I take hold of the electrical cord and start straightening it up and coiling it. It’s a tangled mess.

He says, “She asked about you.”

I scratch my head, which feels like a cork bobbing up and down in the river. “We haven’t exactly kept it touch, Mr. B.” I wrestle with the machine as I begin dragging it across the scaffolding platform.

“Then this will give you two a chance to catch up,” he says. He grabs the other side of the machine and starts pushing it.

“I have to admit it is hard for me to be...proud of her accomplishments. But I am trying,” I say. I tip the machine over and let the excess water drip out of the container.

“Why, that surprises me,” he says.

“Thank you, Mr. B,” I politely say. I’m thinking, *she’s a backstabbing fraud*, but I don’t want to be rude or hurt his feelings.

“I give you a lot of credit for letting her go and not holding her back. That takes a real man, son.”

I know he doesn’t mean any harm, and I realize he doesn’t have all the facts; it still pisses me off, but I don’t say anything. One thing I am is tactful. I just focus on the beastly spraying machine, wrestling it all the way down the scaffolding steps, yanking roughly on the hose and the cord, and dragging it back into the storage room.

When I was a kid I had a fear of this storage room. It was always dark and had an earthy smell to it. It runs underneath the length of the screen, and I always thought it must be where all the movie monsters lived when the movies ended. In the old days, Old Mr. B. would come down here and mill around inside while the movie was playing, never turning on the lights. There was some kind of generator inside that made an awful noise.

I pull the storage room door closed and listen for the click of the lock to take hold. I turn and tell Mr. B., “We’ll finish this up tomorrow afternoon. I’ll be at my aunts’ for Trixie’s birthday and then we’ll get started.”

Old Mr. B. rubs his hands down the front of his coveralls before extending his hand to shake mine. “That’s a fine plan. I appreciate your help.” He shakes my hand and grasps my right shoulder with his other hand. “May I offer you another beer?”

I am not one to be rude, so I graciously accept. We walk in silence together to the convenience store. The only sound I hear is the crushing of gravel under Old Mr. B’s cowboy boots and Duke, the dog, howling from his post where he is tethered along the next row of trailers.

As we approach the front of Old Mr. B's convenience store he points at the movie poster he has plastered in the window of his store. He gets excited as he speaks. "Angel Fed-Exed me a whole box of clippings and promotional material."

He stops in front of the store window and motions to the picture clipping from the internet. "She sent this to me, too. Taken at a movie premiere in Los Angeles. I put an ad in the *Chickasha Express* that we will have a run of the movie next Friday and Saturday night here at the Twin. The newspaper's going to do an interview with her and run it over this coming weekend. We'll open a little early so folks can get their concessions and get situated. Her mom's agreed to run the concessions the same as she did when we were opened for business. I'm sure there will be autograph seekers as well."

I am forced to look at the printout. I am forced to look at her, and I smile politely. There is nothing quite like having your nose rubbed in shit, I think. I'll certainly be Gogglng this clippings in a little while.

"I'm putting in a few more picnic tables around the side there and setting up a VIP section under the metal awning here. I have a couple of rows of theater seats in the storage room down front of the screen that I rescued from the downtown Washita Theater before they remodeled it. I'll reserve you a seat, Cody."

"Are you sure you're going to have enough time to do all that, Mr. B? Sounds like a lot."

"There's nothing to it, my boy. It runs in my blood. I have concessions in line. I have made arrangement to have the sound pumped through the AM channel on the radio. I got the speakers I'm gonna setup in front."

“What about that old projector? It hasn’t run in twenty years now. You sure you’re going to be able to get that old hunk of junk running?” The reality of the event is beginning to creep in and I realize now that he expects I will be instrumental in helping him carry it off. How exactly that will settle as I point to her and call her out as a fraud is of an uncertain future. I’ll be the villain.

“The projector runs fine,” he says. “I tested it yesterday. There’s a clear shot to project the movie onto the screen, as long as no one parks on the main gravel road down to the front.” He motions toward the screen. I can see he’s right.

He continues, “And Angel is bringing the reels herself. All the way from California. I changed the bulbs in the sign and will put her name on the marquee out front tomorrow morning.” He sighs. “I can’t begin to tell you how proud I am.”

Still, I’m a doubting Thomas. “What about the people? How will they park their vehicles to watch the movie with all the trailers here in the way now?”

“I thought of that, too. The people can park out front where the flea market sets up and bring folding chairs and set up along the front by the old playground area. There’s plenty of room down there for a hundred seats, I’ll bet.”

“I got some other stuff I want to show you, too,” he says, as he turns toward the screen door of the convenience store. He opens the door and disappears inside. I stand on the porch a few minutes and study the internet photo. She is pictured with a group of people, none of whom appear to be famous. She has a look in her eyes. For a minute I think she looks panicky, a little out of place, like I felt yesterday when I first heard she was coming home. The suspicion surfaces again. I can’t figure out why she would lie to poor Old Mr. B.

“What about the people who live here, Mr. B? You’ll have to have a lights out policy. Some folks might not cooperate.”

Mr. B reappears in the doorway with an opened beer. He hands it to me and says, “Are you coming inside? I’ve got a whole album of clippings I want to show you.”

“Looks like you have thought of everything, Mr. B,” I say. I empathize with him and allow the feeling he has of pride and happiness tangle inside of me with the feelings of jealousy and anger, like the tangled hose and cord of the beastly machine that hides in wait in the storage room.

“It’s really great, Mr. B,” I lie. I pour through the clipping, but they are just copies of her school schedule and grades. A few photos she shot of the beach, her dumpsy apartment, and buildings in Los Angeles. Nothing really tying her to the movie or a production company. Just school stuff. I’m going to Google all these people taped to the window when I get back to my laptop.

One way or another I’m going to have to call Angel on her scam. I wish it didn’t have to be me. I’m starting to have that trapped feeling like I want to hide somewhere in a hole. At this point I would like to get good and drunk.

Chapter Seven
Jack Daniels Old No. 7

After the flea market yesterday, I got Tweedle situated and, well, I'll be completely honest with you, I got shit-faced drunk and woke up a little while ago in my truck at the Dairy Queen just east of Verden on State Highway 9. I sit here a minute wishing I had some hot coffee before I open the truck door. It's perfectly logical that I would wind up here on Sunday morning before the dawn. It's only a few miles to my aunts' house and I am expected for lunch every Sunday (although my aunts have long given up on me attending morning church services).

Dad used to drive us kids out here on Saturdays for ice cream. He must have been dropping us off at our aunts' house. He always called this place: "the point of no return." I guess for him it was, because back when I was a kid he drove away from this very spot heading west, leaving mom and us kids, never to return.

Now the DQ's abandoned and all boarded up. I climb out of the truck cab and go stand in the shell of the phone booth with the phone's guts all ripped out. When I was a kid I'd wander out to this phone booth dripping ice cream down the front of my Transformers tee shirt. I'd sneak inside and punch the buttons on the keypad as if I were programming the space shuttle. I'd melt away into another dimension and travel through time, dreaming of all the exciting places I'd end up. I never expected it would be right back here to this god-forsaken phone booth.

I try my voice out for the first time today and say, "Hello?" It's weak and scratchy. I clear my throat a few times and think about coffee again. "Houston, we have a problem. Man, oh, man, do we have a problem." It sounds funny in here. It's amplified but very dense at the same time. I feel like I'm in an isolation booth where no one can hear me, which, I guess, is kind of the point—it used to be a phone booth. As a kid, I always figured this booth was the last line of

communication with the civilized world. Katie says that I store all my haunted memories in here and use it as my personal torture chamber. Maybe she's right.

After my dad left, mom would drive us right by this DQ on our way to my aunts' house on Saturday afternoons and I'd panic as we passed by. I thought I could hear the phone ringing and it might be my dad calling to say he'd made a mistake and he was on his way home. I'd urge my mom to stop, but she'd say, "We don't have time or money for ice cream."

The Oklahoma wind is howling around the booth and I look through the dusty door panel at the rising sun. When he left, my dad was just two years older than I am now. And he had a wife, three kids and Tweedle. He squatted down on one knee in front of the driver's door of his 1972 Chevy pickup with the camper attached. His face was level with mine. He was wearing the Mötley Crüe tee shirt my mom gave him for his birthday the previous year and it looked like it had been at the bottom of a clothes hamper for at least that long. He was unshaven and his long stringy blond hair was matted down from sweat on one side. He was a truck driver and on the road quite a bit and at the time I thought he looked like he had been sleeping in his semi-truck for a few days.

He said to me, "Little man, take good care of your mamma and the little ones." It was the same thing he always said when he was leaving to drive cross-country. It wasn't so strange that he was going, but he was shaking and I think I remember him crying. His grip was so tight on my arms that it left red finger marks for quite a while after he let me go. I had a bad feeling. I knew he wasn't coming back.

I remember watching the truck slowly pull away and I had a strong urge to run after him, but my mom was leaning on my shoulder with her hand holding tightly onto my white shirt collar, tethering me in place. I didn't struggle to get loose. In that moment I could only think

about what this must feel like for her. How could that bastard leave *my* mom? It was like a tether from her heart passed through the palm of her hand into my shoulder and tangled together with my heart. I could never leave her or Katie or even Jackson behind like that. Now I look down the same road, it seems much smaller now, and I am reminded that he left me, too.

This morning I stay in the phone booth a long while, but it gets hot and I don't feel so good; so I go lean against the busted sign and strain my eyes down the highway, imagining that I can see Arizona. I want to get into my truck and drive straight through to Phoenix without even stopping for gas. I often think about the last time we came to Dairy Queen and my dad driving away from us. And this morning I remember something different...not exactly earth shattering but still it is the kind of thing that makes you stop in your tracks and slap your forehead. When you're a kid, you're not really paying too close attention, and if you are, it's not like you understand exactly what's happening—it's not like you think, "*Someday I am going to need to remember every last detail.*" What difference does it make if you had wheat toast or white toast, right?

I have a memory checklist I go through. I was nine. Check. We were dressed in our Sunday clothes. Check. It was an unusual Saturday because mom was with us. Check. Movies were Friday. Dairy Queen was Saturday. Church was Sunday. Check. Check. Check. All were melted together and the three universes collided in the Dairy Queen parking lot. This is the forehead slapping part: It wasn't Saturday. It couldn't have been Saturday. It was a Sunday.

I am still staring down the road dreaming of seeing Phoenix, knowing very well that this highway stretches all the way to California. I've looked at maps; although I've never been past Fort Cobb about thirty miles down from here. Now Angel creeps to the forefront of my brain, which aches to catch even a glimpse of her. I go back three years and I can see us loading up her

white '91 Corolla. We were in front of her mamma's house and I was drawing circles in the dirt with the steel toe of my work boot. I couldn't look directly at her; it was too painful, knowing that in a few moments she would be slipping into the driver's seat and gone forever. She stood behind me and grasped her arms around me, clutching her fists together and squeezing my chest. The tether to my heart constricted. I touched her white knuckles and traced the fingers laced so tightly together I couldn't tell which ones were which. Her moist cheek pressed against my back.

“Cody,” she said softly like she was never going to say my name again. “It's not too late to change your mind.”

Chapter Eight Eight-hundred Parakeets on the Ceiling

Today is Aunt Trixie's seventy-third birthday. So here I am, back in my regular Sunday afternoon spot on my aunts' couch. Remote in my right hand. Left arm outstretched on the armrest. Left ankle on right knee. Check. My little nephew Braxton has dumped out the contents of my sister's purse onto the living room rug and is playing with her cell phone and lip balm. The ugly bird-shaped vase that Katie and I picked up at the flea market yesterday is neatly wrapped in a box setting on the coffee table in front of me.

My Aunts Trixie and Lulu live in a birdcage—with four hundred pairs of parakeets, which has earned them the nickname of the Bird Ladies of Anadarko. Actually the birdcages are in a separate building next to their small two-bedroom house near Verden, Oklahoma. They inherited the land and the little house from their mother, my great-grandmother Emily, when she passed away. As far as I know they have lived their whole lives right here on this twenty-acre spread; although my Aunt Lulu was married for a short period of time in the fifties to a soldier who died in the Korean War.

About twenty years ago Aunt Trixie had the bird building constructed intended as an art studio where she could paint, and hold ceramic and pottery classes, and maybe sell a few antiques and whatnots she picks up here and there. But Lulu, without so much as a mention to Trixie, purchased the birds and finagled my dad into constructing rows and rows of wire bird cages. Then the rest of the business was left for Aunt Trixie to figure out. The details are still fuzzy to me about what my aunts do with the birds, what kind of market there is for parakeets, but a business they have made of it. Trixie was less than happy, you can imagine, crushed dream

of serene painting studio and all, but I guess of the two sisters Aunt Trixie is the brick pig. She is the matriarch of brick pigs.

I must have been six or seven when the bird building was completed. I remember, Aunt Lulu was wearing her green satin bathrobe and house slippers and wandering around the thousand-square-foot birdhouse with the southern facing windows. She was flailing her arms around and sloshing coffee all over the floor, herself and anyone who came within sloshing distance to her.

“They’re all so cute,” Lulu cooed from the next aisle of wire cages, as she made a kissing sound at a pair of parakeets. “What do they do with all of them?”

Trixie tilted her head from shoulder to shoulder and made a face, scrunching up her lips, mocking her sister while her back was turned. She manipulated her fingers into two sets of beaks pecking each other, and she swooped her hands down at my belly and tickled me. “How should I know, Dear? I’m sure they find them good Christian homes.”

She leaned over to me putting one hand in front of her mouth as if to keep Lulu from hearing her, although no one could hear over all the chirping birds. She whispered to me, “I hope they chop their squawking heads off.”

Last night my Aunt Trixie came by for Tweedle. He always looks forward to spending Saturday night with our aunts. They give him chocolate milk and let him wander around the old barn, scavenging for tools, and old tractor parts and whatnots. He’s out in the birdhouse now, pretending to count the parakeets.

A Spiderman jigsaw puzzle is set up on the card table that my Aunt Lulu and Tweedle started last night. I shout to my aunts who are in the yellow kitchen frying chicken, my personal favorite. “How did Tweedle do last night?”

“Don’t shout, Dear,” Lulu says. “He was in bed by ten o’clock and worked on a jigsaw puzzle with us most of the evening.”

I get up from my spot, and even though I feel hungover, the chicken frying is piquing my appetite. I wander into the kitchen, saying, “Thanks for looking after him and giving me a break.”

I take a pinch of the birthday cake my sister is frosting. She slaps at me but I’m too quick. Katie drove up with the kids in Rowdy’s truck just after I arrived.

“It’s really the only time I’m not worrying about him. When he’s here with you.” I bear hug Lulu, lifting her tiny frame straight off the floor and turning her around.

“Stop that right now, young man,” she squeals with delight.

It’s a dual party celebrating both my birthday and Trixie’s. We were born forty-seven years and two days apart and have been sharing a party since the day I turned twenty-two. I go back for more and run my finger around the edge of the cake and scoop a little frosting. Katie swats my hand this time.

I wander back to my spot on the couch and resume my checklist. My eyes, which are always a little scratchy, dry, and irritated because of the sand at the quarry where I work, remind me I drank too much last night. Last night’s kind of fuzzy but I did notice that Jackson has graduated to Starbucks (the bar not the coffee). I strongly disapprove. He and my mom spent half the night two-stepping, laughing, and carrying on like they were teenagers—and then he disappeared the other half. He was flashing his garage sale money around, celebrating like he had won the lottery or something. He’s button-lipped about where the money comes from. It’s a top secret among our clan. Especially where Mom is concerned. She doesn’t know anything about it and I promised not to ever tell her. How could I?

Today my mom and Jackson arrive in Jackson's truck. Late for Sunday dinner, as usual. My mom lifts my baseball cap to remind me it doesn't belong on my head in my aunts' front sitting room. She's already talking ninety miles an hour.

"What happened to you last night?" She says, kissing very near my forehead. "You were supposed to be my designated driver." She disappears into the kitchen. I seriously don't know how the woman keeps up this pace. She looks and acts like she's twenty five.

"Yeah, what *did happen* to you? Did you get robbed or something?" Jackson says. He thunks down four bundled stacks of the *Chickasha Star Express* onto the dining room table which is quickly followed by protests from the kitchen, "Huh, uh, young man. That does not go there."

He carries the bundles into the sitting room and chunks them down on the roll-top desk by the wood-burning stove, settles into his regular spot on the floor by the paisley-print rocking chair, and has his cell phone and texting thumbs going at rocket speed all in one swoop.

I give him a minute and then say, "Hey Jack...do you remember going camping with Dad that one time at Ft. Cobb?"

He crouches on the floor fiddling with his mobile phone. "No, I don't guess so. I was pretty little back then."

"Yeah. I guess you were." I'm scrolling through the remote control guide looking for ESPN. "It was in August, and remember, we almost died from the heat?"

He nods and smiles but is not distracted from his all-important phone fiddling.

"We had gone canoeing and you were as red as...." My voice trails off as I start going through the memory checklist. "Without a word, the following morning we packed up the tents

and gear, loaded the pickup camper, and drove into Anadarko where we stayed at the Red Carpet Inn. Remember?”

No response. Just more clickity-clicking.

“I’ll never forget it. Air-conditioned Rooms. King-sized Beds. Swimming Pool. I’d never swam in a pool before.” He’s not listening; he’s texting. “That was a thousand years ago.”

Click.

“So guess things are working out pretty good at the print shop? And your lucrative part-time job...garage saling, isn’t it?”

Silence.

“That’s good. Really good.” I notice a spot of black ink on the back of Jackson’s ear, probably smudged when running the press. I told you about Jackson taking Offset Printing I and II at the Vo-Tech. Well, he got a job running the press for Don Williamson at the Chickasha Printing Company after he graduated. At first Trixie protested loudly about Jackson’s involvement with the Williamsons, especially Mrs. Williamson, Brenda. See the three girls: Trixie, Lulu, and Brenda were friends back in the day when they all went to school together. I can’t tell you exactly what caused the falling out, hell, I’m not sure any of the old girls could either for that matter, but it has been a feud of epic proportions for some sixty years. The line was drawn and the girls have been crossing it every chance they get. It’s really pretty funny and Jackson and me get a big kick out of it.

Jackson and one of the Williamson’s boys, Danny, were in the same class and pretty good friends so he grew up with more exposure to the Williamsons. I remember Danny as a

snot-nosed kid with thick glasses who breathed through his mouth. He hasn't changed much. He has the beginnings of a shiny bald head and a round belly from drinking too much milk.

Williamson started Jackson off part-time and said they'd see how it worked out. He's been there a year now; so things must be working out okay. I'm pretty sure he only keeps his day job to make counterfeiting easier. I keep warning him he's gonna get found out and thrown into jail. Mr. Williamson was suspicious of Jackson at first and thought he'd been sent as a spy by my sweet little aunts. Can you imagine that? I *say* they are my sweet little aunts, but my Aunt Trixie's has a mean streak in her. I wouldn't ever want to cross her. Jackson neither—so to show his loyalty each week he swipes a few bundles of the weekly newspaper, owned by Williamson.

