

AND THE RAIN
CAME
DOWN

S. A. BAILEY

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For my father, Gregory Stephen Bailey, who left me with a great appetite for many things, the least of which was a love of books, and a natural animosity toward every windmill along the path.

I miss you, Coach.

~ About the Author ~



S. A. Bailey was born on June 12, 1979 in Bridgeport, Texas. He grew up in Athens Texas graduating High School there in 1998. He is the son of a High School Spanish Teacher and high school football coach/history teacher. S. A. Bailey attended college locally. His degree is in Criminal Justice. S. A. Bailey also served four years in the United States Army. He was Airborne Infantry, serving with Echo 51st Long Range Surveillance unit during the Iraq War. S.A. Bailey is also a self-professed “itinerant gun nut” and shooting enthusiast. *And The Rain Came Down* is his first novel and centers on his growing up in East Texas while showing the frequent surrealism found in the lore of small town life in East Texas. S. A. Bailey makes his home in Dallas, Texas, where he maintains an active writing schedule and a loyal fan-base.

-Acknowledgements from S. A. Bailey -

This was a long work in progress. It's very first seeds were planted while I was still serving in Iraq, a useful tool to while away the 90% boredom that war has always been said, and often proven, to be. It took a long time before I even realized there was a story to tell in the jumbled mass of short stories, poems, notes, and chicken scratch I had amassed before turning my energies into producing this modest first novel. I would be lying if I did not admit much of it was written as a form of therapy, though I did not realize this at the time. Therapy for what exactly, I'll leave for another work.

Indeed, this is a work of pure fiction, no matter how therapeutic it may have been for me to write. While there are certainly truths here, of that have no doubt; they are not specific, and appear in no discernible depth, length, or breadth to leave speculation. You either get it, or you don't.

I am fortunate to have grown up in a unique and colorful part of the world, East Texas, specifically Athens, Texas, which I will always consider home. East Texas is, for good and bad, the ragged edge of the Old South, and all that it entails. East Texas is a character all its own. I am also fortunate to have served with a great bunch of dirtbags, specifically, Echo Company, 51st Inf (Abn) (LRS) from the Spring of '02 to Spring of '05, which obviously includes our tour during the invasion of Iraq and OIF-1. Extra special shout out to Second Platoon.

Because of the nature of the story, and the necessarily shared history I have with the protagonist, the characters in this story are all amalgamations and juxtapositions of many people I've known in my life. No character within, especially the main character, Jeb, escapes this. I'm nowhere near as tough, or as interesting, as he is.

This novel took many forms along the way, and I would be remiss, if I did not publicly thank certain people for their effort in helping me make it a much better, richer story.

Greg Bean, writer, novelist, and editor extraordinaire, who convinced me I really did need to rewrite it. Nothing should be quite as dark as the original

version, and no audience should probably be subjected to that. Thank you, friend, for your knowledge and insight.

To the girls, Jane Bailey, Don (hehehe) and Anne Andrews, Mary Ann Tyner, and Danae Rockwood, for giving me honest answers, opinions, and assessments. You all know what I think of you.

I have to thank Shellen Snowden for the same, her enduring friendship, and her honest answers about what it's like being the spouse of a veteran, and the battles they face. If only they gave medals. One of my favorite people.

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A super special thanks goes out to Noël Daley, for making my manuscript both legible and "proper." I'm a writer, not a speller. For the super cool, awesome, outstanding cover design which I am so proud, I have to thank Christina McCall and Lucas Bailey, for putting together something I was not smart enough to describe. Thank you both so much.

I said that a big part of this was therapy, so I would be greatly in the wrong, if I did not thank the people who had been there for me in my darkest days. For providing inspiration, insight, advice, an ear to listen, a beer to drink, or simply having my back, I have to thank, in no particular order: Lucas Bailey, Jeremy Basore, Ryan Lavoie, Rocky Clapp, Garland Curtis Watson, Jr., Adam Smith, Rob Smith, and Michael Farmer; and from another life, for the same, and for being there, and themselves when it has always mattered the most: Perry Gilliam, Michael Records, Thomas Grove, Matt Russell, Raymond English, Joshua Schmidt, Scott Zivoder, Christopher Condra, Lukus Collins, Vincent Harbort, and Eric Pazz. There are many more, but to continue would require another volume, and like I said, another work.

I actually owe Eric, special thanks, because I totally ripped off his survival school story for my protagonist. He'll get a beer in return, and like it. Each of these men is my brother, and I love them deeply.

And to two I'll see in the next life, Spc. Spencer Timothy Karol and Sgt. Coleman S. Bean, two different kinds casualties of the same war. I cry every day. Godspeed.



1

In the darkness she stirred, nuzzling perfect hips against me, seeking warmth from the chill that crept through the window above our bed. She tugged on my arm, bringing me closer, until our bodies found each other, our hips settling into a comfortable embrace. I felt the warm streak of a single happy tear slide down my cheek toward her and thought, *Please, baby, let it be okay.*

We'd fought earlier that night. It had been an odd, rambling affair that leapt viscosly from one extreme to the other. As usual she'd been working late, trying to make ends meet, and had come home to find me not making dinner, cleaning the house, or filling out college applications, but sitting in the dark nursing a tumbler of Jack Daniels, watching the latest footage explode across television as two talking heads took the opposing views on a war neither really knew anything about, and a life that had left me far behind.

I didn't even realize she was there until the light flickered on. I watched as her eyes went from me, to the

television, to the drink in my hand, to the .45 on the table beside my dog-eared volume of S. S. Sassoon. I could see anger building behind her eyes like dark clouds rolling across a prairie sky. She didn't say anything as she took it all in. Surely there was still time for me to prevent a fight. I wasn't drunk; I hadn't even been drinking, not really. Just floating in my own space; that's all, really. I wasn't in Iraq, just watching the news. The gun wasn't in my mouth, hell; it wasn't even in my hand. It was just sitting on the table, in its holster, where I'd left it when I'd come home from work. We didn't have to fight.

"What the fuck's your problem?" I asked. I always knew just what to say. Lightning crackled behind her eyes, and then, the rain came down. The usual things were said, the usual accusations made, the usual door slammed. When it was over, I sat simmering in my usual mix of anger, fear, and shame. I poured another finger into my glass, and stared into the void, into the comfort awaiting me at the bottom. Wondering when I'd become such a goddamn loser. She deserved so much better. I wasn't the man I was supposed to be. I couldn't stay in school, I couldn't hold a real job, couldn't seem to maintain. Stopped going to the V.A. Stopped seeing the shrinks, stopped taking the goddamn pills they handed out like candy.

We'd fought about these things and others, with an ever-increasing frequency that frightened me. She had every right to be mad. I was not the man I promised her I'd be. I wasn't the man she needed or deserved. I had no idea who I was. Hanging my head, I showered before crawling silently into bed, leaving the whiskey on the table, longing for the peace and certainty of its sweet, sweet oblivion.

I was thinking about how I'd never be good enough for her, probably never had, when she pulled me to her. The touch of her skin brought so many things: relief, joy, hope. I wasn't good enough for her, but maybe she saw something that was. Maybe I could, one day, be the one she needed and deserved. Her touch brought other things, things I wouldn't wake her for. I didn't deserve them, not

then. I might not ever deserve anything she had to offer. I doubted I ever had.

As I tried unsuccessfully to will away my errant erection, embarrassed by my weakness, fighting both tears and desire, she reached back and gently stroked my shame.

“Not mad anymore, huh, soldier?” she asked. Her voice was as soft, sweet, and warm as an opium dream. I tried to speak but only managed a gasp. She rolled over, and saw the tears rolling silently down my face.

