

# DOWNFORCE

Only the strongest—  
and the fastest—survive . . .

**A STOCKCAR THRILLER**



**STEVE EUBANKS**

*Author of Hot Laps*



# ***DOWNFORCE***

**A STOCKCAR THRILLER**

**STEVE EUBANKS**



HarperCollins e-books

*For James Stephen Eubanks, Jr., USMC*  
*Semper Fi*

# Contents

## Chapter 1

Stanford Lichwick put forth a spectacular and silly lie, one...	1
--	---

## Chapter 2

The Viking helmet was a first. Racing legend Robert “Redball”...	10
---	----

## Chapter 3

Twenty-six hours later, on Monday afternoon, Robert set the cruise...	30
--	----

## Chapter 4

“Okay, this guy calls in sick for work.”	43
--	----

## Chapter 5

Early Monday morning an eighteen-wheeler shuddered like a detoxing drunk,...	53
---	----

## Chapter 6

The human head is a lot sturdier than most people...	59
---	----

## Chapter 7

Throughout the long history of the American capitalist system, corporate... 64

## Chapter 8

Mississippi Lieutenant Governor Roy Coon would have preferred jogging through... 72

## Chapter 9

“You cannot use that shot!” the producer shouted. “For the... 81

## Chapter 10

The TV trucks attracted a small crowd of neighbors to... 87

## Chapter 11

Jackie Simon ordered tomato juice to complement the Alaskan salmon... 101

## Chapter 12

While Jackie Simon sipped tomato juice and watched her DVD, ... 107

## Chapter 13

As the sun popped up over the Fort Morgan Peninsula,... 113

## Chapter 14

The service for Stanford Isaiah Lichwick  
took place on the... 120

## Chapter 15

After Hurricane Katrina the FBI had  
enough boats harbored from... 131

## Chapter 16

Robert didn't ask to drive Obadiah Plunkett's  
van, but he... 139

## Chapter 17

"So what the hell's so special about this  
place, other... 151

## Chapter 18

"I've got our angle," Jackie said while  
pacing back and... 168

## Chapter 19

"The boss is hot," J.P. said as he shared an... 180

## Chapter 20

The boys from Octopus Sports were always  
in a hurry. 190

## Chapter 21

If Robert Redding had owned a pair of  
ruby slippers... 199

## Chapter 22

Crowds for the Bridgestone Truck racing  
series would have been... 208

## Chapter 23

“I’m telling you, there are no North Carolina  
numbers on... 220

## Chapter 24

In the honorable traditions of Lyndon B.  
Johnson and Daniel... 225

## Chapter 25

“I’m sorry, sir, rules say you can’t take  
cell phones... 230

## Chapter 26

Birds in nearby trees sang triumphant  
songs of peace and... 236

## Chapter 27

Robert was sorting a week’s worth of mail  
when Ty... 242



## Chapter 28

Robert took the Hawker 800 from Charlotte  
to Pell City,... 250

## Chapter 29

On his fourth lap, Roy experienced what  
drivers called having... 272

## Chapter 30

Screw regulations: Robert was letting  
Johnny Pea and Jackie Simon... 288

## Chapter 31

Crime scene pathologists, including Biloxi's  
own Dr. Terrance Natterly, found... 301

## Epilogue

Robert opened the kitchen fridge hoping to  
find a refreshing... 307

## About the Author

## Other Books by Steve Eubanks

## Cover

## Copyright

## About the Publisher



## Chapter 1

---

Stanford Lichwick put forth a spectacular and silly lie, one his feeble brain had failed to vet for plausibility before the words tumbled out of his mouth. He claimed to be an avid fisherman from Oregon, “Just in town for a couple of days. Wine seller’s convention over at the Imperial Palace. Want to get a jump on the tourists and snag some triggerfish before sunup.” The least he could have done was check the convention schedule. There wasn’t a commercial wine seller within fifty miles of Biloxi this week.

His claim of expert boating and fishing skills was an equally egregious whopper. The closest Stan had ever come to the helm of a seaworthy vessel was the two months he’d served as coxswain on the Sacramento Prep crew, a job he’d gotten because of his rail-thin frame and the steady supply of Tijuana Red he’d shared with his crewmates. One phone call would have blown Lichwick’s story to smithereens, but Tattoo Charlie, the name Stan had assigned to the sad-eyed drunk behind the counter at Biloxi Boat Rental, didn’t seem to care that his only customer of the afternoon thought port and starboard were after-dinner drinks.

