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The Long Road Home

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Abstract

The Long Road Home is the first half of a novel consisting of 113 pages of narrative prose divided into nine chapters. Fiction-writing techniques utilized include exposition, character development, and action. These techniques are designed to produce conflict within the protagonist. The rising action of the narrative reaches climax at the close of this document. This climax serves as the turning point for the continued development of the novel.

Chapter One

It was four nights before Christmas and a bitter cold front had swept in from the Rockies. Sleet peppered northeast Oklahoma like quail hunt birdshot as Cindy Taylor massaged the headache throbbing behind her temple. She peered through the windshield into the darkness, focusing on the whirling yellow beacon of the snowplow directly in front of her. She'd been following the plow for over fifty miles now, and was exhausted. Glancing at her daughter, curled up asleep beside her, she thought, C*ouldn't you at least wake up and keep me company?* Christina had been dead-set on getting to the Tulsa mall, despite her daddy's misgivings. Jack was probably sitting on the couch beside the phone right now, worried sick. Swiping a tissue across the foggy windshield, Cindy thought, *Ten more miles*.

Jack was working the grill at the family's cafe that afternoon when Christina had burst through the front door shouting, "All A's, everybody!" She met his challenge, and he'd felt proud.

The cafe had been crowded for lunch, and everyone looked up when Christina came in. Jim McSpadden, the usually dour septuagenarian who owned the biggest cattle ranch in Craig County, pushed his cowboy hat back and smiled. Marilyn Sarratt, the widow who ate every noon meal at the cafe, fluttered her chubby hands in applause. Ainsley McGregor, the lot boy at the Chevy dealership, stuck two fingers between his teeth to shriek a whistle while stomping his ropers on the linoleum floor. The regulars all beamed: they'd been in on the challenge for weeks. Christina had told every one of them—and anybody else who'd listen—about Jack's promise of a new dress for the New Year's dance for perfect first semester grades.

Dorothy Gaines, the waitress who had been working at the cafe for years, bustled down the aisle to give the high school freshman a hug.

"Congratulations, darlin', I knew you could do it."

The table full of tourists she'd been waiting on shouted, "Hey waitress. Can't that wait?"

"Aw, keep yer pants on," Dorothy had hollered back at them. "Can't you see I'm huggin' my baby doll?"

Jack had noticed the tourists' license plate when they pulled into the parking lot—Illinois: his ad campaign was working. But Dorothy didn't have much patience with out-of-towners. Jack almost told her to take care of business first. But heck, this was Oklahoma and his daughter's happiness was more important than any tourist's time.

"Pay up, Jack!" McSpadden hollered. "We want to see the moths fly out of your wallet when you give her the money."

Amid choruses of "Yeah, Jack, pay up!" Christina strutted to the counter and sat on one of the stools. She planted an elbow on the formica and held her chin in her hand. Aiming a coquettish grin through the serving window toward her dad, she extended the other hand, palm up.

"This is highway robbery," Jack began to protest as he walked around the wall between the kitchen and into the dining room. Flattening both palms on the counter, he stood with his elbows locked, head cocked to one side and his eyebrows raised.

"No way, Daddy, a deal's a deal. And I've got witnesses." Christina turned to the customers. "Don't I?"

"You bet!" they all shouted. "A deal's a deal!"

"Now wait just a minute," Jack said. "None of you were there when she and I discussed this."

"You're right, Jack," McSpadden said. "But Christina has told us about it so many times we *believe* we were there. Now pay up!"

Jack feigned a frown, but when Christina giggled he began to laugh. He'd been wrapped around her little finger since the day she was born, and he liked being wrapped. He pulled the white apron around his hip and reached for the wallet in the back pocket of his Levis. "OK, OK. Here you go, Sweetie. I'm proud of you." The happy crowd counted along as he ceremoniously placed five twenties into Christina's outstretched hand. The tourists made a big show out of throwing their coats on and huffing out the door, but everyone just laughed.

Cindy had been watching the scene from her perch at the cash register near the front door, and she called out to Jack. "I think a job well-done deserves a bonus. How about a little extra for a new pair of shoes?"

Any mob enjoys watching somebody else spend his money, and their raucous agreement turned Jack's cheeks red. "Sorry, gang, I'm all tapped out," he said, opening his empty wallet to prove his poverty. He quickly realized the implications of his action and glanced at Cindy who gazed back darkly. Jack realized his wife must be wondering about the $300 he'd taken from the cash register just yesterday afternoon.

"Aw, listen everybody," he said, "Christina will be so pretty at the dance nobody's gonna notice her shoes anyway."

"Well, maybe her daddy's broke," said McSpadden, "but the sweetest girl in town needs the sharpest outfit for the dance. I'll feed the kitty first." Taking a breadbasket from a nearby table, he dumped the biscuits on the floor and deposited a five-dollar bill. "Who'll ante up?"

Jack watched as the citizens of his small community, the people he fed and watered everyday, passed one by one to drop a wadded bill or a handful of change into the basket. As each kissed Christina's cheek, Jack realized again that his mother's wish had come true — *Whatever you find in the world out there has got to be better than this.*

The people passing one by one were Jack's people, enjoying the atmosphere of Jack's cafe. He had owned the place since his father-in-law, Red, had sold him the place five years ago. The day Red hired him off the street in 1982, he had no idea he was meeting his future father-in-law. The two had worked together everyday, just like father and son, for over twenty years. Everyday, that is, until last February when the family had been forced to move Red into a nursing home. But the old man's presence still haunted the cafe; Jack expected to find Red at the coffee maker every morning when he opened up.

At two o'clock that afternoon as usual, Cindy calculated the bank deposit as Christina counted the money in the breadbasket. The weather forecast called for snow—but Jack's protests about their going to Tulsa fell on deaf ears.

"Listen," he said, "if you're dead-set on going, Dorothy and I will clean up so you two can hit the road," he said. "I want you home early this evening."

"We'll go just as soon as I drop this deposit off at the bank, Jack," Cindy said, looking at him through her eyebrows.

"What color dress should I buy, Daddy?" Christina asked.

"I don't care about the color, hon, just watch the neckline: none of that low-cut stuff—you're only fifteen, for heaven's sake."

Cindy pulled on her coat and gave Christina a wink. "Don't worry, Jack, I'll make sure she stays prim and proper."

Christmas vacation also begun that day at Catoosa High School, fifty miles west of Vinita down the turnpike toward Tulsa. The hallways were abuzz with students hurrying toward their two-week holiday. The overly studious girls, red bows adorning their hair and light coats of holiday glitter sparkling their flushed cheeks, staggered beneath books and homework assignments. The cool kids had gathered around the pop machines, and snarky debaters commandeered the benches by the library door. Cheerleaders stood leaned against the trophy case in the lobby of the gymnasium, and football players barreled out the doors past the shivering freshmen who had forgotten their coats in the rush to catch the morning bus. The nerdy lonely losers were huddled like a herd of buffalo faced outward against the taunts from more popular kids. Every student had instinctively found his place in the social order. But two stood apart: Waylon Bushyhead and Bocephus Harrington.

Those weren't their real names, of course. In truth, Waylon was Jonathan, and Bocephus answered to Charles at home. They considered themselves to be the only members of the student body who really understood life and saw the world as it really is: a winner-take-all arena where only the baddest survive.

The two boys had nicknamed each other the previous spring one night, hiding out beneath the empty grandstand at the rodeo arena while smoking their first-ever joint. While feeding his FFA calf in the barn that spring afternoon, Bocephus noticed an unusual odor wafting down from the loft. He discovered his older brother upstairs smoking marijuana and quickly struck a deal: he'd keep the secret in exchange for half of the stash.

Every geographic variety of adolescence has a delinquent fringe, and in red dirt Oklahoma that fringe often finds refuge in outlaw country music. Twang bleeds into the heartbeats of Okie babies from the day of conception, and when that primal "three-chords-and-the-truth" gets mixed up with "just-don't-give-a-damn," it becomes an explosive combination. Waylon and Bocephus possessed "don't-give-a-damn" in spades.

Other students sported Nike athletic shoes or faded Chuck Taylors sneakers. But Waylon and Bocephus shuffled arrogantly down the hall in Nocona boots scruffed at the heels, the cracked and worn leather vamps hidden by too-long Wrangler jeans that had Skoal can rings embossed on the left rear pockets. Other boys in the hallways were either bareheaded or had on Dallas Cowboy ballcaps, but Waylon and Bocephus were crowned with stained Stetson cowboy hats turned backward and the front brims steamed low. Jocks wore letter jackets, flirty girls shivered beneath black leather jackets. Future Farmers of America proudly wore dorky corduroy barn jackets beneath plain-as-shovel faces and flattop haircuts. But Waylon and Bocephus—both been kicked out of FFA at the Craig County Fair last October after poking a baby lamb with their cigarettes—caped themselves in menacing black dusters, the brass buttons of the coats pinging against their shiny NFR belt buckles, big as bucket lids.

The two bobbed down the hallway like black corks in a whitewater of students, throwing the exit doors against the brick walls with a crash as the left the school and swaggered into the student parking lot to Bocephus's ride, a '95 F-150 4X4. A vanity license plate was screwed to the front bumper—"A Country Boy Can Survive"—and brass bull testicles and a copper cowbell hung beneath the rear trailer hitch.

Waylon swung into the passenger seat. "What are we gonna do for fun tonight, Bocephus?" Waylong liked the way hanging out with the bigger, meaner kid made him feel. Bocephus was already eighteen and a senior, he was still just a sophomore.

"Not sure," Bocephus said, revving the engine and jerking it against the motor mounts to let the straight pipes roar. "I was thinkin' we might to get a little sideways tonight."

"Stole us a case of Coors from the 7-11 this morning."

"That'll do," Bocehpus said as he shoved a pinch of tobacco black as Irish peat behind his lower lip. Screeching from the parking lot and lighting up the tires he said, "Ain't your family got a huntin' shack up the turnpike toward Vinita?"

Few shopping days remained, and the mall in Tulsa was swollen with shoppers when Cindy and Christina arrived around five o'clock. Many of the shoppers were men—car salesmen in their polyester windbreakers and gaudy holiday ties, tradesmen with their names embroidered on stiff industrial shirts, and squat bankers who wore belted London Fog trench coats. Families also milled about, young couples who pushed infant strollers, parents pulling their screaming toddlers past toy store windows, and older couples out for an evening stroll. It seemed that the entire population of south Tulsa was searching for that perfect last-minute gift.

Cindy navigated through the harried river of humanity to collapse into the chair beside Christina in the food court. Opening the plastic clamshell containing her salad, she glanced at Christina's three slices of pizza. She used to be able to eat like that and stay then. But she was forty-one years old now, size two dresses—and fours and sixes, too—were just a memory.

Christina pulled box from the sack at her feet. "What do you think of the Christmas gift I bought for daddy?" The two had gone solo-shopping after choosing Christina's new dress, and Cindy had purchased a pair of earrings for her daughter, a surprise contribution to the New Year's dance wardrobe. She'd caught Christina smoking the week before and vowed to never buy the kid another thing as long. But the holiday spirit had wiped most of her anger away.

"Oh, honey, they're perfect," Cindy said, holding the sunglasses to her eyes. "Your daddy is always complaining how the sun hurts his eyes. His blue eyes are way more sensitive than our brown eyes--he'll love them."

Cindy found Jack's blue eyes attractive from the very first day they met—though it took her a couple of years to admit it. Their first introduction had been the afternoon after her dad had hired Jack, right before she went skating in a puddle left by his mop. She was a year and a half older than Jack, and she'd felt totally ashamed lying there on the floor on her ass. But in those days, Cindy had considered everything about Vinita, Oklahoma embarrassing.

It's funny, though, how that first semester at Oklahoma University had changed her perspective. She'd always dreamed of attending OU, despite the fact that her dad had always hoped she'd just commute to Rogers State in nearby Claremore. Cindy's mother, Viola, died in '79, and Red always held Cindy extra close.

All these years alter, that first semester at OU was just a blur. It was the Barry Switzer era, and Sooner football—and Cindy—were flying high. It all came crashing down for Cindy at the ’83 Fiesta Bowl. She had traveled to Tempe with friends for the game, and while there had hooked up with a boy from Arizona State at a bar. She never even knew his name: his friends just called him Billy.

She returned to OU the next semester, but only for a few weeks so she could take care of things—there were options in Oklahoma City that simply weren’t available back in Vinita. She had dropped out of school in March, and returned home to quietly resume waiting tables at the cafe. She’d told her dad homesickness got the better of her, that maybe she’d go back in the fall. Red had just drawn her close and said, “Welcome home, baby.”

Cindy never told a soul about it until the night Jack asked her to marry him several years later.

She withdrew into a shell after returning home, avoiding the few old friends who weren’t away at school or married. Spring became summer, and then summer fall. Soon it was Thanksgiving, then it was Christmas, and it had been a year.

Then late one afternoon in the spring of ’84, Cindy was sitting alone in the cafe sorting flatware when she heard a noise in the kitchen.

“Who’s there?”

“Just me,” Jack answered.

“Well, you might whistle or something—scared me to death.”

“Sorry, I just stopped by for a minute.”

Cindy had returned to her task when a leftover dinner roll hit her on the head. She looked up and saw Jack grinning through the window over the grill. He'd never done anything like that before. She threw the roll back at him, and they chased each other around the cafe until they felling giggling to the floor, clinched in the corner behind the Hobart dishwasher. When she looked up, Jack's laugh had become a soft smile and his blue eyes were dancing.

It took them a week or two to get their heads around what had happened, and Jack became Cindy's special puppy dog friend. But a couple of months later, after Jack had graduated from high school, he invited her to the movies, and they began spending a lot of time together. The regulars at the cafe began kidding her, but Cindy just shot back, "Him? Are you kidding? Dating Jack would be like dating my brother." But she was always smiling when she said it.

Cindy didn't go out much, just worked a lot of hours at the cafe. But Jack still dated around quite a bit, once even getting a little serious about a girl from Afton. But one night late in the early fall of '85, Jack showed up at the door of the apartment above the cafe. At first Red was angry, standing there at the door in his pajamas. But when Jack whispered, "I need to see Cindy, Red. It's important," the old redhead had just smiled and stepped aside.

About a month later, Jack and Cindy had been cruising around in his old '67 GTO and wound up parked at Fairview Cemetery overlooking Vinita. When he pulled the engagement ring from his pocket to propose, Cindy began to cry. He'd expected as much. But she continued to cry, and Jack asked why.

"Jack, I can't marry you until I find somebody to forgive me."

The story finally gushed out. Cindy had felt so alone after returning from OU. Her mother was gone, and she couldn't bear the thought of disappointing Red. She had considered confiding in Dorothy, but the old waitress's brusqueness—so oddly endearing when everything was fine—intimidated her. So Cindy had just bottled it all up inside.

Overlooking the streetlights of their little hometown the night Jack proposed, Cindy first tasted true forgiveness. At first, Jack had been bewildered by her sobbed plea. Forgive Cindy for what? And why him? But as she told the story, Jack silently drew her close, and Cindy had felt the first cleansing wave wash over her. Years later, still was still incapable of fully articulating what had happened that night, but being accepted—despite her past—had made the difference. Sometimes the only thing powerful enough to forgive is the love we need the most.

In the years that followed, Jack and Cindy formed a solid marriage. It wasn't a perfect union: but what marriage is? Cindy worried about Jack spending more too much time on the golf course, and lately she had become concerned about his appetite for the Indian casinos that had begun popping up all over northeastern Oklahoma. Jack's secrets puzzled her: sometimes the cafe receipts didn't balance lately. But deep down, all that mattered was how crazy he still seemed about her, and the way he cherished Christina.

Cindy's cellphone rang as she and Christina left the Tulsa mall. Snow had been falling heavily, and the SUV was covered. Pulling the phone from her purse, she glanced at the caller id: "Hello, Jack."

"Thought you'd be home by eight-thirty," he said. "It's almost nine. The roads are terrible up here— I nearly lost it a couple of times on the way home."

What's Jack been doing out this time of night? "I know, Jack, I know," Cindy said, "We're leaving Tulsa right now. Don't worry, it's hardly snowed here at all." When she opened the door of the SUV a pile of snow fell across her arm. "We'll be home soon."

As Cindy began driving north toward the turnpike, Christina was already scrunched into the passenger seat with her iPod buds. Shrugging out of her coat, Cindy turned the radio to the oldies station as the heater began to warm the SUV.

Good, there's a snowplow, she thought as she entered the turnpike. *I'll follow and drive slowly. We'll make it home by ten, no problem.*

Chapter Two

The headlights of the pickup threw Waylon's black shadow against the cabin wall and silver dollar-sized snowflakes swirled in the howling wind. He brushed the ice crystals from his cheek, leaned against the crude oak door of the hunting shack and shielding his eyes from the glare. The wooden door, like the rest of the uninsulated structure, had never tasted a drop of paint. Waylon lifted the lock from its hasp and tilted the combination face toward the headlights. *Damn it, Bocephus, cut 'em to low beam, woncha.* He removed his right glove and spun the dial: twelve, eighteen, nine — the month, day, and year of his uncle's birthdate. All of the men on his mama's side of the family gathered here at the shack last Saturday night to celebrate Johnny Dean's birthday. It was the first time they'd included him, and everybody got drunk as hoot owls. Waylon's mama had begged him to stay home. She's a good Baptist. Her brothers aren't. The lock fell open into his hand, and he waved toward the truck for Bocephus to come on in.

The two boys had left Catoosa at six that evening, and the usual forty-five minute trip had turned into a two-hour trek because of the violent winter storm. Waylon knew his mother would be worried, but she'd get over it. Wrenching open the door, he picked up the Coleman lantern and held it aloft as Bochephus dragged the beer cooler off the tailgate and through the snow toward shack. The black clouds that were gathering that afternoon when they left school had turned into a major storm and were dumping their fury on northeast Oklahoma. Waylon felt a twinge of guilt—just a twinge—about his mother's worry. His dad was dead, and Waylon was all the man she had left.

"Quit yer daydreaming, you pussy," said Bocephus. "Help me get this cooler through the door."

The fire the built in the ancient fieldstone hearth had soon burned through the short stack of fatwood they'd found in the wrought iron rack by the door, and Bocephus went outside to gather logs from the woodpile near the barbed wire fence. Waylon could hear him stomping around, the thuds from his boots mingling with the splatters from the occasional car on the turnpike below.

The two-room, tin-roofed shack was perched on a precipice fifty feet above the turnpike, hard-set against the northern boundary of the remnants of his mama's family homestead. Waylon's great-grandfather, a Cherokee pureblood, had received this quarter section allotment after reluctantly signing the Dawes Roll in 1905. After he died, the land had been divided between his two sons, and Waylon's maternal grandfather had won the coin toss. He chose this eighty acres and the cabin. When the federal government built the new interstate highway through the land in the early '50s, they'd tried to buy it all. But Waylon's grandpa stood firm. The rainbow in the turnpike around the shack was the legacy of that fight to spare the cabin; just one more battle in the long Indian wars. His grandpa had died in 1998, and Waylon's mother had inherited the property. She'd sooner cut off her right arm than sell the little cabin near Vinita.