“What’s wrong, baby?” she asked. My lips struggled, around a thousand useless words.

“Oh, baby, don’t be that way. It’s only a fight. We’ve had those before,” she said, wrapping around me, providing comfort and warmth and offering protection, from myself, from my nature

“I know but...” I croaked, sounding like a weak old man, or a frightened child.

Her lips met mine, shushing me as she pulled herself up, straddling me. Our eyes were locked as she pulled my thickness inside her, and before I knew it I was lost, in the only place I’d ever really wanted to be.

The next morning I was dicing onion and peppers for my omelet, thinking about my workout later that afternoon, as the last of my venison sausage thawed in the microwave. Probably the only game I’d bag that year and it was already gone. Hard to hunt when your rifle’s in the pawnshop.

It didn’t matter though, between the Winistral I’d injected before running a hard five and going to town on the heavy bag before breakfast, as well as the night before, I felt a sense of elation that wouldn’t be bogged down by a mere lack of money. I had a few days off. I could do a lot of things. Look for a real job, for one. Get to work on the college applications, for another. Our mortgage was due; I could sell an organ, take care of that. I could do anything for Abigail.

Thinking about my financial obligations brought certain unpleasant certainties to bear. With them, the

realization that I had precious few skills, none of which were equitable in civilian life. And, as they had recently, brought with them the conversation I'd had with an old teammate, as he propositioned me with the prospect of going to work. Earlier that month, an old friend from my recon team had rolled through town for a weekend, before heading back to the Garden of Eden for his second term as a security contractor. He loved it, was making a name for himself, and wanted me to know I had a place the moment I was ready. He knew I wanted to, just knew I missed it. It was everything we'd loved about being soldiers at war, with much less of the bureaucratic bullshit. People knew their place, and either did their job or got taken care of. Whatever had been on your uniform didn't matter nearly as much as simply doing your job; as being a warrior.

Besides, the money was great. One year, I could have the house paid for, free and clear. I could go to school without killing myself to make ends meet. We could make a real start, instead of the one I'd rushed us into, thinking I had to capture the magic in a bottle before she came to her senses. I remembered his words that last night, just us; floating in the whiskey haze.

"Hair's getting long, you goddamn hippy," he said, tossing back his Jägermeister with a cough.

"Least it's not getting grey, old man," I said, laughing. I was older than he was. He ran a Mui-Thai callused hand through his thick black hair, flecked with grey. He shook his head, and pointed a hard finger my way.

"That shit's your fault, bitch. You did that," he said. Thankfully he was grinning when he did it, at peace with our history. It was my fault we were the only two left for our little reunion. "I know you miss it, Shaw. I know you're dying here. This isn't you, it never was," he said, his glass held against his cheek, the pink scar against his dark brown skin still against the movement of his jaw. "Besides, there's still a war on."

"You're wrong Ro. I'm happy here. I got a good woman."

“You got a woman that thinks you’re something else. Lie to her if you want, lie to yourself if you can. Don’t you dare, lie to me. I know you, motherfucker. You ain’t ever gonna be happy with this picket fence shit,” he said simply, without spite or malice. I didn’t say anything to that; didn’t think there was anything to say. Thought he was mistaken. I shook my head, trying to ignore the fact that there was still a lot of money to be made, doing something I was good at. By the time the venison thawed, I was pouring more coffee into my mug and trying to think about something else when the phone rang, nearly in tune with the microwave alarm. I answered it on the second ring.

“Hello.”

“Is this Jebediah Shaw?”

Christ, a bill collector, I thought.

“The one and only,” I said, wondering if he’d believe whatever lie I came up with.

“Goddamn son, how’s it going? This is Harold Cody Harrison the Third. Long time no see,” he said. Shit, I thought, as my teenage summers came rushing back after ten years and a thousand ill-fated adventures.

Harold Cody Harrison the Third was the last surviving male of one of the families that founded our little county. They owned more of it than not, creating a virtual monopoly in real estate. They either owned it outright, or had a good chunk of everything substantial in our little podunk corner of the world: from the piney woods to the prairie. The only reason they didn’t control everything local, was simply because they were too busy expanding. They owned politicians in at least three states, had fingers in pies from Dallas to Miami, and had enjoyed friendships with more than one President. I could only remember a brief time, as a teenager, when my brother and I first went to work on the Harrison family ranch, when I didn’t hate them.

I didn’t know why. But it probably had something to do with wasting several summers working way too hard on his family’s ranch to not be able to enjoy my own as much as he had famously enjoyed his. When you go to work

before you can drive to help pay rent, it doesn't take much to hate the very rich. And Harold knew it. He was the obligatory wild child that everyone loved. He could get out of hand, and get away with anything, as long as he smiled that golden smile afterward. He was a world traveler. I could remember once, shoveling horse shit in the barn when he'd just come back from Paris. He wouldn't shut up about it. I thought I was going to snap and stab him in the chest with a pitchfork. After his stepmother died, his father, Harold the second had a massive stroke, and he came home to take the reins of the family empire. I'd always thought of it as his ascension to the throne.

Maybe I hated them because everyone else always seemed to love them. They gave unfailingly to the local schools, to the hospital, to whichever charities where in vogue each year. Tax write-offs, sure, but who cares about that? They laughed at themselves in public and seemed to be as honest as you could expect anyone that rich to be. Maybe I simply hated them because they owned the bank that had held every note to every house I'd ever lived in. The one that had foreclosed on the family farm after the oil field crashed.

"What do you need, Buddy?" I asked. I remembered he didn't like being called Buddy. He cleared his throat before speaking.

"Well I hear you're working as a private investigator, and, uh, I might have some work if you're interested."

I looked at the battered Suunto on my wrist. I hadn't slept after our lovemaking, preferring to enjoy the glow's bask, holding her tight, feeling her heartbeat so close to mine.

"Hey Jeb, you there?" he squawked in my ear, breaking my reverie.

"Yeah, I'm here. Look, Buddy, I don't know what you were told but I'm not really a P.I. I work for one part time, but I'm just extra muscle..."

"You were highly recommended," he interrupted.

"By who?"

“My lawyer, J.J. Washburn,” he said.

That made sense. J.J. Washburn had inherited his father’s legal practice, and built upon it to become one of the most prominent legal names in the area. His name and likeness were splashed on billboards from Dallas to Shreveport.

Unlike Buddy, who was several years older, I’d actually gone to school with J.J. The thought that somebody who’d graduated high school only a couple of years before me already had a thriving legal practice, while I still couldn’t force myself to finish my B.A. didn’t bother me as much as the fact that my wife’s boss was trying to throw me a bone. He was always trying to get me to work for the P.I. his firm used. I didn’t know if he was trying to help us or get in her pants.

I also wasn’t very interested in going back to work for the Harrisons, and besides, it would be against the law for me to work without consent from my employer as well, since he held the license. Not that it would be a problem. Not only would he be at the racetrack all weekend, he was also my oldest friend. He wouldn’t mind.

“If nothing else, just come out and talk to me. Hell, catch up,” he said. I thought about it. Extra money would be nice; I needed all I could get. Buddy had lots of money.

“Yes,” I said.

“Remember how to get out here?” he asked. I’d spent a fair portion of my childhood sweating on his ranch and probably still knew it better than he did.

“When,” I asked.

“You want breakfast?”

It was tempting; I remembered the layout his father could rollout when he was feeling generous. But I still had to clean up, and besides, I was busy perfecting the omelet.

“How ‘bout afterward, does ten o’clock sound good?” I asked.

“You’re missing a helluva breakfast, but if you’re good with that I am,” he said. I told him I was and hung up, wondering where the day would take me.