Williamson has good cause to be suspicious, but Jackson has won him over. The thing that is happening right under that old man's nose...Danny and Jackson have been working late into the night at the print shop making "extra money..." literally making extra money. They came up with a scheme to make ten and twenty dollar bills, go garage saling in Oklahoma City in the richer neighborhoods, and trade their bills for goods at a small cost and rack in the change, in real money. So far they have been lucky and haven't gotten caught. I keep telling him it's just a matter of time before they cross paths on the wrong side of the law.

We finish our lunch and gather around to open presents.

I am the only one who knows that Trixie hates birds. She would never tell Lulu for fear of hurting her feelings—neither would I. So as an inside joke I always get Aunt Trixie a bird-related gift, like a coffee mug or calendar—ceramics are the best joke of all. The uglier the better.

We're all gathered in the living room eating birthday cake and chocolate ice cream as we open gifts. I open a box of socks and underwear from Aunt Lulu. Trixie opens a box of soap and girly spray from my mom. I open an envelope with a gift card for I-Tunes from Jackson. Etc., and so forth.

Aunt Trixie opens my gift and passes it around admiringly and says, "Oh, how sweet." She put her delicate hand to her chest as if she's really touched, and she adds, "Oh, isn't it just precious? Cody, you really shouldn't have." And she gives me an approving wink letting me know that I "really" shouldn't have.

My mom, Lulu, and Katie clean the kitchen and wash the dishes while Aunt Trixie works on her scrapbooking. Jackson and I watch TV and doze off and on. The gift-wrapping papers are scattered all around the front room floor and the babies are both running through the paper like it's a pile of leaves in the yard. Baby girl has a red bow on her head. Katie starts to clean up, but my Aunt Trixie stops her by saying, "Oh, no, Dear. Leave it that way for a while. It looks more like a party."

Trixie is sitting at her roll-top desk where she will spend a good part of this afternoon painstakingly cutting out all three-hundred copies of her girlhood rival Brenda's weekly column—the one with her picture. Trixie cuts out the last newspaper clipping and glues it into the Brenda scrapbook she keeps inside the piano bench. She says, "Brenda is always so accommodating. Her column is always just the right size." She gathers all the column clippings and heads out to the birdhouse to line all the birdcages. Face up, of course.

My mom scoops up the two babies into her arms and carries them into the front bedroom to put them down for naps; so Katie sits next to me on the couch, tucking her feet under her and

resting her head on my shoulder. She's all cute and it reminds me of when she was a little girl.

"I wanted to ride over with you today," Katie says. "How come you didn't answer your phone?"

I touch my phone pocket. No phone. "Oh, shit, I must have left it somewhere."

"So you seem to be handling everything okay?" Katie says.

Jackson stirs to life. "You obviously didn't see him last night when he made a complete ass out of himself." Ah, finally Jackson joins the conversation. At last, it speaks. "He was drunker than a skunk. Last I saw him at Starbucks, he had taken off his shirt, climbed into the back of his pick up and was howling to the moon."

Mom rolls up one of the newspapers and swats Jackson. "That's enough," she says, which only makes it worse when your mom takes up for you. "Can't you see your brother's in distress?"

If Jackson were texting right now, he would be typing: LMFAO. "He was bare-chested and jabbering on about how the only thing he really owned had been stolen from him. Sounded like a soap opera: *Makes My Stomach Turn.*"

"Glad you enjoyed the show," I say.

"Show? More like an embarrassment. What a jackass."

"I said that's enough. And I mean, that's enough." Mom gets up and starts picking up the gift-wrapping.

Katie says, "*You're* the ass, Jack."

"Now aren't you one to talk," he says, bridging a forbidden topic. "You're the biggest fool of all, Katie. And everyone knows it but you."

"Watch yourself, Jackson," I say. I feel the brick pig swelling up inside of me.

"What do you mean by that? I demand to know what you mean by that," Katie says.

I'm looking at Jackson now, really looking at him. He's looking at me, too. We're in a staring contest like two gunslingers waiting for the other to make a move. He flinches. Blinks. But doesn't look away. He says, "Where's your loser husband today anyway?"

"He's at home, fixing my car."

"Your car's a piece of shit," Jackson says. He casually goes back to his phone fiddling.

Katie's squinting her eyes at Jackson like she's been in a dark movie theater all day and trying to adjust her eyes to the bright afternoon sunlight. She squeezes my arm and I relax a little but my gaze is trained at the back of Jackson's head. I'm ready to take him down if he goes any further. There's a long silence in the room.

"Okay, Cody," Katie says, cuing me that she wants to go home. "What are you going to do now?"

I have my eye fixed on Jackson. There is room for another neck on the gallows. I say, "Same thing I always do."

Chapter Nine
Déjà vu on Aisle Nine

After the party, my mom rode home with Tweedle and me. We stopped off at the Wal-Mart in Chickasha. I made my purchase and waited at our agreed upon rendezvous point by the battery display, but my mom didn't show. So I have been dragging Tweedle by the hand all over Wal-Mart for like thirty minutes hunting for her and finally find her staring, as if hypnotized, at bags of frozen chicken wings on aisle nine. She is standing in front of the opened freezer door and holding a bag in each hand as if she is weighing them. My mom has turned into a zombie.

I'm a little disgusted with her. The last place I want to be on Sunday afternoon is Wal-Mart. With my mom. I gesture to her half-filled cart and say, "I thought you said you weren't going to get a basket?"

"Well, I know, but I figured I'd just pick up a few things while we're here. You were taking so long. What were you getting anyway?"

I take both bags of chicken out of her hands and toss them into her cart. I gently guide her away from the freezer door toward her basket. The door bangs shut. I say, "Never mind that. Now you got a full dose, Mom. You're a full-fledged zombie."

It's no coincidence that when you go to Wal-Mart you lose all track of time, buy shit you don't need, and then forget where you have parked your car. It's all part of code word: *Rollback*. It's my theory that they pump the air conditioning with a zombie shopping drug and blast us with it when we enter the store. You know that welcomed blast of cold air you bask in when you enter through the automated doors? Full of zombie meds. The greeters aren't really greeters at all—they are hypnotists strategically placed in the store to ensure everyone gets a good dose of the zombie drug. You get a second more powerful dose in the frozen food section.

Mom smiles and touches my face with her icy cold zombie fingers, “Oh, you’re right. It’s a good thing you’re driving.” She pushes her basket and pauses two steps away at the next freezer door. We’re going to be here all day. I can tell.

She’s thawing out a little, coming out of the zombie fog, and she asks, “What’s in the bag?” She motions with her eyes at the Wal-Mart sack that I’m now trying to hide behind my back. She’s nonchalant like she doesn’t really care but I can tell her curiosity is piqued. I should have taken her home.

“Just stuff I need. Nothing to write a book about.” I turn and start looking at loaves of bread. I’m careful not to make eye contact because my mom has a way of dragging the truth out of me; I suspect that she might have gone to hypnotism school herself.

“You seem. Odd.” She stares through the closed freezer door as if in a trance. “I guess it’s really none of my business.”

“It’s no big deal. Just personal stuff.”

It’s like she just caught me in the act and she says, “Oh, oh. I see. I’m sorry. It’s *really* none of my business.” Holding the freezer door open with her hip, my mom bends down to rifle through frozen pizzas.

“Not *that* kind of personal stuff.” I grab the door and hold it open for her. “If you must know...it’s a GPS.”

She straightens up. “Like for a trip? You’re going on a trip?”

“Not really a trip,” I say. “Mom, no one knows about this. You have to promise not to tell anyone.”

“I won’t. I won’t.”

“You won’t promise or you won’t tell?”

“Give me a little credit, Cody. Did I ever tell anyone how you were too scared to ride the Ferris wheel at the carnival when you were twelve?” She reaches into the freezer and erratically begins loading her shopping cart with boxes of frozen food. “I can keep a secret.”

“Not Katie. Not the aunts. Not your friends. No one. You understand?”

She purses her lips together and I can tell that she is now disgusted with me. She holds up the Scout’s Honor fingers and pledges, “I won’t tell a living soul.” She crosses her heart with the three fingers and makes a spitting sound (to mock me), “Pooley. Pooley. Pooley.”

“Well,” I begin, giving her the look, and taking a deep breath. “I don’t want to be caught off guard anymore.” I push her basket to the side of the aisle to avoid on-coming shoppers. “I got to thinking about Angel and how if she’s going to be here and Old Mr. B gets the drive-in ready to show her movie. I want to be...you know. Prepared.”

“Okay, I’m starting to worry a little. This isn’t something permanent, right? Let me get this straight. You’re going on a trip? Just while she’s here?”

“Let me finish.” I slowly start pushing her cart down the aisle and she walks closely beside me. “I decided maybe I should see her so-called movie first—before it’s shown on the giant screen right outside my bedroom window for all the world to see. So I Googled it today and found it playing in *one* theater. In Sherman, Texas.”

She stops walking and goes back to the freezer. “I have an even better idea than that. Why not get it directly from the source? Why don’t you just call Angel? You know. Ask her about it. Maybe even congratulate her on it. I’m sure she’d like to hear from you.”

I blow air through my teeth and make a hissing sound. “I’m going to Sherman. They have a dollar movie on Tuesday at two o’clock. I’m calling in sick and driving to Sherman.”

My mom is squinting at me. “You don’t need a GPS for that. I was born in Sherman and can drive there with my eyes shut. We can stay with my cousin Cheryl.”

“I hadn’t exactly planned on you going with me. And it wouldn’t be much of a secret if I stay with Cheryl, now would it?” I push the basket another inch. “It’s not like I’m driving to Phoenix, there’s no need to *stay* with anyone.”

“I’m not going to let you drive out of state without me. You’d probably wind up in Mexico,” she says. “Besides, Tuesday is your birthday.”

I had forgotten that Tuesday is my birthday. I reach down and touch my tee shirt where it covers my appendectomy scar. Now this whole conversation is reminding me of something else—like this has happened to me before, and I can predict what my mom is going to say next. I know I’m licked and can’t possibly deter the outcome of this conversation but I say, “I think I can manage. I have a GPS now.”

“I’m calling in sick, too. I’m going and that’s all there is to it.” She opens the next freezer door and a cold blast of air sends a chill down my spine. I am tranquilized by the zombie drug and it strikes me right there on aisle nine in Wal-Mart: my mom is always looking for a way to be my mother. After my appendectomy five years ago (almost to the day five years ago), I recuperated at my mom’s those first few weeks. I had my own place with Tweedle, but my mom wanted me close at home. It was one of her last ditch efforts to take care of me. I didn’t mind it, after all I had had a close call and I wanted to be surrounded by my family. Katie had just graduated and Jackson was turning sixteen in a couple of weeks. That’s when Angel came into the picture.

“I don’t think it’s really necessary, Mom. The movie starts at two; it should be over by four or five at the latest. I’ll be home by eight. No big deal.” I’m still thinking of Angel. She

and Katie were friends, and while I was recuperating, she would stop by my room before the two of them headed out somewhere. Now I can picture her standing in the open doorway of my old bedroom at my mom's trailer. She said, "Hey." You'd think she was talking dirty to me instead of a sweet, innocent "hey" because it stirred me to life. It wasn't the word though; it was the sound of her voice. She did a little stretch that exposed a small part of her abdomen, enough that I knew she was evenly tanned and her skin was smooth all over her body. We talked a little here and there. She'd play cards with me to keep me company. I'd share my theories with her and she'd laugh at my stories. I'd do anything to hear her laugh. Then one day out of the blue she just kissed me. And I was stuck. You don't get over a girl like Angel. Never.

My mom wanders across the aisle and starts straightening the loaves of bread. She's quiet and says, "It is kind of a big deal. To me. It's your birthday."

I push the basket two inches to the next freezer door. This really is going to take all day. "If you go with me...and I mean *if*...we are not staying at Cheryl's. We are coming right back after the movie. Do you understand?"

"I understand. Whatever you say, Cody. It's your call."

She walks toward me with her arms extended and she hugs me. I have made my mom happy. I can endure a three-hour drive with her. No wait, it will be more like six hours counting the drive back and then three hours in the theater. That's nine hours. Plus, I'm sure we'll have to eat a couple of meals together. If you compare it to the two hours I've been with her in Wal-Mart today...God, Tuesday is going to be a long day.

"If one word of this gets out, the deal is off and I will have to disown you."

"Oh, whatever, Cody. You know you can count on me."

I know she's right. Those few weeks I spent recuperating gave me time to try to make sense of it all. You don't come out of a near-death experience like that and not question why you're here. I realized that I had no idea where I'd come from. How can you know where you are heading if you don't from where you came?

I thought about my kinfolk buried over in Caddo County and my Grandma Helen. There's something to be said about ancestry. I wish I had been born Jewish-American or African-American because they got a qualifying proper noun describing who the hell they are and what kind of suffering they had to do to earn their titles. I have nothing. A long line of poor white trash; Katie would call it dysfunction. I come from a long line of dysfunction. But it couldn't be all bad blood because look at my mom, for instance. She's got poise, charm, and beauty. And Katie, too. She may live in a trailer park, but she is not trash. She wasn't born here—she just landed here. I think of her as trailer park class.

I studied all the old family photos above the piano in my mom's living room. My grandmother's eyes in the photo said, "I have grace. I have beauty. I have class. So how the hell did I wind up here?" The only conclusion I could come up with was that the women folk in my family were cursed as bad pickers. Somewhere way back in our ancestry one must have picked a real doozy of a loser husband—bad enough to curse all her women descendants. It happened to my grandmother. It happened to my mom. And now it's happened to Katie.

Then I took a good look at my fifth grade photo. I was just a boy. Innocent. No, guilty. Guilty about Martin. Martin was dead on account of me and my negligence. I tried to cut myself a break and convince myself that Martin's death wasn't my fault, but I couldn't. As long as I carry the guilt, Martin would be alive somewhere. My invisible tether. My guilt is an invisible wound that never heals. It's as much a part of me now as the scar on my abdomen.

The zombie cloud around me begins to dissipate. I realize that my mom has been talking ninety-miles-an-hour and I haven't heard a word she's said. No telling what I have nodded and agreed to.

“It's just like when you were a little boy and we'd go to the movies together on Friday night. Remember?” Mom's pushing the basket to the end of the aisle, heading toward the check-out line.

And I have a sudden craving for buttered popcorn.

Chapter Ten Ten Crumpled Digits

Monday morning rolls around and it's like five a.m. and I had forgotten to set the alarm, but it doesn't matter because the dog next door has been barking and howling his fool ass off for the past hour and a half. Duke hasn't had a very good upbringing and doesn't have good manners. He is the poster child for mutt dogs. A victim of his environment. He's tied to one of the few remaining speaker poles and it is as if his barking is amplified and being broadcast all over the trailer park. And I have a front row seat.

Trailer parks are the melting pot for dogs. They start off somewhere as French Poodles, Irish Setters, or German Shepherds, but once they hit the park they are free to be what they really are: dogs in heat. I'm sure on the other side of town even my aunts' high school rival's two poodles (by no coincidence named Trixie and Lulu) have their ears perked listening to old Duke. They aren't sticking their snooty noses up at him—those blue-blooded French Poodles don't care about breeding or upbringing.

Poor old Duke's on the chain gang. He doesn't have enough sense to stay put where other dogs wouldn't step one paw off their master's lawn. You'd think Duke would know what it's like in the real world, but he doesn't seem to understand how the world works. I have the notion to go release him so he'll shut up, but that would be as cruel as keeping him bound. He'd see it as an opportunity to take off in a last ditch effort of escape only to get run over by a semi on the highway.

He's hoarse from barking to a pack of dogs in perhaps the next county. Their woeful cries carry back to him like short and long dots and dashes of Morse Code howls. I saw an old movie one time about a group of people who survived a plane crash in the desert. No matter how

hard they tried to fix the busted radio, and no matter what attempts they made for rescue, they couldn't get back to civilization. Come to find out they hadn't survived at all—they had all died and couldn't leave because their bones had not been properly buried. An invisible tether.

There's no escape for poor old Duke either.

Oh, hell, I can't stand another minute of this. I sit up and just as soon as I yank the sheet aside, the barking stops. I sit quietly in my bed and strain my left ear listening for Duke. He'll probably start up as soon as I put my head back on the pillow.

I'm working the night shift at the quarry today. So I settle back down rather pleased with a shit-eating grin on my face knowing I don't have to be anywhere until one o'clock, when I remember Jackson's working days and he can't get himself up. I stumble around in the dark patting the wood-paneled wall until I reach the light switch in the hall. I holler, "Jackson? Get up."

Nothing. No stirring. No rustling of covers. Nothing changes around here.

I feel my way around the corner and say, "Get up you lazy..." I flip the light switch on in his room. "...bum." No Jackson. His bed is empty. Can't say whether it's been slept in or not the night before because it's been good and slept in for a while. It's the most unkempt bed in American history. *Guinness Book of World Records* slept in. I thought for a minute I could do like an Indian scout in the movies and feel of it to see if it's still warm, but that's just stupid. And kind of creepy. It's too early to be thinking. I'm going back to bed.

Tomorrow is my birthday. I reach down and touch the scar on my abdomen. The sun is making its appearance but it's still dark enough that I can admit something. Here, alone in the dark. One thing I figured out that summer five years ago was that it isn't all about me, and if there is no reverse life and this is all there is, then I should make it all that it can be. So I got a

job at the Dolese Plant, spent as much time as possible with Angel, and started taking care of my family and my responsibilities, which made me wind up in Ms. Barb's "Advanced" keyboarding class and so on.

Going to my keyboarding class at the Vo-tech was embarrassing. I didn't tell anyone at first and just kept pretending that I was driving Jackson to and from his class. I only think of it now because of my birthday. Angel-Martin-Katie-my Mom-Dairy Queen-my dad-Rowdy-the typing class all seem to be twisted together in a ball in the pit of my stomach where my appendix gave me such hell five years ago.

There were about ten people enrolled in the class. All silly women, mostly middle-aged or older. All trying to improve their typing and internet skills in the hopes of landing an online romance, except one girl who wanted to get a job as a receptionist, so I don't really count her. I can't exactly say they were ridiculous women, because trying to find love is not ridiculous...but certainly what we do for love, and where we look for it, is. I did spend a lot of time in class thinking about rolling my eyes—not *actually* rolling my eyes, that would be rude. I was raised better than that.

My instructor, Ms. Barb, was a little eccentric, into meditation and yoga and healthy living stuff. She wore moo-moo dresses that looked like vinyl tablecloths that could double as tents, like the lady on that old TV show *Three's Company*. She had curly hair that had once been shiny auburn red, I imagined, but had turned a dull brown...now obviously dyed in a vain attempt to restore it to its former glory but the best she could do was a bright pumpkin orange. She kind of reminded me of that Mrs. Roper character, too.

Class was going along okay. I was feeling kind of macho about my sixty-five-words-per-minute typing speed and ten-key by touch. Then something weird happened. Ms. Barb came to

class one day and said for us to close our *Gregg Typing* books. She said we had the keys memorized and didn't need the typing exercises. Everyone kind of looked around at each other like we might be going on an unplanned field trip or something.