The old geezer raised a gray eyebrow and stared at Stan’s Birkenstocks and *Earth First* T-shirt. “Triggerfish,” he said as the ash on his Pall Mall defied gravity.

“That’s the plan.”

Had Stan bothered with a five-minute Google search, he’d have learned that recent El Niño currents had driven the gray Gulf Coast triggerfish southwest toward Galveston.

“What sort of gear you taking out?” Tattoo Charlie asked.

“Gear?”

“Yeah, you know, fishing gear.”

“Oh . . . well . . . you know . . . standard stuff . . . you know . . . triggerfish gear.”

Stan rubbed his palms and calculated the number of steps to the nearest exit. He felt sure he could beat Tattoo Charlie out the door if it came to that. The old sot didn’t seem up for a footrace.

Tattoo Charlie shrugged, grunted, and slid a clipboard across the dirty linoleum counter, not knowing or caring that he was leasing a twenty-footer to someone who had recently gotten seasick on the Lazy River ride at BananaRama Water Park.

It would have been easy for Stanford to use a phony ID and fake credit card. He had plenty of both. But this time he wanted reporters to spell his name right. Even though his mug had made it above the fold in numerous newspapers, the only time a print journalist had attempted to identify him was when Stan had hurled a wooden sign that read *Save the World—Kill a Republican* at a presidential motorcade. Then and only then did a reporter ask his name. To Stanford Lichwick’s dismay, the next day’s *Oregonian* identified him as “Stan Ford of Lincoln.”

This time would be different. He’d used his personal Travelocity account to book his flights to Mississippi, and rented the Ford Focus with his MBNA Visa. He’d paid for the room at La Quinta with his American Express, and given Tattoo Charlie his Oregon driver’s license to lease the boat. Helen Keller could follow this trail.

"Rate's for twenty-four hours," Tattoo Charlie said.

"No problem-o."

Stanford put his credit card and license back in his wallet and broke into a wide grin.

"Going out alone, are you?"

"Yeah, I always fish alone." Stan hitched his camo pants like John Wayne.

"Um-hum."

Tattoo Charlie pulled one more drag off the Pall Mall before ushering Stanford through a back door and onto the dock.

"You'll want to use ammonia," the old man said once they were outside.

"What?"

"Clean it with ammonia. Masks any residue."

"Residue?" Stanford's palms exploded with sweat.

"From . . . you know . . . fishing."

That's when it hit him: Tattoo Charlie thought Stan was a drug smuggler.

"Oh, I'm not—"

"Course, if I was off duty I could sell you some industrial cleaner. Stuff'll put a three-day buzz on a bloodhound."

"But I'm not—" Stan stopped himself. Having Charlie think this was a drug thing wasn't so bad.

"I also got some Coast Guard scanners," the old man said as he tossed the butt of one cigarette in the Gulf and lit another in one fluid motion. "Best to know who's in the neighborhood when you're trolling for triggerfish."

"How much?" Stan asked.

"Well, if I was off duty . . ." He took a long drag and expelled a blue cloud into the warm breeze. "Two-fifty for both the cleaner and a scanner."

"When do you get off duty?"

Charlie raised his left arm, the one sporting skin art of

Captain Hook getting a blow job from the Chicken of the Sea mermaid. He squinted at his watch and said, "Why, funny you should ask. I get off right now."

"Lucky for me, huh?"

"Fishermen make their own luck. You're a good fisherman, ain't ye, boy?"

"Getting better by the minute," Stanford said.

That night, after the last star had disappeared behind a thin layer of clouds, Stanford took the wheel of his rented Sea Waver like a caricature from Hemingway's drunken nightmares. Squinting and wiping puke residue from his chin, Stan took an extra-wide stance as the boat bounced through the choppy surf. He couldn't see shit. The waters off Biloxi were dingy in the daytime. At two in the morning, this was like driving through a coal mine.

The only light glowed from a dim orange beacon. Stan did his best to point the bow at the thin light. He had no clue how lucky he'd been. Any other morning, fog would have made it impossible for him to see his feet. A low-pressure cell had delayed the atmospheric blanket for a couple of hours and provided Stan with ample time to complete his task. So far, Stan's biggest challenge had come when a school of dolphins thumped the side of the boat looking for food. Captain Lichwick hooted, cursed, and came within inches of falling overboard when the mammals began chattering off the starboard side.