2

The morning sun filtered through the odd mix of pine, oak, pecan, and cedar trees that marked our county as the edge of East Texas, and the end of the Old South. Further down the highway, as you made your way to the Dallas/Ft. Worth Metroplex, the thick lush foliage would gradually thin, along with the world I grew up in, a place that had remained, for better and worse, from another era. Out of time and tune as the world grew up around it. In the rearview, amid the rolling hills of pine and swampy river bottoms, a people and place, unique to both Texas, and the south, would fade as far away from this world as ghosts of the confederacy.

To be replaced by strip malls and other aberrations of glass and concrete, with chain coffeehouses that couldn't brew a decent cup if their lives depended on it. Filled with pretty, pretentious people who abhor violence, vote for whomever Hollywood tells them, and never learn how to hold the door open for a lady. The type of people who think they're smart because they've read Kafka, and sensitive

because they've read Chopra. The type of people who tell you they're not religious, but deeply spiritual. Thank you for your service to this country, they'd say, but let me tell you why you're so wrong, and why I'm so much smarter and better than you for going to college and making something of myself. I hated every single one of them.

Like all people who come of age in small rural towns, we'd always looked toward the nearest big city, in our case Dallas, as the quickest way out. It held the promise of higher education, employment, the chance to make something of ourselves, without being crippled by arthritis before we turned fifty. A place where the Klan didn't hold rallies on the town square, and children grew up without an overbearing religious presence, and adults weren't scared of MTV. But we would always see it through a strange filter that time, space, and distance had little effect on.

Church pastors warned of the dangers held inside the big, bad city. They warned of the acceptance of vice and the loss of virtue. Drugs and sin and violence, oh my! I learned early that you could get anything, and do anything you wanted to without even crossing the county line. The difference was that there, in the 'big city', sin was more anonymous, and when people judged you it was because they thought of themselves as God, instead of simply being his agent.

When I mustered out, that's where I went. Living with my brother, I gave college another try; it hadn't worked out. I hated college and the people I met there. I spent too much time in bars and no time at all in the library. I got in fights with everyone who I felt tried to judge me, including my brother. Once during a lecture, the professor, who was an aging hipster suffering from white guilt, went off in a politically fueled tirade about the evils of American Imperialism. My response was, well, unique. Maybe my personal history jaded me. Maybe he was a self-righteous asshole anyway. Maybe we both were. It didn't matter. I'd probably never be allowed on that campus again.

The cab of my old Ford rattled as I turned off the blacktop, over a cattle guard, and onto the estate. A quarter mile of pipe fence on either side framed the driveway. Behind the pipe, cows grazed lazily; Holsteins on one side, Angus on the other: dairy and beef. I passed a couple of Hispanics who were walking down the line, paint buckets in hand. I'd spent the better part of a summer, younger brother in tow, painting every inch of pipe on the place. I didn't envy them their job. They returned my wave, clearly as enthusiastic about their day ahead as I had been in their place.

The driveway eventually curved to the right; around the football field of lush St. Augustine they called a front yard; comfy grass even in winter. If we'd had a freeze, I would've been more impressed. It was early in the season still. But then, the only time we ever seemed to get snow was during Spring Break. God's sense of humor, I guess. Maybe he just wanted to validate the mythos. Pulled up next to brand new gray Chevy pickup and got out, stretching my legs, feeling my morning run. Officially it was winter, but we were in the middle of the worst drought anyone could remember, and it barely felt like early fall, much less a winter wonderland. It was cold enough, though, to feel the metal in my bones holding me together. The forecast finally projected rain. And, if it did, the temperature would drop, and I wouldn't be running again until it warmed up; that was for sure. I wasn't that tough, not anymore.

I looked past the house, toward the barn and stables. Not much had changed since the last time I'd been there. Everything had a fresh coat of paint, plus new trucks and tractors and everything else sat waiting to earn its keep. I didn't know what I'd been expecting. It'd barely been a decade yet. That was long time for me maybe; but not a working ranch. I shook my head and walked to the door.

As I raised my fist to knock a second time, the door swung inward and Jose, the ranch foreman, glared down at

me. He was dressed in faded wranglers, a Garth Brooks-style brush popper shirt faded fifteen years past its prime, and narrow-toed boots that made my feet hurt just looking at them. Grey streaked through his moustache and hair, and I figured he had to at least be in his fifties by now. We'd never really gotten along, though I couldn't remember why.

"Wait in the study. Buddy will be along," he said through a scowl.

"Surprised you ain't been put out to pasture yet. Gettin' grey and all," I tossed it at him as I walked through the door. He scoffed behind me, muttering unintelligibly in his native Spanish.

The study was really a game room at the back of the house. It contained a bar, pool and poker tables, sofas and chairs of deep, rich, red leather. The cases along the walls were filled with guns I couldn't afford and busts of animals I'd never be able to hunt, and a bar so expensively furnished Jack Daniels was the well. The back wall was glass, and afforded a view of the heated pool and the rolling pasture behind it. I watched the sun reflect diamonds off the water's surface, and started to remember why I'd stopped working for this family.

I was pouring a cup of coffee from the carafe just inside the door, shaking my head at a huge bear in one corner, standing on its hind legs and baring its fangs, trying to ignore the bar, and the scotch that promised to be older than I was. I thought a seventy-dollar bottle of Macallan was extravagant. What I saw on the bar probably cost as much as my mortgage payment. Fucking rich people, I thought. If he took too long I might go ahead and have a taste.

I was saved from myself by Buddy, who came bounding down the stairs, smiling the smile of moneyed confidence.

"Nice one, huh? Got him in Alaska couple of years ago." What could I say to that? I'd never gone to Alaska to hunt bear. I wasn't even sure I wanted to anymore.

"I got an ancestor, died on the trail eating tainted

bear meat,” I said, the only thing I could think of. At least it was the truth. Hell, the poor bastard had been roving for his great-great-great grandfather.

“I didn’t eat that ol’ boy, that’s for sure.” He chuckled, sticking his hand out. His grip was firm under the manicure. It was that of a rich kid who’d done manual labor as a rite of passage and was content to leave it far behind.

“So, ol’ J.J. tells me you’re a detective now, that right?” he asked, pouring himself a cup from the carafe.

“Not exactly, it might be best if you told me what you need done. That way I can tell you whether or not I can do it,” I said, watching as he poured twice as much sugar into his cup than I had, and what looked like a gallon of milk.

“Well come on to the office, let’s talk about that,” he said, nodding to the door in front of the bar. I followed him into a decent sized office, about half the size of the game room and just as ornately furnished. Instead of guns behind glass cases, pictures hung between bookcases. Instead of a snarling bear, the head of a large Cape buffalo hung above the desk.

“Take a seat Jeb,” he said, sliding into the large captain’s chair behind the desk. I sank into the deep rich leather trying not to spill my cup. It would’ve been a sin to mar such fine craftsmanship. Once I was settled, I looked up and stared, transfixed on the Cape buffalo head high on his wall. There was something wrong with the bust, something out of place I couldn’t quite make. He noticed my focus.

“Cape bull, the old man got him in Africa.”

“Yeah,” I said, shortly. The biggest deer I’d ever bagged had been a mangled six point. On his land, out of season, with a spotlight, while half drunk. I didn’t think he’d appreciate that story though.

“How you been?” he asked. Great small talk! This had better be worth it, I thought.

“Not bad, how ‘bout yourself?” I asked, trying to

steer it ahead. He drank his makeshift latte. I wasn't sure he heard me. I kept looking at the head above him. There was something wrong about it. I just couldn't put my finger on it.