She moved amongst us. It was as if she floated around the room in her long tablecloth dress. She said, "Place your fingers on the keyboard in the home position, close your eyes, and begin typing."

We all perched our fingers obediently, but the only things moving were our heads as we looked around at each other, puzzled like. Exactly what did this lady smoke before class?

"Let your fingers be one with the keyboard."

I was shaking my head (I didn't know about the spitting thing yet or I would have been spitting up a storm in my mind), but I figured I'd go along with it for a few minutes just to see if it led some place else. I closed my eyes. All ten fingers hovering over the keys.

Then it happened. I accidentally typed an "F." Oh, shit, I didn't mean to do that and it startled me.

She said, "That's it. Connect with the keyboard."

I didn't know what the hell I was supposed to be typing. So I shrugged my shoulder and followed it with a logical "U." I got a tingling sensation holding my hands like that. I could feel it start at my shoulders and carry downward to my ten fingertips. Ten-nine-eight...my fingertips were getting heavy. Seven-six-five...my fingertips were being hypnotized. In my head I kept repeating the letters 'F-U-F-U-F-U.' A single bead of sweat appeared from under my hairline and crept slowly to my brow.

My brain shouted, "Type a C."

It felt as if my fingers were receiving a powerful message from my brain to type; individually they could not resist, but together they were a force to be reckoned with. The devil part of my brain was urging my fingers to type a “C” but I knew I’d have to turn in the paper and I didn’t want to disrespect Ms. Barb, so I finished it with an “N.”

Then it was like a floodgate opened up in my fingers. The words began pouring out of my fingertips so fast I couldn’t keep up. I churned out volumes of pages and stories in the remaining four weeks of that class. I never felt such freedom.

One day Ms. Barb stopped me after class and asked, “Have you ever thought about writing? This is really funny stuff, Cody. I think you have a gift.”

I became kind of bashful with her, not really knowing how to respond. “Really? You think? I wouldn’t know how to do that,” I finally responded.

“Go over to USAO and talk with Professor Knowles. Here, I’ll write her name and number down for you.”

I carried that little pink Post-it note around with me for a week or so. I took it out of the front pocket of my jeans—unfolding, reading, rinse and repeat. I refolded and shoved the paper back into my pocket so many times it became crumpled so I could barely make out the ten-digit number. So I drove over to the college and enrolled in the only creative writing class offered at the time: *Writing Memoir*, where I entered a whole new level of embarrassment—a grown man in class with a bunch of women writing about their personal experiences, I mean *very personal*. I didn’t care though; I think it made me more of a man. Angel thought it made me sensitive, manly, and sexy. I soon discovered sensitivity can do wonders for a man’s sex life.

But now I’m alone in my bed, drifting back to sleep. Crossing over into the dreamland: The Paradise Twin opens up as a panoramic black box screen with the soundtrack of the dogs

yowling in the distance melding with the clickity-click-clacking of fingers on a keyboard. The deserted concession/convenience store, the neglected playground, and the looming screen are off in the distance. Martin sits in the swing waving half-heartedly at me—like he’s really not sure if it’s me or not. Beyond that there is blue sky and tall prairie grass broken only by a railroad track that stretches west and disappears into the horizon. I can see a native scout sitting high on his horse and he looks in both directions before dismounting and putting his ear to the railroad track. The clickity-clack gets louder and louder. Clickity clack like the sound of thunder. The blue sky quickly turns dark as a sudden storm rolls in. Swirls of red and blue light the dark sky. The clickity-clacking thunder is deafening like the Buick air conditioner over at the convenience store. The scout turns to me and says in his best Clint Eastwood impression, “Don’t you think you should get that?”

The clickity-clacking is pounding in my head and keeping beat with my heart. I startle awake. Someone is pounding on my front door. The swirling red and blue lights from my dream are right outside my bedroom window and belong to about fourteen hundred cop cars of every law enforcement agency in the county.

Chapter Eleven

I holler, “I’m coming. Give me a minute!” My heart is pounding harder in my chest than the law is pounding on my trailer door. At five in the morning, it can only be bad news. My first thought goes to Jackson...is it Jackson? He’s in jail—drunk and disorderly—or worse drunk driving, or worse yet he has been killed in an automobile accident while drunk driving. My chest tightens and my heart sinks. I picture Jackson’s truck overturned in a bar ditch. Counterfeit bills floating across the highway. I try to peer through my bedroom window as I zip my shorts, but I don’t want to be messing with the blinds while the cops are knocking at the door, which is only five feet away from where I stand; it might give them the wrong impression. You hear all kinds of stories about how a fellow gets his head blown off because the shadows on the wall look like he was wielding a gun of some sort. I can understand cops getting itchy fingers, not knowing exactly what they are walking into. I’d be taking pot shots at anything that moves, too, in a place like this.

I stumble into the living room and reach for the doorknob. I pause and search my mind for any unpaid tickets and panic a little at the thought that there might be a warrant out for my arrest, but I can’t pinpoint anything that I might have done that would bring the law to my house at five o’clock in the morning. My hand is shaking. I take a deep cleansing breath, like Marjorie always tells me to do when I get anxious, and I squeeze the knob. Only one hollow-core door stands between me and the law. Whatever it is, good, bad, or ugly—I will find out soon enough.

I open the door to discover Tom Davis is on the other side of the door. The sheriff.

“What the hell, Tom? You trying to give me a heart attack?” I say, as I open the screen door and gesture for him to come inside.

“Sorry, I know it’s early, but I wanted to catch you before you headed to the quarry,” he says, extending his hand to shake mine. He shook my hand; so I know he is not here to arrest me.

“Is everything okay? It’s not mom?” I say, panicking a little. My heart is beating in my throat. I still see Jackson’s truck overturned in a ditch.

“No, no, Cody. It’s nothing like that. Everyone’s fine. Sorry to give you a fright,” he says, making his way into the trailer. “But I *am* here on official business.”

I am somewhat relieved. “Well, let’s get to it then. I’ll go peaceably,” I say half-jokingly.

He smiles. It’s been a while since I have seen Tom, maybe a year. I caught a glimpse of him at a carnival at the fairgrounds about a year back. He was wearing dark sunglasses while driving his cruiser; I waved, but he was in “cop mode” and scanning the crowd. I’m pretty sure he didn’t see me.

He used to be a regular fixture around my house when I was growing up. That was back when we still had our house down on Elm Street in town, just after my dad took off. Tom’s elderly parents lived across the street and when he was in the neighborhood he’d always check on my mom and us kids...he’d stop by after he got off duty, wearing his deputy uniform; it was always neatly pressed like you’d see in a magazine or on a poster.

My mom had a kind of revolving door of men back then, after my dad bolted, but I always looked up to Tom. Often he’d come for supper, and after, he and my mom would sit out on the front porch talking; their laughter would rise in the night air and filter through my opened bedroom window above the porch. He did a few odd jobs around the house like repairing the

lawn mower and taking Jackson to Cub Scout meetings. He showed me how to patch my bicycle tires. Stuff like that.

Now he takes off his white Stetson cowboy hat and sits at the small wooden table in the kitchen in my little trailer. I automatically start the Mr. Coffee and get two ceramic mugs from the cupboard. He folds his hands together on the table interlocking his fingers. He is quiet.

My breathing is still irregular. It must be serious, I think. He is definitely in his “brick pig” cop mode. I experienced it firsthand once when I was about fourteen years old. Me and some other rowdy kids went south of town and stole one of Mr. Marshall’s dirt bikes, smoked some marijuana, and took turns driving the bike around the back roads and hills by the Washita River. When it came my turn, I ended up wrecking the bike and scuffed myself up pretty good. All the other kids took off, while I drug the motorbike back to Mr. Marshall’s barn. It was Tom who came and got me from Mr. Marshall’s farmhouse; he was still a deputy then. He was quiet all the way into town before depositing me back into my mom’s custody. He made me ride in the backseat like I was a criminal. I watched his eyes in the rearview mirror but he never once looked at me. His jaw was set and his eyes looked straight ahead. I kept trying to catch his eye so I could explain how I wound up in such a predicament. He never looked at me. Not once. So I stayed quiet. When he parked the car at the curb in front of my house, he turned off the engine and just sat there a minute, still looking straight ahead.

Then he got out and opened my car door and said to me, “Everyone makes mistakes, Cody. This was yours. Don’t ever make me take you to jail. You understand, son?” I didn’t ever want him to look at me that way again. I knew I was never going to lead a life of crime. I didn’t want to disappoint him. You know, I still drive out to the Marshall farm every other Saturday and mow the grass and haul trash.

“We got some real trouble, Cody, and I’m hoping you can help clear it up,” he finally says.

“You’re making me nervous, Tom. What’s this all about?” I place the coffee cups on the table and take a seat across the table from Tom; the one Tweedle uses when he eats his breakfast cereal in the morning.

“They had the flea market here this last weekend. Isn’t that right?”

I nod in agreement and take a sip from the coffee cup.

He says, “Is Mason Tweedle still living with you?” He unfolds his hands and molds them around the outside of the coffee cup, from which he doesn’t look away.

“Yeah, he’s still here.” I look at the dark hallway across from the kitchen that leads to Tweedle’s small nine-by-nine bedroom, the walls are covered with fake wood paneling, a low popcorn ceiling, and wall-to-wall small engine parts scattered on the floor, loaded in boxes, and piled on all available surfaces in the room. I hadn’t peeked into his room this morning when I went to wake Jackson. I question whether he is in his room. Did Tweedle get out, wander to the highway, like old Duke would do if he was untethered?

“You were with him on Saturday?” he asks.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Do you know how Mason could have gotten his hands on some counterfeit bills? Seems he bought a little engine from a guy with a phony bill.”

My heart is pumping blood to my brain and my body is generating adrenaline, but the answers to his question are not being produced. My mind cannot put it all together yet. “I gave him some money. A ten-dollar bill, as I recall.”

“Where’d it come from, Cody?” He makes eye contact with me and it reminds me of the look he gave me when I was sitting in the back of his police cruiser when I was fourteen.

“I’m not sure, Tom.”

“Do you have any other bills?”

I maneuver my wallet from my back pocket. “Not a plug nickel, Tom. I swear.” I unfold my wallet and sift through the empty compartments, only to discover, to my surprise and Jackson’s eminent demise, there is a ten-dollar bill. I had forgotten Jackson gave me some of his garage sale money Saturday night at the Starbuck’s. I’m cursing myself. I am always so careful where Jackson’s money is concerned, but I was drunk Saturday night and not very mindful. I hope this is the real deal; I pray it’s not counterfeit. I also ask God for it not to be the original ten dollar bill.

I reluctantly hand the bill over. As it passes from my hand to Tom’s, I think of Jackson and the gong in my brain begins to sound. Also I remember now that I got a wadded up ten dollar bill from his dresser on rent day that I gave to Tweedle. I can’t be sure though. My hand starts moving in slow motion and my brain is spinning backwards like a Beatles song and I expect to start spitting profanities and denouncing god at any moment, but I remain calm.

“I’m sure I just got it at the 7-Eleven or at the Ace Check Cashing, but I’m not sure,” I say.

Tom holds the ten-dollar bill up toward the naked light bulb dangling from the kitchen ceiling. Now he looks back to me and to the bill again. He takes a worn notebook from his front shirt pocket without breaking the holding stare he has on me. He compares the serial numbers to handwriting on the notepad.

“Say if it was from Tweedle and he had passed the bill innocent-like, like I did to him...what then?”

“Depends, Cody.”

“I have to be honest with you, Tom. I’ve never lied to you and don’t want to start now—no matter what the consequences. I’m positive that he got the bill from me.”

“I’ll need to speak with Mason.”

I do what Tom requests and trudge down the dark hallway and peer into Mason’s bunker room. It smells like gasoline and mothballs. We glued fluorescent plastic stars to his ceiling that glow in the dark for a little while after the light is shut off. The wall above his bed is filled with pictures of the moon, the Milky Way, and Mars that he clipped from the *National Geographic* magazine and the backs of cereal boxes.

I hate to wake Tweedle; he is such a creature of habit. For the past nine years, we have followed a very tight regiment of him rising at eight-thirty and taking care of his bathroom necessities, while I pour Fruity Pebbles cereal and milk in his Sponge Bob bowl. Tweedle always sits in the kitchen chair opposite the living room so he can watch cartoons while he eats his breakfast, which also includes frozen orange juice concentrate that he eats with his cereal spoon right out of the container.

I switch on the light and am relieved to see he is in his bed. I say, “You have a visitor, Tweedle. Guess who’s come to see you?”

He stirs a little and rubs his eyes.

“Sheriff Tom is here to see you. Get up! You don’t want to make Sheriff Tom wait for you, now, do you?”

My tactics work. He sits straight up in his bed, scampers from under his sheet, and heads toward the bathroom down the hall ahead of me.

As I pass down the hallway, I knock on the bathroom door to remind him. “Hurry. Don’t keep the sheriff waiting too long.” I stand and listen at the door for a second and then head back to the kitchen where I find Tom standing in the living room gazing out the window which faces the Paradise Twin movie screen. My mom’s trailer is clearly in view—only two lots down and across the gravel road. Lot number one-o-two. Tom is sipping his coffee.

“He’ll be out shortly. It’s better not to rush him and get him all wound up, if you know what I mean?” I get my coffee and stand next to Tom facing the window also. I stand shoulder-to-shoulder with him now.

Tom tips his coffee cup to my mom’s trailer like he is tipping his hat to her. “How’s the family, Cody?”

“We’re good. I’m still at Dolese and taking classes in the fall at the junior college. So is Katie. Her and Rowdy are fixing to go through a rough spell, I expect.” I purposely don’t mention my mom. If he wants to know badly enough, he’ll ask. I’m going to make him ask.

“I hear Angel’s coming back for a visit with the folks,” he says.

“Is that right?” I say, like I don’t really care and am just engaging in polite conversation. “Yeah, I think mom mentioned something like that to me.”

He drinks from his cup. “How is your mom?” He asks, pretending like he is just making polite conversation and doesn’t really care. He faces the east window where the sun is rising, looking at the silhouette that my mom’s trailer is casting on the road caddy corner in front us.

“She’s been better. Honestly. She’s still working at Dr. Morris’ office during the week and carousing Starbuck’s Ballroom on the weekend. Just as ornery and stubborn as ever.”

He looks thoughtfully at me. “Dr. Morris must be ninety years old by now. He should retire.”

I say boldly, “I always thought you’d marry my mom, Tom. Why didn’t you?”

I caught him off guard, but he keeps his cool and takes his time before answering. “There were extenuating circumstances. Things you probably don’t know about.”

“Maybe it’s time I do know, Tom. Why don’t you tell me about it now?” Of course, I know that back when we lived on Elm Street Tom was married. His wife had been sick for several years with cancer and suffered terribly. He stuck by her side faithfully until the end. But she passed away years ago...that’s the part I don’t understand. He’s free now to be with my mom, but instead he lives alone out on his little ranch west of town.

“It’s not my place, Cody. You’re not my boy. Although I often wish you were.” He places a hand on my shoulder.

Now he’s caught me off guard and I have a feeling of regret. I wish I *had* been his son. He was there when I really needed a father—not like my real dad who took off just when I needed him most. When I was a little kid I used to pretend Tom *was* my dad. I’d put his deputy hat on and admire myself in the hall mirror by the front door. Even now I feel proud when he calls me “son.”

He says, “That’s really a question you should ask Cissy. It wasn’t me who didn’t marry her; it was she who didn’t marry me.” The door to the hall bathroom opens and out emerges Tweedle. Tom’s voice trails off and seems to wander down the gravel road outside my trailer. “Lord knows I asked.”

Tweedle acknowledges Tom by showing him the instruction booklet of one of his gas Weedeaters. He flips through the Spanish section of the pamphlet and points at the drawings that

illustrate how to use 20:1 oil, as if he is asking Tom to explain to him how it works. Tom takes the book from Tweedle. He shifts his warm eyes from the drawing back to Tweedle's eyes and asks him, "Do you have this model, Mason?"

Mason drags him to the back bedroom and digs through a pile of rubble until he uncovers a mess-of-a-whacker. He holds it out to Tom as if he is presenting arms to him. He makes a sharp movement with his feet as if he is clicking his heels together and he bows at the shoulders as he extends the Weedeater to Tom.

Over the past fifteen years, Tweedle hasn't responded to very many folks, but Tom has been one of the exceptions. After the accident that caused Martin's death, Tweedle was in the hospital and then in the rehabilitation/recovery center for quite a spell. I spent the entire summer at the rehabilitation center; I'd ride my bike over early in the morning and stay until the nurses made me leave late in the evening. Tom made it a point to stop by every afternoon to check on Tweedle. Tom would come and sit with me in the physical therapy room while Tweedle went through his daily exercises. Sometimes Tom would take me down to the cafeteria and we'd have a bite to eat together or he'd throw my bike in the back of his truck and drive me home.

Now here we are. I'm standing in the doorway of Tweedle's tiny room, leaning against the door frame, and realizing that back then Tom was checking on me, too, to make sure I was all right.

Tom squats down next to the box and turns the Weedeater around in his hands and admires it. He praises Tweedle. "This is fine, Mason. Did you buy this at the flea market on Saturday?"

Tweedle is already digging through another oil-stained box and gathering spindles wound with plastic string. He gathers four different spindles and dumps the box onto the floor.

“None of these fit it, Mason,” Tom says. “I’ll see if I can’t find you one that will work.”

Tom gives me a look like he knows it is hopeless—Mason can be of no help to his case.

Tom musses Tweedle’s hair before standing. He keeps turning the Weedeater engine over and black oil has leaked onto the palms of his hands. “Cody, this place is a walking fire hazard. You’d better get it cleaned up. Get a place for him to store all this crap. I’m sure it’s not good for him to breathe gasoline fumes.”

He puts the Weedeater back into a box on Tweedle’s dresser. “You’re doing fine, Mason. I’ll come back and check on you soon.”

We leave Mason in his room and walk single-file down the hallway back to the living room. I say, “I’m telling you, Tom. He got it from me.”

“You’ll need to come down to the courthouse and make a statement.” We walk out of the trailer and stand by his cruiser. The sun has risen and reflects a bright glow on the twin screen. Old Mr. B and I painted the Twin screen with Kilz yesterday and the sun is shining on it like a spotlight. The rusty and rickety scaffolding stands in front of the Paradise, casting a shadow across the screen. It reminds me of the playground and the swing set gallows that stand as a ghost town in front of the screen. “I’m going to catalog the contents of your wallet. This bill doesn’t appear to bear the same serial number.”

He gets in his cruiser and puts on his dark glasses. “I don’t want to see you get mixed up in a counterfeiting scheme, Cody.” He starts his engine and I can hear the dispatcher squawking on the cruiser’s radio. “If you know where the money came from...it would be best to turn that information over to me.”

I have a clear vision of Jackson squirreled away in the print shop, washing bills, and counterfeiting new ones. “No doubt, Tom. I’ll do whatever is necessary.”