Waylon and Bocephus had driven up that afternoon from Catoosa on old Route 66, crossing the turnpike on the East 290 bridge before turning left and rattling down the old farm lane to the shack. They'd stopped at a convenience store back up the road in White Oak to purchased snacks—chips and Vienna sausages and beef jerky—and Waylon removed them from the cardboard box and placed them on the plain wooden kitchen table as he surveyed the familiar room. A handful of spent twelve gauge shotgun shells lay on the floor beside the galvanized sink, verification of the old homestead's designation as a hunting shelter. But there were a dozen or so

crushed Miller High Life cans in the corner of the room testifying more truthfully to its regular use. Little black pellets on the floor were droppings from a raccoon that was now forced to find another place for the night. Webs from last summer's spiders laced the wavy glass in the lone sash on the south wall, and the wind whistled through cracks in the walls. Bocephus blustered back into the room and threw the firewood he'd gathered onto the floor.

Their feet propped on the hearth and their boots steaming against the fire, they began adding smashed silver Coors cans to the accumulation in the corner. Waylon stared at the fire from inside the tunnel of his sandstone-colored Carhartt jacket hood, recalling good memories from this place: shooting his first buck at age ten, an eight-pointer taken while hunting with Johnny Dean; that weekend he'd talked his mama into letting him come here alone when he was thirteen, the first time he felt the presence of his ancestors while roaming the land. And then there was that afternoon last summer when he'd brought Brittany Curtis here to do it — his first time.

When Waylon closed his eyes to a slit and let imagination take over, he sensed the shadowy presence of a stolid red man sitting at the ancient table bent over a book. His grandpa had passed away when he was in seventh grade, but Waylon remembered the stories his grandpa told about his own father, a pureblood who had started every day reading the Cherokee translation of the Bible. By the time of the Civil War, his grandpa had told Waylon, the New Testament had already been translated into Cherokee from the original Greek by At-See, known to the white man as John Arch. Uncivilized savages, indeed, his grandpa had said, laughing. His grandpa still had that New Testament, and Waylon remembered being fascinated by it as a little boy, all the ornate characters on the onionskin pages.

Leaning forward, Waylon, crushed an empty can beneath his boot and threw it onto the pile. “You reckon God don’t like our drinking, Bocephus?”

“Who?”

“God.”

“Waylon, thain’t no god.”

“Ain’t no God? What are you talking about — of course there’s a God.”

Bocephus pushed up from the couch and threw another log on the fire. The snow outside was now sleet, and the persistent pings on the metal roof overwhelmed the sounds of traffic on the highway below. Bocephus ripped open a bag of Doritos and shoved three into his mouth while reaching for another beer. He collapsed again on the couch. “Thain’t no god, Waylon.”

“What about that time we were fishing on the Verdigris and that twister blew through?” Waylon said. “That sucker was headed right for us and we prayed. I was there, heard you praying like a preacher—and the storm went around us? What about that, Bocephus, huh?”

“Nothin’ but fate, Waylon. Nothin’ but fate.”

“Fate, hell. God turned that storm north to spare us.”

The room had warmed to almost comfortable, and Bocephus removed his down jacket and loosened the galluses on his camo overalls, then unzipped the leggings up past his thighs. Removed a joint from the bib of his overalls, he set it afire with a Bic and took a long drag. He passed it to Waylon.

“Fate, I’m tellin’ ya,” he said. “Nothing but fate, Waylon: luck, destiny, fortune — whatever you want to call it. Life’s just a crapshoot, the luck of the draw.”

Taking the reefer, Waylon pulled a long drag and leaned his head against the couch, the smoke rolling around deep in his lungs. He exhaled the smoke toward the ceiling timbers and breathed in deeply through his nostrils. He and Bocephus had had this conversation bunches of times before. Somebody had told him once that getting high turns loose the person you really are inside, the real you. Might be so, he thought. Waylon always jsut felt lonesome when he got high, wanted to talk about important stuff. Getting high just made Bocephus meaner than usual.

All his life Waylon had felt like one big, walking contradiction. Tonight, in the midst of the snowstorm with the beer and the marijuana, he was just hoping that Jesus was otherwise occupied and not paying attention. Waylon had attended Sunday school faithfully as far back as he could remember, but last year when he got his driver's license he quit going. He knew it was breaking his mama's heart, but he just couldn't take that church stuff anymore. He remembered how much he liked the cherry suckers and grape Kool-Aid in Sunday School when he was a little kid. He remembered those perfect little paper cutouts Mrs. Anderson placed on the perfect flannelboard in their perfect positions between those perfect palm trees and the perfect Sea of Galilee. All that orderliness, the idea that someone up there was taking care of everything down below, always made him feel better, like somebody was watching out for him. Waylon especially remembered a lesson from Vacation Bible School the summer before he entered second grade, that July when it was so hot he thought he'd die: *God has a plan for your life, Jonathan,* Mrs. Anderson had said, *a good plan. God's got everything planned out.* His daddy's heart attack happened on Christmas morning that year.

Waylon took one more drag and passed the joint back to Bocephus. "Then what about heaven?"

"Hell, man, when you're dead, you're dead." A clump of snow fell from a log on the fire, hissing as it disappeared. "Listen, Waylon, it's snowing tonight because of fate. We're sittin' here right now because of fate. There's some longhaul trucker from the East Coast driving past this friggin' cabin on the turnpike right now because of fate— right by the cabin where you timber nigger grandpa used to sit by this friggin' fire and beat his tom-tom."

Tension had been building since earlier that afternoon as they sat in Bocephus's pickup at the Sonic Drive-In. Brittany Curtis was carhopping, and when she brought their Dr. Peppers, she had chatted with Waylon across the front seat while Bocephus took the drinks. Waylon didn't think Bocephus liked Brittany all that much—her daddy was police chief in Catoosa—but as she walked away, Bocephus had remarked that she had a cute ass and had winked at him. Waylon initially took it as a compliment; Bocephus was the only person who knew about that afternoon in the cabin last summer.

But then Bocephus had said, "You know what's really cute about Brittany? It's that little heart tattoo below her navel, just to the right above her pussy."

Waylon had just looked at him, confused. Then Bochephus had simply drawled, "Don't go thinkin' you're the only one fishing that pond, ol' buddy."

Waylon had just bit on his tongue and took it, like he always did. He hated himself for being that way, hated the way he followed Bocephus like an abandoned pup. He hated the way he'd always laugh when Bocephus tripped a nerdy kid in school, always laughed so Bocephus would think he was twisted, just as messed up inside. He always laughed, just so he could run with the only kid in school who made him feel like somebody. Waylon hated knowing that deep

down inside, he and that nerdy kid Bocephus was picking on were exactly the same guy — lost, lonely, last. Waylon hated it. But he took it.

But making fun of his Native American grandpa was what finally pushed Waylon over the top. The beer and the marijuana and the frustration and the cold and the howling wind outside and the fire in the hearth and the ghosts of family past all mingled together threw his switch. He lunged across the couch, throwing Bocephus to the bare floor, and the two drunks grappled and rolled, crushing the bag of chips beneath them. They finally wound up against the wall, and Waylon momentarily had Bocephus pinned. But the larger boy quickly struggled free and cocked his right arm, slamming his fist into Waylon's face and hurtling him feet-first into the fire. Waylon scampered away from the flames, kicking coals around the room as blood streamed from his nose. A live coal landed on the dust ruffle of the couch, and when the fabric began to smolder. Bocephus turned the couch on end and stomped it out. Waylon crawled into the corner and sat holding a bandana over his face, staring like a wounded animal.

"Fate, I'm telling ya," Bocephus snarled through his teeth as he threw the couch back onto the dirt floor. "Nothin' but fate."

"Go to hell."

"God, it's hot in here," Bocephus said, "I'm going outside." He shrugged into his coat and pulled his gloves onto his hands. As he wavered toward the door, he paused at the concrete block that was used to hold it open in the summertime.

"Hey, Waylon. You remember that longhaul trucker from the East Coast I told you was passing by on the turnpike right now?" he said, lifting the block. "I think I'll give him a little

thrill. Me'n fate is goin' up on that bridge right now and throw this sucker in front of his rig—gonna scare the shit outta him. You comin'?"

"Go to hell," I told you.

"Aw, come on, Waylon. It'll be a hoot."

"Go to hell."

"Suit yerself, half-breed."

Waylon rose from the corner and crumpled onto the couch. Dark droplets of blood had sprinkled the front of his shirt. His head throbbed and his nose felt like somebody'd hit it with a Louisville Slugger. The fight between them was the last straw. He'd always felt like an outsider, had never had any friends until that day in shop class last year when Bocephus motioned to him from across the room while Mr. Sanders was occupied. The two of them had slipped out the backdoor and run behind the school buses and through the trees in the park behind the school toward Main Street downtown, where they'd spent the rest of the school day in the darkened corner of the pool hall. Finally, Waylon had felt like somebody. Ever since, he'd been Bocephus's running buddy, swallowing his abuse to be accepted, so he'd have someone to hang out with, someone who made him feel like a man. But this time Bocephus had gone too far. Jonathan spit into the fire.

Closing the door of the hunting shack behind him, Bocephus pulled his fleece stocking cap lower over his ears. Staggering through the snow to the pickup, he lowered the tailgate and dropped the concrete block into the bed, then walked around the truck to the cab. He stepped up and into the truck, then shifted the transfer case into low range, creeping toward the bridge and

rubbing his eyes, searching for the tire tracks from when they'd arrived about an hour before. The trail was almost hidden now by the accumulating snow, and the truck careened off the right side of the narrow lane, growling and bouncing through drifts and between the trees before Bocephus could return it to the lane. The big snowflakes were no longer falling, and the vicious wind sandblasted tiny pellets of sleet against the windshield. The windshield wipers slapped furiously, and the wind shrieked through the doorjambs of battered pickup. Turning up the volume on the radio, he tugged the hood of his jacket tighter around his head.

The barbed wire gate lay crumpled beside the corner posts where they'd tossed it, and a fresh layer of snow on the county road lay fresh and virgin, untraveled since they'd arrived an hour before. Turning to the right, he drove toward the bridge a quarter of a mile away. As he reached the center of the span, he turned off the engine and cut the headlights, letting the radio play. The lights of nearby Vinita were barely visible through the storm, a couple of miles east of the bridge. Usually crowded with cars and truck, the interstate below him was ghost quite; most of the traffic forced into truck stops and motels by the storm.

A triangle of light from the pickups floor lamps fell to the snow as the opened the door of the pickup and stepped to the ground. Leaving the door open, Bochephus reached back inside and cranked up the volume on the radio. He tramped down the side of the pickup, his gloved left hand sweeping snow from the bedrail, and paused to steady himself at the tailgate. He dragged the concrete block from the bed and let it fall heavily to his side. Wobbling upright, he turned his back on the lights of Vinita and stomped through the snow to the western side of the bridge. Setting the block atop the waist-high rail of the bridge, he leaned over the eastbound lane. Hank III squalled from the truck radio.

I guess old fate's got that longhaul trucker settled at the Big Cabin truck stop for the night, he thought.

He had stood upright and turned to go when he noticed a whirling yellow light a half-mile west.

That's even better. I'll throw this sucker right in front of that snowplow. The driver'll freak, and then the blade will push the concrete block off to the shoulder and bury it under a big pile of snow. Nobody'll ever know.

The orange highway department snowplow neared, trailed by a convoy of cars. Grabbing the concrete block with both hands, he raised it above his head. The sudden exertion dizzied him. He reeled, nearly toppling under the weight. He teetered to the edge, trying to time the throw and drop the block right in front of the snowplow. But his buzzing brain skewed the calculations, and he released it just as the back of the snowplow had passed beneath the bridge. He watched, bewildered, as the projectile crashed through the windshield of the black SUV traveling directly behind.

Waylon sat bolt upright, startled by the squealing brakes and the crush of metal on the turnpike directly below the cabin down the embankment. Jumping to his feet, he stood stock-still, his hands caked with dried blood, listening intently. All was quite again.

He sat, puzzled, stating at the fire. Bocephus's truck was gone; there was no way he could investigate the sound, no chance to offer help. Besides, he was in no condition to help anyone anyway. He had just thrown another log on the fire when he heard the growl of a pickup.

The door of the cabin burst open. "Gather up the shit!"

"Why? What's going on? What was that noise?"

"Just throw everything into that box. Now! And put out that fire. We're getting hell out of here."

Frantically, they gathered everything and opened the few remaining cans of beer to douse the fire. Waylon grabbed the bail of the lantern and extinguished the mantle as Bocephus sat in the pickup gunning the engine. Jumping into the cab of the truck, he threw the lantern onto the seat between them and slammed the door as Bocephus began plowing down the lane toward East 290.

"What the hell's going on?"

"Nothing." Bocephus's face flared red behind the flame of the Bic. "Just fate. Shut up and hang on."

Chapter Three

Jack Taylor was the thirteenth, last, and accidental fruit of the loins of a seventh son. His father was the only son of a no-good, moonshining, ne'er-do-well named Luther. Luther had been the son of a worthless old-timer named Ebeneezer. That's as far back as Jack knew.

In 1889, sick of the world with the world sick of him, Jack's great-grandpa, Ebeneezer, rushed into Indian Territory with the rest of the Sooners, grabbing his very own forty acres of worthless red dirt. He was figuring to start over again, but the windswept parcel of nothing that he grabbed suited him no better than the nothing he'd already tasted, so he wandered on.

Somewhere along the way, Ebeneezer connected with an aging barmaid and they produced Jack's grandpa, Luther. Luther inherited all the old man's ruthless genes save the gypsy, and he eventually settled in the tiny town of Talihina, in southeastern Oklahoma, and set up shop. Set up shop, so to speak, if a moonshine still in the Kiamichi Mountains of Little Dixie counts as a shop. Luther perceived his position in life as somebody simply filling a position begging for an applicant, despite the moral ambiguities. Most of his customers didn't care the hell about the ambiguities, and those who did simply carried their Mason jars home wrapped in last week's Sunday school lesson.

Luther was a man who got things done. You need a little libation, the heck with the laws of dry LeFlore County? Not a problem. You got yourself a snarled-up situation involving that handsome son of yours and some tramp in the next town? Trouble yourself no longer. Luther was a genuine product of his raising, and he combined the ruthlessness of Ebeneezer with a work ethic that wouldn't quit, and was soon a vital, if disparaged cog in the city's machinery.

Ebeneezer's lazy streak skipped a generation, then popped right back up in the DNA of Luther's son, Hiram. Hiram was a worthless, hated-by-all, just-wish-he'd-die, sack-of-shit excuse for a human being, called all his life by the nickname, Frog. The short, fleshy boy with zits scattered across his fat red face (hence his nickname), he was completely devoid of ambition. Most days were spent leaned against the wall of the alley between the drugstore and the pool hall, amusing himself by whistling at respectable girls passing, each of whom paid him never-mind. Nobody, absolutely nobody, had any use for Frog Taylor.

But one day a tall, plain, hawk-nosed girl wheeled sharply on her heel when he whistled. She didn't smile exactly, but neither did she run down the street shooting looks to kill back over her shoulder. She just stopped dead still, and stared at the greasy, pomaded, hair-combed-straight-back creature, studying him with a look more curious than anything. Her expression resembled the features of some fool who'd never seen a copperhead before, someone who thought the beast colorful. Sadly, she had no idea her planet had just fallen off its axis, never to be right again.

Sarah Gage hailed from Taneyville, a crossroads just down the road a piece from Talihina, and nobody in town had ever seen her before. That was because her pa, Virgil, the proprietor of the country store there, always kept her inside—his very own little plaything. Just fifteen-years old, she was all knobby knees and bony elbows strung with cotton string. She had come to town that day looking—not for much—and when Frog whistled, he proved just enough.

When Sarah's jagged excuse for a hip struck sparks, she fed the flame. Frog didn't quite know how to handle the nibble on his line, so he just stood leaned against the Coca-Cola sign

painted on the red brick wall of the alleyway, looking like the barking dog that caught the car. Now what?

The little drama repeated itself once a week during that hot, dry Oklahoma summer, and Frog became acutely aware that only a thin layer of cotton dress stood between him and hormonal bliss.All Sarah knew was some man besides her no-good daddy had started paying attention. She was incapable of distinguishing between good and bad attention, between love and lust, between animal instinct and human intentions. All that would become clear much too late.

In late August, Sarah turned up pregnant. When Luther realized what his idiot son had gone and done, he dealt with the problem with cool-eyed practicality. The situation wasn't exactly what he had been expecting, but it did, all at the same time, solve the problem of a shiftless, no-good son and present a rare business opportunity. So, with the young couple stuffed beside him in the front seat of his big, black Dodge, (the back seat removed to haul more profitable cargo through moonless Oklahoma nights), the three paid a call on the proprietor of the Taneyville store. When the meeting was over, the shopkeeper had lost his mail-fetcher, but got a new product line. Luther got a daughter-in-law and a new distributor. And Frog got a new plaything. Sarah? Well, she just got got.

The ensuing years presented a parade of babies, one every year or two. Each took its place in the crib beside Sarah's bed, which, save for the rare encounters instigating the next in the family lineage, she occupied alone. Frog’s nights were occupied by slithering the black Dodge around dark curves and through lonesome hollers, delivering his daddy’s product.

Eventually Luther died, leaving his son just enough to never really need to work again. But Frog squandered his inheritance, and the yard around the tumble-down mansion began

accumulating the darnedest collection of junk cars and machinery you ever saw, along with an increasing and motley menagerie of worthless kids. Frog's affection for drink was unquenchable, but instead producing whiskey like his daddy, he drank the ready-made stuff—in vast quantities. Frog was never good at but two things in life: he was a ceaseless accumulator of rusting iron, and he was paternally prolific. The old man could throw some kids.

Taylor babies arrived in a steady stream, like tainted water cascading down a mined-out mountainside after a hard rain. William, the eldest, was born during WWII, from which Frog stayed home, and he was followed by Virginia, Bonnie, and Alnita. Another onslaught of boys commenced next: Terrence, Ernest, and Leroy, who were followed by a few of each: Daphne, Hiram, Jr. (called Sonny), Sally, Lucille, and Thomas. Twelve. Then finally, in the early 1960's, one more son came along, Jonathan Ebeneezer Taylor, always called, simply, Jack. Number thirteen.

It was quickly apparent that Jack was his mother's child. He was towheaded like her, and he carried her delicate bone structure and natural grace. But somehow the gene of a more attractive ancestor slipped through, and Jack was considered an attractive child. He drifted through boyhood quiet and detached, coping with the chaos by escaping to other worlds described by the books he learned to read early, and by wandering the hills alone.

Much of Jack’s imagination was occupied by God; he alone among his siblings embraced his momma’s religion. Through all the frightening circumstances of her childhood, Sarah always had one bright sunshiny memory: the simple country-Christian faith of her mother, Mariah.

Mariah chose wisely as a child herself, placing her faith in Jesus. But as a teenager she had chosen quite foolishly by marrying Virgil Gage, mean as the devil himself.

After marrying Virgil, Mariah began walking two miles down a rocky road every Sunday morning to church, little Sarah holding her hand. But one Sunday when they returned home, Virgil broke Mariah's nose and threatened worse dare she make the trip again. The child's sanctuary afterward was the warmth of her mother's lap, and for the rest of her life Sarah cherished the gospel songs she first heard gliding just beneath her mother's breath. The old hymns Mariah sang were simple melodies, wrapped in a thin, ever so-slightly off-key alto whisper that harmonized with the porch rocker's creaking rhythm. Europe's greatest cathedrals offered no greater peace.