"You were in the army right? Did you go over there?"

"Did a year in Iraq."

"See any action?" What do you say to that?

"All I could find," I answered truthfully.

"How long have you been out?"

"Year and a half, there 'bout."

"Going to school?"

"I'm taking the semester off. I'll go back in the spring." Maybe, hopefully, I thought. If I find my brain, quit being a fuckup, I thought.

"You like detective work?"

"That's what I was trying to tell you, I'm not really a detective. My partner holds the license. Anything I do I'd need to clear through him, for legal purposes. If it's even something I can do, which I doubt."

"Why do you say that?"

"Tell you the truth; I'm not really much of a detective. What I do doesn't really require Sherlock Holmes."

"What do you do?" he asked.

"Help run down bail jumpers. Shakedown deadbeats that owe child support. Mainly I just stand around and look mean." And wonder when I turned into a loser and a bully.

"You any good at it?"

"Fair to middlin', I guess. It's not exactly rocket science," I said. He sucked on a tooth, nodding his head in thought.

While he thought I glanced back up at the bust on the wall, and realized the reason for my fixation. Entry wound. When a Cape buffalo charges, your best bet is to shoot just below the horns, at the top of the forehead. It was a hell of a shot, taken under an enormous amount of stress. It was old, and faded. The scar itself so faint it had taken

me that long to recognize what it was. It was a shot to be proud of. I spent a year as point man, running recon all over Iraq and had taken my share of stressful shots. I didn't think I could make that shot. I didn't want to try, anyway.

"I got to ask you something, so please don't get mad now," he started. Shit, I thought, that's always the first sign somebody's gonna piss you off. Don't get mad now, but . . . , here we go. "But, uh you manage to pay the bills, doing that? Doesn't sound like that work has a lot to offer? I imagine things get a little tight. Especially with the holidays and all," he said, leaving it where it sat.

"I make do," I said trying to keep my cool. Buddy owned the bank, ran the bank, and could find out anything he wanted to about my finances. He probably knew better than I did, just how deeply in debt I was, struggling to stay afloat, while he watched from shore. And there he was asking permission before he threw me a life preserver. Anger, my oldest friend and constant companion started to creep out of his box. I slammed the lid back down before he could reach out and put his hand on my shoulder. He wouldn't help, he never did. I tossed back the rest of my coffee imagining it was the scotch. It didn't help either.

"What do you need, Buddy?" I asked, watching a slight tick jump at the corner of his eye. He looked away, sipping his coffee.

"You remember my sister?" he asked, eventually.

Vaguely I did. There weren't as many years between me and her as there were between him and me, but enough. I probably wouldn't recognize her if she passed me on the street. She was in junior high when I graduated, but what I could remember was a bright, pretty girl, remarkably unaffected by her family's wealth. What I remembered was a girl who promised to be all things to all people: 4-H, student council, national honor society, cheerleader, homecoming queen. I could've mapped her life through graduation as surely as I'd been there for it. But I hadn't been there for it, and obviously something had gone wrong.

"A little bit."

“She should be in her sophomore year right now, down at Baylor. But, uh, well, you know the story,” he said, circling his hand in gestation.

“She fell in with the wrong crowd, partied too much. Grades went bad. You know, the usual. I let it pass; you’re only young once. Lord knows I’ve had my fun,” he said grinning. According to most people, he *still* had his fun, too—pushing forty full speed ahead. That must be one of the perks of never marrying, or having children of your own. Of course he practically raised his sister, so maybe he didn’t need the experience. Her mother died when she was still a little girl, and the old man had a stroke not long afterward and slid further into dementia every year. Why he wasn’t dead was beyond all logic. Buddy came home from his year abroad to handle the family business, and help raise his little sister. Driving a Porsche, and cutting a swath through the local supply of willing women.

“I pulled her out of school, brought her home. Put her in a program. She seemed to straighten out, even started seeing somebody in her program. I wasn’t sure about it, but they seemed to have something so what could I do? Long as they weren’t on the shit,” he said, taking a breath, and tapped his thumb against the desk top.

“Anyway, she started taking classes over in Tyler last summer, easing back into it, then started fulltime this fall. Well, she slid back into it, harder this time, heavier, doing bad things. Not just normal college stuff, bad shit. Showing her tits and God knows what else.”

“Stripping?”

“Yeah, other shit, too, maybe.”

“She still there?”

“No, she dropped off the fucking earth. Just poof, moved out of the apartment she was staying in, broke up with her boyfriend. She asked for money once, told me if she didn’t get it she’d start sending these movies she’d made to people we do business with, people that we’ve known us for years. Told me she didn’t have a choice in the matter.”

“You gave it to her?”

“What else could I do? In business, once your reputation’s gone, you’re gone. Besides, I thought maybe if I could get her to come to me for money, maybe I could keep her from doing some of the things she was doing,” he said shaking his head. I knew better than to ask if it did any good. At least I was that much of a detective.

“Did she contact you after that?”

“She showed up one night, while I was in Houston on business. She couldn’t get into any of the safes, but she took some things, china, silverware, a couple of pistols that were upstairs. Things she could get some money for.”

“Was anybody here?” I asked. He paused, rubbing his chin.

“Jose rolls Dad out every night it’s not too cold. It’s the closest thing to a vice he has anymore,” he said, shaking his head. “Anyway, Jose was making his rounds while Dad was outside. When he came back she was giving the old man a lap dance. Jose pulled her off and she pulled a gun on him. Haven’t seen or heard from her since. Dad hasn’t been the same. He’s getting worse every day. He wasn’t exactly well to begin with. He can’t have much time left.”

“And you want me to find her after all this? Maybe she’s just got to hit rock bottom. My experience, that’s usually what it takes.” I told him, then wished I hadn’t. My experience was none of his business.

“I know, I know. But it’s for Dad. He can’t have much time left, I hope he doesn’t, anyway. Not in his condition. It’ll mean so much if we can straighten her out just long enough to give him some peace of mind. Even before he started getting bad he couldn’t be as active in her life as he was when I was growing up. He was just too old. And she looks so much like her mother, it hurts him so much to see her like this,” he said. He’d stopped moving around so much. He was making an effort to look me in the eye.

“Can you find her for us? Bring her back?” he

asked. I didn't know what to tell him. I wasn't a detective.

When in doubt, tell the truth.

"I think this is a little out of my league. Even if I were to find her, I don't think she'd come willingly. Kidnapping's a felony."

"Don't worry about that. That's what lawyers and money are for."

"I still don't see why you want *me* to do this. I'm not a licensed investigator. Anything I do for you I'd need to run by my partner first; he holds the license."

"Or you could just be doing a favor for an old friend," he said, the look on his face one of salesmanship.

"Why not the police or your uncle? Wouldn't he look into this for you?"

"No cops, please. We gotta lotta irons in the fire right now, and news travels fast in the business world. Know what I mean?" When he spoke, 'the business world' sounded like it might have been an entirely separate planet. I decided I didn't like him any better than I had when I was fifteen.

"You don't want to ask your uncle for help?" I asked. 'King' Johnson was his mother's brother and had been sheriff for as long as anyone could imagine. He was a mean, old, racist bastard that I just remembered had stopped speaking to his brother-in-law when he married Buddy's stepmother, who was Mexican. Maybe I just love awkward situations.

"Well, I'd rather not involve him if at all possible. Things have always been a little...strained...between us. He never approved of the way I let Lucy run loose around the ranch. He wouldn't be happy to know she'd gotten herself mixed up in these things and I didn't tell him."