Chapter Twelve
High Noon Doesn't Start Until Twelve Fifteen

I ended up calling into work today. I just told my supervisor that I needed to take a couple of personal days to attend to some family business. I haven't missed a day in five years; so I don't feel too guilty. After all, my family does come first. Let's face it, anyone with a little muscle who can push a green button can do my job. I make big rocks into little rock at the gravel pit, but it is all done with machines these days, of course, not like you see in the black-and-white movies from the 1930s of a chain-gang or something. My supervisor is pretty understanding and said to take all the time I need; he said I was overdue for a vacation anyway and to take the rest of the week, if need be.

After we hang up, I have a sense of relief and freedom, like I have never had before. It feels kind of like when you're a kid and they call school off due to snow, only to have all the snow melt by noon. Now I just stand here in my living room looking at the tiny screen of my cell phone, trying to think of who to call and where to find Jackson. It's funny, just a few years ago when he was in high school, I knew exactly where he'd be and whom he'd be with. Now he's a grown man—my roommate, no less, and I don't have the first clue as to where to find him.

I scroll through my alphabetized list of contact names saved into my phone and stop when I see Jackson's name and number. I press the "send" button and it goes straight to his voice mail; so he either has his phone turned off or it's dead. I don't leave a message. I mean, what would I say? He'll see soon enough that he missed a call from me.

"Counterfeiting," I say. I try the print shop number where he works, but it also goes straight to voice mail, telling me to select a party's extension. I'm pretty sure Jackson doesn't have an extension.

Now a memory pops into my head. My mind goes through the checklist—this time it is recalling every bit of data I have concerning counterfeiting. There was a story I read a few years back in the county newspaper about a dumb-ass couple of counterfeiters. As I remember it: the girlfriend went into the police station to pay a fine for the boyfriend who waited in the car. She tried to pay with three twenty dollars bills which all had the same serial number. She then explained about getting the money from the boyfriend; so the police go out to the car and discover the boyfriend has the original twenty-dollar bill in his wallet along with a forged check. Naturally there are drugs in the car.

I'm trying to remember the number of years they got. I wonder if Jackson knows them. They very well could be his associates. But he actually is counterfeiting ten dollar bills which makes him an even bigger dumb-ass criminal than that couple. That reminds me of that Pan-Am guy who made a glamorous living making forged checks and counterfeit money, they made a movie about him, *Catch Me If You Can*. I wonder if all counterfeiters start out on a small scale. I would imagine that they probably start out with a small quantity—not small denominations. I tried to talk some sense into Jackson when I found out. To no avail; so I told him it's dumb enough to be counterfeiting in the first place, but it makes no sense to reproduce ten-dollar bills. Ten-dollar bills. That's just stupid.

I wander down the hall and into Jackson's room. He was a good kid growing up and never gave mom much trouble. It doesn't feel right to be snooping around his room now since I never did when he was a kid, but I'm beginning to feel a little panicky. I'm sure Tom has already put the connection together with Jackson working as a pressman at the printing company. What if he gets to Jackson before I do?

The window air conditioning unit in Jackson's room is humming. It makes a comforting noise, low and methodic, but it is irritating me. It irritates me because I have to always remind him to turn it off when he's not home. It's a safety hazard and it cost a small fortune to keep it running around the clock. But at the same time I feel a little guilty, responsible, because if I made Jackson pay the electric bill to start with, maybe he'd begin to appreciate the cost of running the blasted thing and the economic sense of turning off lights and whatnot. What is it that they call someone like me? Oh, yeah, an enabler. I'm an enabler. They would come up with some term to turn in around and make it all *my* fault. Brick pig enabler.

I grab a golf club propped up against the wall and begin sifting through a pile of clothes on the floor. I'm carefully sifting through, like at the bottom of the pile I'm going to find a rattlesnake or a dead body or something. The only thing I find at the bottom of the pile is the dirt-colored brown shag carpeting that covers the entire floor in his room. I don't know exactly what I thought I'd find.

A few ribbons from Jackson's high school track days and FFA calf trophies are scattered around the room. There are a few certificates haphazardly nailed to the imitation wood paneled walls. Nothing to indicate where he'd be today—all mementos from when he was in high school just a few years ago.

I turn to Jackson's dresser and pause looking at my own reflection in his mirror. I've got a bad case of hat hair. Taped to the mirror is a rodeo ticket stub from last spring that I have no idea what the significance of it is, and a black-and-white four-by-six inch snapshot of Jackson and me with our arms around each other's shoulders. He's wearing his cap and gown and we are standing in front of the Chickasha High School gymnasium. We're both grinning ear-to-ear. My mom took that picture; I can see the gray shadow she cast on the ground in front of us. She has a

similar photo that Aunt Lulu took of all three of us. It's in a silver frame on the upright piano next to Jackson's official senior picture in my mom's living room.

Now a funny thought pops into my mind. I think about how in the high school yearbooks they always have a most likely list in the senior section. I was voted most likely to end up in a Mexican jail....but we all know that's not going to happen since I have never left the state.

I pick up a stack of unopened envelopes on Jackson's dresser. A couple of bills from his credit card company, but mostly quotes from insurance companies and a few cruise ship travel brochures. I think of that job interview question again, the one my supervisor asked on my performance appraisal Friday morning...the one they always ask you where you think you'll be in five years. I don't think anyone five years ago would have thought that Jackson would be here now (or wherever he is. I wish he were here now).

I reach for a dresser drawer knob and pull the drawer about half way open, but then stop. I don't like the idea of rifling through his belongings. There is a small crudely carved wooden dog on his dresser. I pick it up and turn it over in my hand a few times, feeling the rough carved edges.

I look at the photograph again and this time I really look at Jackson. It's like I haven't seen him in a long time. You know how when you see someone at a side angle from across the street and for a minute you think they are someone you know and you wave and holler your fool head off only to have them turn and you feel like a complete moron because they aren't who you thought they were? Well, it's like that right now for me looking at Jackson. I have no earthly clue who my little brother is.

I used to know him.

Now it dawns on me that he might be down at General Lee's. It's a little local hole-in-the-wall bar just outside of town that happens to be on the way home. It happens to be on the way to everywhere for Jackson. I don't know why I didn't think of it sooner. He goes there to play pool and hang out with Corky, the bartender, who is his high school buddy. I close the bureau drawer and decide to start there. At least maybe Corky will give me an idea of where Jackson is spending his time these days. I'm not sure they are still open though.

So I run a brush through my hair and put on my ball cap to hide my hat hair from yesterday. I figure I can get a cup of coffee and maybe a doughnut. I manage to get Tweedle to cooperate with me fairly easily with the promise of doughnuts. I strap him in the backseat of the king-cab of my truck, rev up the engine, and pull slowly out of the lot. I ease my way onto the highway and am driving down Highway 81 heading north to General Lee's. About a quarter of a mile away from the bar I catch sight of Jackson's truck pulling out and heading in my same direction toward town. I speed up to catch him, and about two miles up the road at the red light right before you get to town, I manage to pull beside him. I give him a honk and a rolling down the window motion.

He rolls down his window with a push of the button and says, "Hey, can you spare me a couple of bucks?"

"Meet me down at Row and Charlotte's. I'll buy you breakfast and a cup of coffee."

He nods and rolls the window back up as the light turns green. He pulls away ahead of me and I follow at a distance behind him. The Chickasha Hotel Cafe, a coffee shop owned by Charlotte and Row, is caddy-cornered to the Grady County Sheriff's office. I pull next to the curb in front of the diner. I park on the north side, where my truck will be hidden from view of the Sheriff's office. I drop two coins in the parking meter in front of Jackson's truck and the

same in mine. I glance toward the Sheriff's office as I round the corner. Tom's truck and his cruiser are both in the parking lot.

Jackson is sitting at the counter and has already ordered coffee for us both. I take a stool next to him and smile at Charlotte as she hands me a menu. Tweedle is sweet on Charlotte and sits up nice and straight on the stool next to me. He really likes her pancakes. The nice thing about Row and Charlotte is that they always extend credit to men at the plant. She's knows it's my payday and will be good for my bill after lunchtime. It's part of my regular routine. Jackson's pouring a shit-load of sugar and cream into his coffee. I close my eyes and take a long slurping gulp of my strong black coffee. I have a shutter go through me and I say, "hurry up with the sugar."

He slides the glass sugar canister toward me and says, "What's up?"

We both look over the menu, which is a waste of time, because we always order the same exact thing. I order three scrambled eggs with three thick hickory smoked bacon slices, and three buttermilk pancakes. Jackson orders a ham and cheese omelet with biscuits and country gravy, and a large chocolate milk. We both order hash-browned potatoes. And salsa.

Tweedle is drinking his orange juice out of a coffee cup and watching the old TV set.

I say, "I'm going to get right to the point, Jackson. Looks like we may be in a little hot water." I begin stirring sugar into my coffee with my spoon. "Remember how I paid the rent on Friday? Well, it seems I may have taken some money from your dresser that was..." I lower my voice so only he can hear me, "...counterfeit."

"What?" Jackson says, nearly coming off his stool.

"The worst part is I kind of gave it to Tweedle and he turned it at the flea market," I say, grabbing his shoulder in a friendly manner. "But we got to figure out the right thing to do here."

He goes back to pouring more cream into his coffee cup. “The right thing to do would be for you to stay out of my fucking room,” he says harshly.

“That’s not exactly a helpful suggestion after the fact, now, is it? Maybe if you had paid your portion of the rent to start with...” I sigh. “This isn’t going to get us anywhere.”

In one sweeping motion Charlotte brings out the breakfast plates, sets them on the counter in front of us, and fills our cups to the brim with coffee.

Jackson tears into his food like he hasn’t eaten in a week. I unroll my silverware and say, “Looks like counterfeiting really works up an appetite.”

He says, “Looks like stealing from your brother works up quite an appetite, too.”

I take a bite of bacon. I take the syrup away from Tweedle. I cut up his pancakes and sausage. I point to my brother’s plate with my fork. “Apparently.”

For a few minutes we sit silently, except for, knives scraping on plates, loud chewing and swallowing.

I pour syrup on my pancakes and chase the pat of melting butter around with my fork. I say, “Look, it’s not going to help if we keep after each other this way. I’m going to help you. Whatever trouble you are in.”

“I guess I can’t blame nobody but myself, Cody. It was a fool-ass thing for me to do to start with and I should have paid better care not to leave money lying around where you or anyone else could get to it.” He chews a few more bites of his biscuits and swallows half of the chocolate milk. “I did not intend to be passing counterfeit bills around town though, Cody. It’s down-right embarrassing—and to Old Man B, at that.”

“I didn’t use it for the rent. I gave it to Tweedle and he passed the bill at the flea market buying a Weedeater engine.”

He stares blankly at me for a moment. “The garage sale ladies were always easy to bargain with when Tweedle was along. They’d give him stuff for free most of the time.”

Charlotte tops off the cups again and I have a general feeling of peace and that everything is going to turn out all right. The coffee is steaming hot, and I take a sip. I burn my lip, which brings me back to reality. I become a little irritable. Now I remember Jackson was actually making counterfeit ten-dollar bills. What the hell was he thinking? I’m pissed off. I turn to him and say, “I told you this was a bone-head scheme.”

I push his shoulder with my fist—not really wanting to punch him, just to jostle him a little, but I push him with a little more force than I had intended and knock him partially off the stool.

He jerks his shoulder back and says, “What’s the idea?”

I reach over and smooth out the sleeve on his tee shirt. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to push that hard.” I go back to blowing on my coffee to cool it down.

“Danny and me had a little bet going,” Jackson says, settling back on his stool. “He said he didn’t think it could be done and I had to prove him wrong because he thinks he knows everything. He’s all the time bragging about how his family has been in the printing business for more than one-hundred years, and how his great-great grandfather brought his printing press across the prairie by oxen and wagon from St. Louis and started the first newspaper in Oklahoma Indian Territory.”

I motion for Charlotte to fill Jackson’s cup and with my fork cut into the three layers of pancakes and take a bite.

“What a joke,” he continues. “He doesn’t really know shit about printing *or publishing*, for that matter. Neither does his old man. I bet his great-great grandfather would roll over in his

grave if he could see what a joke they have made of his newspaper business. They are no more newspapermen than the man in the moon.”

He begins the routine of pouring sugar and cream into the coffee. We sit in silence for a minute and I watch him put the spoon on the cup’s saucer. He reaches across me for the Tabasco sauce and ketchup. He pours the Tabasco sauce on his hash-browned potatoes as generously as he poured the sugar and cream into his coffee cup. He follows up with a big heap of ketchup and stirs it all together. I prefer syrup on my potatoes; so I begin mixing my potatoes with my pancakes, adding more syrup.

I break the silence and say, “So? Go on.”

“That’s really all there is to it. I washed a few one-dollar bills with alcohol and stuff, and then used my Epson scanner/printer/copier. That’s all there was to it.”

I have cleaned my plate. I haven’t felt this full since last Thanksgiving dinner. “That’s not the worst of it,” I say, feeling a dull ache right under my skin where my appendectomy scar is.

“No?” Jackson asks, between chewing and swallowing, “How’s that?”

“Well, Tom came around this morning asking about the bill. He checked the content of my wallet to compare the serial numbers. And he tried to talk to Tweedle.”

“Oh, shit,” Jackson says. His face seems to sink. “What’d you tell him?”

When growing up, as close as I was to Tom, Jackson was even closer. When we were kids, late in the afternoon while all the other neighborhood kids were together at the school field playing baseball or football, Jackson would hang around the front porch at the old house on Elm, just in case Tom stopped by his parents’ house across the street. Jackson would peer down the street in hopes of spotting the black and white cruiser and when he caught sight of it, he’d grab

up his ball and glove and meet Tom in the Davis' driveway. Tom didn't seem to mind. He always made time for Jackson, Katie, and me. He often took us to the library or the railroad station on Saturday morning.

“Just that Tweedle had gotten the bill from me and I wasn't sure where I had gotten it. At the time, that was the truth. Then I remembered that I had taken a wadded up bill and some change from your dresser.”

Jackson's elbows are on the counter and he runs his hands through the hair on both sides of his head, as if he is squeezing his skull with a vise.

“I'm sorry, Jackson,” I say. “The last thing I'd ever want to do is get you into hot water.”

“I know,” he says. “It'll work out somehow.”

Before we had to move to the trailer park, the summer I turned fifteen years old, Jackson spent a lot of time at the Davis' house across the street. They were like our adopted grandparents—since we never really got to enjoy knowing either set of our grandparents. Pop Davis as we called him, would whittle little figures, like guns, pigs, dogs and whatnot, out of wood. Jackson used to wander up and down the banks of the Washita River gathering suitable pieces of wood and then he'd cart them in his wagon to Pop's front porch. The two of them would spend hours whittling and telling stories to each other. Jackson took it very hard when Pop died. He still goes by to check on Tom's mom. Mows her lawn and rake leaves. She usually rewards him with a glass of iced tea and homemade lemon-meringue pie. And love and acceptance.

“The only thing to do is turn myself in. I'm going to write out the whole story and turn in the real bill, the other fake bill, and myself this afternoon.”

My heart tether is breaking. I am supposed to be the brick pig, you know, where the other little pigs find refuge. I never thought that the brick house I would lead my brother to be in would be “the big brick house.”

I say, “I’m to blame. I can’t help but feel this is my fault.”

He smiles at me. “You didn’t make any counterfeit money. So it can’t be your fault. This is my own doing.” He knocks my elbow off the counter with his left hand and laughs at me, reminding me that he is my brat of a little brother. “I don’t tell you this much, but you’ve been good to me. Too good.”

I am relaxed again and starting to formulate a plan.

“I should have just destroyed the bills and not taken any chances. It was just plain stupid on my account. Just do me a favor, Cody?”

“Of course, anything.”

“Don’t tell mom until we figure out how to fix this. Whatever you do though...say you didn’t know anything about it. Stay clear of it. Will you do that for me. Don’t be some kind of stupid honest hero.”

I’m helping Tweedle finish his pancakes.

“And help me fix this, will you?” He crosses his arms and leans on the counter. “I don’t mind confessing that I’m a little scared..”

“You’re doing the right thing. I’m proud of you,” I say, pushing his shoulder with my fist again, only not as hard as I did earlier. “I think it might be smart to consult an attorney first though. We want to keep you out of as much trouble as possible. I mean, how is it going to look on your resume when you apply for a press operator job, if you are a convicted counterfeiter?”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Jackson says. “That bites.”

I wink at Charlotte as we duck out to the side of the building where Jackson lights a cigarette. There is an attorney's office right across the street and we both get the idea at the same time. I drop four more coins in the parking meters and we cross in the middle of the street. We stand under the green and gold striped awning of the entrance to the attorney's office while Jackson finishes his cigarette. It's a little before nine o'clock now.

I say, "How much was it?"

His brow crinkles as he squints at me. "How much was what?"

"The bet. How much?"

"Oh, ten bucks," he smiles as he takes the last drag of the cigarette. "It was the *original* ten-dollar bill. I still have it in my wallet. I hope someday I can laugh at all this and think it was all worth it."

"Did you know that Alexander Hamilton who is on the ten-dollar bill was killed in a duel by US Vice-President, Aaron Burr. Weird, huh?"

"Is that true?" He asks. "He wouldn't get away with that shit today." He crushes the cigarette butt under the toe of his shoe and opens the office door. He motions for me to go in first.

"I'm pretty sure it's true," I say. "It'd be a great way to get rid of politicians...kill half of them and then hang the other half for murder." I pause just inside the doorway. I'm nervous and shaky. "Here goes nothing."

"Or everything," he says, as he steps through the doorway and the glass door closes behind the three of us.

Chapter Thirteen
Thirteen Steps To The Gallows

I'm sitting at the red light at Third and Choctaw and sweating my ass off because the air conditioning in my truck went out last week. The backs of my legs are sticking to the driver's seat and the rough edges of the torn vinyl are digging into my skin. I brace my feet against the floorboard, lift my body from the seat, and pull at the hem of my brown cargo shorts, to cover the worn place on the seat and protect my skin.

Marjorie is sitting in the passenger seat. A couple of weeks ago she downloaded a do-it-yourself divorce kit at the public library and now I'm giving her a ride down to the courthouse so she can file the paperwork. She is carrying on some nervous chatter about a guy who won big at the casino the night before last and left her a three-hundred-dollar tip. The same night she broke her foot.

"It's definitely a sign," she says.

I'm having a hard time paying attention. She propped her booted broken foot on my dash. Her left barefoot is on the dashboard and her freshly polished black toenails are pressed against the windshield. She has a silver ring on her "this little piggy stayed home" toe. She's wearing a gypsy-kind of Bohemian skirt, which at the moment is definitely highlighting her best physical feature because she has the skirt hiked up to her thighs in an attempt to cool herself. She is fanning her hands out the passenger window and making a motion as if she is scooping fresh air into the cab of the truck.

"So I'm going to use the money to start paralegal school," she says. My attention is focused on her long tanned limbs but I'm trying not to be too obvious. Marjorie's voice sounds like a single soft peal of a bell, low and consistent, but muffled as if my head is underwater. A

single bead of sweat runs from the back of her bent knee and creeps slowly down the back of her thigh. I have a similar one running down my forehead from my hairline.