"Christ Almighty, get hold of yourself," he said out loud.

Twenty minutes later, Stan cut the throttle, hit the spotlight, and stared in awe at his target. The piling looked like a giant phallic idol popping out of the water and extending fifty feet into the inky sky. He could barely see the tiny beacon that warned wayward aircraft away from the concrete monstrosity the *Mobile Register* had dubbed

“the largest engineering project since the TVA dammed every aquifer in the region.” Stan’s boat rocked closer as waves broke on the concrete. He needed to hurry. The longer he was out here, the better his chances of being spotted.

Using ambient glow from his spotlight, Stan lifted the aft cushions and removed a steel case containing blocks of C-4. Six bricks were overkill, but they were shooting for spectacular. He would bring down this piling tonight. Soldiers from the Planetary Liberation Front would sabotage the others in coming weeks while Stanford spread the message from whatever federal torture chamber the jack-booted neocons tossed him into. The *Pointe aux Chenes* Bridge must be stopped no matter what. That was the creed. They had chanted it in Jackson, painted it on walls in Oxford, and spammed it to every politician in the state (along with a nasty virus that gobbled holes in the Mississippi government’s operating system). But none of the suits had taken heed. The governor had responded with the mealymouthed press release that said, in part, “We understand and appreciate the concerns of certain groups, but the *Pointe aux Chenes* project will proceed. All necessary steps are in place to protect the natural beauty of our great state.”

Yeah, this monster was a real beaut, but that didn’t matter now. No one would ignore them after tonight. Their message was peaceful, but if violence had to be used as a tactic . . . well, this was war.

Stan tried not to ponder the hardships awaiting him in prison. His features were just delicate enough to catch the eye of a sex-starved yard boss. God only knew how his digestive tract would react to institutional food. He couldn’t think about that. He had to focus on more pleasant things, like the Che Guevara status he would obtain within the movement after tonight. The Front might even put him on a T-shirt and hold “Free Lichwick” marches on the capital.

That thought brought a smile to his tight, cold face as he wiped mist from his eyes and fumbled with the Reynolds Wrap encasing the C-4.

It wouldn't be long now.

Five hours later, Jolene Newberry kicked off the sandals she'd bought on sale at Target and stuck her toes into the water along the shell-strewn Biloxi beach. Jolene was registered in room 1223 at the Beau Rivage, although she'd spent a grand total of five minutes in the room in the past eighteen hours, just long enough to put her Samsonite bag on the hot pink bedspread, christen the toilet, and touch up her baby blue eye shadow and "exotic" rust-brown lipstick. Then she'd wriggled into the tightest pair of jeans she owned and donned a thick brown belt with a silver buckle the size of a pie plate. One final glance at her oversized ass in the mirror and Jolene had trotted downstairs, where bells dinged, lights flashed, and the promise of untold riches beckoned her to the gaming floor.

Now, with brown sand washing between her aching toes, Jolene stared out at the sunrise and wondered how things could have gone so wrong. She'd followed every word of the dog-eared *How to Beat the House* paperback, including the part on picking three slot machines that hadn't paid out. When three machines near the roulette wheel sat silent for fifteen minutes, Jolene parked in front of them for the better part of two hours. Sure enough, after shoving a beach-bucketful of quarters into the one-armed bandits, Jolene hit it big. Her payout was a thousand dollars after investing only three hundred and seventy. She was six-thirty to the good when she walked away from the slots and answered the siren call of the blackjack table.

By one A.M., she had tripled her thousand-dollar payout by counting the cards, just like the book said. By three, her stash had dwindled to five hundred bucks. When she



walked through the tinted glass hotel doors a little after seven, she had lost all her winnings plus seven hundred dollars of her own money, all the cash she had brought for the week.

Jolene thought about stripping naked and swimming out to sea where she would either drown or be eaten by sharks. Anything was better than calling Odell, who would take great glee in his goddammits and I-told-you-so's.

Fantasies of drowning quickly passed as Jolene examined the water. Mississippi Sound always looked like an oil tanker had ruptured offshore. The state had created twenty-six miles of shoreline, the largest and longest man-made beach in the world, and then rebuilt it bigger and better with FEMA money after Katrina. Still, not an inch of it was worth a damn. Barrier islands from Petit Bois to Bay Boudreau kept the tidewaters murky and the beaches bland. It was like God's giant practical joke: Mississippi really was the sewer of the Gulf.