I thought about it anyway. It sounded out of my league, but I might know some people who could point me in the right direction. The way the world worked, she was probably shackled up with some struggling musician, smoking pot and denouncing capitalism and "The Man", whoever he was. The problem was that I was afraid if I told

Abbey what I'd be doing, she'd go nuts. But I also had bills to pay. Bread to win!

"I could probably poke around; ask some people that move in those circles some things. See if anything turns up."

"You know those people? You can do that?"

"I can try. I'd need to let my partner know what I'm doing, in case I have to talk to the cops. Also, if I do get lucky and turn something up, I'm not going to do anything dangerous without backup."

He sucked his tooth again, thinking about it.

"Okay," he said, darting his hand inside his desk. When he brought it back out there was a thick brown envelope sealed with tape. When it hit my hand it felt like a brick. Looking at it I waited for my feeble mind to click with activity.

"That's ten thousand dollars to start you off with. When she's back here I'll give you ten thousand more. How's that sound?" he asked, as if twenty thousand were nothing, and ten thousand milk money. I just stared. This wasn't a life preserver. It was a boat ride to shore. I could already feel sand between my toes.

"Do we have a deal?" he asked.

My mouth may have dropped open. Drool may have slipped out. He was probably already thinking this was a bad idea.

"Do you need a few minutes to think about it?" he asked.

"We have a deal," I said, and hoped I was being reassuring.

"Good, good," he paused, "just one thing. If you find her, and uh, the people she's with try to get, like, rough with you, will that bother you?"

I didn't think he was asking just what he was saying, but thinking had never been my strong suit, and for what he was putting on the table, I wasn't going to start.

"No."

"Hell, yeah! I knew you were the man for the job!"

He exclaimed, slamming his hands on the desk, excited.

He gave me a card with various numbers on it, asking me to check in at least once a day. I started to leave, and then the obvious popped in my head. Nothing to this detective stuff, nothing at all.

“You know the name of the guy she was seeing, from rehab?” I asked, turning back.

“Yeah, it was a local grease monkey named Hector some-shit. He was in your grade, went nut’s after his family got killed in a car wreck.”

“Hector *Sweeney*,” I asked, suddenly afraid of where the day was taking me.

“Yeah, you know him?”

“Yeah,” I answered, walking away. Well, shit.

Rumbling south down the highway toward town, I lit a menthol and cracked the window, trying to think. Not about Buddy Harrison, and his family’s ranch, or Hector Sweeney, and the misspent youth he’d had no small part in. I’d had plenty of time to not think about all the reasons I’d once left home for. I was thinking about another friend, the only one I really had anymore, and what he’d have to say about this particular undertaking. Since he was also my employer, and the one who held the license, his say-so was critical.

Halfway through the smoke I decided what I needed to say, and tossed it. Rolling up the window I pulled my cell and punched his home number. It buzzed several times before kicking over to his answering machine. I clicked it off without leaving a message, and looked at the clock on the dash. We’d spent the past two weeks busting ass so he could take off to the drag strip with his current deathtrap for the weekend. He was probably on his way there now. He’d probably be happy to give me the go ahead for anything as long as it left him to his passion. I punched in his cell number.

“What the fuck do you want?” he growled, more chipper than usual, the asphalt humming in the air behind his trailer laden truck.

“Ask a favor,” I said.

“What the fuck do you want?” he repeated. He’s not much of one for useless conversation.

“Buddy Harrison asked me to do a favor for him—some detective work. I need your go ahead since you hold the license.”

“What’s that prick want you to do?”

“Wants me to check up on his little sister going to school over in Tyler.”

“What, you’re Mary fuckin’ Poppins now?”

“Not, hardly,” I didn’t know what else to say. I needed the money, but I didn’t want to give him the hard sell. If I did that, he’d just tell me to fuck off. I heard him make a whistling sound between his teeth, while he thought about the implications.

“Why doesn’t he hire a real detective?”

“Because he knows me, he trusts me. Hell, I grew up working for his family. Besides, lawyer Washburn angled him my way,” I said, the taste of bile rising in the back of my throat. Admitting something we both thought we knew.

“Yeah, well, shit son, you really wanna go be his field nigger for a couple days, I ain’t gonna stop you. Just don’t call me unless you really need something. I plan on tearing a motherfucking hole in the wind, partner.”

I promised not to need him, and we said our goodbyes, and I slid the cell into the cup holder in the dash, atop the rattling change.

3

Holding out of hope that rehab had worked for Hector, I tried the Ford dealership first, and the last place I could remember he worked. I found a tall skinny kid who knew me well enough to say hi without making me want to blow my brains out with small talk.

“Nope, ain’t seen him in a year or more. Damn shame what happened to his family. Damn shame way he went nuts too. Sure was a good mechanic. Last I’d heard, he was runnin’ round with that cousin of his, Toady or whatever his name was.”

“You mean Todd-Lee?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Thanks. Shit.”

I stopped at three more shops before giving up. One didn’t know him, one didn’t know how to get hold of him, and the third didn’t want to talk about him. When I offered money, he threatened to bash my head in with a cheater bar. It took me twenty minutes to convince him I wasn’t a drug dealer. Even after that he didn’t have much to say. He

did confirm that, yes, Hector was living with Todd-Lee, and that yes, he was sucking that glass dick again. I thought he was going to break down and cry. I thanked him and left.

Christ, I thought, *I want a drink*. Instead I sat in my truck and smoked a cigarette and listened to Adam Carroll sing a song about a man named Cole. Cole was in prison. I turned it off. Shit, shit, shit.

The last time I had seen Hector was during my convalescent leave from Walter Reed Army Hospital. All my scars were still fresh and pink, and I was opening up the gears on my own downward spiral. I'd fought with my father over dinner, over what I couldn't remember, and later, when sleep refused to come, I marched out the door once again, knocking back fistfuls of Percocet and Jack. I even took the old man's last pack of Kools too, just to piss him off.

Fate's a bastard and I couldn't tell you if it was two hours, two days, or two weeks later, but we found each other in a bar on the bad side of Cedar Creek Lake. Not that there's much of a good side, at least where we were welcome. It was a real dingy place, the kind that wouldn't let you in without a gun and knife. We shared a long weekend together, two old friends, not quite as different as we'd once been. We had a good time that weekend. We shared booze, we shared drugs, and we even shared a couple of women. We shared everything but the pain we were both trying desperately to escape.

It was a lot of fun until the last couple of hours, in my run down motel room on the water's edge. We were waiting on his cousin (yes, the one and only Todd-Lee) to pick him up, when he broke down. At first, I thought it was because we were out of booze. It happens on Sundays in the Bible-Belt if you don't stock ahead. But no, he had a much sadder song to sing than I, and God save my selfish soul, I was glad when his cousin arrived to take him away.

Hector had never had a chance to be anything but East Texan half-breed white trash. That's what he'd been born, that's what he'd always been, that's all he'd ever had a chance to be. Except for a very brief period of time when a

glimmer of hope was cast upon him. He'd never been big enough for football, was too short for basketball, and wouldn't run track or cross-country because he only ran like that to get away from the cops. Nobody expected much from him anyway. His family was infamous for its various exploits in our area. His grandmother chopped her own hand off with a hatchet for the insurance money. His father died in prison: his mother, who everyone knew had been, and probably still was, a prostitute, moved him and his brother across the tracks to the north side—to the area known as Nigger Town, where everybody just knew she spread her legs to the jigaboos out of spite toward her dead husband's family. A rumor even circulated that she'd arranged to have him killed through one of her many liaisons. Others said she was a *bruja*, a Mexican witch, and had cast a hoodoo spell that eventually ended his life.