She says, “I sure appreciate this.”

The guy in the car next to us at the light honks and gives a loud whistle, which startles me from my distraction, and I bolt the truck forward into the empty crosswalk. Marjorie doesn’t say anything. She has stopped talking and it becomes apparent to me that she is aware that I was checking her out. I’m embarrassed that I got caught. I take off my cap and rub the sweat from my forehead onto the sleeve of my tee shirt. “I guess that was meant for you...not me. Damn, it’s hot,” I say in an attempt to draw attention to the heat away and away from the silence between us.

I’m looking straight ahead now down Choctaw Avenue toward downtown and the light turns green. I slowly move the truck forward. I say, “So you were saying you’ve been reading signs and they point to you going to paralegal school. How do you know?”

“Yeah,” she says and pauses briefly. I can see with my peripheral vision that she turns her head to face the windshield and leans her head forward to let the breeze blow on the back of her neck. The bright neon pink and green strands of her hair float softly in the breeze. “You have to pay attention. The signs are all around us. To guide us.”

I hit the left blinker and slow down to turn onto Second Street. I sigh in relief because I have successfully diverted attention away from the awkward gawking I was just caught in the act of. “How do you know which ones to follow though?”

“The signs usually come in threes, for me anyway.”

“In threes?” I’m suddenly interested.

“They always reveal themselves, if you are paying attention. It’s like I was telling you. It all started a couple of weeks ago on seven/eleven. I went to buy a lottery ticket at 7-Eleven on seven/eleven at 7:11 and the lady behind me in line was talking on her cell phone about how she had downloaded a divorce kit online. Well, I immediately started paying attention because the lucky numbers of the date, place and time.”

I turn right and drive around the courthouse looking for an open parking spot. “That’s what led you here?”

She pulls her feet from the dash and noodles around on the floorboard for her flip flop. “I know it is. After I went to the library and downloaded the software I was checking my email and an ad for paralegal online classes popped up in the middle of my screen. I knew it was a sign placed to guide me.”

“So you have a calling or something?”

“Yes. Later I had a dream about it that cinched it for me,” she says.

I spy an opening as an old man puts his car in gear. I yield to him and ease into the now empty spot. I shut off the engine. “This is it.”

She sits still for a minute and looks out her window at the courthouse. “David and I were married in Sherman, Texas, at a courthouse that looks very similar to this one. That was Grayson County. This is Grady County.”

Sherman, I think. Funny it should be Sherman. It must be a sign. I’m at a loss for words. I sit clenching the steering wheel waiting for her to make a move. My original intention had been to just drop her off and go upstairs to check on Jackson. When she asked me to give her a ride, it didn’t seem to be a big deal—no more than driving her to the bus station or Walmart, but now I see the significance for her and realize how alone in the world she really is. I

don't want to be like her deadbeat husband who ditched her in the middle of the night in the middle of nowhere.

Marjorie turns and looks into my eyes and says, "I was wearing this same skirt. Even now I'd have to say it was the happiest I have ever been. There at the end we had been struggling because he was unable to find work, but with what I was making at the casino we were getting by." She diverts her eyes back to the courthouse and her voice softens as she adds, "And then I wake up one morning and it's all over. He's gone without one word."

I look over at the steps leading up to the courthouse and visualize David abandoning her right there at a place similar to where he had made vows to her before God.

"I've gone over it a thousand times in my mind. There wasn't anything that I can think of that triggered it. We ate dinner and watched a little television the night he left. We played gin 'til around midnight. We didn't quarrel or anything. We went to bed together and he turned his face and body away from me and said 'good night' in a sad way that I didn't quite understand. If he had just talked to me, maybe we could have worked it out. Somehow."

I get out of the truck and go around to open the passenger-side door. "For what it's worth, there's nothing you could have done. It would have only delayed the inevitable," I say, leaning against the doorframe. "David was a fool. He had everything a man could hope for. When he ran out on you, he was doing you a big favor. It may have been the only unselfish thing he has ever done in his whole worthless life. The only explanation as to why he left was that he knew he wasn't good enough for you and never would be. He took off in the dead of night because he couldn't face you. He couldn't face being such a failure to you." For a moment I visualize someone giving the same speech to my mom seventeen years ago when my father bailed.

Marjorie smiles and wipes her tears on the back of her wrist. She picks up the manila folder that holds the divorce papers and places it under her arm. “Thanks for that. All I really wanted was an explanation from him. A card. A note. A posting on my Facebook wall. Something.”

I reach out my hand to her and she takes it. Even as hot as it is we walk arm-in-arm up the sidewalk to the courthouse. She limps a little with the boot on. Now a tiny bell goes off in my head and this feels like a dress rehearsal before a wedding—only in reverse. We enter into the front of the courthouse and a big whoosh of cold air hits my face and instantly cools the back of my neck. We pass through the metal detector and I push the button of the elevator that will take us up to the third floor.

“I’m nervous,” Marjorie says as we wait for the elevator door to open.

“No sweat. You’ll be fine.”

I know that I have been receiving signs and wonder how many I have ignored. “So what happens if you ignore a sign? Does that mean that you miss out on an opportunity or do you get a second chance?”

“Guess it all depends. I think everything happens for a reason. For myself, if I hadn’t gone to the library and printed the divorce papers I might have never gotten the idea to take the online courses, but then again, if I was meant to be a paralegal the notion would have occurred to me at some time or another, I suppose.” She impatiently pushes the elevator button again. “The main thing is to keep an open mind so that you are receptive to all the signs as they present themselves.”

The signals I’ve been receiving seem to be getting all twisted and cross-wired together. Sherman, Texas. Katie. Angel. Then I see it. A clear sign—Rowdy and his whore of a girlfriend

exit his truck that he just parked and I watch them enter the dive, Roy's Bar, across the street. The tiny bell in my head is now like a giant gong with a bright neon light arrow pointing at Rowdy. It's not even eleven o'clock yet and here he is parading around in broad daylight for the entire world to see. The elevator doors open and the occupants begin flooding the courthouse lobby, blocking my view of Rowdy's truck and the door to the bar.

As we ride up in the elevator my temper is also rising. I plan to avoid Rowdy's truck when we leave the courthouse because I have a strong urge to ram it with my truck and push it over a bridge with him in it. I'm going to keep my head to avoid any more run-ins with the Sheriff's Department this week. One visit is enough; instead I will remain calm and in control. I take a deep breath when the elevator stops on the third floor and the doors open.

I walk Marjorie to the double glass doors of the district clerk's office. I say, "I'll be right here." I gesture to the wooden bench to the left of the elevator.

"Wish me luck," she says as she opens the door.

I sit on the bench for a minute soaking up the air conditioning and collecting my thoughts. I reach in my pocket for my cell phone and scroll for Katie's number. I press "send" and it begins to ring. She answers without saying 'hello' and immediately says, "I'm with *your* mother at the DMV and she is driving me crazy. What's up?"

"I'm down at the courthouse with Marjorie and was wondering if you'd meet me for lunch in about an hour or so...at the Main Street Café. You're buying."

"What's the occasion?"

"It's lunch at the Main Street Café...not the Red Lobster."

"Don't you have to be at work at one? You don't have time for lollygagging downtown with me."

“I’m on an unofficial vacation. To take care of family business. Namely Jackson.”

“Oh, I see,” she says and pauses for a brief moment. “That’s kind of on the other end of my route. Can you just pick up Sonic and let’s eat at the house?”

“No, no. That won’t do,” I protest. “I have something I want to show you. It has to be down here. It’s not like you have to drive thirty miles or something. It’s only six or eight miles. Just have Mom drop you off here when y’all are done.”

She is silent for a minute and I can hear my mom in the background talking to someone about the cost of car insurance. Katie says, “Well, all right. I guess so. But this better be good.”

“Let me talk to Mom,” I say. There is a rustling noise as the phone is passed.

My mom is still talking about insurance and she says into the phone receiver, “I don’t believe in that online bull crap. I take my check down to the State Farm office like I have for the past thirty years. Where are you, Cody?”

“I need you to do me a big favor, but don’t ask me any questions, okay?”

“Okay. Why?”

“I need to make a trade with you at the courthouse. Katie for Marjorie. I need you to take Marjorie home for me.”

“Okay. When do we make this trade?”

“When you get done at the DMV. How long will you be?”

“That’s a stupid question, Cody. I’m at the DMV. It could be minutes, hours, weeks. Who knows? I have a number ticket thingy.”

“When you get done then—whenever that is. Now here’s the thing...when you come to the courthouse... pull up to the south side and drop Katie off. We’ll be watching for you. Now

this is important: Do not drive on the north or the west side of the building. Just pull up to the curb on the south side and drop her off. Okay? Do you understand?”

“Yes, yes. The north side...”

“No, the south side.”

“I’ll have Katie text you when we get to the corner. Does this have something to do with Jackson? Does Marjorie know something about Jackson’s case? Is that why you are at the courthouse?”

“No, Mom. It doesn’t have anything to do with Jackson. No questions for now. Don’t talk about it with Katie either.”

“This is torture, Cody. You know that, right?”

“Don’t worry; I’ll fill you in later. I just need to talk to Katie alone first.” I click the button and hang up the phone. I get up from the bench to pace a little. I walk to the large window on the north side of the building. People are just specks on the sidewalk about one inch in height. I can easily see Rowdy’s ’76 Chevrolet parked on the street. I picture myself dropping this big potted plant out the window and smashing it through the roof of his truck.

“I really hate that son of a bitch,” I say, under my breath. I think about the three pigs again and how at the end of the story the brick pig boiled the wolf in a pot on the fireplace. I am finding it easier to sympathize with the brick pig and am caring less and less about the wolf. It doesn’t mention anything in the story about him having little hungry wolves to feed at home; it only mentions that he is a selfish greedy bastard that can’t be satisfied with one pig. He devours one pig right after the other. He has to have one in every port.

Marjorie comes out of the double doors and makes her way toward me to the end of the long, wide hallway. She has an aura of tranquility about her. I say, “Everything okay?”

She says, “One door closes and another opens, as they say.”

“Is that divorce kit a one-time use?” I ask. “I may need to borrow a copy.”

Chapter Fourteen
You know It's Not Really The Fourteen Floor

It feels good having Marjorie holding onto the crook of my arm with her tiny hand. It's noontime and we have to wait awhile for the elevator. She holds onto my arm to steady herself; she's not gotten used to the boot yet. She likes numbers the same as I do, but she is superstitious. She is telling me how she can remember numbers better than she can remember people's names. Me, too. I could listen to her talk all day.

"I should have known our marriage was doomed from the get go," she says, pushing the elevator button. "We went to Dallas for a so-called honeymoon and our room was on the fourteenth floor."

I'm not seeing the connection at all. I say, "I've never stayed in a hotel with more than two floors. Actually I've never stayed in a hotel. Motels. All motels. I've never been in a building with more than six floors."

"Really? So you've never seen a number thirteen elevator button?" She's smiling at me with her eyes.

I shake my head no. With my left hand I caress her hand which holds my arm to let her know I don't want her to move it and I push the button for the fourteenth time.

She smiles and squeezes my bicep. "No one has. I guess Otis was superstitious. They skip the thirteenth floor. The fourteenth floor is really the thirteenth."

"No shit. They skip from twelve to fourteen," I say. "You're making that up."

"No, really. I shit you not." Another guy comes up beside us and pushes the "down" button. "I asked David to get us a different room on another floor but he said I was being ridiculous. Well, look at us now. We were cursed from the get go. Maybe if we had been on the seventh floor we'd be together today."

I pull her closer to me so only she can hear me say, “I’m glad you were on the fourteenth floor and I’m here instead of him.” I press my lips against her temple. She smells of heaven and earth.

We manage our way to the first floor and down the courthouse steps. I sit on the south steps of the courthouse with Marjorie by my side, waiting for Katie and my mom to arrive. It’s high noon and we are baking in the sweltering Oklahoma heat. I am preparing myself for the Clint Eastwood-style showdown between Rowdy and myself, if it comes to that. And I actually hope it does come to that because I look forward to kicking his ass up one side of the street and down the other, but Marjorie has calmed me.

The deputy sheriff sticks his head outside the door excited like and says, “Come quick Cody, it’s Katie.” Then he darts past us to the other side of the courthouse lawn.

I’m a little panicky, not knowing exactly what to expect, but Marjorie and I follow behind the deputy and round the corner to discover that the showdown is not going to take place between Rowdy and me. At least not here. Not now. Not on the courthouse lawn. The first thing that I notice is a large crowd has gathered in front of Roy’s Bar, and I see only a puddle of oil and shards of safety glass remaining where Rowdy’s truck sat just fifteen minutes ago. There are hunks of blonde hair, pieces of tattered clothing, and a lone broken black flip flop left on the sidewalk. I scour the crowd and catch sight of my mom.

“Show’s over, folks,” the deputy announces.

I make my way through the small crowd, which is now dispersing, to reach my mom. “What the hell, Mom? Where is Katie? What happened here?”

She looks as if she has battlefield fatigue and she finally answers, “I went to the north side, just like you said.”

“South side. For Christ’s sakes, Mom.”

“I thought you said north.”

My mom and I are reenacting the civil war. The north side/the south side. “That doesn’t matter, Mom. Where is Katie?”

“They took her to the county lock up. Her and that Brittany girl. It all happened so fast.”

“And Rowdy just took off? That chicken-shit.”

“Not before your sister smashed his windshield with a crowbar,” the deputy says. “But I didn’t see anything. She’s a feisty pint-size Tasmanian tornado.” He gives my shoulder a hard pat. “Katie got the best of his little girlfriend, too,” the deputy says with a slight smile. “Come on, Cody. Let’s go get Katie out of this mess.”

I look up at the fifth floor barred windows that now houses half of my immediate family. Holy shit, at this rate by the end of the week my entire family will be in the county jail.

Chapter Fifteen

I forgot to pay attention to the signs this afternoon but I'm sure they were all around me. Marjorie stays with me at the courthouse after the ruckus. I like having her with me and she doesn't seem to mind my crazy family. I am grateful because I need someone to entertain my mom who is on the hysterical side and mad at me, of all things. Of course, because I am the oldest and the only one of her children who is not in jail—it must somehow be my fault. It's because I am the enabler and in the end this will somehow be all my fault. It's part of being the brick pig. She does have a good point though because both of my siblings are in jail today and I had an indirect hand in both instances.

My mom, Marjorie, Tweedle, and I are sitting on a long wooden bench in front of the Sheriff's office at the county jail on the third floor. What a police line-up we are making. Marjorie has her headphones plugged in and resting her head against my shoulder. I can feel the music vibrating from her earphone all the way through me and her soft breath is tickling every fine hair on my arm. I'm keenly aware of her presence. A few feet in front of me four-year-old Braxton runs in circles, squealing like a police siren. I don't even mind because he is entertaining Tweedle. Tweedle usually is pretty restless when we have to wait like this and he's not familiar with the surroundings. I think it goes back to all the doctors and hospitals after the accident. But he insisted on sitting next to Marjorie and is holding her hand. Katie's baby girl sleeps on my mom's lap. Rowdy is MIA. If he's smart he will stay good and gone for a long while.

I listen to the dispatcher at the county jail desk talking to a deputy who is obviously taking his lunch break. She says, "Yeah, we've had a little activity here this afternoon."

I regret calling Katie down to the courthouse now. I thought I had figured out how it would play out, but I never dreamed it would turn out with Katie in jail. I kind of figured it would be me—justifiable homicide for killing Rowdy. It would be a service to mankind. They probably would have erected statues, monuments, and had a parade in my honor.

I'm not ashamed to admit that I'm kind of proud of how Katie stood up for herself. Come to think of it, I am proud of both of my siblings today. They both did the right thing and stood up for themselves.

After consultation with Jackson and the attorney this morning, I programmed the attorney's office number into my cell phone. He's now in speed dial and I called his office leaving a message for him to call me back. I wonder if he will give us a family plan—two for one discount?

I'm not sure what Jackson's fate will be. His attorney didn't offer much encouraging information about the counterfeiting, it being a federal offense and all. Jackson's actually in the slammer right now not because of the counterfeiting, but sitting out a traffic warrant. Dumb-ass. They haven't formerly charged him yet on the counterfeiting. Katie is another matter altogether though. I only hope that when the judge sets bail that Katie isn't too mad at me for not telling her about Rowdy in the first place.

My mom is talking on her cell phone to my Aunt Trixie, while Aunt Trixie drives to the courthouse from Verden, about a thirty-minute drive. Aunt Trixie is the mother of all brick pigs and is there for my mom at all family crises.

Tom's voice comes over the radio and gives his location as being in the courthouse parking lot. Even though my mom is talking ninety miles an hour on her cell phone, and probably not listening to any of my aunt's responses, obviously she did hear Tom's voice and

suddenly she is quiet. She reaches over to me and grabs the crook of my elbow. It's that mom response...that natural response moms' have when driving down the road, and suddenly have to slam on the brakes, and instinctively reach their arm across the seat to protect the passenger.

The dispatcher replies, "Be advised of a ten-twelve in the building."

The dispatcher is talking about my mom. My mom is apparently known as a ten-twelve in police code: a visitor in the building. I can't help but wonder what the dispatcher, a woman who has held the same position with the Sheriff's Department for twenty-five years, knows of my family and my mom to refer to us as a code ten-twelve.

There is a long pause on the radio and then Tom's voice responds, "Copy that. Ten-four."

My mom releases her grip and begins breathing again. She quickly finishes with her phone call, gently passes the baby to my lap and retrieves a makeup compact from her bottomless pit of a bag. She begins dousing around her eyes with powder. I can't help but watch her; it's like watching an orchestrated train wreck with the conductor directing a symphony, but she looks just fine; so I say, "You look just fine, Mom. You're simply gorgeous."

She rests the pink Mary Kay powder compact on her bag and nudges me a little with her shoulder when Tom enters through the back door of his office and makes his way straight to my mom.

He says, "How are you holding up, Cissy?" He sits next to her, but does not lose the air of authority. He remains professional and in control. I find myself sitting up a little straighter, as well, and I muss with the baby's pacifier that is safety pinned to her sleeve.

Chapter Sixteen
A New Chapter, Sherman, Texas

I wake up earlier than usual this morning. The trailer was too quiet with Jackson and Tweedle both gone. Tweedle has always loved spending time at my aunts' house. He loves all the birds; so my Aunt Trixie invited him home with her yesterday after we got Katie out of jail. I figured she'd be staying with my mom, but Katie threw all Rowdy's clothes on the driveway of the covered carport and asked me to change the locks on the front door of her trailer. I am a little uneasy about going off and leaving her by herself today, but she proved yesterday that she can take care of herself.

To be honest with you I slept at Marjorie's. It was so late by the time we got the locks changed and everything settled. Her foot was swollen; so I propped it on a few pillows and scrambled us up some eggs. We drank a couple of beers, lying on her bed and watching a little television. I talked until she fell asleep resting her head on my chest and I couldn't bear to move. It was the best night's sleep I have had in a while.

I am up early this morning downloading new maps from my laptop, programming the new GPS and calculating the hours and the route in which we will take to Sherman. I notice on the GPS that I have to cross the Washita River three times before I make it to I-35 South. Then south of Ardmore we will cross the Red River.