Shortly after marrying Frog, Sarah returned to her momma's faith, realizing too late that she had perpetuated the curse by marrying the wrong man. Each Sunday morning she loaded her brood into the black Dodge and coasted quietly down the rutted driveway, so as not to disturb Frog sleeping off last night's liquor. Reaching the paved county road, she'd pop the clutch and startle the ancient beast to life, then drive to the holiness church in the poor part of Talihina, where she'd line the ragamuffin gaggle down the pew beside her like battered tenpins.

The emotionally charged holiness worship services held little fascination for Jack's older brothers and sisters, who resisted their mother's evangelism. One by one, they fled her influence until, by the time Jack came along, only Sarah and the quiet blue-eyed boy coasted down the driveway on Sunday mornings.

The religious education Jack received at Northside Holiness Church, like most everything else in his life, was far from perfect. But he caught a few glimmers of hope amid the fanaticism.

Members of the church meant well, they were just emotional, like Sarah simply searching for answers in a world full of questions.

Worship services were raucous, emotional affairs, outbursts of pent-up confusion reflecting the people's day-to-day lives. The festivities each Sunday would commence with the appearance of a simple, rotund man, Albert Hockington, weekdays an employee of the canning factory. Brother Hockington always wore a white long-sleeved shirt adorned by a plain, black tie, and his rising from the front pew signaled that church was about to begin. Standing sternly behind the massive wooden pulpit, he'd peer into another world, then lean forward and intone, "Would the choir please come forward?"

Alone and by twos, nearly everyone in the building—some who sang like birds, and others who bellowed like hogs under the gate—trooped to the pews behind the pulpit in front of the galvanized tin baptistry. The choir assembled, Hockington would then raise his right hand and pause momentarily. The split-second before he dropped that hand was like the moment before a horse race, one final instant of quiet before an hour and a half of sheer and total bedlam.

Beginning the song service with a emotional number and working upward in intensity and volume, the red-faced song leader—his flushed face turned heavenward and eyes tightly closed —would lead a succession of gospel songs: *I'll Fly Away, Just Over in the Gloryland, Victory in Jesus.* Solid and still, Hockington was the tether around which the choir members whirled with their hands raised in ecstasy, their feet dancing, their minds briefly set free from the pain of daily life.

Pastor Paul Tidwell always sat ensconced on a massive, worn, red velvet between the pulpit and the choir. The son of the deceased founder of the church, Tidwell had been groomed

for the position since birth. He was well-read and extremely intelligent—in a country sort of way—and completely at home in the setting. But he also evidenced a barely perceptible detachment, a studied tolerance of the proceedings. This connected with a skeptical, but sincere, member of the junior Sunday school class, Jack Taylor, and as their relationship grew, the minister and Jack would each discovered in the other what he'd been lacking at home.

By junior high, Jack was in the habit of stopping by the church on his way home from school. Pastor Tidwell, who never had a child of his own, sensed the heart of the quiet, blue-eyed boy, and he adjusted his daily schedule to be at the church that time of day. Munching on cookies that Mrs. Tidwell provided, Jack and Tidwell discussed many things: the weather, fishing in the spring, deer hunting in the fall. They discussed God a good bit, too.

The pastor understood Jack's confusion well. Tidwell was the offspring of not just a religion, but of a culture as well. He realized the two were tangled vines, and that to untangle them would be the death of both. He had learned to accept the contradictions, and had mastered the art of enduring doubts to preserve truth.

At home, Frog was hardening into a desperate creature. Each of his daughters had fled at first opportunity, and like their mother had married the first man who paid attention. The older sons either joined the army or moved away as quickly as possible, and never looked back. Frog was aging alone, and had become ghost wandering between the rusting hulks of the salvage yard.

When Jack turned sixteen-years old, he began begging for a car, but Frog ignored him. Then late one summer night, Frog received a call from the county sheriff, an old moonshining

buddy. The sheriff had been called to investigate an accident a few miles west of the Taylor place, and while interviewing the out-of-state driver, had discovered six large suitcases in the trunk for which the driver had no explanation.

They quickly struck a deal: if the driver would abandon the car and its contents, the sheriff would look the other way. When Frog arrived to tow the car, he and the sheriff opened the suitcases and discovered dozens of little plastic bags full of white powder. Both agreed they hadn't seen a thing, and the sheriff went to file his report while Frog towed the 1967 Pontiac GTO home.

Emerging from the house the next morning and scratching his belly through a thin white cotton undershirt, Frog found Jack examining the car.

"Get away from that car!"

"Where'd you get it, Daddy?"

"I said, git!"

"This is exactly the kind of car I want, Daddy"

"I said, git!"

"Where'd you get it?"

"Wreck on the highway last night. None o' yor business. Just git."

"It's dinged up a little, but not bad. I looked her over good. What about them suitcases in the trunk?"

Jack had opened the driver's door and gotten into the car when a patrol car pulled into the driveway.

“Mornin', Frog,” the sheriff said, emerging from the car with a smile. But the smile melted into a grimace when he spotted Jack behind the wheel.

“Good to see 'ya this mornin', Sheriff,” said Frog, suddenly bright and happy. “You got here at just the right time. Here’s them evidence files you asked me to fetch from over in Centerton. Lots more than I expected, so I just put ‘em in the trunk of this car I bought while I was there. See, I’ve been lookin’ for a car for Jack. The boy just turned sixteen and ...”

Frog was standing with his hands on hips, a big grin on his stubbled face, when Jack jumped out of the car.

“She’s all yours, son. Happy birthday.”

Jack jumped back into the driver's seat of the Pontiac and began working the shifter through the gears with the radio blaring as the sheriff and Frog bent into the trunk to remove the suitcases.

“Frog, what are you doing?” the sheriff hissed out the side of his mouth. “We stole this car fair and square, got the title and everything.”

“Now, now, don't get greedy,” said Frog. “The boy was out here this morning before I woke up; he’s done seen the suitcases. We’ll just give him the title he'll forget all about ‘em. You’n me are gonna make so much money on this stuff, we’ll forget all about this old car.”

Throwing the last suitcase into the trunk of his car, the sheriff gave Frog one last glare and drove away. Turning the radio off, Jack got out of the car and stood in the driveway admiring it; he could just see himself cruising the town in style. A blizzard of emotions swirled inside him, and Jack arrived at the only conclusion that mattered: this was his dream car, and his father had made it possible. He hugged his father for the first time in his life.

Frog stood frozen, his too-short arms limp and unresponsive. The icy reaction cut right through Jack, jerking him back to reality. He released his hug and stepped away, feeling no more emotion than if he'd looped his arms around a telephone pole. Examining the car again, he noticed for the first time the dented side, the missing chrome, the cracked taillight.

"I'll go in the house and get the title, boy," Frog said. "That way you can go into town this afternoon and register it."

In the weeks to come, Jack and the car became linked in Frog's mind, and what little conscience the old man still possessed was pricked each time the Pontiac pulled into the driveway. Sarah had been kneeling in the garden the morning that Frog's selfish brain had conceived of the coverup, and she began noticing Frog's hating Jack for something that wasn't the boy's fault. She could see where things were headed,remembering the skinny girl who ran smack dab into hopelessness, and knew there must be a better way for her thirteenth child.

The end of the line came the day an increasingly drunken Frog, his newfound prosperity not abiding well with his established proclivities, received an unannounced pastoral call. Apparently Pastor Tidwell had obviously never truly studied the theological concept of a reprobate mind, or he would have spared himself the trouble of even bothering.

What really pushed Frog's detonator that afternoon was Tidwell's comment about how close he and Jack had become.

"Git off my property," thundered Frog at the minister.

Sarah was between the rows of her garden, watching as Frog continued his tirade, poking his finger into the ribs of the backpedaling minister.

"I'll have you know," Frog said, "my family will *never* set foot on your church property again. You've been weaseling your way into my wife's purse every Sunday for years, and now I discover that you've been filling my son's head with foolishness, too. Get off my property, preacher."

As PJ's car disappeared down the driveway, Sarah rose from her unseen vantage point in the garden. The disgust she felt was precisely the way she wished she'd felt all those years ago, the day he whistled at her and she turned.

"Tell Jack goodbye if you get the chance," she said flatly under her breath as she passed. "You'll see the boy no more."

That afternoon when Jack arrived home from school, Sarah was sitting in the front room, hands folded in her lap, the sharp shadow of her set jaw dark against the far wall.

"Jack, honey, I love you, but it's time you for you to leave."

"What do you mean, Momma?"

"I mean that whatever you find in the world out there has got to be better than this. Lord knows I did the best I could with every one of you kids, but you're the only one who tried."

Jack laid his schoolbooks on the table and stood silently.

"Here, take this envelope," she said. "There's five hundred dollars in there, it'll get you by until you find work."

He stared at the envelope, then glanced into his mother's reddened eyes, hollow pools of hurt, shame, and despair.

"Baby, this is the hardest thing I've ever had to do," she said. "But it's your only chance, so go. Now. Don't tarry. I've made up my mind."

Jack looked around the cluttered room of a house once proud, a house long ago left to go its own way. A stained cotton curtain fluttered in the window beside the worn upholstered rocker where she sat. He had always known, somehow, that a day like this would come, and had secretly hoped it would. Yet he'd always dreaded it just the same.

Sarah rose and stepped to him, smaller, shorter than he'd realized. "I love you, Momma."

"I love you too, Son. Enough to see you gone. Don't come home. Write when you get the chance; I always get to the mailbox before him. Put your trust in God. He'll make a way."

Jack opened the screen door and paused. His mother stood stooped, elbows tucked in, one hand clutching a wadded tissue held to her mouth, the other supporting that elbow. Her face was tilted ever so slightly forward and down, but her eyes were focused on her son one last time, watching what little hope she had walk out the door and drive away.

Chapter Four

In the three months since the incident on the turnpike, the only place Jack found any peace at all was on the golf course. The struggle wasn't getting any easier. For nearly twenty years, his routine each day had been about the same: up before dawn and down the back stairs from the apartment and into the cafe, spoon the coffee into the drip basket of the machine and light the grill, call back upstairs to wake up the girls …

Weekdays since Christmas were bad for Jack, but Sundays were the worst. Once his favorite day of the week, the break in routine—a luxury he'd treasured for years—made the loneliness even more unbearable. The cafe was closed on Sunday, so he wasn't around people and had to contend with the quietness of the apartment. For years, the routine had been sleeping late, then attending church together as a family. On Sunday afternoons they usually drove up the turnpike to Joplin, for lunch and to shop at the Sam's Club there, stocking up on supplies for the coming week.

When Christina got old enough for the youth group at the church, she began staying in Vinita with friends on Sunday afternoon, and Jack and Cindy began spending the day together, just to the two of them. They made the regular trips to Joplin for lunch and shopping, and in the winter the might catch a movie. In the summer they'd go to the golf course about twilight, playing nine holes together, then return to the apartment. Of all the hours during the week now, Sunday evenings were the hardest for Jack to bear, and he often went to the course alone. The only thing worse than *being* on the course on Sunday evenings without Cindy was *not being* on the course on Sunday evenings without Cindy.

He stepped to the first tee box in the crisp mid-March air and addressed the ball. The sweet spot of the titanium driver crashed into the Titleist with a plink, and Jack froze in follow through, watching the ball accelerate and draw around the dogleg of the first fairway. Pretty shot, real pretty.

Looping the strap of the golf bag over his right shoulder, he began walking down the fairway. The afternoon golfers had all retreated to their La-Z-Boys with a Bud. All of the golf carts had been corralled into the equipment shed, and the range balls were gathered into the wire buckets, awaiting tomorrow's beating. The attendant had already turned out the light and locked the door of the clubhouse, waving goodnight and driving away, leaving Jack alone on the course.

His nylon-spiked shoes scraped the asphalt cart path as he walked and pulled the knitted cover on the head of the driver before sliding it back into the bag. The polymer grip of the club struck the bottom of the bag with a thump. He missed the old sounds, the familiar soundtrack of the way the game used to be when he was a teenager: the crack of persimmon against balata, the typewriter heel-to-toe clack of steel-spiked shoes, the tiny squeak of a corded grip being twisted by leather-gloved fingers. But then, Jack missed lots of things these days.

He slung the bottom of the bag behind him as he walked, hugging it with his left forearm, and put a white golf tee in his mouth — an old trick he'd found to stop the nicotine cravings after giving up smoking a few year ago. Cindy's never approved, and when Christian came along, his wife had finally convinced him to quit tobacco.

He thought about the new innovations as he walked. They were good for the game, he supposed— forgiving, oversized metal drivers and power-packed balls make the game easier. But as a result, herds of newbies had flocked to the course, and the old traditional hoofers like

him were nearing extinction. The newbies roared willy-nilly around the course in their golf carts, clueless and rude. Jack had spent most afternoons here for years, but the game just didn't seem as fun to him anymore. Nowadays, after making the bank deposit, he usually spent the afternoons playing solitaire on the computer in his office. Making the deposit used to be Cindy's job.

Lately on Wednesday mornings he'd been leaving the cafe with Ainsley — the kid he'd hired a couple of months ago to help run the cafe—and attending the weekly senior scramble at the golf course. Still a few months shy of forty, Jack was too young to join in, and just spent the morning walking along. Somehow he felt comfortable with all the older guys. The seniors carefully steered their golf bags around on squeaky-wheeled pull carts, then scrunched their tired old bodies over the ball to attack it with tiny whacks.

Every so often, one of the old geezers would get frustrated by one of the newbies and challenge him to a game. The matches always began the same way: the newbie boomed a monstrous drive two hundred and fifty yards— and right into the trees. Then the old guy'll step quietly to the tee and crack a pretty little buck and a half tee shot right down the middle, and follow with a iron, pin high. Then the senior lags a putt close to the hole and taps in, while the newbie hacks around in the trees searching for his six-dollar ball. Jack always enjoyed those matches: the old guys play the game the way it's supposed to be played.

Everything's changed these days, he thought. Whatever happened to mastering your swing on the driving range first, then abiding by the rules and hitting the sweet spot every time? It used to be that if you worked hard, loved your family, and went to church, life was supposed to turn out OK. This new breed? All they know to do is plunk down $400 for a new driver and yell get the hell out the way.

Jack paused in mid-stride picked a hickory nut from the ground, then threw it at a squirrel chattering on the lowest limb of a flowering dogwood. The strap on his golf bag squeaked rhythmically as he continued walking, and the low, late Sunday evening sun had painted big shadowy splotches across the Bermuda fairway. He felt his stomach growl and realized that he'd had nothing to eat since the honey bun he'd microwaved for breakfast. Hard getting used to living alone.

He'd been haunting the course on Sunday evenings since the snow melted in February. He missed those date nights with Cindy. During the winter when it was too cold to come to the golf course, they might spend an hour in the hot tub with a bottle of wine before going to bed early. Or they might order a pizza and watch a DVD. But on the long, warm summer evenings they played nine holes of golf together, just the two of them, Jack carrying his own bag while pulling Cindy's on a cart.

Lately on Sunday evenings, Jack had been playing a fantasy match alone — one ball for Cindy and one for him. He'd found some peace that way, but no spring was arriving, and the air was thick with the scent of new-mown grass. He knew that summer neared, and the old memories would soon begin ganging up on him. Memories like the way Cindy made up the rules of the game as she went along: she was allowed to tee off from wherever his tee shot landed; she could hit as many mulligans as she cared to; she only had to count two putts. One night after they finished playing nine holes it was nearly dark, and she suggested climbing the fence around the clubhouse pool and going skinny-dipping. They had hid in the deep end, naked giggling, while the night watchman pissed against a nearby tree.

A thousand times Jack wished he'd gone to Tulsa with Cindy and Christina the night they were killed. A million times he'd asked himself: Why hadn't he just taken the car keys that afternoon and said, *No, you can't go, it's too dangerous*. He had let a fifteen-year old girl's excitement about a new party dress overcome his good judgment. The whole thing was his fault.

Jack continued walking down the fairway, and nearly lost his balance when he stepped on a range ball. He kicked it angrily, and watched it hop off fairway back onto the practice area. He remembered the afternoon spent there with Christina last fall. She'd sure been cute that day, ponytail swinging out the back of her cap when she jumped clear off the ground as she swung at the ball. He'd hoped they'd be golfing buddies someday.

Reaching his tee shot on the fairway, and sat the bag on the ground and surveyed his lie. A man of simple tastes, Jack was dressed in a pair of khakis and a gray oversized fleece pullover. His blonde hair was close-cropped beneath a faded-red ball cap; his eyes were blue, his build slight, and his chin stubbled by a Sunday growth of whiskers. When Jack walked, he landed first on the balls of his feet, which gave his stride a spring-like momentum, like an escaped basketball dribbling softly down the street. His lone extravagance was the Tag Heuer watch he treasured, protected in its velvet pouch and tucked into the bottom pocket of the golf bag, next to the unopened Marlboros and the Bic. It had been a gift from Cindy on their fourteenth wedding anniversary in '02, the week after she had watched Tiger Woods wearing one on television after winning The Masters.

Jack had purchased the cigarettes about two weeks ago—not planning to smoke them. He bought them just to quiet the mocking inner voice that kept whispering, *You'll take up smoking again, now that the girls are gone.*

He stepped back from the ball and reached into the golf bag for the smokes. Walking through the first cut of rough, he leaned against the trunk of a gnarled oak and unzipped the plastic from the cigarette pack, then removed the white golf tee from his mouth. He lit up the cigarette, breathing deeply and letting familiar old sensation waft into his brain and watching shadows shroud the trees and swallow the clubhouse.

It wasn't fair, this lonesomeness; he deserved better. For years, he'd risen at half-past four every morning and gone to work, first as Red's assistant, then as the boss after buying the cafe from his father-in-law in 1991. Jack had since turned the business into a Route 66 landmark, with billboards painted on barn roofs for a hundred miles east and west on I-44 advertising Trackside Cafe. Every few weeks Jack spent an afternoon driving up and down the turnpike, placing brochures on motel desks, on the counters of convenience stores He sent nice little notes and commission checks to the desk clerks and cashiers who passed them along to the travelers. A couple of years ago, Ira Glass had interviewed him for the National Public Radio show, "This American Life," and the cafe had been featured in a two-page spread in *The Kansas City Star* back in '02. The clipping was framed and hanging on the wall by the cash register, right beside the framed photo of Jack shaking Bill Clinton's hand when the President had stopped during his campaign for reelection.

Not only had Jack built a profitable business, he'd forged a strong marriage. Their seventeenth anniversary would have been this May, and he had been completely faithful for fifteen years now. Thankfully, Cindy had never known about that girl he'd met at Grand Lake Casino. Gosh, that little cowgirl was hot.

But after his dad died in ’89, Jack had taken stock of his life and had some long talks with Red. He had moved his mother to Vinita in the spring of ’90, and set her up in one of those nice HUD apartments near the park. Christina had been born the following September. He bought the cafe from Red the following March. The family all got back in church a few months later. And then … well, everything had finally come together. Jack had been rock-solid for years now; and proud of it. Helluva lotta good it had done, he thought.