I never believed the rumors, or at least didn't want to. Children are mean and he was too easy of a target. His mother was one of those rare, ageless beauties who just naturally carried herself in such a way that made you simply forget you were looking at them. When I was old enough to notice all of the things men notice, she would often smile sweetly and pretend not to catch me looking. I always felt bad about my leers, and chastised myself for not treating her with more respect.

Not everyone had my knack for guilt and anger, and every boy in town was well aware that Hector Sweeney had one well put together mother. The fact that she rarely had visible means of support, other than that as a part time waitress, didn't help the rumors. He never bothered anyone, but that didn't stop them from picking fights. He ignored them whenever he could, fought whenever he had to, and always took it on the chin, with a smile and a wink.

After a while the taunts drifted away. But just because he faded from people's radar, didn't mean they expected anything from him. Then freshmen year, on a lark he tried out for the baseball team and everything changed. By our junior year he was in a place nobody expected from

him. He had offers for scholarships from every baseball school in Texas and Louisiana. He had a pretty girlfriend from a rich family. He was popular, one of the cool kids, with a mint '71 Mach 1 he restored himself and a letter jacket to wear while cruising the square with his girl. He also had something no one on else on either side of his family had ever had: a future.

Until his girlfriend came up pregnant. When she wouldn't abort it, her parents disowned her. Then his scholarships disappeared, and so did the lives they thought they would have. He graduated early and went to work at the Ford house to provide for his young family and help put her through nursing school. It wasn't the life he'd dreamed of, but it could've been worse.

He took it on the chin, like always, just happy to be loved for once in his life. Then one afternoon, while he was hard at work, elbow deep in grease and camshafts, she was driving their baby girl home from the daycare they used while he worked and she went to nursing school. It was a clear, windless day with blue bonnets and sunflowers blooming along the roadsides. They were taking a gentle curve at the top of a short hill just south of town, when a rock truck driver on his 6th run of the day and tweaking on crystal meth crashed through them. They never had a chance. With more than a ton of steel and gravel barreling down the road at nearly a hundred miles an hour, the Peterbilt ripped through the plastic and metal of their small car, crushing it and tearing it in two all at once. Taking away everything Hector held onto in a bloody mess I didn't want to imagine. The truck driver received a concussion and went to prison with too short a sentence. Hector stopped taking it on the chin.

It happened while I was overseas, so I didn't have to watch it, but everyone in town agreed that it was the worst thing to happen to our community in a long, long time. The fact that half the town had turned their backs after their union was, of course, lost to their collective conscience. Now Hector lived with his cousin, who was going for the

Guinness World Record for being a degenerate white trash piece of shit. Cooking meth for peckerwoods that hated him because his mother was a wetback whore who slept with blacks, whether they could prove it or not. As if it mattered, one way or the other.

Shit. I tossed my cigarette out of the window and pulled out of the parking lot. I decided to try his mother's house first. At the very least I could gather some intell. and it was much closer than Todd-Lee's. Besides, I'd want to stop by the house and gun up before I made the trip out there. Marianna Lopez-Sweeney was in the side yard hanging clothes on the line when I pulled up. She turned to look as I closed the door of my truck, but didn't stop what she was doing. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been to her house, but everything, the house, the yard, the clothesline, all seemed smaller now, the way it always does when you return to a place that you haven't been to since you were a kid. Even the colored-glass bottles hanging from the large old oak tree in their front yard—said to catch evil spirits—looked faded and worn, bleached by the sun; so unlike her.

She wore a red sundress that showed the shape of a woman who'd managed to take care of herself despite the life she'd lived, with a body most women half her age couldn't hope for even with surgery. She smiled as I walked up.

"Is that Jeb Shaw I see walking up?" she asked. When she spoke her voice carried just enough of her native accent to add to her allure. I knew that, when she wanted to, she could speak far better English than I ever even cared to. Not that it mattered just then.

"That it is; that it is."

She pinned a sheet to the line smiling, and stepped forward giving me a hug. I couldn't remember us being that familiar, but children seldom know what adults truly think of them, and I'd been Hector's friend before baseball made him the cool kid on the block, and then after he'd fallen from grace. Maybe that had counted for something. You

never know. Whatever the reason, we embraced, and I felt her firm breasts press against me as her scent filled my nostrils. Equal parts of lavender and honey, poured on top of raw energy, it brought back all of the old familiar adolescent fantasies. It felt odd, like I was still a boy lusting after his friend's mother. The romantic child, who placed all women on one pedestal, then saw them through an enigmatic lens, clouded with mystery and mysticism. The one who believed they held the secrets of the universe. The one who believed one woman could possibly hold the secrets to them all. Her much rumored professional endeavors hadn't helped to suppress those stirrings in me as a teenager, and didn't now, years later.

"How have you been Jeb?"

"I been okay, you?"

"*Asi, asi,*" she said, shaking a hand in the air.

"Nothing ever changes around here, Jeb. You know that."

"Yeah, I know. Do you mind if I ask you some questions?"

"What about," she asked sweetly, turning back to the straw basket near her feet.

"Hector."

"I haven't seen him in a few weeks. He spends most of his time out at his cousins."

"I know that. I needed to ask you about something else."

"What's that?" she asked, still smiling as if any question I had could be nothing but innocent.

"When he was in rehab, he started seeing a girl. Lucinda Harrison, did ever you meet her?" I asked, and watched her eyes go cloudy, with what emotions, I couldn't tell.

"What do you want to know?"

"What were they like together, how they acted, that sort of thing?"

"She's a fucking bitch; she treated him like shit."

"Maybe so, but I've been asked to find her and right now all I've got is Hector."

“Why would you want to find that bitch?”

“It’s a job. It pays the rent.”

“You used to protect him,” she said, scoffing. I shrugged in return.

“Jeb, I’ll tell you this. I only met her once, but that bitch was as mean as a rattlesnake. She acted sweet, but she only wanted Hector so she could have someone wrapped around her finger she could slum with to piss off her family. They’d be lucky if she got lost forever.”

“That’s all you can tell me about her?”

“Afraid that’s it” she said, shaking her regal chin from side to side.

“So he’s out at Todd-Lee’s?” I asked. She looked at me indignantly.

“Ain’t gonna be anywhere else, babe,” she said.

“How’s he doing?” I asked, as if I couldn’t guess. I just thought it would be rude to leave so soon. Wham, bam, thank you ma’am, just never seemed justified.

“He’s at Todd-Lee’s, Jeb,” she said solemnly, making me wish I’d just left.

“He spend a lot of time out there?”

“More than I’d like,” she said, looking all too much like a disapproving mother. I started to say something but she went ahead.

“You know Jeb; he was doing pretty well there for awhile. He was in rehab, he had a chance; he was going back to work. He just can’t get a break. It’s like he’s doomed, you know?”

“I know, babe. It’ll get better,” I said, as if I had any control over it. She smiled dryly, feeling sorry for me.

“I hope, Jeb, I hope,” she said, pulling another article from the basket on the ground. There was nothing else for me, so I thanked her and went back to my truck, promising not to be such a stranger from then on. If I was going to go to a house everyone knew was a meth lab, I wasn’t going with ten thousand dollars in cash, or without my .45.

4

It must have been a good year for grey Chevys. I passed three of them on the drive to Todd-Lee's house. I passed the last one, turning off the highway onto a threadbare farm-to-market road, when a teenage girl in sunglasses and a blue feed store cap pulled down over a shock of red hair blessed me with a wave and a smile as I rattled past. Oh, how I love country girls.