The rising sun glistened off an oil platform near Dog Keys Pass as Jolene let the waves wash over her ankles. She watched the kaleidoscope that is a Gulf Coast sunrise while practicing her speech to Odell. That's when she felt a stab on her Achilles tendon.

"Oh, hell hath no fury!" Jolene shouted as she jumped away from whatever creature had chosen that moment to nibble on her leg. Unfortunately, an ocean wave hit her just below the knees as she made her leap. Before she could scamper back to shore, tidewater knocked Jolene's feet out from under her, and her rump splashed into the Gulf. Another wave broke onto Jolene's sleeveless Jordache top as she listed to starboard and stuck her palm into a pile of seaweed. Soft sand caved under her knees as she tried to right herself, and a splash of black salt water filled her mouth.

Once upright, Jolene spat and spewed water while swat-

ting sand off her face. She shook her head like a wet dog and did her best to push the mats of hair out of her eyes. That's when she saw the item that had been nipping at her ankles. Staring back at her from shore was a charred, tottering, severed head, the jagged edge of his fourth cervical vertebra still clinging to a few shards of skin from Jolene's ankle.

Her screams attracted a retired couple from Ocean Springs out for their constitutional, as well as an off-duty cop who had chosen this stretch of beach for his morning run. The cop vomited. The retiree called the peace officer a "gnadless peckerhead." Swearing he'd seen worse at Guadalcanal, the barefoot old man grabbed what remained of Stanford Lichwick's hair and dragged the head inland.

By day's end, officials had recovered a hand, a wristwatch, a wallet, and the melted remains of a toe ring, all belonging to Stan Lichwick. In subsequent days, the Coast Guard would find both legs, a few shards of a T-shirt, and pieces of the boat, some as far away as Bayou la Batre.

Jolene Newberry basked in the media spotlight for a day, giving fifteen interviews before four P.M., and receiving two free nights at Beau Rivage along with a hundred dollars in chips for her troubles. She never called Odell. To hell with him. He would have hogged her spotlight anyway.

Tattoo Charlie, whose real name was Floyd Smick, answered questions for three hours until a bench warrant for an outstanding larceny charge came to light. Then Floyd asked for a lawyer.

Nelson and Donatella Lichwick were understandably distraught at their son's untimely passing, but not terribly surprised. It had been almost a year since they'd seen Stanford, a date that had coincided with the maturation of the boy's trust fund. Nelson didn't know his son had been

living in Oregon. Donatella had kept tabs on Stan through an old friend in the Oregon Highway Patrol. She knew that he'd lived with a palm reader, and that he was well known to the Beaverton police. In addition to multiple disturbing-the-peace and failure-to-obey-a-lawful-command arrests, Stan was the prime suspect in a spree of SUV arsons.

It was with no small sense of satisfaction that the lead detective in those fires paid a visit to Stan's concubine, a pretty girl with heroin eyes and gunmetal-blue hair who went by the name Sky Hi. Upon learning that her live-in had blown himself to bits in the Gulf of Mexico, Sky asked the first question that popped into every grieving lover's mind:

"So," she said while picking at the stud in her nose, "like, who's gonna pay for the boat?"

## Chapter 2

---

The Viking helmet was a first. Racing legend Robert “Red-ball” Redding thought he’d seen every screwball getup a race fan could wear, but the genius in line at the infield beer stand had proven him wrong by gluing a squirrel’s hide and two curved dildos onto a mixing bowl, creating a reasonable facsimile of ancient Nordic headwear. It wasn’t until Robert was a few feet away that he realized the horns had rubber foreskin and penis heads that jiggled as the guy staggered toward the Pabst Blue Ribbon vendor.

“Is that what I think it is?” Robert asked his golf-cart traveling companion, STOCKCAR president Miles Hinton.

“Oh hell,” Hinton said as he spotted the dick hat.

“Think we’ll see him at the Outreach service?”

“Not if security sees him first.”

Miles unsheathed a walkie-talkie from his belt and barked Penis Viking’s coordinates over the airways. The hat would belong to the Alabama Motor Speedway in a matter of minutes.