He flicked the cigarette away and glanced at the numbers painted on the sprinkler head near the ball on the fairway— ninety-seven yards to the green. He chose the pitching wedge and returned to the ball, waggling the club, trying to concentrate. The kid who killed Cindy and Christina was going to be sentenced in June. What in hell would make a seventeen-year-old kid angry enough to throw a concrete block off a bridge? The kid said he hadn’t meant to hurt anybody. Yeah, right.

That punk kid from Catoosa had destroyed his life. There hadn’t even been much of a trial, thought Jack hadn’t attended; just couldn’t take it. The kid, Charles Harrington, had initially been charged as an adult, but had pled guilty to manslaughter in a plea bargain. Sentenced as a minor, he might get five years—three with good behavior. The whole crime had been tied up neat and tidy, so everyone could just get on with their lives. Place in hell for you, boy. Place in hell.

Jack leaned the shaft of the pitching wedge against his thigh and lit another cigarette. He took a long drag, then set the smoke on the ground and took a half-swing, skulling the ball. He cursed and hurled the pitching wedge down the fairway after it.

Where to from here? Lately, Ainsley sometimes found him standing at the grill as if in a trance, his face set hard, glaring into space. A couple of weeks ago, an old high school buddy home visiting his folks had come stopped by the cafe. When he asked about Christina, Jack had felt the blood rush to his head, had felt like punching him in the nose, and then realized that his old friend hadn't heard. But the off-hand remark set the woods on fire again. Jack had babbled something about a pot on the stove and ran out the back door and jumping into his car to drive around until after dark.

Dusk had fallen across the golf course by now, and Jack picked up the pitching wedge and threw it into the bag, then walked past the green and toward his car. As he approached the parking lot, the outline of another car began taking shape in the gloom, with a large form leaned against the fender, the tip of the man's cigarette glowing, fading.

He spoke. "A bit late, isn't it, old buddy?"

"Who's there?"

"Been awhile, Jack."

Tip Mitchelson was a nice man, and successful. Jack first met him the day he and his wife, Michelle, had stopped at the cafe about seven years ago during a cross-country trip in their motorhome. Ten or so years older than Jack and Cindy, Tip and Michelle had just sold a string of successful independent office supply stores to Office Max. Tip was a big man with big ways. Swarthy, he always wore a coal-black goatee, snaked by a streak of gray that began directly beneath the center of his lower lip and ribboned over his chin. He wore earthen-toned nondescript clothing of the finest fabrics — cashmere and merino in the winter, Egyptian cotton

in the summer. Michelle and Cindy hit it off right away—Michelle was a clone of Cindy who wore more expensive jewelry—and the Mitchelsons and the Taylors quickly became best friends. They had parked their motorhome in the Taylor's driveway for several weeks and just kind of moved in. Tip loved hanging around the cafe—said it reminded him of the small Indiana town where he had grown up. Soon he was working the room with the coffee pot, joking with the customers. He was pleasant company, and one afternoon while playing golf at Shangri-La Country Club on Grand Lake with Jack, he had noticed a for-sale sign in the yard of a patio home. The seller accepted Tip's offer the next day.

The couples spent lovely evenings together that summer: grilling steaks on the patio and sipping wine, playing board games and going to movies. With no children of their own, Tip and Michelle became the uncle and aunt Christina had never been able to enjoy. But Tip's entrepreneurial streak was soon restless, and he invested in a small-town bank in eastern Arkansas and moved there to manage the business. Last fall, Jack heard that Tip had sold his bank shares for another tidy profit. Michelle had written, "Sold the bank," on their Christmas card. "Tying up loose ends here. See you in the spring." Below the note had been a postscript in Tip's handwriting: "Jack, have you been thinking about my offer to buy the cafe?"

The old friends embraced in the dark clubhouse parking lot, and Tip gently said, "Jack, we didn't know about Cindy and Christina's death until we checked into the motel this afternoon. I thought I might find you here." Tip gave him another sideways man-hug, and the two men leaned against the fender of his car.

"Why didn't you tell us, Jack?"

"Tip, lately I've felt like a kite flying in a twister. I just haven't been thinking straight. I should have let you know."

The next morning when Jack came downstairs around half past five and unlocked the front door of the cafe, Tip was standing there waiting.

"What's up, Jack? Change the opening time?"

"Naw, overslept, I guess." Truth was, Jack had been haphazard about opening times since December. When he flipped on the lights in the dining room, Tip went directly to the big stainless steel coffee maker and started scooping coffee into the filter. Jack went to the kitchen and lit the burners beneath the grill, and Dorothy Gaines came sidling through the back door sideways. Dorothy had been waitressing at the cafe for years. Rumors had circulated around Vinita about her and Red for years, especially after Cindy's mom died in '79. But Jack knew better. Red loved the old waitress, but not that way.

Dorothy was built like a giant-sized pear—inverted— and carried her girth with authority. Crude and unrefined, she was always wound tight as the kinky gray permanent wave curls hugging her skull like a showercap. Jack loved Dorothy for everything she'd been to the family all these years: she pinch-hit for Cindy's mom, she'd been a sorta-grandma for Christina, and she had always been pleasant companion for Red. A time or two Jack had leaned on the old girl himself.

Foul-mouthed and rouged-up as usual, Dorothy came blustering into the kitchen, her crepe-soled black service shoes squeaking in protest. "Something smells like cigarette smoke in here, Jack. What the hell, you smoking again? Listen, kid, you taking up the habit again wouldn't

make me no never mind—but it would be some mighty surprising shit after all these years. And what in hell would the girls think?" Then Dorothy looked into the dining room and spotted Tip—Tip Mitchelson! *You're* the stink I just caught wind of!"

Dorothy settled onto her perch beside the cash register by the front door, and Jack grinned as he watched them banter. The week following Cindy's death, Dorothy had just assumed the cash register job and told Jack to hire a younger waitress. He loved watching the lovingly bawdy old woman laugh, holding one palm to her forehead and leaning on her ham of an elbow. Ainsley came through the back door and donned his apron, then plopped a slab of bacon on the grill. The new girl—Jack's third attempt to replace Dorothy as waitress—had arrived, and sat rolling flatware into napkins with one hand while twisting a lock of hair with the other. The pungently pleasing smell of sizzling bacon permeated the room, and for one quick moment, the world seemed right.

"Jack," Dorothy barked as she and Tip passed by through the kitchen on their way out the back door, "me'n my boyfriend here need a smoke break. Cover the cash register, woncha?"

Sometimes Jack wondered who worked for whom. "Sure, Dot, whatever you say." He cracked four eggs onto the grill as he saw two customers coming through the front door.

Jack didn't know how he would have survived the past few months without Dorothy, even though his friends in town had gone out of their way being kind to him. Morris Parks at the mortuary said it was the biggest funeral he'd had ever seen. The high school had dedicated the 2006 yearbook to Christina's memory. Cindy's girlfriends had all been great, some even stopping by with home-cooked meals during the weeks following the funeral. A couple of Cindy's friends,

however, particularly the one who was divorced and the one married to an old high school buddy of his, had seemed a little too "helpful."

But when he really needed someone to lean on lately, he'd been turning to Dorothy. Dorothy was safe, and Jack knew she really loved him. In a way, the two of them were all that remained: Cindy and Christina were no more; Jack's mother had been dead for several years, his much-older brothers and sisters—all twelve—were now complete strangers to him. And Red was living in another world, cheerfully wandering the halls of the nursing home north of town with his mind long gone.

All his life, Jack had never really let anybody inside but his mother and Cindy. Maybe that came from cowering behind his momma's dress tail as a boy watching his aging, drunken, violent father. Maybe it came from wandering the woods behind the house alone, all his older siblings—some nearly old enough to be his parent—long fled. Over the years, Jack had gotten good at being alone; but he never figured out how to avoid lonesome.

These days, Jack knew he wasn't the only one hurting: Dorothy was suffering, too. He knew she wanted to comfort him, but that she really didn't know quite what to do. Sometimes late at night, when silence in the apartment nearly drove him mad, he fled to her house in the country. He'd wind up at her old farmhouse in the wee hours, and just sit and stare at her fireplace. Dorothy was a verbal Gatling gun at the cafe, but she held her tongue on those long, cold winter nights, letting Jack talk, just inserting a soft "I know" when silence crowded too close. A couple of mornings after going to Dorothy's house in the middle of the night, Jack had awakened beneath a soft wool throw, the fire nearly died, and Dorothy asleep on the couch. The old gal never married, and she lived by herself at the old home place after her folks had passed.

Dorothy had lost her parents years before. Now Cindy and Christina were gone. Lately she'd lost Red to dementia. She feared losing Jack as well.

Tip and Dorothy stood in the alley behind the cafe watching the ranchers arrive for the Monday cattle auction as the sale barn across the road from the cafe. Tips had grown up surrounded by Indiana cornfields, John Deere green as far as the eye could see, but something about this little sepia-toned Oklahoma town welcomed him the moment he arrived. Maybe it had been the people: resilient, honest, hardworking. Or maybe it was the lifestyle here: laid-back, unpretentious, easy. It might have been the pleasant isolation: plenty of space, wide-open skies, room to breathe. Anyway, whatever it was, Tip felt comfortable in northeast Oklahoma.

He enjoyed Dorothy's company, too. From the beginning Dorothy had been the narrator of these peoples' tales for Tip, the one who knew the town secrets. Sometimes, when he and Michelle craved something stronger than Jack and Cindy's chardonnay, they would meet Dorothy in the lounge at the Holiday Inn out by the turnpike. The old waitress made sense of Jack for them—the way he seemed acquainted with all sorts of people he shouldn't have known, of the way he sometimes exuded vibes contradicting his church-going image. Dorothy knew lots of things about Jack, but coughed up occasional hints—and then only after a couple of drinks.

Tip leaned against he wall of the east wall of the cafe and watched another cattle trailer pull up at the sale barn across the road. He shook a couple of cigarettes loose from the pack and offered one. "How's he doing, really, Dot?"

"No good." Dorothy leaned into Tip's lighter, and inhaled, then lifted her top chin off the bottom one and exhaled, aiming the smoke at the top of the sales barn across the street. "Never

seen a man take it as hard as he is. Oh, some guys like Jim Riggle lose their wives and wail like the world has come to an end. *Seems* like they're taking it hard. But I know old man Riggle; he was humping that waitress from the Oasis in the front room, even as his wife lay dying in their bedroom upstairs. Six months later Riggle married some divorcee from Sand Springs. I've heard she's got money."

Tip smiled and backed up against the brick wall, drawing his right leg beneath him and putting the sole of his boot against it. He watched the traffic out on the turnpike, waited for Dorothy to continue.

"But Jack's different. I've known that boy since the day Red hired him. He wandered into the cafe that morning from the mountains, looking like a whipped pup. I was a little feistier then." She winked at Tip and tapped the ash from her cigarette. "But I couldn't get a rise out of him for a long time. Quiet boy, back then, mighty quiet. Then Cindy got her comeuppance—you were probably unaware she used to be quite the little prima donna—I watched the most amazing thing happen. Those two kids saved each another. I know that's a religious term, Tip—and hell, I don't even go to church—but that's the only way to describe it; they just saved one another."

Dorothy took a final drag and crushed the cigarette against the dumpster. "Them two kids reminded me of my parents' marriage: old fashioned; a couple of homesteaders making it work."

Tip had expected to return to Vinita and pick up where he'd left off. After selling the bank, he and Cindy had considered their options and figured they might buy the cafe from Jack and Cindy, settle down in Vinita for good. Jack had always been talking about trying to make a living playing golf, and Tip figured it might be time. But after discovering what had happened,

he felt like twisting Jack's arm right now to sell would be like stripping a corpse on the battlefield.

Jack glanced up from the grill when Tip and Dorothy reentered the cafe. "'Bout time you two quit lollygagging around out there," he said. "Customers are backed up at the cash register, and we're down to one fresh pot of coffee."

"Aye, aye, Captain! Got it covered," Dorothy responded as she pushed through the swinging door into the dining room. "Just when I was finally getting somewhere with Mr. Right here."

Life began falling into a pleasant routine after Tip's arrival, a welcome change from lurching from one day to the next. Jack began opening up at five again, and when he arrived Tip would already be there, having let himself in with the key Jack gave him. Dorothy would come strolling in around seven, explaining with a wink that her "boyfriend" was covering for her and she could afford to sleep in. Tip had been working so many hours Jack mentioned putting him on the clock, but Tip just waved him off.

Every afternoon they played a round of golf together, and Jack's game began returning to form. The long game came back almost immediately, and before long before he had chased the yips away and started dropping the putts.

He didn't say anything but he began thinking about Tip's postscript at the bottom of the Christmas card. What was holding him here in Vinita, anyway?

On a Friday morning about three weeks after Tip returned, Jack had stopped at the bank to make the deposit when Bob Lee, the vice-president, motioned him into his office. Bob's wife, Shirley, had died of cancer ten years before after, from all appearances, years of solid marriage. After staying single for a couple of years, Bob had married Carolyn Tice, a divorced teller at Security Savings and Loan across town.

"How are you doing, Jack?" Bob had asked.

"Oh, some days are better than others."

Bob nodded. "I understand."

Jack glanced at the framed photos on the credenza: Bob and his son hunting, Bob and Carolyn with her family at Christmas, Bob with his granddaughter. "Bob, what would you do if you were me?"

Toying with an ivory-handled letter opener, the banker swiveled his chair and set his foot on the handle of the bottom desk drawer, and seemed to be peered through the wood-paneled wall.

"I don't know, Jack. That's not for me to say. After Shirley died, I was lonely, and I found a good thing with Carolyn. But sometimes after she's gone to bed, I sit alone on the deck and wonder what it would be like if I'd just moved away and become somebody else—reinvented myself before youth totally slipped through my fingers."

The Seth-Thomas on the wall softly ticked away a minute, and Jack stood to leave. "Nice talking to you, Bob."

"Anytime, Jack."

When he backed out of the parking space in front of the bank, Jack noticed the cafe van was low on fuel, so he pulled into the convenience store two blocks south. As the tank filled, he surveyed his hometown. Not much to it.

Twenty years ago, he'd arrived in Vinita after a cattle-hauler in Tahlequa told him the Vinita sale barn was hiring. Jack had driven his Pontiac through night to see about the job, and had arrived in the wee hours of the morning and parked behind the cattle chutes to catch a few hours sleep in the back seat. His grumbling belly had set him moving the next morning, and the nearest eatery was Trackside Cafe. He was the first customer of the morning, and the ruddy little man wearing a paper hat asked him a few questions, then offered him a steady job.

When the pump handle clicked off, Jack went inside the convenience store and waited in line behind a teenager with her nose glued to her cell phone, texting. An Indian in a cowboy hat stood near the door, beside a fat white girl wearing flip-flops with a baby dangling from her hip. Hot dogs were riding the roller grill, and a high school boy was pushing dust around the room with a broom, as a blue-haired old lady stared at the red digital lotto numbers, eyes darting from the ticket in her hand to the sign and back again.

When Jack returned to the van, he drove toward the family's apartment above the cafe and searched his mind for any reason to stay. Just yesterday as they played golf, Tip had commented admiringly about the way Jack had increased tourist traffic, suggesting he add another dining room to the cafe to accommodate more tour buses. Jack knew that with his business moxie, Tip could quickly transform the homey eatery into an honest-to-God tourist trap and cash cow.

As the thought about the future, Jack realized he'd been in a rut for some time; a pleasant rut, but a rut just the same. A rut's a pleasant thing when you have somebody to love, and they love you back. But a rut with its future kicked in is nothing but a hole in the ground, a grave. He made a U-turn in front of the Sonic Drive-In and drove the van toward the nursing home. He needed to have a talk with Red.

Chapter Five

The sudden resolve Jack had felt at the convenience store had broken loose, and it rattled around in his mind as he drove across the railroad tracks north of town. The initial excitement still sparkled in his imagination, but reality was tugging him back: he was a widower who owned a cafe in a tiny town in Oklahoma. He'd be forty-years old soon. He wasn't allowed to dream that way. But the possibility, the potential of leaving it all behind, appealed to him. A good, long talk with Red would help him see things more clearly.

The very idea sounded crazy—seeking wisdom in an old man whose mind has flown away, but Jack made the trip to Meadowcrest often, and things always seemed a bit clearer when the left. Just sitting there in the sterile, cold room with his father-in-law helped Jack examine his own thoughts more deeply. Despite his foggy condition. Red remained the same pleasant man he always was—just confused.

The tidy Depression-era clapboards on Wilson Street gave way to ranch-style homes as the country road left town, stretching straight across the flat prairie as a bricklayer's string. An old man in hickory-striped overalls was roto-tilling his springtime garden, and he threw a hand of greeting into the air as the van passed. Jack tooted the horn in reply, and a scissortail sprang from the top strand of a barbed wire fence and lofted into the cornflower-blue sky, flitting across a field of knee-high winter wheat.

Cindy began noticing changes in Red not long after Tip and Michelle moved away to Arkansas. It was just little things at first. Like occasionally putting coffee into the drip basket without a filter. Or losing his keys. Red kept a key ring clipped to his belt—the biggest wad of

keys you ever saw—and Jack theorized it was a poor kid's way of reminding himself he'd made it. Red misplaced them one day, and half the town had been enlisted in the search. He was frantic with worry, until Christina found the keys dangling in the lock of the door to his apartment at the HUD retirement village. The vaguely troubling mental lapses grew more frequent, but the family didn't think too much about it: he was 76 years old, after all.

But the situation turned into a crisis the evening Jack, and Cindy, and Christina returned from their '03 holiday ski trip. They arrived home to discover Red's apartment empty, and a note from Dorothy taped to the front door. They hurried to her farmhouse and found Red standing in front of the television in the living room, bouncing from one foot to the other, and staring blankly at the television. He didn't even acknowledge their presence.

Dorothy told them the police had called her at three a.m., asking that she come to town and retrieve him. They had found him standing on the long-abandoned Frisco railroad depot platform, staring down the tracks with a spatula in his raised right hand. The night air had been bitterly cold, but all he was wearing beneath his white chef's apron was a thin white cotton t-shirt and frayed khaki chinos. He had been barefoot, and told the policeman he was waiting for travelers on the morning train. He protested vigorously as they put him in the back seat of the patrol car. He was waiting for the train carrying Mr. Phillips, he told them. They knew Frank Phillips, didn't they? Phillips 66 gasoline?

It was as if Christina's witty—if sometimes forgetful—grandpa had slipped out of town while they were away. They first thought perhaps he could continue living alone checked on more frequently. But he wandered the streets at night, so they were forced to move him into their own apartment above the cafe. But the strain soon became too much. The last straw was the night

Christina had awakened Jack and Cindy screaming frantically. She had just returned from an out-of-town basketball game and opened her closet door to find Red curled into the corner; he had gotten out of bed and was trying on her shoes. The family reluctantly moved him to Meadowcrest Village.

Red had been born Gavin Fitzsimmon in February, 1928 on Coody's Bluff in Nowata County, twenty-five miles west of Vinita. The luckiest day of his life was the morning he'd found the courage to run away from home to stand on the shoulder of U.S. Highway 60 with his thumb in the air. The only thing his no-good father had ever given him was the nickname, Red. And how much brilliance did that take: one look at the auburn brush pile atop the boy's head explained that.