I slowed down, fearing I'd miss it. It had easily been ten years or more since I'd been out this way, and it looked like every other blacktop road on that side of the county. I had almost convinced myself that I'd taken the wrong turn, or missed it entirely when I crossed over the rickety bridge over the sad creek and saw the same sad yellow crossing sign with a wild pig on it. I knew it had to be the same sign because I could still make out the shot pattern from the sixteen gauge Remington my brother and I had used since we were twelve and ten years old, respectively. Others had added their marks to it over the years, but no one could mistake the corner I had mangled and sheared off, to be left

dangling by one strand of stubborn metal. This was the place. Two hundred yards later, I turned down a dirt drive and cringed as every negative stereotype about the redneck south exploded in panoramic Technicolor.

I parked next to an ancient Dodge Daytona that sat on four flat tires with its hood up. Not that anyone had worked on it this millennium. A toddler, wearing nothing but an obviously filled diaper played in the dirt, thrusting a stick into what was left of the pelt of some long dead animal. It was a dog probably; judging by the backbone lying next to him. I wanted to puke.

On the side of the house, a rail thin woman with stringy unwashed hair burned trash in an ancient oil drum. She was probably only a third of the age she showed, but that kind of living has an effect on people. Makes them ugly, makes them dumb. We were in the middle of the worst draught anyone could remember, it was the middle of winter and people could wear short sleeves. The foliage was so dry the underside of a hot truck engine or a cigarette's errant ember could start a forest fire, and she was burning trash...next to a meth lab.

The wrong people get abortions, I thought. She sucked the life out of a cigarette, staring at me with cold appraising eyes as I climbed out of my truck and walked up. I started to introduce myself when she spoke.

"What the fuck you want?" she squawked, looking me up and down.

"I was told I could find Hector Sweeney out here. I'm an old friend."

"Shit. He ain't got no friends," she spat, tossing her butt into the barrel.

"Is Todd-Lee around here anywhere?" I asked anyway. She just looked at me. "It's important, and he knows me," I continued. I probably spoke louder than I needed to, but I was worried that if I talked to her for very long I'd snap and get to doing God's work. Her eyes bugged out and she hissed at me through what few teeth she had left.

"I DON'T KNOW WHO YOU....," she started in. This wasn't going so well after all.

"Linda, who's that?" I heard Todd-Lee's voice whine from the back yard.

"Some asshole, looks like a damn narc to me!" she bellowed.

"Goddamn it, Todd, it's Jeb Shaw. We went to school together. I'm looking for Hector," I shouted back. His head poked around the corner of the house.

"Well, shee-it, why didn't you say so? Come on back, brother. Long time no see."

"Todd-Lee..."

"Shut up, Linda," he called back.

She glared as I walked past her. My smile probably didn't help. Todd-Lee was sitting shirtless in the same ragged looking loveseat that had always sat in the dirt just off the back porch. He was trying to twist the cap off a 40 ounce. He looked at me grinning, and extended the bottle my way.

"Hook a brother up with some muscle, Jeb," he said. I twisted the cap off and handed it back to him.

"Damn boy, I ain't seen you in a bit! Heard you was, you know, out-n-shit. What's up with you?" he said, settling into the threadbare chair and taking a long drink. It dribbled out the corner of his mouth and down his chin.

"Looking for Hector; it's real important that I find him."

"Why? He ain't jumped no bail, has he?" he said, laughing at his own idiotic joke.

"I just need to talk to him. That's all."

He took a drink and swished it around in his mouth. "See you still ain't one for conversating none, are you?"

"I just need to talk to Hector, that's all."

"Well, he ain't around right now."

"Can you tell me where he is? It's important I see him."

"Just how important is it, tough guy?" Linda said

walking around the corner, past us, and on to the fragile porch. She reached inside the door and pulled out another pack of smokes, and the kind of long lighter you use to start grills with.

I looked at Todd-Lee.

“Well, she did ask nice, you know,” he said.

I’d come prepared. Not wanting to unfold all my money in front of people, I’d stashed what I’d brought in different amounts in different pockets. I had to be careful. Flash too much in front of tweakers, there was no telling what they’d say or do. Flash too little, and the worst thing they’d do is ask for more. They’re not that bright. I snapped a c-note between my hands.

“There’s a yard in it for you if you can put me in touch with him, right now,” I said, looking him in the eye. Man-to-man like.

“Well, Jeb, I imagine,” he started.

“Hold up you fool,” Linda started in. *CHRIST*. “I bet he can do better than that. If he don’t spend it all on steroids ’n shit, like some goddamn faggot.”

I looked up at her and took a deep breath.

“Hell yeah, I bet he got that money sucking dick, fucking faggot,” she spit between what was left of her meth stained teeth.

“Hey, Todd-Lee, can you shut your bitch up or what?” I said it without thinking, still looking Todd-Lee in the eye as it came out. For a moment, they both stared silently at me. In my peripheral vision, I watched the toddler bumble around the corner, dragging the remains of the carcass behind him.

She started to screech. Todd-Lee came off the chair swinging a tire thumper, a round length of wood with a heavy metal end cap used by truckers to bounce off their tires to check the air, in a ridiculously slow overhead arc. I caught his wrist with ease and stepped to the side, pulling his arm behind him, taking the tire thumper from him as I brought his arm up behind him. Before I knew it his frail arm had broken. I hadn’t meant to do it, but pulling

punches had never been something I was good at.

He started to wail and I told him to shut up, using the tire thumper to slap the nerve centers in his thighs for incentive. Linda yelled something about taking care of me and ran into the house. The tire thumper clanged off the door jam.

I pulled Todd-Lee to his feet and held him in front of me. His scrawny frame wouldn't provide much cover, but I hoped it wouldn't come to that.

"Does she have a gun?" I asked. He nodded his head up and down.

"Can you talk some sense into her, or am I gonna have to kill the bitch?"

"Man, I don't even know what's happening, this ain't right," he mumbled, nearing tears. The screen door swung back open. Time slowed way down. I pulled the .45 up and held it beside his head, pointed at the door. She stepped out onto the dilapidated porch, a heavy, ancient coach gun in her hands. She walked toward us trying to cock the hammers on the sawed off double barrel shotgun. Why didn't I offer more money? That's what went through my mind.

"Put the gun down!" I yelled. The barrels started to swing upward. She'd kill us both. Her eyes were wide, wild with whatever went on in her head. I was going to have to kill her. I clicked the safety off.

"Let him go!"

"Put the gun down!"

"Fuck you!" She looked down the barrels. I was taking up the slack on the trigger when Hector ran out of the house and tackled her, pushing the shotgun up, away from us. The shotgun boomed, sending its shot high into the trees. She fell to the ground, Hector on top of her.

I let Todd-Lee go, and hurried to scoop up the sawed off before anyone else could put a hand on it. I holstered the .45 before breaking open the breach and pulling out the shells. I dropped the empty to the ground and looked at the shell in my hand, a ten gauge.

Jesus, the stupid bitch, I thought.

I looked at her, splayed out on the ground under Hector. She cried, yelling incomprehensibly. She couldn't be stupid enough to really think she could shoot me without hitting him, could she? Hector grinned at me.

"A ten-gauge? Are you stupid? Trying to kill us both?"

"I was gonna kill you, you cock sucking motherfucker!" She screeched, through the empty spaces of her front teeth.

I shook my head, closed the breach, and swung the coach gun into the underbrush. Hector pulled her up, grinning.

"Be right back, Jeb. Try not to kill anybody, okay?" he said, pushing Linda back into the house. I looked at Todd-Lee. I pulled out my smokes and offered him one. He was hesitant, holding his arm.