Even though I talked to my supervisor yesterday, I check in with him to let him know I would need one more day off. He had already made arrangements with Joe Clark to work my shift. It kind of works out because Joe owes me a favor on account of all the times I covered for him when his wife was sick and in the hospital. Besides, he needs the extra hours.

I shower and take care of the every-day routine, but today is different. It feels different when I wipe away the steam that fogs the bathroom mirror; I brush my teeth and shave.

Every few minutes I look out the living room window across the gravel-covered road to see if my mom's bedroom light is on. I see it flicker on a little after six. I wait fifteen minutes and then head across the road and tap lightly on her front door.

She pulls open the door and holds the screen door with her foot for me; her eyes are soft and she has a slight smile on her face. She says, "Happy birthday, sweetie." She couldn't stay mad at me too long.

The coffee is brewing and I sit quietly by the open window at her breakfast nook while I wait for the coffee to finish brewing. Everything outside the window is visible but gray. I mean, it's not dark outside but the sun has not made its appearance yet; so there isn't any color. Everything is a varying dingy shade of gray and the air smells like dead fish floating in stale water from the Washita River that runs in a crooked path not a quarter of a mile from where I sit.

As the coffeemaker spurts a final ounce of coffee and I begin pouring, my mom emerges from her bedroom, ready to start our trip. Since my pick-up truck's air conditioner is on the fritz, we decided yesterday that we would take my mom's truck and naturally she assumed that she would be driving. Which is logical but impossible. We had a rock-paper-scissor session yesterday afternoon at the county jail to settle who would drive. Luckily, I won. Besides, this is *my* adventure. After I got everyone settled yesterday, I gassed up her truck and vacuumed the interior at the Busy Bee.

Starting out mom is kind of chatty talking about how twenty-six years ago she was already at the hospital waiting for me to make my first appearance. Telling me the story as if I haven't ever heard it before. She speaks as if it was a triumph. She digresses and talks of her

childhood in Sherman, and how when her father died suddenly in 1975 (she was ten years old), my grandmother Helen moved back to Caddo County where she had grown up; so she could be closer to her two sisters, my great-aunts Trixie and Lulu.

We spend a good fifteen to twenty minutes talking about finding an all-you-can-eat buffet once we get to Sherman. I like to have variety and plenty of it; although I tend to gravitate to those southern comfort foods like fried chicken, pork chops, and peach cobbler. Eventually my mom gets situated in her seat to read her book; she occasionally glances out the passenger's window as we pass small towns along Highway 19 before we turn off onto the Interstate. But for me the miles are building. It's like I'm earning frequent flyer miles or something. As we approach the interstate the digital voice of the GPS says, "Turn right. In one-half mile. Continue South on Interstate 35 South for one hundred seventeen miles."

The trip is unremarkable except for the fact it is my first trip. We pass through Pauls Valley and Davis. I see the rolling hills of the Arbuckle Mountain range and I take the scenic view exit because I haven't seen any mountains before, except on TV or the internet. I stand against the hood of the truck and swallow what is left of my cold coffee. It's pretty magnificent, I decide. I can only imagine what "real mountains look like. We get underway again and in a short while we stop at a Love's Store to stretch our legs. I buy beef jerky and a Mountain Dew. My mom uses the facilities and we are back on the road within ten minutes. I'm good at traveling short distances. I'm realizing this isn't any different than driving west of Chickasha to my aunts' house.

We will soon approach the Texas/Oklahoma state line. My adrenaline is pumping. I'm excited. I have never crossed the state line before. I slow the vehicle as we pass the Chickasaw Nation Winstar Casino. It is quite the spectacle. It reminds me of the Wonders of the World

Putt Putt Miniature Golf Course back in Chickasha, complete with a Big Ben and Roman Coliseum. If we have time on the way home, we might stop and play the penny machines. I have a feeling in the pit of my stomach something is going to happen. I think of Marjorie and remind myself to look for omens and signs. Without incident we cross the Red River and I pull to the narrow shoulder half-way across the bridge.

“What are you doing now?” My mom asks.

“I’m going to get out for a minute. I’ve never been out of the state before.”

She smiles and says, “Yes, you have. When your Dad’s mom died, we went to Sherman for the funeral.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.”

“You were three months old.”

“Okay; so I was technically out of the state one time.” I put the gear into park. “You want to get out with me?”

“I’ll stay put,” she answers. “You should go it alone, Cody. It’s your adventure.”

There is more sand than water in the Red River, but the streambed is deep and wide, and the bridge on which I stand is far above the surface of water—all signs that indicate the river has the capacity to channel large amounts of swiftly-running water. The sandy banks of the river aren’t nearly as red as the muddy clay banks of the Washita River.

I appreciate the bridge for a moment...it spans a distance of about 650 feet– it’s long and boring. It’s one of those continuous span concrete girder types, not much to look at but efficiently getting the job done; so I have to appreciate that. I stand on the bridge and listen to the humming of car tires as they roll along the pavement. The semi-trucks roar past, causing a

powerful swoosh of wind to blow me against the guardrail and make me off balanced. I face the river and lean against the guardrail to balance myself. I spit off the bridge for luck. Three times.

A late model Ford king-cab truck is pulled off the road on the Texas side of the highway. I don't see the driver, but I imagine that he is off fishing somewhere. My back is to the wind, which is strong and clean. I place my ear on the metal railing and can hear a metal ringing and feel the vibrating and swaying of the bridge as the traffic passes by. I enjoy the river crossing. I can't help but marvel a little at how easy it is to get to Texas. The pioneering settlers' heavy wagons would have sunk deeply into the mud...maybe that's why they stayed put. The stay putters couldn't be bothered with crossing rivers and creeks. I mean, we take for granted how easy it is to cross waterways. The Washita snakes all over the place and we did cross it three times. Once would have been enough for me with no bridge. On a rickety old wagon with cog wheels and horses.

I get back in the driver's seat and roll into Texas like I had been doing it all my life. Today I turn twenty-six and I cross the Red River. I don't feel a bit different. Maybe if it were a time zone or something, it would have a different feel to it. I wouldn't know though.

The drive is pleasant. We don't have much conversation and mostly just listen to the radio, but I think this is a good opportunity to talk to my mom about her "Tom situation." I didn't exactly plan on my mom coming along on this trip, but now that she has I'm going to make the most of it. The road gives me time to think about how to delicately formulate my words and questions. I decide the best approach is to be casual and see if I can somehow get her to divulge the information as if it is all her idea. The best way to do this is to begin talking about "my situation"—I can catch her off guard that way, I think. At Gainsville the GPS tells me to turn off the Interstate onto State Highway 82. Eighty-two is single-lane and undivided. This is my

first real road trip but it is coming very natural for me. We're making good time. It's a little before eleven o'clock and traffic is light; so I begin.

"Angel coming home's got me worked up a little," I say. "I figured she'd eventually come home for a visit, but I didn't expect all this hoopla. I didn't expect this movie. I didn't expect all this...success. It really caught me off guard."

My mom has stopped reading her paperback but holds the page with one of her recently manicured acrylic fingernail. She's listening. I have her full undivided attention.

I begin, "I think the whole thing is pretty incredible. Unbelievable. She's completely full of shit."

She's supposed to be here Friday. *'In three days,'* I remind myself calmly, picturing a fleet of limousines driving into town from the Will Roger Airport in Oklahoma City. I have a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. In my mind I am like the character Donald Sutherland plays in the movie, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. I'm reenacting the final scene, pointing an accusing finger at Angel, squealing like a pig, as if I'm saying in some alien language, "You, fraud. You betrayer."

"Why don't you just tell her how you feel?"

A laughing sigh escapes my lungs. "My momma raised me to treat a lady with respect. But Angel isn't exactly an Angel."

"I'm not following you, Cody. You're still in love with her. Or is it Marjorie? Either way, you have unfinished business."

I scoff. "This isn't about love." I gnaw off a piece of the dried-up hard-ass beef jerky and work it with my teeth.

She closes the paperback all together. "It's jealousy you're feeling, but that's poison."

I'm getting a little worked up. "Jealous? Love. Jealous? That's not what this is...Just tell me how it's possible a little girl, twenty-three years of age, from bum-fuck Oklahoma, goes to California and within two years has written a movie script, sold it, and it's been produced? My words seem to linger in the cab of the truck like the strong scent coming from the cardboard pine tree hanging from the rearview mirror. "No, mom. Something's not right here."

She sits there as if she is waiting for the punch line. Usually my mom and I are on the same page, but we are not even in the same textbook right now.

"I'm pissed off, but definitely not jealous."

"Well, you can call it what you want but you're only fooling yourself."

I think about it for a minute. What would Katie call it? Katie would call it betrayed, double-crossed, or hurt. I say, "I hadn't said anything out of my deep respect for Mr. B. I'm not the bad guy here."

"That's what you were saying Saturday night at Starbuck's. I don't get it."

"The screenplay. She wrote a screenplay." I articulate the words like Katie did with Tweedle Saturday when she was asking him about his new Weedeater.

"I'm well aware of that. I just don't see what that has to do with you."

"She's a fraud. She didn't write shit."

She puts her book on the floorboard next to her purse and crosses her right leg over her left one so as to lean a little closer to me. "I know she sent you a copy of it because she told me. She asked me about you on Facebook."

I spy a mileage sign that says Sherman is twenty-nine miles east. Mom's right—Angel did email me a screenplay, but I never read it. I knew it would just piss me off. That's when I quit email-corresponding with her all together.

Mom says, “You know, Angel was all alone out there. She couldn’t afford to come home during her semester breaks. She was working two jobs and couldn’t afford to take time off.”

She reaches toward the dashboard and turns the radio’s volume down. She continues, “She spent a good part of that first year trying to reach you. Trying to keep the two of you together.”

“I remember,” I say. “I was kind of bitter back then.”

“What did you expect her to do? Stay in Chickasha and waste her life in that dead end. Just like you.”

“It was good enough for you,” I say defensively. I’m starting to sweat a little. I crank up the air conditioning and reposition the two center vents so the cold air is hitting my neck.

“It wasn’t a waste for me. I had a reason to be there. I had you. And Jackson and Katie.” She crossed her arms and turns her gaze toward the road ahead of us. “Lord, only knows what keeps you there.”

I bite off another hunk of jerky. “Namely you. I couldn’t leave you and Katie. Tweedle. What would have happened to Tweedle if I had packed up for California?”

She uncrosses her arms and lets them fall to her side. “That’s just an excuse, Cody. Sweet. But an excuse just the same. Tweedle would be with me.”

This conversation is not going the way I intended it. “I couldn’t go. But I couldn’t hold Angel back either.”

“And so what is holding you back now? I hate to see you wasting your life at that quarry. That can’t really be what you want.”

“You’re right about that. But still, I can’t stand the thought of walking out on you and Katie, like Dad.” The air conditioning is freezing my right ear. I reposition the vent so the air blows a little over my head.

“Is that what troubles you?” Something in the tone of my mom’s voice changes. “You could never be anything like your father.” Then she laughs. “It’s funny though. In a way, all of the sudden, you kind of remind me of him—except where he was running away so he didn’t have to face his failures—you are simply hiding so you never have to fail.”

I have no response. I don’t know how to respond to that; so I say, “I don’t know how to respond to that.”

“Take a chance, Cody. Put yourself out there. You’re still so young. Make something of your life.”

“I am, Mom. I’m taking classes. Working toward earning a college degree. I am doing something.” The GPS indicates that we are fifteen miles from Sherman.

“I may not say this often enough, but I am proud of you,” she says in a soft, far-away voice. “I know things haven’t come easy for you.”

“You’ve given me something to think about. You’re a good mom, Mom.”

“How much is that going to cost me?” She jokes.

I see my opportunity now. “Speaking of cost...I’ve been putting money into a 401K at work. I’m going to borrow against it to pay Jackson’s attorney fees.”

My mom protests. “Not a chance, mister. That money should go toward getting you out of that quarry—not keeping you in it. We’ll figure something else out for Jackson. I’ve got a little money set aside for emergencies; we’ll use that.”

“I don’t think that’s a very good idea either. What about your retirement? You’re not getting any younger, you know.”

“Thanks for that,” she says.

“Well, it’s true. I worry about your future, too.” The GPS screen says we are ten miles outside of Sherman.

“You needn’t worry about me, Cody. My trailer is paid off. I have a good job. And insurance. I’m not exactly a senior citizen. I’ll be able to work another thirty years, I expect.”

“It’s true you are still young. I do worry though. What about unforeseen circumstances? What if you get sick or something?”

“That’s what the insurance is for.” She has an answer for everything it seems.

“Still I worry about you being alone,” I say. “Don’t you get lonely sometimes?”

“Not sure I see a connection between that and money I have squirreled away.” She shifts around in her seat.

“How come you never remarried? I kind of thought maybe you and Tom.”

“I don’t really care to discuss it with you.”

“It was obvious to me yesterday that the two of you have a spark still. When he came to the trailer yesterday morning to check on Tweedle, he asked about you.”

“He did?” She seems surprised.

“I’m not trying to upset you. I love you and want you to be happy. I just always thought that you and Tom were a good match.”

“Well, he did ask me.” She lets out a deep breath. “But I let that ship sail. Or sink, I guess.”

“Oh, come on, Mom. He is in love with you. I’m sure of it.”

“I was selfish and weak when I was younger,” she says.

My mom has to be the strongest woman I have ever known, so this surprises me. “You? Weak?”

“I’ve never told anyone this, but I couldn’t get past his marriage. Can you remember his wife, Kim?” I remember.

“I was in love with Tom long before she passed away and he was in love with me, too, although we never said so to each other or acted on it while she was alive. There were times that he would come by and I would keep him longer than I should have—finding stuff for him to fix just to be able to spend time with him.” She reaches down and puts her big leopard-print purse on her lap and digs around in it. The stirring makes a noise like her bag is full of Legos that are clanking together.

She continues, “Lots of times he needed someone to talk to...someone who wouldn’t ask about how Kim was doing and I certainly obliged him there because that was a subject I avoided all together. After her death, I felt so guilty. I had been selfish. I didn’t know how to compete with her. You can’t compete with the dead. The dead always have a head start. Here he was free, wanting to marry me, and I let my guilt get in the way. He eventually gave up on me.”

“I don’t think he gave up. I think he’s still waiting for you.”

Chapter Seventeen
The Seventeen Dollar \$1 Matinee

We stand in the concession line behind a rowdy group of elementary-age kids, who are all wearing matching bright yellow tee shirts, obviously part of a summer camp, church group, or day care center, and it makes me think about Tweedle. We have never been more than ten miles away from each other. He's my little sidekick—usually where I go, he goes. I feel guilty that I didn't bring him with me, he likes going to the movies and eating popcorn, but unless it's an animated film, he usually can't sit through a whole show. He doesn't follow the storyline easily either.

Even though we are attending the two o'clock matinee, we spend a small fortune on our sodas, popcorn, a pickle, and Sour Patch Kids candy. The whole thing ends up costing me seventeen dollars plus gas. We hand our tickets over to the ticket taker and find our way to screen three. Three, how appropriate, I think.

There's no one else in the theater. We have the whole screening room to ourselves. I've only been to two theaters in my life: the Paradise Twin and the Washita in downtown Chickasha, which was built back in the twenties before they designed stadium seating—I haven't ever experience stadium seating first hand, other than actual stadium bleachers at the high school football field. I pick a row in the middle of the theater. The seats are squeaky, but deep and comfortable, more like recliners than the stiff worn out seats at the Washita. When I was a little kid I'd go to Saturday matinees with my friends. I remember how the soles of my shoes would stick to the floor like I had stepped into maple syrup. We would have elbow wars to see who would have control over the shared armrest.

“Hah, cup holders,” I say to my mom pointing. I feel like a hillbilly in the big city and my mom’s blank stare back at me confirms it.

We are very early and the big screen is blank. My mom is texting on her cell phone and I become paranoid. “You didn’t tell anyone we were coming here, did you?”

“No, of course, not. I’m just checking on Katie.”

Her phone vibrates. I ask, “Is everything okay?”

“Relax.” She scrolls through her messages. But her thumbs have betrayed me I realize when my mom’s cousin Cheryl shows up at the footlights of the movie screen.

My mom waves to get Cheryl’s attention. “Didn’t tell a soul, huh?” I give my mom the eye. You little liar.”

We exchange hugs with each other, crushing our popcorn tubs and the two are like two high school girls chattering, giggling and showing each other tiny images on their cell phones. I’m not really annoyed. I kind of knew she would call her cousin. It’s probably a good thing, I decide...it’ll keep my mom out of my hair and out of my business.

I call to check on Tweedle. Lulu answers and reassures me that they are all getting along and he is fine. She tells me that he and Aunt Trixie are working in the vegetable garden, gathering yellow squash and okra.

I say, “Don’t let him get too heated.”

“I know, Dear. He’s wearing his visor and sunscreen.” Her voice is calm and soothing.

“Remember he’s allergic to peanuts. And he doesn’t like tomatoes.”

She says, “Stop worrying. He’s fine, Mother Hen.”

I hang up and put my phone into my back pocket. I stop and consider myself a mother hen as opposed to being the brick pig. A hen is a chicken and I kind of fit that description right

now; otherwise my first big adventure in life wouldn't be going to a movie matinee with my mother. It's all so pathetic, I decide.

I'm eating my popcorn and as nervous as I was on my first date with Angel. I had dated girls in high school and such, but none of them stuck. Not like Angel did. How ironic, I think remembering our first date was to a movie at the Washita Theater. I remember every detail of that night like it is a painting.

The lights dim a little and a slideshow starts on the screen advertising a local dentist, the First Baptist Church, and a Farmer's Insurance agency. The ads are on a loop and mixed in with movie trivia. The three of us guess the trivia answers. A few other people wander into the theater. Strangers. It's not too often that I attend a movie with strangers. One advantage or disadvantage, depends on how you look at it, of living your whole life in one tiny spot on the planet means you don't meet many strangers. It makes the anticipation build a little for me. I'm surrounded by strangers. I have a weird thought that if I go berserk and have to be carried from the theater, all the people will say to each other, "Who was that guy anyway? A stranger...a complete lunatic."

Now the lights turn all the way down and the previews begin. My head and my stomach are swimming; my heart and stomach are now both in my throat, but I keep shoveling popcorn in my mouth and can't make myself stop. I hand the tub over to my mom and whisper, "Take this away from me."

She sets the popcorn on the floor between our seats and pats my arm. My mom holds a thumb's down gesture to the preview. I agree. I'm watching the previews and I wonder why they don't have real people help them with these movies. I guess because it really is just all

about the money. Seems like they could make good movies though just as easily as they made *Dodgeball*, *Delivery Man*, or *Twilight*.

I'm a little confused about filmmakers. These guys have been in the business for six hundred years or something. They should have it down to a science by now. Why is it that they make crap like *Titanic* and give it forty-six awards?