The only talent old man Fitzsimmon ever displayed besides bestowing nicknames was his attraction to women—not ladies, mind you, just women. Any human physically equipped as female qualified, and loose women flocked around the handsome little man still carrying a trace of his Scottish daddy's lilt. Laverne enjoyed being attractive, and took full advantage—not for marriage, just for the sex. But it was never long before each new conquest was sated by his meanness and mustered the gumption to flee.

Red's mother grew to hate Laverne just like all the rest. She was of mixed Choctaw ancestry, and she never cared much for her baby's fair complexion and delicate features. So one night she cut her losses and disappeared, abandoning little Gavin in the woodbox beside the stove. Red never so much as knew his mother's name. After she left, the old man cared for the

child—if occasionally providing something to eat *caring*—for the same reason he threw scraps off the back porch to stray dogs: even a reprobate can't stand to see another beast starve.

Laverne razor-stropped the boy most every day just like he did the curs, and one morning fourteen-year old Red had enough. He threw his one extra shirt and the leavings from last night's ham into a gunnysack, went to the highway and stuck out his thumb. As luck would have it, the first vehicle cresting the hill was big as a conestoga wagon and black as midnight, a giant ghost of a car costing more than forty acres of bottomland. And riding in the backseat, scanning the morning paper, was none other than Frank Phillips, the oilman. The tycoon had been spending the morning inspecting new oil wells his drillers had been poking into the pastures near New Alluwe. He was on his way home to Bartlesville.

Red chewed the stick of Wrigleys Mr. Phillips offered and answered his questions, riding silently most of the way. But when they arrived at the mansion, the oilman turned Red over to the maid and her to put something besides chewing gum into the kid's belly. It all happened just natural as could be, and before long Red became a fixture around the place. Scrawny, short, and freckled, he lacked the grit to be a roustabout, but he had a winning smile and a pleasant way with a phrase. So he became the houseboy, sleeping in the pantry while learning to cook from the Sicilian immigrant chef.

When Frank Phillips died in 1950, he left ten thousand bucks to the twenty-three year old, and Red transplanted himself fifty-two miles east to Vinita where he bought a two-story red brick building across the tracks from the Frisco depot. He opened a cafe, and his initial clientele consisting mostly of hungry travelers. By the time the passenger trains stopped running in '55, he had the business so well established among the locals he barely noticed.

Over the years, few Oklahoma diners took note that *Sugo con Sarde e Finnochio* remained a perpetual fixture on the menu, Red's sly tribute to the swarthy Mediterranean who taught him the trade. Trackside Cafe didn't really serve the Sicilian staple, of course, and when some unsuspecting diner ordered the dish, Dorothy would simply jut out her hip and smack her gum. "Had a run on that item earlier today, Hon, and we're fresh out. Try the meatloaf instead."

So the morning in June of '83 when Jack wandered into the cafe at age seventeen, Red hired him on the spot. Jack had grown up in the pine-timbered Ouachita Mountains of southeast Oklahoma, a completely different geography from the rusty, rolling hills near the Kansas line; but lonesome knows lonesome. Red assumed a father's role in Jack's life—much to Cindy's initial annoyance—and Jack responded by becoming a valued and trusted employee. Within a few weeks he got the hang of the kitchen and began providing much-needed relief to his widowed boss.

Red and Jack were both slightly built, but Jack's features and complexion was more fair. Red's ruddy, freckled face began at his pointed chin, then proceeded upward like a sheer-faced bluff, past his pointed nose to the high forehead that seemed higher yet as the years pulled his tawny hairline northward. Jack, on the other hand, had the look of a California surfer who'd landed in Oklahoma via some geographic accident. His bushy blonde hair began about three inches above his eyebrows, and he always kept it cut short. When someone spoke, he had the habit of grinning and cocking his head to one side while simultaneously brushing his hand across the top of his skull—the way you might stroke a kitten's fur. Both men had friendly natures, but vastly different demeanors: while Red was gregarious, Jack was pleasantly reticent. Just ask about the weather and Red would pinch your cheek, slap your back, and wink at you from

beneath his thicket of eyebrows while saying it might rain. Jack would just hover pleasantly on the rim of your comfort zone, allowing plenty of space, but his blue eyes would be boring a hole right through you.

Townsfolk quickly embraced Jack's role as Red's straight man. Red forever retained the charm that had earned him a place in the Phillips mansion, and his staccato repartee had become an important thread in Vinita's social cloth. He'd launch into one of his patented zingers—*How can you tell Slim Johnson, the wrangler at the Lazy K, is levelheaded*?—and Jack would immediately respond: *I don't know, Red, how can you tell he's levelheaded*. Their natural timing made the punch line—*Because tobacco juice drips out both sides of his mouth!*—all the funnier. Then Jack would roll his eyes right on cue and return to the grill, as Red cackled and poured his customers another round of coffee.

Red had taken Jack in when he had no place else to go, and put up with him until he grew up and found himself. Eventually, Red had bestowed his greatest treasure upon Jack, and then watched as his son-in-law almost threw her away. Red never actually knew about Jack's continued dalliances with the Afton girl after he and Cindy married, but had sensed that something was up.

Then, not long after Jack's dad, Frog, died, Red suggested that Jack teach him to play golf. Red borrowed Marilyn Sarratt's dead husband's golf clubs, and arrived at the course in the same chinos and canvas deck shoes he wore at the cafe. He also wore a plaid Scottish tam atop his head, and looked for all the world like Old Tom Morris' slacker nephew. Jack tried to teach Red to play the game, but the older man never took a swing at the ball. "I'll just walk along and observe," he said. Jack quickly figured out that Red's sudden desire to learn how to play golf was

nothing more than a ruse to spend time talking. As Jack drove north of Vinita toward Meadowcrest Nursing home, he smiled and remembered Red wheeling the rusty old golf cart down the fairway beside him, whistling in that bird-like way of his. “Lovely day for a walk,” he’d said. “Shame to spoil it chasing the wee white ball.”

Jack parked the van in the lot at the nursing home and picked up a small bag of toffee from the console. He smiled a nod at the receptionist just inside the front door, and she buzzed him through the door guarding the Alzheimer’s wing. The first few times he’d visited this hallway had been surreal and like running a crazed gauntlet: “Mister, have you seen my dog?”; “Wanna play Indian ball today — do ya?”

But enduring the silently fierce and bewildered stares on the faces the silent patients was even harder. Many of the shocked masks were the faces of Jack’s former customers. Most patients were in splendid physical condition for their age, they were just perpetually mystified; Alzheimers had left their wrappers intact but sucked out the life inside. And then there were those in more advanced stages, drug-quiet in their rooms. The very worst were warehoused in the ward at the end of the hallway, their carcasses strapped as humanely as possible to hospital beds where they lay staring at the ceiling.

“Hi, Jack. Here to see Red?” The shift supervisor sat in the break room reading *People* magazine, and had noticed him when he passed.

“Hey, Linda,” he said. “How’s the old redhead doing?”

"Just as sweet as ever; seems especially happy today. He's down at the kitchen right now sitting on a stool in the corner watching the cooks. They've given him his own little paper hat and everything. Here, have a seat, I'll go the desk and have him brought back."

Linda was a tiny fifty-something woman who spent too much time in a tanning booth. He hadn't known her very well before Red began living here, just that she was the wife of the greenskeeper at the course. But Jack grown fond of her since, and he admired the way she supervised this part of the building. She returned to the break room carrying two cups of coffee and sat to visit. They made small talk—the weather, high school sports—then Jack remarked about to the cruelty of life, how unfair it was to see his father-in-law in such a condition. Someone who'd lived a mean life deserved it more than Red.

"*Deserve* is a funny way of putting it," Linda responded softly. As she saw it, nobody deserved anything—good or bad. Did Jim McSpadden's son, busy squandering his old man's money, *deserve* to be the son of the richest rancher in northeast Oklahoma, despite being an idiot? And think about the Cherokees, thick as songbirds around. Did their great-grandparents *deserve* to be rounded up like cattle then herded across six states? For that matter, does anybody *deserve* what comes their way? She abruptly stopped and looked away, silent.

The hum from the Pepsi machine grew louder. Jack took a pack of smokes from his jacket pocket and offered one. He noticed that the lines around her lips were becoming pronounced; she really ought to cover her face while in the tanning booth. He lit hers first he said, "I know you didn't mean anything, Linda."

"I'm sorry Jack," she said, closing the magazine and pushing it aside. "When I first got out of high school I had trouble finding a job, and I resented being forced to work in this part of the

building. But something happened to change my way of thinking. Eventually I went to night school and became an RN, and I could have transferred the residential part of the nursing home. But I've chosen to stay here. For me, this job is about human dignity.

You see, she continued, one night not long after I first started working here—I was stuck on the graveyard shift—I had grown weary of wiping the drool off their faces and changing their diapers. Sulking into the laundry room thinking I was alone, I threw a bedpan against the wall and nearly hit my boss who was taking a break. She dodged the bedpan and quietly told me to go on home, to come back the next night.

"I didn't want to come back the next night, but I needed the money, so I figured I'd at least pick up my paycheck. But when I got to work my supervisor greeted me like nothing ever happened. She told me to come with her; she had a few things to show me. And then she led me on a tour from room to room, describing each patient's life: this man ran the grocery store; this woman raised two sons, scientists now with NASA in Houston. She probably would have been one too, had she been born a man. This fellow had been a chess champion; that woman half-raised most every kid in Vinita while working as a babysitter.

Just never know what life's gonna throw your way, my supervisor told me that night. All's we know for sure is every one of us is God's creation, from conception to the grave, she said. And it's our job—you'n me—to bring as much dignity to the end of their journey as we possibly can. The little tour changed my way of thinking, Jack. About lots of things."

A heavyset young nurse's aide poked her head into the break room. "Red's in the parlor, Linda."

Red sat in a rocker next to the hearth of the faux fireplace, when Jack entered the room, and sat looking out the window. Pausing at the door, he examined his father-in-law's craggy profile. Red was never what you'd call handsome, and as the old Scotsman neared eighty his face was weatherbeaten. His flaming hair had always been unruly, and the best the nurses could do these days was beg it not to stand straight up. He had liver spots dotting his cheeks, and a scar on his nose where they'd removed a pre-cancerous lesion. But his old face was serene, and when he turned to Jack, the pleasant smile that parted his lips revealed two rows of perfect pearl—the old bugger had never suffered a cavity. "Hello," the old man said, rising from the rocker and extending his hand. "It's nice to meet you. I'm Red." He seemed to be enjoying one of his better days.

"It's nice to meet you, too. I'm Jack."

Jack had always heard that dementia has a way of reaching into the core of its victim's soul to drag the pure essence to the surface. If so, Red was proof. Sweet he remained; sweet as the toffee Jack had brought along—Red's favorite. "How nice of you," Red said, returning to the rocker. "I like toffee. How did you know?"

"Oh, I just guessed." Jack settled onto the couch across the coffee table from Red. Jack knew that some of the Alzheimer's patients were belligerent and mean, and some were so far gone they made no sense whatsoever. Red, however—at least to this point—was just pleasantly addled, slightly in touch with reality, with a nature soft as a kitten.

"What did you say your name is again, young man?" Red's cheeks caved on a piece of the candy.

"Jack."

"Oh, that's right. Do you have a family?"

"Yes, I do."

Jack rose to close the door. The room was nicely done, but it looked like the set of an eighties movie, two-dimensional props that would topple if touched. "Red, would you like to talk for awhile?"

"Why, yes, I'd like that very much. What would you like to talk about?"

Jack was silent, and Red turned, looking out the window at the two bluebirds on the feeder just outside, his smile still affixed as his tongue worked the toffee from between his teeth.

"Red, I've been thinking of leaving town."

"Is that right? Well, lots of folks seem to be on the move these days. The St. Louis Cardinals broke camp and headed north from spring training just last week. I listen to all their games on the radio. Do you like the Cardinals?"

"Yes, the Cardinals are my favorites."

Red frowned and glanced out the window. "I'm sorry to correct you, sir—you say your name is Jack?—but you're mistaken. You see, I know my birds. Just yesterday Mr. Phillips and I were talking about birds. And I know for a fact those birds aren't cardinals." Red returned his gaze to the feeder outside the window. "Those are bluebirds."

Jack reached for the bag of toffee and took a piece for himself.

"Red, what would you think if I sold the cafe to Tip?"

The old man turned and reached for the white paper sack on the coffee table between them. "You know, I've been thinking about opening a cafe myself. I'm a pretty good cook, I learned from that black dago at the mansion. Don't think I will, though—open a cafe. Running a

business would tie a fellow down too much, and I like to travel. There's nothing like going where you please, doing what you want. Don't want no chains on me. Say, where'd you get this candy? I think I'll buy some tomorrow when I ride my bicycle to town."

"Just keep the whole bag, Red. It's for you."

He rose to leave. "Well, I've gotta go. I'll stop by to see you again in a day or two."

The old man stood, nearly a full head shorter than he'd been back in '83 when they first met.

"That'll be fine," he said. "The best advice I can give you, young man, is to stay loose. It's a big world out there. I should know, just got back from California yesterday. Say, where'd you say you bought this candy?"

Jack drove out of the parking lot of the nursing home west, back toward County Road 2. Fairview Cemetery lay a stone's throw south of the road just before the junction, and he turned into the lane and drove beneath the wrought iron arch, following the tire tracks to the end of the lane. He got out of the car and walked to the southwest corner, and crouched before gray granite stone. The marker was the same height as most of the others, but it was a third longer. He read the inscription in the center, then the one on the right: *Christina Viola Taylor, September 10, 1990 - December 21, 2005, Cynthia Renee Taylor, August 12, 1964 - December 21, 2005.* The relentless prevailing southwesterly wind that blows and blows, blustering everything on the prairie to its knees, had pushed the faded silk flowers across the monument, and had obscured the etching on the left side of the marker. He straightened the flowers and read: *Jonathan Ebeneezer Taylor, January 20, 1966 - .*

The dash. Jack stood, pulling the collar of his jacket higher around his neck, and kicked a pebble away from the hump of red dirt. The tiny lavender flowers of spring henbit covered the settling mounds: nature's incessant and relentless continuation. He recalled one of P.J.'s sermons from when he was a kid, one that had stuck in his mind. "The Dash Between the Dates" had been the title. The dash, the one one our tombstone between the years of our birth and our dying, is the only thing in life we truly own, he'd said.

Walking to the edge of the cemetery, Jack leaned on the iron fence surrounding the cemetery, every dozenth post topped by a spear-point. The graveyard sat atop what passed for a hill around Vinita on the flat prairies of northeast Oklahoma, and offered a view that stretched for miles across the red dirt prairie. From where he stood, he could see the stone entrance pillars of Meadowcrest Village just behind him a quarter mile back up the road. The other direction, Vinita lay down the valley a mile and a half across the pastures. If he squinted into the afternoon sun, he could barely make out the red brick cafe building, on the southern outskirts of town across the road from the sale barn.

Everything he'd come to hold dear was within sight. But the remembrances were nothing more than silent mile-markers alongside a road already taken. Stepping back into the car, he closed the door against the whistling wind, and sat for several minutes, his chin atop his interlaced fingers on the steering wheel.

He put the car into gear, and as he drove beneath the cemetery arch and back onto the county road he made a call on his cell phone.

"Tip, this is Jack. I want to talk to you about something. How about meeting me at the golf course?"

Chapter Six

A woman about Jack's age was standing at the pumps fueling her car in Sallisaw when he stopped at the convenience store for coffee. Her eyes followed him as he went inside the store, and he noticed that she continued watching as he got into his car away south on 59. Cindy would have laughed at the scene: *Jack Taylor, you are* so *clueless, that girl's eyes were all over you.* It had been over a year now since she'd been killed, and Jack's subconscious was finally catching up to his new reality. Cindy and Christina were really gone; sometimes lately he longed for a woman's touch.

Dorothy had said something wise not long ago, and she was right: while Jack would never completely get over the tragedy, little by little he was getting used to it. Memories of his old life were fading just a little around the edges, despite the fact that the smooth ridge around the base of his ring finger was still soft below his calloused knuckle. He wore the wedding band on a chain around his neck these days, dangling from a tiny gold chain he'd found among Cindy's things. The unbearable pain he'd felt those first few months, that gut-wrenching sense of loneliness, was being tempered—slowly— by a sense of gratitude for the wonderful years they'd spent together.

But the memories of Christina were a different matter altogether. Sometimes still, in the middle of the night, Jack would awaken with a start, and imagine that his daughter was crying out from her bedroom, the way she did as a baby.

Vinita had been ghost-quiet that morning when he left, still a little hungover from New Year's Eve the night before. He'd planned to arrive in Hot Spring, Arkansas, by late afternoon today and get a good night's sleep. The horse racing season would begin at Oaklawn in a couple

of weeks, and Jack wanted to circulate around and meet local players, and spend time alone playing the local golf courses. But he had reached Sallisaw about midmorning, then decided at the last minute to detour south through Talihna. He wanted to list the old home place for sale, get rid of another memory.

As he drove south through Oklahoma, he reflected on the extravagance of his new Lexus: fifty-grand; a lotta money for a car. Just by touching the accelerator, he shot the car to ninety, then quickly to over a hundred. Coasting back to eighty, he set the cruise control and relaxed. Jack had purchased the car because his old ’67 GTO convertible had been part of the sale of the cafe. He’d told Tip that the car needed to stay with the business; people were used to seeing it parked out back.

Tip had always admired Jack’s old muscle car, but he seemed surprised when Jack had insisted on selling it. He knew the car carried a lot of memories. Jack had been driving the GTO the first night he arrived in Vinita twenty-three years before. He’d been sitting with Cindy in the front seat, parked at Fairview Cemetery overlooking the town, the night he slipped the engagement ring onto her finger. Christina had ridden home from the hospital in the car the day after she was born. And Jack had driven the car in the football homecoming parade, a couple of months before the incident on the turnpike, Christina perched atop the back seat as one of the queen candidates. But despite the memories, Jack wanted the car gone; it was part of the process of moving on.

Tip wanted to pay the entire $350,000 in cash, but Jack insisted on receiving $100,000 upfront, with the balance paid in payments over the next twenty years at six percent interest. That

way, Jack knew he could count on $1,500 coming in every month, no matter what. He knew better than to trust himself with a third of a million in cash.

Ever since he'd been a kid, Jack fantasized about being high roller, able to exploit an opponent's weaknesses. Usually, though, Jack just failed to understand himself. The gambling bug had bitten him early in life, and when he was just a boy, he enjoyed hanging around after school shooting marbles. Always a persnickety sort, dressed clean, his hair combed, Jack was uncomfortable around the rougher boys who dipped snuff and spit, those country kids who coon-hunted all night and arrived at school in the morning with the odor of skunks on their yesterday clothes. The marble-shooters were the kind of boys who'd bet on whatever came along: Which bird will fly off the telephone line first? Will Billy Sanders get a hit off Riley Goodnight? Will Angela Mortenson cry if we call her a slut? Jack loved to gamble, but the other boys had more moxie: by Halloween he'd usually lost all of of his marbles.

By junior high the stakes had increased to lunch money, and Jack usually left school hungry at the end of the day. During one of his regular afternoon visits with his pastor at the church, Jack had asked about gambling. Was it sin? No, P.J. said, gambling wasn't sin—it was just plain stupid. Money is a gift from God, and he expected us to use his gifts wisely. After the conversation, Jack had tried to stifle his gambling compulsion, without much success. A few months later, however, when father gave him the GTO, the gambling habit had taken a backseat to keeping the gas tank full.