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to break your arm, but you moved so fast, man, I didn't have time to think. Sorry," I said. At least it was half true. He took a cigarette, nodding through swollen, hurt-filled eyes. I felt like a heel—almost, anyway.

I fired us up and pulled my money clip out. I didn't know how much it would cost for him to get his arm set, but hoped a thousand would be enough. I doubted it would matter; it wasn't my money to begin with. Besides, the ER wouldn't turn him away, even if he couldn't pay. Tax dollars at work!

"Here you go, Todd-Lee. Get your arm set, okay? Like I said, I'm sorry." I put it in his hand. I wasn't sure he heard me.

"Todd-Lee, you okay? We cool or what, man?" I asked. He nodded, stuffing it in the pocket of his jeans.

"Hey, Jeb, you think she was gonna shoot?" he asked. By now, he was practically crying.

"Naw, man, she was probably just trying to scare me is all." I lied, but I didn't think he believed it.

"Why's every bitch I meet fuckin' dumb?" he asked.

I shook my head, watching the toddler chew the carcass he'd been dragging.

"Way of the world I guess," I said, not wanting to explain it. I walked over and took what was left of the long-dead animal from his grasp. He looked at me like I was taking away his favorite toy.

The trash barrel was still burning when I dropped it in. Embers flew above my head. I looked around for a lid, but saw nothing. They probably hadn't even thought of that. I heard another baby cry inside the house.

Christ, for the love of God, stop reproducing!

I made a mental note to make an anonymous call to the sheriff's dept. and child protective services.

Fuck that! Cleanse the earth!

I told the voice in my head to shut up, and walked back around to smoke with Todd-Lee and wait on Hector.

5

Not wanting to discuss the business at hand so close to the lovely Linda, I let Hector convince me to buy him a beer at the closest bar, which was just down the road, on the county line. Unfortunately, that happened to be the Kounty Korner Klub. It was a notorious Klan hang out, or at least it had been until enough people died off for them to lose the lease. Which was just as well, because country folk, even white trash, have long memories, and the last time I'd been there I'd left in cuffs. Others had left in ambulances. It was my first real, honest-to-God bar fight. I was sixteen years old.

Now it was just called the Korner Bar and nobody knew me but Hector. Which was just as well because, while guilt aside, it had gone downhill. Far down hill. At least when the Klan had owned it outright, the confederate flags and assorted memorabilia on the wall had been kept clean, neat, and orderly, with a certain misplaced, despicable pride. There was none of that here. Nobody could remember having any kind of pride at all. Not in that place. Anytime a

place goes down, after the Klan owns it, it is probably a sign to the rest of us.

The bartender was an ancient trailer park queen who'd never seen a pageant. She served our drinks and spat through the few remaining tobacco stained teeth in her head into a genuine brass spittoon.

"You boys gonna want another round?" she asked, not wanting to leave her regulars, a group that consisted more than likely of out of work truck drivers and oil field roughnecks who were congregated around a crippled pool table in the back. I slid three twenties across the bar, to pay for two long necks and two shots of Jack.

"We need another round or two; I'll take care of it. Let us know when this is up," I said. She smiled and slid the bills between her sagging breasts. I drank my beer and stared straight ahead until she had rejoined the group in the back.

"So, what's up, dude? Why you hittin' on old bitches and breaking people's arms 'n shit?" Hector asked.

"What was I supposed to do? The guy had a goddamn tire thumper," I said, putting the bottle to my lips.

"Wow, chill, dude. I'm just fuckin' with you. He knew what he was getting hi'self into, he knows how you are."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You got to do what you got to do, and everybody knows you ain't ever had a problem doing that," he said. I let it drop. I had too much on my plate anyway. He'd gone off the deep end after losing his family, and then found something worth pulling himself out of it for. Then he lost that. And I needed him to jump back in that swimming hole. I took another drink. This was turning out to be harder than I thought.

"Hey brother, how's married life treating you?" He asked.

"Can't complain," I said. Not before I ask you what I have to ask you, I thought.

"She still wild, you know, where it counts?" he

asked.

“Wild enough, brother. Wild enough,” I said, taking a drink. He laughed maniacally.

“So, why ain’t you got any kids runnin’ ‘round?”

“It’ll happen soon enough, brother. Soon enough,” he said. Christ, it was like talking to my mother. At least he didn’t dwell on it. Thank God for small favors.

“So, what’s up, dude? What’d you need me for?”

“I’ve got to ask you ‘bout something I don’t think I’d appreciate if I were you, and I’m a little fucked up about it,” I said, feeling like a heel, truthfully, this time. This was harder than I thought.

“Motherfucker, I’ve known you ‘bout as long as I’ve known anybody. Say what you got to say.”

“Well shit, I’m looking for Buddy’s Harrison’s little sister, Lucinda. He told me y’all were an item for a bit,” I said. Sometimes it’s best just to get it out there. He drank his beer and stared at the wall. Shit, maybe I was too abrupt.

“What’s that motherfucker want her for?” he asked.

“Bury the hatchet...reconnect. Their dad’s about to kick the bucket, wants to see her one last time.”

“What, to pretend they’re family? He ain’t ever going to die anyway.”

“That’s what he said. He might be full of shit too, but he wants me to find her.”

“So what, you’re a detective now?”

“Something like that. So, what’s up? What can you tell me about her?”

“Not much, I haven’t seen her in months. Just as well. Little bitch was poison anyway,” he said, turning up his beer.

“How so?”

“We met in rehab; I was trying to get right, you know? She was just there to make her family happy. She really didn’t have a problem, not then anyway. She just got carried away with the good times and couldn’t make her grades. For some reason she took a liking to me, and it went

from there. It was good, too. Hell, it was great. I hadn't felt that good," he paused briefly, looking at the bottle in his hands, "in a long time," he finished, staring into nothingness.

"Sounds like a good thing."

"It was, 'least I thought it was. I was clean, I had a job, she was back in school, over in Tyler. Then it just," he raised his hands, shaking his head, "went bad. I let myself smoke a little J she'd gotten off her roommate, next thing I know we're both up to our necks in the full tilt boogie man. It didn't take long. When Buddy cut her off her roommate helped her get a job dancing. Then shit got worse."

"How bad?" I asked.

"Just bad man. She turned mean. I think she was hooking on top of everything. We had a fight, she told me to go to hell, and never come back. So I went."

"What's her roommate like?"

"Oh man, Khandi's a peach. She's super cool. The one stripper I know who's actually paying her way through school like everybody says. A fuckin' brick shithouse to boot."

"Candy? That her real name?"

"Yep, man. It's spelled K-H-A-N-D-I, like a black girl, which is funny 'cause she looks like Snow White with bigger tits. She grew up in Oak Cliff and talks like it to. She's cool, though. Sexy as hell," he said. I nodded. Oak Cliff was Dallas's version of a ghetto. I'd lived there once or twice with my grandmother when things had gotten particularly heated between me and my old man. Not long after the last time I enlisted. It's not as bad as some people like to think. There were parts of it that resisted urban plight and white flight as well as any large neighborhood. Some parts hadn't though, and it explained why a white girl would walk and talk and act like a poor black girl from the hood.

"Think she might know where she is?"

"It's possible, but I doubt it. They had a falling out over something. Last time I was over there she said she'd

kicked her out.”

“You wanna go over there tonight, introduce me? Drink some beers. Check out some tits?” I asked, like he had something better to do than drink beer and ogle women. Cooking meth’s not that attractive.

“I’d love to. I ain’t had none in a while either, but I’m fucking broke dude,” he said not quite looking me in the eye. Embarrassed about being broke! I’d been there, it was all too familiar.

“Don’t worry about that,” I said. Why not, it wasn’t my money anyway.