Forty-Six. Isn't that's the human number on account we have forty-seven chromosomes or something? God or whoever must be some kind of math wizard to figure out all the numbers of the universe. Like, the perfect number is seven. And Satan's number is 666. How'd he figure out all that stuff? The filmmakers should be more like god. You know, not let it live unless he saw that it was good or at least three stars. That's why the dinosaurs are not around, because they weren't working hard enough; so they died. Guess god got the scale wrong on that Jurassic Park era. The dinosaurs just didn't fit in. Social outcasts as it were. Like Alec Baldwin or Lindsay Lohan.

Although I wouldn't miss an Alec Baldwin flick. Not that he's my favorite actor or anything. He's no Clint Eastwood. But Baldwin is like the new William Shatner, you know, the guy who won't turn down any roll that is offered to him and does the priceline.com commercials; although Baldwin might be the new Kevin Bacon...six degrees of separation. I think he is connected to every movie ever made somehow. He was probably a clue on *Lost*.

It's easy to be a critic from where I sit in this dark theater, eating my buttery popcorn and drinking my giant medium size Coca-Cola. I know from my memoir class that it isn't easy to write, much less to get published or produced. It's competitive and lots of closed doors. That's why this whole thing with Angel is so sketchy. It's just impossible. I'll be interested to hear how she was able to work two jobs, go to school, graduate, write a screenplay, and well, it just

doesn't add up. I guess it can happen if you're F.S. Fitzgerald or somebody. She's no Fitzgerald.

Sometimes you see these guys burst onto the scene with their first book and make it on the *New York Times* Best Seller List or someplace like that. But then you never hear another word from them for the rest of their lives. Like Harper Lee or JD Salinger. They put all their eggs in one basket. Think about it, how many ways could you write a coming of age story. One is plenty. You know the really great writers are the ones who can write more than one book with new things to say. Don't keep saying the same shit over and over, it ain't so good. Stop writing. Because we don't want to read it again. If we *do* want to read it twice, we will read *To Kill A Mockingbird* or *Shane*.

Movies aren't art. It's science. Unless you have something really unique, don't mess with that formula. We know it's cliché. It's cult not culture. We know what is going to happen. That's what we paid the nine dollars and fifty cents to see. We want Hugh Grant to end up with Julie Roberts in *My Best Friend's Wedding*. Don't make the guy gay like in that movie with Jennifer Aniston—unless Jennifer Aniston is really a gay man dressing as a woman. That would work, too.

My mom offers me a sour piece of candy. "Want one?"

I wave it away. The previews have ended.

"They used to be your favorite," she says and looks at me in such a way it is as if I've been away to war and changed so completely she doesn't recognize me. She's still holding the bag open so I reach in and get a couple.

"Thanks," I say, and now something is happening. It is beginning. The production companies' logos flash one by one across the screen. The screen goes completely black and the

ominous overture of a single violin begins to play. On the screen way in the distance is a bright fire that is moving toward the camera—moving faster than the speed of light all the way from up center stage to down center stage. It dawns on me this movie is 3D. The fireball is a space capsule completely engulfed in flames, hurling out of control through deep dark space. A swooshing noise from the rocket engine syncs with a loud crescendo of cymbals and brass horns as the opening title credit appears in large flaming letters that seems to burn a hole in the screen: *STARLITE 6*. My heart is pounding in my throat.

I missed my calling—I should have been a film critic because I’m already questioning how can a space capsule be engulfed in flames out in cold deep dark space where there is no oxygen? It is complete bullshit.

Now the moment I came here for...there it is displayed for a brief moment: *Screenplay by...Wait. Who? Brady what?*

I lean over to my mom and whisper, “See? I told you.”

My mom is drinking her Mr. Pibb and eating a dill pickle. She shushes me the way she did when I was a kid and asked her to stop at the Dairy Queen because I thought my dad might be trying to reach me at the phone booth. She didn’t listen to me then either, she thought I was wanting to stop for ice cream.

“I was totally right,” I whisper and turn my head around like I’m looking for the manager so I can claim some kind of prize. My mom shushes me again so I resume eating the popcorn, while trying to make sense of what I am seeing on the screen. These characters are Amazon women who wear silver and black skin-tight bodysuits made of latex. What’s that got to do with Angel? These people don’t live in a trailer park in Southwest Oklahoma. They live in a distant

galaxy on a planet called Starlite 6, and their existence is being threatened by an alien devil-monster.

I allow myself to sink into the red velvety stadium seat and prop my feet up onto the back of the seat in front me, crossing my legs at the ankles. So this is what complete vindication feels like? It feels calming. Sweet. I think we might buy tickets for the next show, eat hotdogs and watch it again. I mean, it is not often in life to be so right—to be so completely satisfied. What an exhilaration. To be able to go back to my clan and have everyone say that I was so right and could see straight through Angel’s scheme. I might not ever get another chance.

This is the stupidest movie I have ever seen. It is like a bad B-movie from the 1950s, and even worse than *Burn After Reading*. I wish they had burned that script after writing. The only good thing about it was Alec Baldwin’s cameo on a cake.

I can’t begin to tell you how much I am enjoying the movie now.

The movie ends and we sit watching all the credits roll until the house lights come up. We gather our pile of trash and I throw it in the receptacle on the way to the lobby. I say to my mom, “I want to stay and see it again.”

“Are you kidding me? Why?” Cheryl asks.

“I just need to make sense of it. You know, come to terms with it.”

“I think you don’t make any sense. Can’t you just watch it Friday night?” My mom is giving me the evil eye, suspicious. “Are you sure you don’t need a doctor? Or medication?”

“I for one wish I had missed it the first time around. I have no intention of watching it again,” Cheryl says. “Ex-girlfriend or no ex-girlfriend.”

“That’s fine,” I say, giving my mom a disappointed look because I know she has told Cheryl the whole embarrassing story. “It’ll give you two a chance to catch up. I walk the “girls”

to Cheryl's car, an old brown Pinto with big chunks of paint chipped away exposing the bare rusted metal. I exchange numbers with Cheryl just in case, and we set a rendezvous point at Hometown Buffet, the all-you-can-eat buffet restaurant that I saw on the main highway when we first drove into town. I step back away from the curb, onto the sidewalk, and watch as they drive away. It feels like an old western movie scene, where the hero sends all the womenfolk on the stagecoach to safety, before he alone faces the outlaws in a final showdown at high noon.

I am on my own.

I waltz back into the theater lobby like I own the place, guns blazing. I'm not paying another dollar to watch the movie again. That's ridiculous. I will support the concession though...it's my duty. I buy a hotdog, giant medium Coke, and nachos loaded with jalapeno peppers and extra cheese. My hands are full what with all my snacks and all; so the ticket taker doesn't even bother with me, but just waves me through. I march right back into screening room three and slip into the same seat I occupied during the two o'clock matinee. The previews have already started. There are only a few other people in the theater, mostly senior citizens. I don't mind sitting here by myself, but I do wish Tweedle was here so I'd have someone to talk to. Sometimes I leave an empty seat between Mason and myself...for Martin. Tweedle pretends that Martin is alive. Maybe he is, somehow. I look at the empty seat next to me and I have an eerie feeling, like what if the seat really isn't empty? What if Martin really does tag along everywhere? I picture Martin sitting next to me now and wonder how life would have been different if the accident hadn't happened. We probably wouldn't even be friends. I'd probably be in California.

There is a *Star Trek Beyond* preview that makes the number forty-six pop into my head again. The chromosomes. It's a really popular number with filmmakers, mathematicians, and

well, god. I start adding my concession costs and realize that I've spent forty-six dollars on this movie. Marjorie would say it's a sign, but I have no idea what it might mean. If she were here she could tell me. I shrug my shoulder. It's just a stupid number and means nothing in the grand scheme of my life, but then again maybe it's a sign. I sit up straight in my chair and look around to see if I recognize anyone. Nobody. I eat my nachos and wait for the movie to start, I lump the preview movies into three categories: those that I would pay to see, those for Netflix, or those I'll skip all together—unless Alec Baldwin is in it because then I'll watch it no matter what. I won't go into all that again.

It's just a formula. Don't mess with the formula. If it's an action film just throw in a couple of chase scenes and snappy one-liners. Surprise us. We don't really care. Just blow some shit up.

The movie's starting again and I sit forward in my seat. I whip my phone out point the phone camera at the screen, and click the record video button. I am paying close attention to the opening credits this time and there's no mistaking it...screenplay by *Brady Lyman*. This isn't even Angel's story. This is Brady's story, whoever the hell Brady is.

Angel is a such fucking fraud.

Chapter Eighteen
Wednesday 12:14 a.m.

I am feeling pretty cocky on the way home from Sherman tonight. The ride is uneventful. Earlier I ate too much chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes, and dinner rolls at the buffet and got sleepy by the time we reached Gainesville—so my mom’s non-stop talking ability has come in handy. She keeps me entertained with all her happy chatter about her cousin Cheryl and her family. She spends a great deal of time talking about Marjorie, too. I really want to talk to her about the movie and the fact that it is not Angel’s movie, but over the course of the past few days she has proven to be not very reliable in the secret keeping department. I’m alert all the way to Ardmore where we stop at Love’s for gas and coffee.

It is nearly midnight by the time we pull in front of my mom’s trailer. I lock her truck and walk her to her porch. I give her a peck on the cheek and say, “I’m glad you went with me. I had fun.”

“Me too,” she says, now standing inside her trailer holding the screen door while I stand on her wooden porch deck. She flips on the porch light. “You made me think, Cody. Examine myself a little.”

“Me, too,” I say, not really knowing why she says this now, after three hours riding home in the truck. “My eyes are wide open now.”

“Happy birthday,” she says.

I make sure her door is good and locked before walking across the gravel road to my own trailer. It is going to feel really empty with Tweedle and Jackson both gone. I know Tweedle will be ready to sleep in his own bed tomorrow when I go get him.

Jackson's truck is parked out front of the trailer. Even though I know he's in the county lock up and can't get his messages, I call his cell phone anyway to leave him a voice mail, just to say I am home. I can't say it is ever exactly quiet at the trailer because the walls are paper thin and I can always hear an argument across the way or a baby crying in the night. Then, of course, there's always Duke the dog next door. But it is deafening quiet tonight.

My eye is drawn to Marjorie's bedroom window which is dimly lit. I know she's not gone back to work yet, with her broken foot and all. Really she is the only person I want to be with and to talk to. I think I could tell her anything and she would never treat me like I'm stupid or ridiculous. I tap lightly on her door but it is quiet inside and she doesn't come to the door.

I tap again and say, "It's only me." I can hear her move about and I feel bad for making her get up on her bum foot, but once she opens the door I've never been happier to see anyone before.

"Well, how was the movie?" She is holding the door open for me and I go in, passing close enough to her we're touching. "I forgot to tell you happy birthday this morning." My arms slip easily around her waist and I bury my face into her sweet smelling hair. Nothing between us except her thin silky robe and my sweaty tee shit. She's curvy and fits nicely against me.

"It's still my birthday," I say.

She kisses my mouth, soft, slow and sweet. "Well, happy birthday then."

We spend the night like all new lovers do. There's no awkwardness or shyness between us. It feels as if maybe I had been waiting in this god-forsaken trailer park for her to find her way to me. I suddenly do believe in signs and feel the whole world opening up for me, like it had been waiting, too. Corny, I know but nothing has ever been like this for me. She makes me look deep inside myself and like what I see.

Sometime during the night I slip on my shorts and go to my trailer to snag the last two Budweisers while she smokes a cigarette. She lies on the bed covered only in her glorious skin and an Ace bandage around her foot. I slip out of my shorts and into bed next to her. We share one of the beers and make love again. Then we talked about all the things new lovers talk about.

I say, “Why didn’t you leave this place?” The moon is high and bright. The night is clear enough for every star in the sky to see us.

“I felt I was led here and hadn’t figured out exactly why.”

“I’d like to think the stars led you to me. I’m pretty sure it is a sign.”

She opens the last beer and says, “I can’t argue with the stars and moon.”

Chapter 19

The whole feel at the park today is a mix between a carnival and the apocalypse. Everyone has started parking their vehicles on the grassy field out front of the trailer park where the flea market vendors usually set up their booths. Except me. All the residents are on lock down, bringing in their prized garden gnomes, plastic flamingoes and various other lawn ornaments for safe keeping. Except me. We are battening down the hatches and hunkering down to weather the storm of movie-goers we expect this weekend. It's like we are stock piling supplies in preparation of the end of the world. Including me.

I sleep in this morning. I probably could have slept another hour if it weren't for someone woke me up with loud hammering. I'm really enjoying this vacation thing. I can imagine myself taking time off to take a trip somewhere next time.

It's Wednesday which is the day we go out for breakfast each week. I myself have done my part to make ready for the show, for Old Mr. B's sake. I'm going to put it out of my mind today though. Today I'm spending the day with Tweedle and Marjorie.

When Tweedle gets home, he and I have a tug of war because he wants to bring his backpack but he doesn't really need it. He wins and I help him strap it on his back. It weighs a ton and I decide that later, when he is watching TV, I will clean it out to lighten his load.

I drive us down to Sonic and order a few breakfast burritos which we eat at the picnic table out front of the restaurant. Next stop is the liquor store where we pick up a few empty boxes (to pack away some of Tweedle's weed eaters)...and a bottle of Jack Daniels, just in case I need it to get me through the weekend. It's kind of like ketchup... you don't want your supply to run low.

I don't park out by the road because it is too far for Tweedle to walk especially carrying his heavy backpack. It's hot and Marjorie has trouble with her foot. When we get home, I turn on the window air conditioning unit in the living room and flip on the TV for Tweedle to watch his cartoon shows.

I reach over to help him slip off his backpack but he yanks away from me and won't let me touch it. He is telling me, "Naaaaa. Nooo."

We struggle and I say, "Cool it, little man. I'm just trying to help you."

He does not relent but I can be just as stubborn as he. There is a look of rage on his face that I see ever so often, but I never have any warning of it. He will throw a little temper tantrum but it's usually over as quickly as it is started. He's pulling, I'm pulling and then he suddenly let's go, causing himself to fall backward over the blue corduroy recliner. As he goes down, his arm come up and his fist smacks me right in the mouth. I tumble backward and land on my ass. I'm stunned.

"Good left hook." I use my right hand to move my jaw around. I touch my lip where his fist made contact and there's a little blood.

Tweedle is flat on his back with the backpack still attached. His legs and arms are flailing and he looks like a turtle that has been knocked on its back and can't right himself. The noises coming out of Tweedle's mouth sound like cursing, if he could curse. I don't know what to make of it—this is not like Tweedle.

I jump to my feet and check him to make sure he didn't hurt himself in the fall. His face is red and he is spitting mad at me. I grab the front of his shirt to help him up but I'm having to duck and dodge the punches he is swinging at me. He moves his arms around like one of those

lawn ornaments that turn its arms in the wind like a pinwheel; that is the only way I know how to describe it.

He makes contact with my ear. I shout at him, “Knock it off!”

And it’s over. I think he just tired himself out, but it ended just as quickly as it began. He lets Marjorie help him and is instantly calm and happy as if nothing happened at all. I on the other hand am shaken. I plop onto the couch and we both sit, exhausted. My ear and lip are stinging and his face is still bright red.

He didn’t know what he was doing,” Marjorie says. “He didn’t mean to hit you.”

I can’t help but be annoyed and shocked. This has happened before but not in a long time.

He’s already watching television. He doesn’t listen to me any more than Jackson does. I look deep into his eyes, studying him. He’s in there somewhere. He is staring straight into my eyes but he doesn’t see me. I take his jaw gently but firmly in my hand to hold his face still while I look deeper, trying to make a connection. I only see my own reflection in the black pits of his pupils. Now I look past his eyes and study my reflection. I am intense and it’s a look that would scare most people. It scares me a little and I’m glad Tweedle doesn’t see me.

I let go of his face and schlep to the bathroom. I’m shaken. I check my lip. It’s not too bad. I’ll live.

Marjorie decides not to go to Angel’s reception. She says she knows I have unfinished business and will be at her trailer when I’m finished. She kisses me and hugs her arms around my shoulders and neck. I don’t get a sense of insecurity or jealousy from her at all. It is an unspoken act of support and I know she knows I’ll come home to her.

Tweedle and I stand in a long line at the convenience store. It's the kind you get in at a wedding reception to wish the bride and the groom well. Only this line is not moving, instead the honoree, Angel, is making her way down the line of well-wishers. It would seem that way she can control the amount of time she spends with each person. It's all very organized and Angel's mother is policing the line to make sure the mob is orderly and single file. I stand facing square ahead of me, but I'm watching Angel's movements with my peripheral vision. I keep switching places with the person to my right so I move farther down the line away from her. I am very discrete about it. I'm not going to cause a ruckus or create a scene or anything.

I am very much aware of my heart beating, and being aware of my heart beating is causing me to sweat a little. As I switch places for the last time (I've reached the end of the line for the fifth time), I wind up right in front of the old Buick air conditioner in the convenience store and feel instant relief from the heat.

Ida Mae says, "Hasn't Mavis done such a wonderful job with the decorations?"

"Yeah, festive," I say. "The cake is a nice touch." I really don't want to make small talk right now, rather I want to be left alone with my thoughts.

Angel's mom, Mavis, locked the door yesterday afternoon and hung welcome home banners, balloons, and crepe paper streamers. She ordered a huge rocket-shaped cake dotted with silver beads as stars from the Sweet Shop Bakery. Scrawled in silver icing across a chocolate sky are the words: "Congratulations! First stop - Starlite 6: Next - the sky's the limit!" There are a couple of six-foot long folding tables set up in front of the counter by the cash register. The tables are draped with yellow paper tablecloths and lined with plastic forks, cups, plates and napkins. The cake is in the center flanked by two jugs of lemonade and a punch bowl. Scattered at each end of the table are an assortment of cookies, an unopened can of mixed

nuts and a couple of bags of chips. It's all very sweet and makes me feel sick to my stomach, but it could be all the coffee I had earlier or not sleeping last night.

My attention is diverted back to Angel who is making her way down the reception line. I can see a pattern developing. If the person is a girlfriend from high school she holds her arms wide open and above her head while they both simultaneously squeal each other's names, followed by a hug while both girls sway only their upper bodies back and forth from left to right a few times like a clock pendulum.

She uses a handshake for people that she wants to keep at arms' length away from her. First, she locks her elbows stiffly, clasping their right hand with hers, and then clamping her left fingers over their right thumb as if she might twist it in a karate maneuver in case they try to move any closely to her. That handshake seems to be reserved for people like Janet Miracle, who either doesn't have running water in her trailer or her obese size prevents her from fitting into the slim shower stall, in other words she doesn't smell-fresh.

I am relieved that Angel is not in a big hurry. She is pacing herself. Two more lookie-loos get in line behind me and I politely switch places with them, pretending that I want to stand near the air conditioner.

This whole thing reminds me of an old black-and-white movie that starred Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn, *Roman Holiday*. She was a princess and had a rip-roaring time in Rome incognito with Gregory Peck, who was a journalist and well aware of who she was. By the end of the movie he had fallen hopelessly in love with Audrey Hepburn, I mean, who wouldn't? Peck and his photographer buddy went to the palace to expose her, creating a major scandal for her and journalistic stardom for Peck, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Then Hepburn broke ranks and royal protocol to shake hands with all the reporters. She made her way down

the line of men calmly, just like Angel is now, but Hepburn was only doing it so she could get to Peck one last time.