Then, near the end of his junior years in high school, Jack left Talihina for good, landing in Vinita, where he began working for Red. He began supporting himself, and money was too precious to gamble away, and the ten-hour shifts at the cafe didn't leave much time for

recreation. When classes began at the high school in late August, Red helped him enroll, and a few weeks later he discovered golf during gym class. His swing was wild and unpredictable at first, and he had a terrible slice. But he generated terrific clubhead speed right off the bat, and demonstrated a light, magical touch around the greens. Most importantly, he displayed the temperament of a real player, approaching the game with extraordinary stoicism and concentration.

Hanging around the dusty little nine-hole municipal at the edge of town, Jack began to notice how gambling was a big part of the game. So he memorized the rules to the betting games the older men played—skins and nassau; bingo, bango, bongo; and acey-deucy—and was soon winning the equivalent of two or three days' wages each Sunday afternoon. The successes resuscitated his comatose gambling bone, but playing for money seemed different this time, not so stupid. Betting on his own golf game was like entering a little tournament where the winner gets the other guy's money, not some dinky little trophy. Jack joined the high school golf team, placed third at the state tournament held that spring.

Early one October morning a few months after he graduated from high school, Jack was playing the Shangri-La Resort course on nearby Grand Lake early one morning when he came upon a stranger. The stranger was short and barrel-chested, and he wore golf shoes that had obviously seen hundred of miles on fairways, but Jack could see that they were clean and carefully polished. The man's cheeks were deeply tanned, and when he removed his straw porkpie, his balding pate was white as the top of an egg. He appeared about fifty-years old, and though his hands were gnarled, his grip on the club was like a work of art. The stranger was

playing alone that morning, and when Jack neared he invited him to play along. As Jack strapped his bag to the golf cart, he noticed that the sole of the man's golf clubs. Each beryllium copper Ping Eye 2 iron in the man's bag had been worn perfectly by ten thousand crisp, clean golf shots, and looked as if it had been polished on a buffing wheel.

"Wanna play for money, kid?"

"Don't have much money, sir."

"Figured as much. Let's play for tees then—gotta play for something."

While driving the golf car to the fourth tee box the man said, "Stimpson's my name." He unrolled a new Titleist ball from the sleeve and tossed it to Jack. "Here, Sonny. Enjoy the honors, on this hole,'cause I plan on taking 'em back."

He struck the ball like a machine, displaying a pure sweetness Jack had never witnessed on a golf course before. The man played the game like a graceful ballroom dancer, with complete aplomb, and had the uncanny ability to pull just the right shot from his bag of tricks at the appropriate moment.

When they paused at the water fountain at five, Jack asked, "What do you do for a living, Mr. Stimpson?"

"I'm an honest gambler, sonny. Just an honest gambler. And by the way, boy, Stimpson's not my last name."

"Is Stimpson your first name then, Sir?"

He stepped away from the ball and glared.

"Sorry," Jack mumbled.

By the seventh hole the two of them settled into a pleasant rhythm, and the man began explaining his life. He told Jack that he lived like a migratory bird, spending earlys winter in south Texas, before moving on up to Hot Springs when the horse racing season began in January. His summers were spent playing golfing resorts in the mountains, and he had stopped in northeast Oklahoma that week on his return a summer spent at the Broadmoor in Colorado Springs. Stimpson hoped to pick up a few bucks at Shangri-La, then return to the Rio Grande Valley where he'd hunker down and await January.

"Is that where you live then, south Texas?"

"Not really. See that building over there?" Stimpson pointed at the resort hotel with his driver. "That'll be my address 'til Sunday."

Jack knew Shangri-La was an expensive place. The only way he played here was by sneaking onto the course early in the morning.

"Gosh, how can you afford to live at a resort all the time … ?" He nearly added *Mr. Stimpson*, but left the question dangling without an address.

"It's free, Sonny. Everything's free." Stimpson explained that he made his living hustling golf during the day and playing cards in the evening.

"No offense, sir," said Jack, "but aren't you afraid management will catch you and trhow you out?"

The man just laughed, explaining that fancy resorts like Shangri-La appreciated having him around. Men like him were good for business, and he'd built a solid reputation around the resort circuit for being trustworthy. Management knew what they could expect from him: he was always clean and quiet, and he never messed with another man's wife. They counted on

Stimpson to provide discrete and honest sport for the guests, and they were happy to provide a complimentary room and meals for a week or two. Stimpson had arrived at Shangri-La the evening before, and he was out on the course early to work a few kinks out of his swing before looking for a game that afternoon.

After finishing his round of golf with Stimpson, Jack had raced to Vinita, begging Red for a few days off. He spent the rest of the week arriving at the Shangri-La clubhouse before dawn and going directly to the locker room, where he scrubbed the grooves of Stimpson's clubs with a wire brush and treated the grips with solvent. After restocking the bag with a couple of fresh towels, Jack went looking for Stimpson, and usually found him at a corner table in the coffee shop behind an issue of *Thoroughbred Times*.

"Mornin', kid," the hustler would drawl from behind his paper. "Think I'll be lucky today?"

When Stimpson talked like that, Jack felt explosions of anticipation inside his chest. "You bet. You're always lucky, Sir."

Jack spent the rest of the day shadowing his hero from a discrete distance. The victims—usually four guys who had sent their trophy wives to the hotel spa—would be standing near the ball washer at the first tee, swinging their drivers in wide circles, when Stimpson would drive up in a golf car, introducing himself as a businessman who was traveling alone. They wouldn't mind a fivesome, would they?

Jack had figured it would be easy to spot a professional hustler, but Stimpson acted like a regular guy. He would play decent golf for a few holes—capable, not stellar—and exchange small talk with his fellow golfers while building his biography around a series of innocuous lies.

Stimpson was likable by nature, and by the fifth hole his friends would invite him to join in on their money games. The groups would be just about even as they made the turn at nine, but by the twelfth hole, his victims would sense something different about their new friend.

Jack figured they'd become angry when they figured out they were being hustled, but he soon learned that testosterone trumps logic every time. Their egos would invariably push them to increasingly larger wagers, despite the danger, and by the eighteenth tee box they'd be hopelessly behind and ask to press. But even that last-ditch effort at double-or-nothing would fail, resulting in an even bigger payday for Stimpson. The whole group would then decamp to the clubhouse bar to settle their bets. Stimpson always graciously picked up the bar tab—but only after he'd cleaned their pockets first.

Over the years he'd perfected the art of manipulating alpha males. The members of that particular breed—former college football players with bad knees and insurance salesmen sporting fraternity rings worn smooth by time—were happy to pay princely sums in exchange for manly stories to tell their buddies back home over the barbecue grill. Such men invariably possess an incurable, if grudging, respect for another man capable of fleecing them—as long as the man is a gentleman about it, like Stimpson.

As he drove the new Lexus south from Sallisaw and across the Arkansas River Bridge, Jack calculated in his mind that Stimpson would be near seventy, if he were still alive. Jack never saw Stimpson again after that week they spent together, but many times over the years he'd thought about how different his life would have been if he'd accepted Stimpson's invitation to join him on the road.

Jack had only driven about a hundred miles since leaving Vinita, but the terrain had begun changing drastically. The flat red prairies of northeast Oklahoma were becoming the rolling foothills of the wild Ouachitas. He had only been back to Talihina a couple of times, and during those twenty-three years he'd nearly forgotten how different things were in Oklahoma's Little Dixie. The biggest difference was the pervasive and undeniable tattoo of poverty on the land. The highway he was driving ribboned past mile after lonely mile of barbed wire fences, the languid lines sagging from one wizened Osage Orange post to the next as he passed. But the fences seemed almost unnecessary, guarding nothing but barren landscapes dotted with meager cattle, seemingly rooted to the sparse and rocky ground.

Every quarter mile or so, he passed another dented singlewide mobile home, the modern dust bowl shack. One flamingo-pink trailer sat propped on concrete blocks, its dry-rotted tires still dangling naked mid-air, with no skirt to keep the cold winter wind from whistling beneath the floor. A faded homemade porch yawned toward the road, and as he passed, a gaggle of ragamuffin boys appeared out of nowhere, mustering to the ditch and aiming their stick guns, firing imaginary bullets like miniature warriors. Their whoops and hollers were inaudible inside the quiet cabin of the Lexus, and the skirmish was just a silent-screen pantomime. But as he watched, their cheeks exploded in childhood imitations gunfire, staccato puffs spitting *pkew! pkew! pkew!* Threadbare laundry flapped listlessly in the breeze, pinned to a rope strung from the porch to a nearby blackjack oak. Three rusting automobile carcasses squatted on their haunches beside the propane tank, and a flock of Guineas jerk-danced futilely, pecking for bugs in the dust beside the well house. A hand-lettered sign dangled from one nail guarding the family's treasures: *No Trespassing*—as if anybody'd want to.

Instead of taking the easy route into Talihina at State Road 271, Jack turned southeast, snaking the car up the narrow Talimena Scenic Byway. The narrow, two-lane tourist road lay loosely stretched across the ridge like a looping garden hose, and when Jack got to the summit he parked, pulling the collar of the fleece jacket tightly around his neck. Leaning on the top rail of split-oak fence zig-zagging along the shoulder of the road, he looked fifty miles north, where the bright midday sun gleamed on the Arkansas River he'd crossed just an hour before. Kiamichi Mountain jutted upward over his left shoulder three miles to the west, and his boyhood hometown lay just twenty or so miles beyond, down the other side of the mountains.

He arrived in Talihina a little after two in the afternoon, and cruised a few times up and down the length of 2nd Street, just like he'd done on Saturday nights as a high school sophomore. Slowing the car to a crawl, he peered down the alley between the pharmacy and the vacant hardware store, summoning two ghostly figures to his imagination. Frog was standing in the mouth of the alley the day he wolf-whistled at Sarah and she turned, the day the whole tragedy began.

As he ate a sandwich for lunch at a hamburger joint beside the bank, he scanned the country faces, but he didn't recognize a soul. But somehow the old men's mannerisms—one cleaned his fingernails with a bone-handled Case; another lifted his stone-china coffee mug to his lips with just his third and fourth fingers because the other fingers were holding a hand-rolled cigarette—struck a chord deep inside, memories thought long forgotten.

He used his cell phone to call the number painted on the window of the real estate office across the street, and the realtor said he would meet Jack at the Taylor place around four. Jack

had a little over an hour to kill, so he drove on out to the old home place to spend a little time alone.

While maneuvering the car slowly between the potholes in the narrow county road that led to the house, he recited the family roster in his mind. William, the oldest, had joined the army at nineteen in ’63, two years before Jack was born. William would be sixty-two now, had he made it home from Viet Nam. The three oldest girls—Virginia, Bonnie, and Alnita, all married and left town while still in their teens, and no one had heard anything from them since. Terrence spent his fifty-third birthday last year in a cell in McAlester, where he’d celebrate the ones that remained. Ernest and Leroy lived in Louisiana, the last he knew, working the oil rigs. He really didn’t really know that much about those seven oldest; they’d all been gone when he was just a toddler.

But he could live to be a hundred and never forget the next two. Daphne had beat him as a child—*Why I gotta be an old mama afore I get the chance to be a girl?* She’d be forty-nine now. Hiram, Jr.—momma called him Sonny—had been killed in a logging accident when Jack was just ten-years old. His mother’s mournful wail echoed in his memory to this day.

He remembered the next three Taylors best: Sally, Lucille, and Thomas. Jack last saw Sally and Lucille in court after momma died. His mother had left the old house to Jack when she died, along with what was left of the farm. He wished at the time that she hadn’t done it, knowing it would bring trouble. But as he was going through her effects, he discovered a letter that instructed him to use the money from the house to send Christina to college, and he became bound and determined to enforce her will.

As expected, the sisters contested the will, and Jack had been forced to return to LeFlore County for the hearing. The judge decided the case in ten minutes, and when Jack turned to ask about Thomas, his sisters just cursed and stomped away. He'd been wondering about Thomas since, what had happened to his next older brother, the simple one. Jack and Thomas had played together when they were small, and they had shared a bedroom growing up. Jack remembered feeling bad about that time he'd pushed Thomas out of the barn, the time his brother's face so cut badly.

When Jack pulled into the gravel drive of the old home place, little seemed changed. Time's wind had sandpapered the clapboard siding a little more deeply, and the sprouts poking up between the rusting automobile corpses had matured into scrub timber. But the place remained shrouded by the same smothering sense of despair he remembered. It was an awfulness that gripped the property, like the poison oak twisting around the porch rail. He walked toward the house, pausing at the well to give the pump handle a couple of jerks. The squeak of the rusted metal startled a stray dog creeping stealthily behind him, and it yelped as it wriggled under the fieldstone foundation of the house and disappeared.

Wintertime weeds shrugged in clumps around the yard, and the sharp stickers on the bare branches of the multi-flora rose grabbed at Jack's jacket when he climbed the back porch steps. Picking his way along the edges of the rotten wooden treads, he was surprised when the doorknob turned in his palm. The kitchen appeared hastily abandoned, as if long ago inhabitants fled an approaching army. Wandering through the stale rooms, he noticed that most of the original furnishings remained but had been tossed about, like a tornado came swirling down the hallways. The stuffing was pulled from a ragged hole in the couch by some burrowing animal,

and the sideboard in the dining room had been thrown on the floor, its leaded glass doors lying shattered across the water-stained rug.

He climbed the stairway to the second floor and opened the door of his old bedroom. A rumpled mattress lay in the middle of the floor, and several empty Van Camp pork and bean cans were thrown into a pile the corner, the labels still bright and new. Several unopened cans stood carefully stacked against the opposite wall, and he remembered hearing a faint noise as he'd made his way through the downstairs, a scampering. He'd thought it was probably a squirrel. But standing in the doorway of his old bedroom he heard the front door slam, and going quickly to the window, he caught just the fleeting glimpse of a man running into the brush beyond the yard. Jack stared at the edge of the woods where the man had disappeared, then called the realtor and canceled the appointment.

The winter sun was gone for the day when Jack maneuvered the Lexus past the ancient gas pumps of the old country store and pulled into a parking space. The old, gray, clapboard building was about a mile or so up the road from the home place, and five miles north of Talihina. Jack remembered walking there as a child, holding his mother's hand as the cars rushed by. She'd called it the general store back then.

Jack got out of his car and clicked the doors locked with the remote, and walked across the concrete porch. As he opened the door, the bell tied to the Colonial Bread push tinkled his arrival, and the proprietor looked up before returning his attention to the man at the checkout stand.

"Listen, Robert," he said. "I don't care how bad your nose is runnin'. I cain't sell you no more Sudafed until next month. Now you know that. Go on home."

The skinny customer's white beard hung long over the bib of his overalls, and the toes of his camouflage boots had been worn through, exposing his grimy socks. He turned to leave the store and noticed Jack in the doorway.

"Hey, mister. Reckon your allergies need some Sudafed?" The man winked. *Yeah,* his expression said. *Help me out here, buddy.* Rotted yellow tooth stubs, putrid brown in their angry red sockets, showed when he smiled.

"Go on home now, Robert," the man behind the counter shouted. "Leave that stranger alone." The man spit on the floor and stuck his thumbs behind the galluses of his overalls, then stepped out the door into the night.

Leaning his elbows on the smooth white oak boards of the counter, Jack said, "Do you ever have a man come in here, mid-forties, kind of simple-acting? He's got a long scar down the right side of his face."

"Sounds like that Taylor fella. Yeah, I see him ever now and then. He stocks up on canned goods occasionally."

"Tell me what he's like."

The storeowner was silent, looking away as he fiddled with a box of matchbooks by the register. "Who's asking?"

"I was just wondering."

"Sorry, mister. I don't give no information to outsiders."

"He's my brother."

The shopkeeper studied Jack. “Gotta say, you put me in the mind of that Taylor woman. Mighty sad, that Taylor lady. Haven’t seen her in years.”

“I moved her up to Vinita near me after daddy died.”

A woman wearing a hair net and knee-high rubber boots entered to buy a frozen pizza, probably to feed to her kids for supper. Jack figured she had just gotten off work at the chicken plant in town.

The woman left with her pizza, and the shopkeeper put the money into the drawer. “Your brother’s okay. Don’t never say much or stay long. He reminds me of a thief, the way he acts, you know—but he always pays me cash. Time or two he didn’t have quite enough money and I had to put a few cans back on the shelf after he was gone.”

Jack paused and studied the shelves of the store. “Do you ever set up an account for somebody here in the store?”

“Now listen, mister,” the shopkeeper said, twisting his neck looking stubborn. “Your brother don’t cause me no trouble and I’m glad for his business. But this store don’t give credit to nobody.”

“You misunderstand me,” Jack said. “All I’m asking you to do set up an account for him in my name. Cash in advance.”

The shopkeeper relaxed and leaned on the counter. “I reckon I could do that, mister.”

Chapter Seven

After leaving the general store outside Talihina, Jack had driven back over the scenic route and into Arkansas, staying the night at a motel in Mena. After breakfast the next morning at a cafe in town, he left town on Route 270, headed toward Hot Springs. Near Mt. Ida, an old Buick had whipped out and passed, Jack as the Buick careened all over the road, accelerating again and again to over sixty miles an hour before returning to a crawl. After a few miles, the driver threw a beer can over the top of the Buick, slapping his buddy on the shoulder and pointing behind the car with his thumb. Both men had turned and looked at Jack, laughing wildly, and they began throwing debris out the windows of the car. Jack was forced to bolt the car back and forth across the highway like the last man standing in a game of dodgeball. Another man was sitting in the backseat who just stared at Jack, wild-eyed.

Finally, just as the Buick seemed to have settled on a steady pace of about twenty miles an hour, a burst of black smoke shot from the tailpipe and the Buick accelerated sharply across the highway, hurdling the opposite ditch before going airborne and crashing into a large tree. Jack parked on the shoulder of the road and began running to the scene, astonished at how quickly silence had reclaimed the highway. Bracing himself for a goy sight, he arrived just as the two front seat riders fell out of the car and began staggering around. Collapsing against adjacent trees, they sat cursing like pirates washed ashore after a shipwreck.

“Stay right there,” Jack said, immediately realizing how stupid he sounded. “I’ll run back to the highway and flag down a car.”

“Like hell you will,” the driver shouted. “You just go on down the road and pretend you never saw nothing.”

"But you're hurt," Jack said.

"You heard me, mister. Just git!"

"Damn you, Jerry," interrupted the passenger, who was making an attempt to stand. "If you hadna been foolin with the radio we'da never wrecked the car."

"Well double-damn you, asshole," the driver shot back. "All I's doin was ejecting that crap CD you put in there. You know good and well that song reminds me of Marilyn—I just couldn't take it no more!" Throwing his arms into the air, he fell flat on his back and lay pounding the ground with his fists.

The passenger responded by throwing a rock, and the driver rolled onto all fours to begin crawling menacingly toward the rock-thrower. Figuring it best they settle this among themselves, Jack returned to the wreckage to check on the backseat rider, but the man was gone. When he returned to the Lexus, he discovered the man sitting in the passenger seat. When Jack returned to the Lexus, he found the stranger sitting in the passenger seat of the car, staring out the windshield like he'd just witnessed the end of time. He had tiny glass beads braided into his long, dreadlocked hair, and three small small studs marked his dangling left earlobe. He had an old, dark dragon tattoo etched onto his neck, and nothing about him moved but the tiny twitch that fluttered his wrinkled eyelid.

"C'mon, man," he said when Jack opened the car door. "Just get in the damn car and let's get out of here."

Jack was usually wary around strangers—particularly savage-looking men who rode in cars driven by raving maniacs. But he'd been studying the man's frightened eyes for miles now,

and had sized him up as a gentle soul somehow caught in a bad situation. He slid behind the wheel and steered the Lexus back onto the highway.

"Quite a crash back there," he said after a mile or so.

No response from the man in the passenger seat.

"Are you hurt?"

Still no response. The man shifted his small frame toward the door, and the beads in his hair clattered. His grip on the strap above the door was so tight his knuckles had turned white. Several minutes later he finally released his death-grip on the door strap and wove his fingers together, laying his hands on his lap. He sat still as stone, staring fixedly out the windshield.

"Nope," he said.

Jack remembered the question left dangling a few miles back.

"All I can say is you're lucky to be alive," he said. "Your buddies on the ground back there were bleeding like stuck hogs."

"Not my buddies. Never saw them until a couple of hours ago. Crazy people. I was hitchhiking when they picked me up back around Pine Ridge. I'm going to Hot Springs. Where you headed?"

"Hot Springs," Jack said.

"Good." There was a sound of rushing wind as the man relaxed and breathed deep and loud through his wide, flat nose. Turning toward the driver's seat, he faced Jack for the first time.

"Is that where you live, Hot Springs?"

"Nope." Jack picked up a roll of Lifesavers from the console and sliced through the wrapper below the top candy with his thumbnail. He offered it to his passenger, and when the man shook his head, he was wearing the most expressionless face Jack had ever seen.

"Never been to Hot Springs before," Jack said. "This guy just told me one time that it's a good place to watch the ponies in January, maybe play a little golf."

They rode in silence, and Jack noticed the man examining the interior of the car. It still had that brand-new smell, the aroma of high-grade leather and big money. Three golf tees were stuck into the seam of the driver's sun visor, and a couple of putters had been thrown atop an issue of *Thoroughbred Times* on the backseat. A fresh sleeve of Callaway golf balls sat in the console tray beside the Lifesavers, and a half-empty pack of cigarettes and a chrome lighter were wedged on the dashboard against the windshield.

"What are you," the man said. "Some kind of hustler?"

Jack hesitated and smiled, but didn't respond. He could feel the passenger sizing him up.

"Maybe I can help," the man said, turning forward again. "By the way, my name's Hugo." The way he said it sounded like Oogo. "But most people call me Stoop."

"Pleased to meet you, Stoop. Most people call me Jack."

Stoop continued staring out the windshield, allowing his heartbeat flutter back to normal after all the excitement. He'd been watching Jack in his peripheral vision, evaluating the quiet man who steered the car along the narrow two-lane curls and curves of the highway. Dusk was tumbling down, and the dead-of-winter sun sat squatted low on the southwestern horizon. Intrigued by the driver, Stoop examined him closely in the soft glow of the dashboard lights.

Jack's appearance fit with his demeanor, a curious mix of cocksure man and vulnerable child. He was perfectly groomed and dressed sharp, and his close-crop haircut fit the playboy image he seemed wanting to project. But Jack's eyes gave him away, he thought; just plain sad, like wan light might shine through the curtainless window of an empty house.

He noticed Jack had a persistent tic that moved him every few minutes, as if in response to a voice inside, a voice prodding him to buck up, to turn on the confidence. When it hit, Jack would suck a quick burst of air through his nostrils and turn, stretching his neck while pushing tight against the back of the seat and lifting his shoulders. Gripping the steering wheel even more firmly, he'd narrow his eyes, like a contender awaiting the bell. But Stoop noticed that, little by little, the confidence would begin to leak, the determined grimace would start to relax, and Jack's shoulders would sag. Staring dejectedly into space for a few moments, he'd appear lost, and then the voice inside would prod him again.

"You hungry?" Jack said.

"Yeah, man. I could eat," Stoop replied, realizing he didn't have but a couple of bucks in the side pocket of his cargo pants. "You buying?"

"Sure, why not? We'll stop at the next town."

They were driving through remote and desolate country and the towns were few and far between. As they descended a sharp hill, the lights of a small village appeared, brightly wadded together in the dark, like tangled Christmas lights in a box. A small liquor store sat on the edge of the little town, with two ancient gas pumps were moored out front in a concrete island.

"Pump twenty dollars worth of premium into the tank while I go inside to see if they've got some sandwiches," Jack said.

"Okay, man. Hey, Jack, do something for me, wouldja?"

Jack leaned back inside the car.

"Bottle of Maker's, please."

"Do what?" Jack said.

"Maker's. Forty-six, please."

Jack seemed confused.

"Whiskey," Stoop said. "Get it?" His placid eyes were like two still ponds beneath the bushy eyebrows. But a tiny bemused smile escaped and played his lips behind the beard. "I'm asking you to buy a pint of Maker's Mark while you're in there. Forty-six, if they got it."

Jack shrugged and waited for the money. Stoop just smiled back, innocent, childlike.

"Spot me today, would you man?" he said. "I'm short."

Stoop watched Jack walk across the parking lot toward to the entrance of the store, thinking it unusual for a guy that age—what was he, forty maybe?—to remain so trim and wiry. He had a bounce in his step, not exactly sprightly, jangling a little as he walked. He bent forward just a little as he neared the door, as if walking into a sharp wind, and had his hands driven deep into the pocket of his plain-front khakis. He seemed fixedly polite, greeting the locals as they pushed past him out the door.

A ragged, twenty-year old Lebaron convertible roared past the gas pumps and into the parking lot, dragging its muffler across the ground and trailing sparks. Jack had to jump to one side to avoid being run over. That kind of idiot would have made him furious, Stoop thought, but as the pajama-wearing drunk jumped out of the car holding an open can of beer, Jack just stepped aside and opened the door.

Nice guy, *Jack,* Stoop thought. *Easy*.

Stoop returned the nozzle to the pump and had returned to the car by the time Jack came out carrying two sacks. He handed the smaller sack to Stoop across the console of the car.

"Maker's Mark 46 my ass," he said, shaking his head. "Have you got any idea how much that stuff costs?"

Stoop just stared at him wide-eyed, like a second grader astonished to discover that the world wasn't flat after all. "*Really*?"

"It's forty bucks a bottle, man. What are you, nuts?"

"Gosh, I had no idea," Stoop said, pulling the bottle of Evan Williams from the sack. "This'll do fine. Half an hour, it won't matter anyhow." He broke the seal on the bottle and offered it to Jack.

"No, thanks."

That tone was different, Stoop thought. Nothing polite about that response. "Something wrong?"

"Naw. Me and whiskey just got bad history," Jack said.

"Had to quit drinking, huh?"

"No, it's not that; I drink a little: a couple beers on a hot summer day, a glass of wine with my wife now and then. Well, used to."

"Used to?" Stoop screwed the cap back on the bottle.

"Yeah," Jack said. "Used to."

Silence hung between them like smog. Taking one of the sandwiches from the other bag, Jack handed it to Stoop.

"So," Stoop said. "You plan to play a little golf and watch the ponies. Got anything else in mind?"

Jack fidgeted, seemingly unsure just how much to reveal. Stoop waited.

"Maybe some other stuff." Jack reached across the steering wheel for the cigarettes. "You said a few minutes ago you could help me. What are you, a bookie?"

"Naw. I just know people," Stoop answered.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jack said.

"Nothing. I just know people."

For over five years now, Hugo Rodriquez had been supporting himself by cashing the winning tickets on thoroughbred races from all over the world—though he'd never once left central Arkansas. And not one of those bets had involved a dime of his own money. Stoop was part of the bottom-feeders of the racing world, a small and quasi-secret society known as stoopers. Stoopers were accepted at off-track betting parlors, as long as they observed a few unspoken rules: they must not harass paying customers, they must not monopolize the ticket scanning machines, and they had to work out a working agreement with the janitor.

Stoop had grew up around horse racing, the only child of a Puerto Rican couple who had immigrated to the Bronx. Stoop's mother quickly found the confining tenements and the dangerous atmosphere of the city suffocating, and she would not hear of raising a family in the city. Withholding sexual favors from Luis, Alondra demanded better living conditions.

To escape the pressure one stifling afternoon, Luis escaped by taking a bus to the Belmont Park track. The horses at the track reminded him of his grandfather's farm in Puerto

Rico, and he had returned the next day to take a job cleaning the paddocks, where he and Alondra lived a tiny apartment. Hugo had literally been born in a stable.

Hugo began cleaning the paddocks while just a boy, and by his teens was the groom for a major racing syndicate and traveling the country. As the years passed, he became an expert at caring for million-dollar animals, but he got around to learning how to take care of himself. A few years before he met Jack, Stoop's team had been traveling from L.A. to Louisville for the Kentucky Derby and stopped in Hot Springs for the Arkansas Derby. The owner of the syndicate had arrived night before the race and he awakened early the next morning to discover that his prized horse had reared and broken its leg during the night. It was Hugo's job to guard the horses, but he was discovered passed out in his girlfriend's trailer and summarily fired.

Alone in a backwater Arkansas town, Hugo had gone to an off-track betting parlor, putting all the money he had on a Pick 3 ticket in the third race. Watching the race on the in-house monitor he realized that he'd lost it all, and threw the ticket onto the floor. But the next day while reading a discarded newspaper, he learned that the judges had declared a rules infraction: his ticket was a winner after all. He had rushed back to the OTB, only to discover that the janitor had swept all the tickets into the trash the night before. Diving into the dumpster in the alley, he fished among the cigarette butts and wadded paper towels, gathering every ticket stub he could find. After feeding them through the ticket machine that afternoon, he found himself five thousand dollars richer by dark.

While having dinner at the Arlington Hotel that evening, it occurred to him that the same thing probably happened every day in races all over the country, and he started haunting the OTBs immediately after the most lucrative races. By cutting deals with the janitors, who swept

the discarded tickets into a pile in the corner, Hugo became a legend around town, and now everybody just called him Stoop.

"How do you know so many people?" Jack said.

"A guy in my line of work just meets lot of people."

"What kind of people?"

"All kinds. The people you're going to need to know for all that *other stuff* you have planned."

Chapter Eight

When a man nears middle age and has been nurturing a fantasy all his life, turning it over and over in his mind for years like a shiny stone, it doesn't surprise him when fate darts directly down that road. At a crossroad a few miles outside Hot Springs, Stoop said, *Turn right.* Jack never even asked question why.

Human nature's a funny thing. A billion lives are lived according to a simple handful of templates, etchings engraved ten thousand years ago by poor souls plowing behind a mule, or women cooking wooly mammoth over cave fires. When Jack turned the Lexus down the dirt road at Stoop's command, he was simply becoming the Jack he was fated to become. King Solomon had it right; there's nothing new under the sun.

Squinting into night, Jack chased the car headlights down the road. Dropping his hands from the steering wheel—right, then left—he rubbed his palms up and down his khakied thighs, silently calculating the money left in his wallet.

The rutted road twisted sharply, descending into a river bottom as the fencerow trees entwined their limbs above. Moonlight filtered through the fingers of the gray leafless branches, as spritzes of branch water splashed the car trundling across the low-water bridge.

Stoop spoke. "Turn here," he said, pointing at the driveway that sliced an opening through the graded shoulder on the side of the lane. "Drive down there and park behind the house."

"Park in the backyard? Why not out front with the rest of the cars?"

"The backyard, I said."

Jack maneuvered the car slowly across the yard of the house, dodging the woodpile, then turned the corner behind the house. He parked beside the squatted well house and killed the headlights, silent. Whiskey gurgled from the bottle, and then Stoop opened the passenger door. The old house sat mute, and dark, a far cry from the gaudy Indian casinos Jack had been frequenting in Oklahoma. As he stepped out of the car, an old cur was hiked and marking the left rear tire. He kicked at the dog, then joining Stoop to walk around the side of the house toward the front door. A dozen or so cars and trucks sat nosed around the perimeter of the unpainted house, mostly old wrecks just one step up the food chain from the salvage yard. Two newer-looking pickups had been parked near the front door—a crew cab King Ranch and a Silverado HD. Out of place among the others, like king and queen of a tattered chessboard, the big chrome brush guards of the pickups were nudged inches from the rambling porch spanning the width of the house.

"Just don't say something stupid," Stoop said.

"What do you take me for?"

"I'm not sure about that yet. Just don't say anything stupid."

They walked between the front row of cars and trucks and moved toward the porch.

"Just a minute." said Stoop. "Gotta go back to the car—forgot the whiskey."

As he waited beside a flatbed pickup, Jack sensed it rocking slightly behind him. He glanced into the cab, and saw a man's stark-white ass gyrating above a woman, her face twisted into a place somewhere between where she was and where she desperately wanted to be. Moving on, Jack leaned against the porch rail and waited.

"Listen," he whispered when Stoop rejoined him. "If I get in over a couple hundred bucks, you drag me out of there, hear? I can't afford to lose a lot of money my first night in town."

"Shit," Stoop said, "if I had your money I'd burn mine."

They ascended the two steps and Stoop knocked on the door in what seemed to be code: two shorts and then a long bang, bang, bang. The door cracked an inch, and a round, burly man wearing overalls over a cotton t-shirt peeked out before opening the door wide. Short, five-four maybe, he must have weighed a couple hundred pounds. Rust-colored hair scattered from beneath his stained felt hat like straw from a loose-tied bale.

"Hey, Stoop," he said in a low voice. "Good to see ya."

As Jack shivered into the house, dull and muddled conversation murmured from the closed door across the room. Stoop handed the paper bag with the bottle to the man who'd opened the door, then turned to the wood stove in the corner of the room and began rubbing his hands together briskly.

Edging closer to the stove, Stoop said, "Meet my new friend, Jack."

Jack extended his hand, but the doorkeeper had the bottle tipped to his lips and stood stark still and oblivious, face to the ceiling, his eyes closed.

A lean figure in a brown duck Carhartt jacket lay sprawled on the couch beside the stove, apparently asleep, with his fingers laced across his chest. His sock cap was pulled down and over his eyes, and faint wisps of steam rose from the wet boots he'd propped atop the woodbox just inches from the stove. Scattered laughter wafted into the room from somewhere in back, female voices mostly, and the wind whistled past the broken corner of the windowpane behind the flue.

"Game's in there, Jack" Stoop said, pointing to the closed door, then turned away, facing the stove.

Jack remained rooted to the floor.

"You not going in there with me, Stoop?"

"Nope. Your party tonight."

Jack shifted, replanted his feet, and stood frozen again. Glancing from Stoop to the door, he sucked a quick burst of air through his nostrils and walked across the room

The rumble of low voices was being punctured by a single sharp laugh when Jack opened the door, and the room fell abruptly into silence the moment he stepped inside. He reached behind himself to shut the door tight, examining the four men who sat around the folding table. There was another man, just a boy, really, leaned against the old refrigerator in the corner. A bed sheet had been tacked onto the far wall—over a window, Jack supposed—and the only light came from the single bare bulb of the table lamp perched atop an over-turned cardboard box beside the door, lampshade lying on the floor beside the box. The floor was rough, bare plywood, and the kinkhead strips that once held carpet tight remained nailed around baseboard. Stale smoke danced slowly, sylphlike about the room. The man on the opposite side of the table laid his cards facedown, looking Jack up and down. He took one last last drag of his cigarette and threw the butt into the coffee tin sitting in the middle of the table beside a pile of poker chips. Bald, a three-day stubble forested his chin, and his coarse woolen sweater was zippered tight on his neck with the sleeves pushed above his elbows.

"Who the hell are you?"

Jack's throat tightened hard at the base, his left shoulder sagged imperceptibly. He pushed his eyes open wider, more vivid, and stepped into the room.

"Stoop brought me."

The bald, sweatered man turned to the rangy kid leaned against the refrigerator, noddding in the direction of the door. The kid shrugged upright as the man reached inside the collar of his sweater for a pack of cigarettes, shook one loose, and placed it between his lips. His puffy face with its broad, flat nose jumped to life behind the flare of his cigarette lighter, then vanished back into the shadows. The kid pushed Jack aside when he passed, and opened the door, glancing into the front room. He closed the door tightly again, turned, and nodded. Shaking another cigarette loose, the sweatered man extended the pack across the table.

"Have a seat."

Jack slid the cigarette from the pack and placed it between his lips. The man to his left held up a lighted match, and the kid scooted another chair to the table. Jack sat and pulled a long, deep drag on the cigarette. Smoke poured from his mouth and nose when he exhaled sharply toward the ceiling.

No one spoke as the rangy kid resumed his posture beside the fridge. Sixteen maybe, the kid was tall enough that he rested the underside of his upper arm on the top of the refrigerator. Half-erect, he stood slumped, his head leaned against his upturned palm. A vinyl bank bag was tucked into the waist of his jeans, and a handgun, small and black, lay atop the refrigerator beside a can of mixed nuts.

Jack turned his attention to the table, green felt faded and stained, and reached for his wallet. The kid raised his head raised in slo-mo, and laid his hand flat atop the refrigerator. He

displayed no emotion, no hint of alarm, and focused on an imaginary dot on the wall just above Jack's head. Jack removed his wallet from his pants pocket and laid it on the table. The kid pushed away from the fridge and rocked upright, removing the bank bag from the waistband of his jeans. Moving to the man's side, the boy held the bag expectantly, like a dog awaiting command. The man rose from the chair, an inch, maybe two, and extended his hand across the table toward Jack.

"My name's Preston, mister. Just put your money away for a minute and watch us play a couple of hands. We're a friendly bunch; wouldn't force ourselves on nobody." He softened his lips, rearranging them into an ambiguous mix of *glad to meetcha* smile and fox-in-the-henhouse grin.

Jack reached across the table and shook Preston's outstretched hand. Then, half-standing, he introduced himself to the other men seated around the table. The fellow to his left who had lit his cigarette resembled the prosperous ranchers Jack served back at the cafe in Vinita. He was tall and slim, well-dressed, and he wore a starched, snap-button Western shirt tucked into his deeply-dyed indigo jeans. His hat hung from the back of his chair, and his forehead bore a permanent creased just above his eyebrows.

On the other side of the cowboy sat a man much resembling the doorkeeper he'd encountered when first entering the house. He sat slumped behind his poker chips, a dark turd of a man, heavyset with his fingernails gnawed to the quick and stained black with grease. The letters R-o-g-e-r were embroidered on the left breast of his uniform shirt. His face bore no expression, his handshake was like a dead fish.

The man to Jack's right seemed vaguely professorial and older than the rest. The windbreaker he wore was zippered halfway up, and he had a swizzle stick dangling from his lips. As he shook Jack's hand, he bent forward and down, examining Jack over the top of his reading glasses.

With the introductions complete, the game resumed. The cards changed hands rapidly, a flawless choreography from many nights of practice. After a half-dozen hands had been played, Preston spoke.

"Well?"

"How much?" Jack said.

"Shares in our little enterprise are five hundred dollars, renewable at each meeting of this," he swept his hand around the table, "our board of directors." He laughed, and the laugh seemed to break a spell. The other men began moving about and talking among themselves, as if their pause button had been released. The cowboy stood and, stretching his arms nearly to the ceiling, went to the refrigerator. He returned with a can of beer for each man. The professor checked his watch as the mechanic picked at his knuckles with his pocketknife.