I glance down the line at Angel. Could she be doing that now? Making her way down the line to get to me? I can't help but notice that she is wearing a sundress that fits tightly until it reaches her waist where it flairs away from her body and is what I would call flirty. She wears a low heeled strappy sandal and she is bare legged. Her legs are the color of honey. The dress is just a shade lighter than her honey-colored eyes, honey-colored skin, honey-colored hair. She is the color of honey. She probably even smells like honey. Tastes like honey.

I have got to get control of myself. I have to remember why I am here in the first place. I'm not going to cave like Gregory Peck did. She is no Audrey Hepburn. I am going to expose her for the fraud that she is and write a Pulitzer Prize winning news article.

I fold my hands together in front of me and take deep deliberate breaths. She is close enough to me now that I can hear her voice and distinguish a random word or two. She is holding hands with Mrs. Glover, her senior high school English teacher. They face each other holding hands, lacing all their fingers together, both have their arms open wide to each other and all four elbows are stiffly locked into place. It looks like they are getting ready to play a game of Mercy, but it does not appear that either have a death grip on the other, rather they seem to be enjoying the conversation and now Mrs. Glover is motioning to a young girl at her side, who I suppose is a granddaughter or niece.

Angel laughs and briefly looks directly at my face. Her eyes show acknowledgment. My first response is to turn my head in embarrassment that I am caught staring at her. You know, squint and pretend I am reading a sign just over her head or something, but instead I stand my ground and just return a stare. Now I get a sick feeling inside, like when you think some hot girl

is waving at you and you wave your fool hand off, only to discover that she was waving at someone behind you. I casually turn to see if there is someone behind me. There isn't.

She hugs Mrs. Glover briefly. Now there are only four or five people between us. I am ready to get this over with but at the same time I start getting that panicky feeling. I want to run away and hide in my pig hut with my pig brothers, but it is better that I face this here. I may never get another chance to put her in her place again. I can't let her get away with duping all these good folks into believing she is something she is not. I mean, who the hell does she think she is anyway? Brady Lyman?

"Cody," Angel says. Hearing her say my name startles me a little. My blood runs cold but the surface of my skin is as hot as an electric hotplate. I feel as if I am going to spontaneously combust. She gently touches both of my biceps with her cool hands, invading my personal space. My limbs have all turned to stone. I am a statue. As she moves in closer to me, I get a whiff of her hair being blown around by the air conditioner. Sweeter than honey. She no longer has the same effect on me though. My heart is tangled and tethered with Marjorie. Marjorie is the real deal, never pretending to be anything except what she is. Pure and good.

She says, "You came." And she kisses me squarely on the mouth.

I didn't expect that. Gregory Peck and I are very much alike in some respects, but I muster up courage, point in her face, and say in a loud gruff voice, "Fraud."

She shushes me and pulls me out the door onto the porch.

I say again, "You're nothing but a lying snake. What the hell is the matter with you?"

"You mean the screenwriting thing?"

“Yes, I mean the screenwriting thing, you horrible movie whore. What could you possibly gain?” I point at the clipping taped to the window of the concession stand. “How could you do such a thing?”

“I tried to call you but you never pick up. I wanted you to straighten this all up with Uncle B. He let himself get all carried away with this movie business.” She takes hold of my shirt and pulls me to the back of the store where Katie and I saw Old Mr. B on a ladder just a few days earlier. “Katie was going to straighten it out, but she got arrested and had her own problems to deal with. It wouldn’t do much good. Uncle B and my mom wouldn’t listen to me or Katie. But *he* would have listened to you.”

“You are now dragging Katie into this rotten scheme? I don’t even know who you are.” I’m walking around in circles. This isn’t like *High Plains Drifter* at all.

The life has left her cheeks and eyes. “I’m just an intern for the production company. A lousy unpaid intern, lucky to get the chance to serve coffee. But I never claimed to write anything. That was all in Uncle B’s mind. He built it up to be something it never was.”

“Oh,” I say and push the dirt around with my flip flop.

“Can you imagine how embarrassing it has been?” She waves her arms around at the red building. “All this hoopla? And, oh my God, the interview with the newspaper. Took me an hour to explain to them I did nothing more than make coffee for the crew.”

“You sent me a screenplay though that you claimed to have written. What about that?”

She stares at me with a blank expression as if I had just stabbed her in the neck. “Yes, I sent a screenplay that I wrote. For a class. It was about you and me. I had hoped you’d read it and see I was thinking of you.”

“Oh,” I say, pushing more dirt. “I didn’t read it.”

“No shit.” She is pissed off at me at this point. It is just like a woman to turn it around. Make me the enabler somehow just because I didn’t read her stupid screenplay.

“I didn’t know.”

“Well, thank you for all your help. All your letters I never got. All your support.”

She’s right, I think. I’m a shit. I have no response. I try to think of what Clint Eastwood would say, but he’s too cool to be this shitty.

She’s stands there breathing deeply and the color has flushed back into her cheeks. Then she turns and leaves me standing there. All I can think is that my mom was right; I should have called her.

Chapter 20
Twenty Tiny Minutes

Friday morning 9:43 a.m.

You've heard the phrase, it's like a zoo in there or here or wherever? Today it is like a zoo, circus, jungle, insane asylum, day care, and carnival all rolled into a bundle of nerves. If I didn't know any better, I'd think this is a sign meant to warn us of some impending doom.

Tweedle seems to know there is something in the air. He has a worried look on his face, but I think he is just upset with me because I boxed up half his Weedeater parts yesterday. He had a lawn mower grass catching bag in his closet that I accidentally dumped in the middle of his bedroom floor. Now the whole trailer smells like gasoline and moldy grass cuttings. Good reason for us to vacate the premises. So we gather up his backpack and head down to Katie's for the morning brew.

Before we cross the first gravel road, we run into Little Drunk Larry. He is sweating beer from his pores and waving a hand-printed stack of flyers at me. He says, "Don't miss you chance to win a side of beef. Two dollars a chance?"

"Beef, huh?" I say. I give him the look and am skeptical. "Where did you get a side of beef?"

"I found it fair and square. Butchered it myself out at the Marshall's farm. You can ask Marshall yourself. He'll tell you."

Tweedle goes on ahead of me, as if he knows where I am headed. I dig into my pocket and buy two tickets. I wouldn't dare eat the beef, but I want to lessen the chances of one of my neighbors dying from E. coli poisoned beef.

“Thanks, buddy. Tell all your friends,” Little Drunk Larry says. He tears two of the flyers in half, cramming pieces in his front pocket, and handing me two scraps of papers that are supposed to be raffle tickets.

“Oh, I’ll be warning my friends.” I just realized that I may have saved someone’s life. That four dollars is enough for Little Drunk Larry to buy a six-pack of beer and stay out of the ticket selling business for maybe thirty minutes to an hour.

I see that some of my neighbors have staked claims to a particularly good viewing spots near the playground. The chairs are lined up in front of the screen like a sideshow at the carnival and it is full of misfit trailer park freaks. Ida Mae is barefoot sitting cross-legged on the ground because there isn’t a lawn chair large enough to sustain her weight. She has a Wal-mart plastic bag in her hand. She opens it and, using her large breasts as a shelf, she dumps out a huge pile of individually packaged Hostess Twinkies, ding-dongs, chocolate cupcakes, Little Debbie oatmeal cookies and snack cakes. Four or five of her little kids gather around her, picking treats off her enormous boob shelf. I can’t look away. It’s like a train wreck. I’ve never seen anything quite like it before. It’s a little frightening.

Katie is in her kitchen holding a bottle in baby girl’s mouth. She says, “I was wondering if you were ever coming back. Your cup is always where you can find it.”

I start to say I’m sorry, but she gives me the look and I just quietly pour my coffee.

She says, “I’m gonna be fine, Cody. I say good riddance to my fiasco of a marriage. I knew he was a louse, but I don’t give up that easily.” She puts the baby girl on the floor and the bottle in the sink. “I’m stubborn, I guess.”

I smile. “You’re not stubborn. You’re a dreamer. People like you make this world a better place.” I pour sugar into my cup. “You’re better off without that asshole. I never did like him. He was never good enough for you.”

“I know. I’m not done with men. I’m just done with him. Not that I need a man. I can take care of myself. I’ve been doing it our whole marriage. I just have one less child to take care of now.”

I say, “So what will you do now?”

She pours Dr. Pepper into her Big Gulp cup. “I’m going to take classes. Get a degree in something healthcare related. Maybe ultrasound or X-Ray. Make this shit-hole trailer into a decent place for my kids.”

I know she’ll do it. She’s strong like my mom. “So, we’re okay? You’re not mad at me for not telling you right off?”

“I couldn’t be mad at you. You were just trying to protect me.”

I laugh. “Yeah, everyone knows you don’t need protecting. You tore that bitch up.”

“She pissed me off,” she says, laughing.

“I kind of let you and Angel down. I have no one to blame but myself. I wasn’t listening. I was in my own head making up conspiracy theories.”

“It wasn’t your mess to straighten out. Angel should have put an end to Old Mr. B’s delusions a month ago.” She drinks her DP and rinses out the baby girl’s bottle. “It wasn’t your fault, Cody.”

“See you at the movies?”

Marjorie and I drag a couple of old lawn chairs down to the front by the old playground and sit and hold hands waiting for the movie to start. I go on a bit about how many movies I had seen from there. I'm a little nostalgic and actually having a good time. My mom comes down and drags Marjorie off to the concession stand so she can show her off to my aunts. I roll my eyes but I know it's a mom thing and I'm glad she and Marjorie are friendly. Besides, I've already seen this movie twice and I know Marjorie isn't missing anything.

The Paradise Twin has turned into a freak show and Old Mr. B is turning around in circles, but the running of the projector is second nature to him and the movie starts precisely at dusk, just like the good old days.

Friday night 9:43 p.m.

As soon as I see the flames shooting into the air, I know it is my trailer. I know because everyone in the crowd turns to look at me, and they join together to become a unified mass with the intention of staying between me and my blazing trailer. It is me alone against a mob of twenty-five in the ultimate game of Red Rover. Looking for the weakness in the human chain, I tear into the crowd with a surge of adrenaline, the kind of adrenaline that can lift automobiles. There is only one thought in my mind. Tweedle.

I am shouting his name in a voice I don't recognize.

Today the City has a fire truck and ambulance on stand by for the movie screening, just in case, and I can hear the sirens loudly wailing as they weave their way through the park. It only takes a minute or so for the fire truck to reach the burning trailer, only causing me to panic even more so. Hands are grabbing hold of me but I am like a slippery fish flaying madly on the floor of a bass fishing boat. Their fingers latch onto my sleeves or the hem of my shirt but I tear free. A few have small pinches of my skin and I tear free of those too, causing the flesh to be

ripped away. I would rip off my own arms and legs to get to Tweedle. The thought of him being trapped in a burning trailer has me beyond my mind's ability to think.

It is not unlike when I was a child and the Tweedle boys were atop the slide. I saw them crash to the ground. I watched the boys fall, but I couldn't make it to them in time. First Martin. Then Mason right on top of him, falling into a tangled heap of ragged steel slide parts, limbs and blood, cracking his head open on the concrete and crushing Martin beneath him. I should have been watching them. I had been distracted, enjoying the movie, when I should have been watching the little kids. As the oldest, it was my responsibility to watch over them.

I am yelling inaudible words now that sound like the curse words Tweedle was saying yesterday when he was so mad at me. Somewhere in the heart of the crowd I lose what is left of my shirt. Hunks of my flesh have been scratched off and it feels like my whole body is a mass of carpet burns.

I am still fighting my way, just like the tug of war that Tweedle and I engaged in yesterday, but they have a good hold of me and I'm not getting anywhere. I am scanning the faces in the crowd, searching for his face, and hoping to find him safe, but I'm so distraught that I don't seem to recognize any of these people. Just like Tweedle yesterday, I finally quit struggling. They are not going to let me go.

I see my mom at the head of the crowd and she has a terrified look on her face, which I imagine mirrors mine. She must have thought of me in the fire the way I am thinking of Tweedle. I remember looking into Tweedle's eyes yesterday and seeing my intense reflection and I try to picture what his eyes looked like. If there was any acknowledgement at all.

My mom is yelling something, but it is like I have lost my hearing. I can't hear her over all the noise of the crowd. She makes her way through the mob and hugs me tightly. Black mascara tears stream down her face and she says, "Oh, thank God."

I am sobbing Tweedle's name over and over unable to make myself stop. The trailer is engulfed in flames and I can't just stand here doing nothing. Panic sets in once again and I pull free of my mom and escape from all the clutching hands. I only take a few steps before I stumble and fall. The fire is intense with heat and I can feel the flames as if they are burning through my skin.

I get to my feet to be met by Tom. He takes hold of my shoulders and says, "He's safe, Cody. He's in the ambulance."

I collapse. My adrenaline is spent. Tom wraps an arm around my shoulder and helps me to the ambulance where Tweedle sits on the back wearing a fireman's hat, swinging his legs and smiling, without a care in the world. I grasp him to my chest and hug him tightly. "Thank you, God," I pray. "I couldn't stand to lose another Tweedle."

Old Mr. B is talking to the fire marshal. Marjorie catches a glimpse of me and rushes to the ambulance. She wraps her arms around my neck and head. I feel moisture on my skin where her tears touch me. She says, "Are you okay? I thought..." but she can't finish the sentence.

"I wasn't anywhere near the fire," I say. "I'm fine."

She looks me over and then Tweedle. The EMT tends to my gashes, cleans and bandages the claw marks on my forearms and shoulders. My mom has not left my side and reaches over to touch my arm or back as if she is checking to make sure I am still there, even though she can clearly see me.

Everyone files past us at the back of the ambulance, patting my shoulder and mussing Tweedle's hair. Someone brings me a t-shirt. Another hands me a cold beer. And Tweedle a bottle of orange juice. A bag of potato chips. Next thing I know someone puts a ten dollar bill in my ball cap, which I had lost when I was trying to escape the crowd. As each of my friends and neighbors pass, they drop money in the hat and say something like, "Thank goodness you are safe."

Several lookie-loos are snapping photographs or taking video to post on YouTube. Old Mr. B and Tom are talking to the Fire Marshal. I go stand between them, shoulder to shoulder. My mom joins us, slipping in between Tom and me. She leans into Tom putting her head into the crook of his neck and shoulder. I watch him put his arm around her shoulder and kiss the top of her head. We stand in silence together watching the fire burn. Marjorie stands so close to me; I can feel the heat from the fire bounce off her skin which glows as it's lit by the fire. I take her hand in mine and kiss each of her knuckles. Now we all just watch and wait. It is as if the fire will reveal its meaning to us if we look deep enough. Fire is such a beautiful thing. Wild and free, almost liquid in appearance like a kaleidoscope of brilliant gold and deep orange. Deep in the heart of this fire beast I see purple and bright green. Strange. There are crackling sparks and burning chunks of debris that float into the air, embers I guess they call it. Embers that are maybe the wooden dog from Jackson's dresser, the old blue recliner, counterfeit bills, or the millions of little scraps of paper that were pieces of my fiction stories. I've never studied fire that is destroying someone's home before—only the friendly type of fire that is at a campsite or in my aunts' fireplace. The kind of fire that is meant to warm you, not destroy you. A contained fire. This one is different in smell also. I never thought how a house fire smells either. Burning insulation and plastic siding smells, well, like burning insulation and plastic siding. Not like the

pleasant wood burning smell to which our senses are so accustomed. I don't even have to describe it because you can just recall how it smells. It must be a deep-rooted human instinct that has been passed down through our lineage. Our need for fire and our lack of control of it.

As I stand here watching the fire, I realize how completely I am not in control. Although I had cleaned up some of Tweedle's gas engines, I'm sure I shouldn't have had them in the trailer to start with. There isn't anything I could have done. Only now, it does not feel like a weakness—for the first time in my life I can cut myself some slack. Everything about this fire has reminded me of the Tweedle brothers' accident and I'm starting to realize that I had no more control that night than I have had tonight. It wasn't my fault.

The firemen are dousing the fire, but it appears they are only attempting to keep it from leaping to another trailer tender box. It's a total loss, although it wasn't much to start with. Even though my entire life has just burnt to the ground in just twenty tiny minutes, this is the happiest moment of my life.

I stay up all night drinking coffee with the volunteer firemen and watch it smoke and smolder. They douse it now and again and rake it around a bit, but luckily no other trailers caught fire. Right before dawn, I wander down to the playground ghost town and climb the rung-less ladder. Remembering all the movies and fun we had on Friday nights.

Chapter 21

I stand around in the smoldering remains of my trailer. I'm at a loss as to how to begin cleaning this mess up. I pick up a piece of broken window glass and hold it for a minute before releasing it back to the ground. My neighbor, Duke's owner, comes over with a shovel and without saying a word begins shoveling debris into the big dumpster Old Mr. B dropped off early this morning. Soon there are ten or twelve people sifting through the ashes and clearing it away. Even Pickle from the pawn shop is there with a backhoe.

I was never in this by myself. I was always surrounded with good people who look after each other. The whole mess is cleared away and in the dumpster within three hours.

I guess that Aunt Trixie won't get her newspaper bundles any more since Jackson lost his job. There was a nice article about the house fire on the front page of the *Chickasha Express* this morning, attributing the fire to a faulty air conditioner, fueled by gasoline engine parts, but the Fire Marshal deemed it as accidental.

There was some back and forth last night about Tweedle's well-being, but my mom is his rightful guardian and Tom said he'll pull strings with the judge if it comes to that; so Tweedle settled right into his old room at my mom's. I'm not sure exactly sure what he thought about the fire, but it hasn't seemed to traumatize him in any way. He doesn't even seem to miss me. Not nearly as bad as I am going to miss him. He's always in the Paradise Twin.

I go to Marjorie's trailer and put my head on her lap. She runs her fingers through my hair at my temples. "It's Sunday and we're expected at my aunts' for lunch." I'm exhausted.

She says, "Your spirit animal isn't a pig, Cody." Her fingernails are electrifying. "I saw it in the fire. It's a bird. A phoenix."

"Phoenix," I sit up. "You do this paralegal class online, right? From anywhere?"

“Yes, but especially from Phoenix.”

That’s all I needed to hear. We go outside, take down the skirting of her camper, and unhook the utilities; I back my pickup and hitch it to her trailer. We’re getting into the truck and I say, “I’ll never make you sleep on the fourteenth floor of a hotel, marry you in any place except a church, or unhook the trailer in the middle of the night and leave you.”

“Can we get a kitten?”

“Oh, man. I don’t know. We’ll have to talk about that.”

“We have about a thousand miles until you agree.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m deathly allergic. Besides aren’t you superstitious?” I say as we pull out of the Paradise Twin.

“You know Clint Eastwood works toward finding homes for stray cats in LA. We’ll get a yellow cat.”

By the time we pass the Dairy Queen on our way to my aunts’ house, she’s already named our future kitten.