Jack's earlier resolve to wager no more than two hundred dollars was long forgotten, and he reached for his wallet. Holding it furtively beneath the table, he withdrew five one hundred dollar bills and laid them in the middle of the table. Preston nodded at the kid beside the refrigerator, who went to a wall cabinet and removed a small chest. He counted two stacks of green, twenty-dollar chips, ten to a stack, and set them on the table in front of Jack. Swiping Jack's cash from the table and zipping it into the moneybag, he returned to his post. Jack picked up one of the stacks and softly rattled the chips in his palm.

"You will notice, sire, the deduction of a small initiation fee," the professor said past his swizzle stick. He raised his face, gazing directly at Jack from six inches away through his half-moon glasses, then suddenly dropped his jaw and peered over the rims. He bared his teeth and raised his eyebrows high, and rhythmically flicked the end of the swizzle stick with his tongue, waggling it between his fore-teeth.

Preston sniggered at the professor's demonstration, and the mechanic sprang to life, amused. He laughed wildly, and his diaphragm jiggled the loose flesh surrounding his man-breasts as he wiped his brow with the back of his hand. He grasped the top of the Southern Comfort bottle on the table before him with the tips of his grimy fingers, and extended it toward Jack like a peace pipe as he swirled the amber liquid in the bottom. Jack shook his head, and the mechanic sloshed the whiskey again. When Jack again deferred, the man shrugged and returned the bottle to its place.

The five men played briskly, and one of Jack's stack of chips had soon disappeared. As he threw the top chip from the second stack onto the pile, Jack was becoming concerned. But the next handful of cards he was dealt looked strong, and he contained his excitement and raised the pot a hundred bucks, then he countered with hundred more when the mechanic threw eight chips into the pile. Preston called, and when everyone laid their cards down, Jack's straight had bested the professor's three-of-a-kind. The pile of chips he raked his way rebuilt his initial stake and more.

The wind continued to howl outside, and the front door rattled loose on its hinges. A pan of water steamed from atop the wood stove in the front room. The coals on the grate of the stove

sputtered hellish red as the doorkeeper opened the firebox and threw another log on the fire. The lanky man on the couch in the brown duck Carhartt jacket stirred, folding his legs mantis-like beneath him, and angled out of the room.

"Stoop, who's the dude?" the doorkeeper said, poking at the logs afire in the stove.

"Hell if I know. He just picked me up on the highway. His name's Jack."

"What was you doin, just standin there by the side of the road hitchhikin?"

"Could say that. Could."

Stoop stood and walked to the window where he parted the curtain to peer into the night. His stomach growled, the sandwich from the liquor store back down the road long gone. His liver had worked most of the whiskey through his system, and he walked into the kitchen to the stash in the cookie tin on the counter beside the sink and rolled one. He'd just stepped of the back porch to piss and was standing with his business in his hand when he saw the dark form of a car approaching down the rutted lane. Moonlight glinted off the chrome bar mounted atop the car, and the cattle guard at the fence rumbled as the car neared.

He tucked himself in and hurried back into the house. Grabbing the cookie tin from the kitchen counter as he passed through the kitchen, he burst into the front room and threw the container to the doorkeeper.

"Better hide this, we've got company." The doorkeeper looked up, eyes wide with fear, and removed the lid of the cookie tin. "Shit," he said, shuffling the flakes into the flames. "Shit, shit, shit." Emptying the contents of the tin completely into the flames, he stuck his nose into the stove and inhaled deeply, then tossed the tin into the corner. A black-and-tan cat atop the back of the couch sprang softly to the floor and licked it clean.

A skinny girl in a teddy raced through the room from back of the house, chased by a man in boxer shorts carrying a pair of boots in one hand and a wad of clothes in the other. She threw the door open, shattering glass against the wall, and they darted into the darkness. She hopped into the passenger side of an old pickup, and the man hopped barefoot around the other side of the truck, then careened down the lane toward the road.

Stoop stood knocking on the door of the poker room when shouts came from the kitchen, and began moving toward the front room. Ducking out the front door onto the porch, he squeezed beside the deep freeze in the corner. A sheriff's deputy poked his head out the front door and craned about in the darkness, then returned inside. Wedging his way around the side of the deep freeze, Stoop slipped off the porch and crawled behind the shrubbery around the side of the house, rising slightly beneath the window of the front room and peeking inside to see the professor rise with his hands raised. Crouching again, he duck-walked below the open poker room window as a bed sheet flapped through the sash in the gentle breeze.

As he prepared to dart into the woods east of the house, it occurred to him that he didn't specifically remember Jack locking door of the Lexus. Crawling to the car, he pulled the handle and cracked the door open just enough to trigger the dome light. A dark shadow jumped from the backseat floorboard.

"C'mon, man," Jack said. "Just get in the damn car, and let's go."

Stoop raced around the front of the car and jumped into the driver's seat, started the engine, and threw the car into gear. The tires whirled in the soft earth before catching traction, and he steered around the abandoned garage leaning toward the house, fish-tailing the car through a slit in the trees and into the woods. The left quarter panel swiped the fence post at the

open gate, and Stoop snowplowed the car through the brambles of a long-neglected cow path, bombing toward the frozen pond. Scrambling from the backseat as Stooped steered sharply around the edge of the pond, Jack fell into the passenger seat.

"What the hell you doing?" Jack said. "This is a brand-new car."

"And if we don't get away quick, your brand-new ass is gonna get thrown into jail. Garland County don't take kindly to women being rented by the hour, and they damn don't like the meth they're gonna find in the couch cushion. Sit down, shut up, and hold on, Okie."

Stoop steered blindly among the hollows and dips in the pasture, into the far woods of the rise on the other side of the valley. Reaching the back edge of the property, Stoop stood on the brakes and jerked the car to a stop.

"Get out, Jack. Open the damn gate."

Jack jumped from the car and pulled the baling wire loop from the top of the post, jerking the three stands of the jury-rigged gate aside as Stoop drove through the opening then stopped. Jack was carefully re-securing the gate when Stoop opened the driver's door, shouting.

"Throw the thing on the ground, you damn fool. Get back in the car. We ain't got time for that."

Dropping the wire gate, Jack ran back to the car. "But what about the cows?"

"Would you stop worrying about the cows? God, you're a fuss-bucket." The headlights bored through the darkness as the car sped down the gravel road. "Did you win any money tonight?"

"Hell yeah. No, wait." Jack said. "It's all back there in that room. All I've got on me is three bucks cash and a credit card."

"Well, I hope your plastic's good, cause we're gonna need to spend the night in a motel in Arkadelphia."

Jack awakened the next day in a Super Eight beside I-30, Stoop snoring loudly from the other bed. A sliver of bright sunlight slashed the center of the thick drapes, the clock on the nightstand read 12:07. He got out of bed and parted the drapes a few inches, and looked down on the Lexus in the near-empty lot. The left marker light was broken, the side was scratched. The tire sidewalls were muddy. Tufts of fescue poked out of the body seam above the door sill. The door panel was deeply dented. The wipers were frozen half-swipe. The windshield was broken.

He took a shower, and when he returned to the room Stoop sat dressed and propped against the headboard watching cartoons.

"Good morning," Stoop said, rubbing his fingers through his dreadlocks.

"Oh, yeah. It's a great morning. You seen the car?"

Stoop walked to the window. "Wow. We'll have to do something about that."

"Like what? You got any idea what that kind of bodywork's gonna cost? And I'll have to pay for it out of my own pocket: It's not like I can turn *that* into my insurance company."

"I ain't talking about bodywork. We're gonna have to *do* something about that."

"Like what?"

"Like get rid of it."

"What are you talking about, get rid of it?"

"Hot Springs isn't a very big town, and a car like that's gonna get noticed — it's not everyday you see a new Lexus looking like it took last place at Daytona."

"Well, what do you suggest, smart ass?"

"I know this guy in West Memphis …"

"Wait a minute," Jack said. "I've already met a few of the *people you know.* And it wasn't a pleasurable experience."

Chapter Nine

The final blow to the jaw had left Jack sprawled on his back near the eighteenth green. A small crowd had gathered around him, their faces encircling him like angry thunderclouds. His attacker broke free from the men who were restraining him, and he pushed his way back through the mob were he stood towering over Jack like Ali over Frazier.

Jack tried crabbing away from the man, but was blocked by the shins of the mob. Rolling to his belly, he crouched on all-fours and faced the man, who backed away, laughing a low growl. Turning, the attacker shoved the thirty-something man who stood beside him, and stomped to his Lincoln Town Car in the parking lot. The younger man stood embarrassed, then spit on Jack's shirt and scuttled away to his own car.

As the crowd wandered away, an electric golf cart whispered to a halt on the asphalt cart path beside where Jack lay.

"What the hell happened to you?" Mitch Davidson, the manager of the country club, helped Jack to his feet.

"Guess I picked on the wrong daddy's boy. My god, Mitch, who was that old man?"

"I should have warned you about Colonel McConnell, Jack. The old bastard's a retired Marine. Still enjoys throwing his weight around."

"I assume the guy who spit on me must be his son," said Jack.

"Yep, that's the Colonel's boy. Can I assume this little incident has something to do with you hustling junior?" Mitch said.

"Well, yeah, maybe."

"C'mon, Jack, get in the cart. I'll buy you a beer."

Things hadn't been going well since Jack had arrived in Hot Springs three months previous.The wild poker game his first night in Arkansas seemed to have set the tone. The morning after the raid, Stoop had convinced Jack to drive to a body shop in West Memphis, where Jack had traded his battered Lexus for a used pickup. As he signed over the title to the Lexus, Jack had felt like he was abandoning a dream. The sinking feeling just grew worse as they drove back to Hot Springs and he calculated the damages in his head: Fifty grand to buy the new Lexus, $32,000 to clear his debt at the casinos before leaving Vinita. He'd abandoned nearly $8,000 on the poker table when he jumped out the window. He was nearly broke. At least he had the foresight to set up monthly payments on the proceeds from the sale of the cafe.

Mitch parked the golf cart behind the clubhouse and held the back door of the clubhouse open for Jack, who immediately recognized the aroma of baking lasagna when they entered.

"Needs more garlic, Alejandro."

"Think so?" Alejandro was head chef at the country club.

The motel room where Jack had been living was suffocating lonely, so he'd been spending most evenings in the corner of the clubhouse kitchen on a barstool. He and Alejandro had hit it off right away, but the crew was slow to accept him. Then one night the dishwasher had failed to show, and Jack tied on an apron and had gone to work. Standing there, elbow-deep in hot soapy water, he had felt an elusive sense of belonging, something he hadn't felt for some time.

A couple of evenings later, sitting on his barstool in the corner, Jack had burst out laughing.

What's so funny? Alejandro asked.

Nothing, Jack responded. It had just occurred to him that he and Red were both just crazy old men on bar stools in the corner of busy kitchens. But Red was the lucky one; in his confused mind, Cindy and Christina still lived.

"I'm telling ya, Alejandro" Jack said, opening the oven door to peek at the lasagna. "Needs more garlic. A little more basil wouldn't hurt, either."

"Jack," Alejandro said. "Listen, Okie,the next time I need advice on frying chicken fried steak, I'll give you a call. Until then, stay out of my kitchen." The chef laughed as he snapped a towel at the back of Jack's jeans.

"C'mon, Jack," Mitch said from the doorway to the lounge, "My offer to buy you a beer has an expiration date."

Mitch went behind the bar and drew two beers from the tap. Lean as a matchstick, his face was tanned from hours on the fairways. Wiry and hawk-like, he resembled the framed black-and-whites photos of Ben Hogan hanging on the walls of the room. Mitch, like Jack, had perfected his swing on a dusty nine-hole course of his small hometown, and the two had connected like a pair of old spirits.

Jack had been on the driving range that first afternoon when Mitch stepped outside and asked, "What are you're doing here, stranger?"

Jack realized he'd been caught, and made up a story about waiting for a club member who had invited him to play a round of golf. But he was unable to name the member, and Mitch was about to run him off. But then, as he told Jack a few weeks later, that the hungry look in Jack's eyes stopped him cold. In the weeks since, the two had played a lot of golf together and become fast friends.

The lounge wouldn't be open for a couple more hours and was empty, and Jack took an overturned stool and sat in front of the bar. Mitch hopped atop the cooler, and sat leaned against the mirror swinging his legs.

"Jack, we need to talk," Mitch said, setting his pint glass on the cooler beside him. "How have things been going for you?"

The second hand swept silently on the Budweiser sign on the wall, and the only sounds in the room were the quiet, rhythmic thumps of Mitch's heels against the cooler.

Jack examined his reflection in the mirror. The moment had the same feel of that morning in high school when he'd been called into the principal's office about the fight.

Jack and Mitch had an understanding: Mitch would look the other way, as long as Jack didn't offend members of the club. The silence in the room was heavy, and when Jack glanced into his eyes, Mitch quickly shifting his attention to the floor.

After arriving in Hot Springs, Jack had quickly discovered that many things had changed since Stimpson's day. Either that, or Stimpson had been a liar. The first week in Hot Springs, Jack began hanging around the lobby of The Arlington Hotel wearing a blazer and a tie. After being totally ignored for several days, he started dropping hints to the bellmen and slipping ten-

dollar bills into their uniform pockets. The next day hotel security asked him to leave, said he was creeping out the help.

He tried a couple of other resorts with the same results, then had asked Stoop to show him around the horse racing game. It was immediately clear to Jack that everyone at the track knew Stoop, all the way from the janitors who swept the floors to the rich folks drinking mint juleps the opulent suites. But it was also quite apparent they regarded Stoop with disdain. Jack had been hoping to connect with a better, more affluent crowd, and he began going to the track alone. But because he knew so little about racetrack betting, he soon lost his shirt and decided that he'd better stay on the golf course where he knew his way around.

Mitch sat on the cooler awaiting his response, and Jack rose from the barstool and stared out the window.

"I've been making expenses, Mitch," he finally said. "Barely."

"I've been watching you, Jack. It seems to me you've got too much conscience to be a good golf hustler. I think you're a better teacher."

Even on the days Jack had been able to put together a game, he still had a lot of time on his hands. On weekday afternoons the local high school team practiced at the club, and Jack had begun sitting where he could watch the boys play. One kid in particular had caught Jack's eye, a smallish boy with a smooth, sweet swing and a lonely look. Jack had noticed a hitch in the kid's backswing and offered a solution. The kid just listened, silently soaking it all in, then hit a shot so pure the electricity went right up his arms and into his smile. He had turned wearing a mile-wide grin, and Jack felt a sense of accomplishment that carried him for days.

"Look, Jack," Mitch said, hopping down from the cooler. "I've been putting this off … " He paused and began wiping the bar with a rag. "The members have been complaining. And now this confrontation with the Colonel … well, Jack, you're just gonna have to move on."

Jack felt like a bum on the street. Since he'd been a boy, he'd struggled with the feeling of not fitting in anywhere. Before losing Cindy and Christina, Jack thought that maybe he'd finally left the alienation behind, that his success as a restauranteur had erased all that. But then a customer would slight him, or he'd have a bad day on the golf course, and the cloud descended again. No matter how successful Jack became in business and life, no matter how much it seemed like he was becoming a part of the community, he always felt like an outsider.

No one but Cindy had ever gotten far enough inside him to see the real Jack. He'd told Cindy so many things that he'd never shared with another soul. Over the years, again and again, Cindy had been able to sense the dark clouds gathering, and she'd shoot him a deep, knowing look from across the cafe: *I understand*, *Jack*. Red loved him like a son, but Jack knew there must have been days when the old redhead wondered*, What's the matter with that boy?* Only Cindy's quiet confidence was able to get him through.

Alone in their bed at night, or sitting on the hood of the GTO drinking beer after a summer Sunday evening golf game, Cindy had perfected the art of asking just the right question at just the right time. Without even realizing she was leading him on, Jack would open up and bare his soul. In his mind, they were simply having a conversation. But it was all monologue, really, with Cindy inserting a simple, "Is that right?", or an "I know just what you mean," just enough to keep his stream-of-consciousness coming. Later after those talks, after they made love,

Jack would lie in the darkness, Cindy's naked form beside him, realizing that sometimes all that stood between him and insanity was her quiet and careful love.

And yet.

Despite the depth of their relationship, Jack harbored secrets that nobody—not even Cindy—knew about. And when those secrets bubbled to the surface of his consciousness, when he saw himself for what he really was, Jack felt like some bandit had invaded his home and stolen his family's treasures.

Take, for instance, his gambling problem. Cindy knew a little about it, but not the whole truth. When the tribal casinos began popping up all over northeastern Oklahoma, she began enjoying a night out in the restaurant and then a little gambling at the slots. But she set the limits before leaving the house, maybe fifty bucks and a couple of drinks. Cindy loved those "date nights," dressing in heels and the little black dress with the sparkles.

But when, one night on the casino floor, a dealer remarked, "So, back again so soon, Jack?" Cindy had looked at Jack with an expression that said a lot of things suddenly made sense to her. The night Cindy died, she was unaware exactly how close the family had been teetering on the brink of financial disaster. The sale of the cafe had been the only thing that rescued Jack from bankruptcy.

Jack turned from the clubhouse window and faced Mitch.

"I don't want to cause any trouble, Mitch. Besides, I've had about enough of Hot Springs, anyway."

"Where you gonna go, Jack?"

"I don't know." Jack sat again on the stool and wobbled his glass on the bar. "The old home place in Talihina needs a lot of work, maybe I'll go there. I could move into the old house and open a cafe downtown, something like that."

"Jack, you know that won't work. You're a heck of a golfer, my friend, and there's not a course within fifty miles of Talihina. Let's face it, buddy, you need the game more than ever right now—it's what keeps you sane"

"Naw. I think I'll just give up golf altogether."

"C'mon, Jack. You don't belong in Talihina. Why don't you go back to Vinita? Go someplace where you know somebody."

That's the problem, Jack thought, he knew too many people there—both the living and the dad. Cindy and Christina were up there in Fairview Cemetery. Red was rattling in a nursing home. Hell, Vinita was the last place Jack wanted to go. Old friends would always be bringing up memories—it'd drive him nuts.

"Mitch, don't worry me. I'm not stupid. I've known this was coming."

The door to the pro shop opened, and the clerk in the pro shop said, "Hey, Mitch, the Foot-Joy rep needs to see you."

"Okay. Tell him I'll be right there." Mitch took Jack's glass and emptied it into the sink.

"I've watched the way you work with those kids on the golf team, Jack. They respond well to you; you ought to be teaching the game. I've got an old friend who gives lessons at LaFortune Municipal in Tulsa. Why don't you let me give him a call."

"I know La Fortune," Jack said. "Forty-first and Yale, just south of the interstate."

"Yeah, that's where Steve teaches. He's gotta pushing eighty, and I'll bet he'd be glad for the help. You'd make a heckuva teacher, Jack. Hey, and who knows? You might meet some women that way."

Jack had never thought about giving golf lessons. It just might work. And women? Well, maybe.

"There's only one thing, Jack," Mitch said. "You're going to have to to give up the hustle."

"That's no problem, Mitch." Jack smiled. "I think the hustle's done given up on me."