As their E-Z-Go rolled past the concession stand, Robert took one last look at the long queue, and saw a sign on the back of Penis Viking’s mixing bowl. It read: *What Jett Wears at Home.*

Now it made sense. The helmet was another in a long line

of gay jokes aimed at stockcar driver Jett Jordan, the defending champion here at the Alabama Motor Speedway.

"Is Jett still dating Veronica?" Robert asked.

Jett, the most successful active driver in American auto racing, and one of Robert Redding's closest friends, put up with guys like Penis Viking questioning his sexual orientation every week. Already this morning Robert had seen one hand-painted sign in the infield that read, *Jett Blows More than Engines*, and another in the grandstands that simply said, *Face It, Jett's a Homo*. The fact that Jett's girlfriend was a jaw-dropping model either didn't register with these boobs or it didn't matter. Never let the facts get in the way of a good joke.

"She slept in his motor coach last night," Miles said. "Did you know she's the most downloaded underwear model in the world? Just jumped past that lanky Brazilian girl, Gazelle, or whatever the hell her name is."

"Proud of that, is she?"

"I sure would be." Miles was a big man: the thought of him being photographed in his underwear made Robert Redding shudder.

"You'd figure the divorce would've put an end to the gay stuff," Robert said. Jett's divorce from Brandy Jordan had been tabloid fodder for the better part of a year. The gay jokes died down during that time, but no more.

"Did he show you the latest website?" Miles asked.

"I've never seen him laugh so hard."

Jett couldn't wait to show Robert his latest anti-fan website: [jordan-is-a-homo.com](http://jordan-is-a-homo.com). The homepage had a cutout of Jett's face plastered on the oily body of a gay porn star engaged in the kinds of activities that spawned Supreme Court rulings. Jett and Veronica thought it was hilarious. "It's funny that the guys who put this crap out are the same ones who jerk off to pictures of my girlfriend," Jett had said.

“You’ve got to give Penis Viking a gold star for creativity,” Robert said as they sped past the concession stand.

“I’ll pass that along to the mothers who complain.”

Miles whipped the cart down a makeshift gravel path through the infield campground. The grandstands at Alabama Motor Speedway were an hour from filling up, but the infield had been packed and the party roaring at full throttle since sundown on Friday. Bus-sized RVs were wedged next to each other onto the grass like sows at a trough. Fancier rolling units with slide-out side panels and hydraulic canopies had squeezed into their assigned spots like obese airline passengers in middle seats. Even the stripped and painted school buses were sandwiched so close together that a kid with a daredevil streak could have run along the rooftops from turn one to turn three without ever touching the ground. The “motor coaches” belonging to the drivers and team owners (million-dollar homes on wheels with cheery paneling and multiple plasma hi-def entertainment centers: too posh to be called recreational vehicles) were segregated from the cloth-top campers and trailer-hitch Airstreams by an eight-foot chain-link fence. But there was no more space in the VIP lot than in the fan campground, and in some cases the drivers and team owners were more cramped than the public. At least in the general-admit section three families could buy four spots and configure their Fleetwoods into a three-sided U, leaving room in the interior for a barbeque smoker and horse-shoe pit.

The first RV to catch Robert’s eye was a tricked-out Winnebago with chrome stovepipe manifold exhausts, spinner rims, and Lollapalooza-sized Bose stereo speakers blaring AC/DC: “*Rock and Roll ain’t noise pollution / Rock and Roll ain’t gonna die.*” The owner held a Corona in his left hand while putting T-bones on the grill with his right. It was nine forty-five in the morning.

“Hey, Redball,” the fan yelled over the music as Robert and Miles puttered by. The man dropped his grill tongs, raised his beer, and grinned. “Lock up the bad boys, Redball. You da man!”

Robert gave his best Miss America wave as Miles gunned the golf cart through the maze of RVs. Thirty more campers yelled greetings along this single stretch of gravel. Many of the gray-haired fans, of which there were plenty, remembered Robert from his days behind the wheel of the Union 76 Chevrolet when he won four Salem Cup championships. The youngsters in the crowd knew him from the movie *Hot Laps* that had opened nationwide on Friday and was a runaway box office hit. The hero of the film was none other than former stockcar champion Robert “Redball” Redding, who had become a crime-busting prosecutor after retiring from the rigors of racing. Robert’s mug had appeared on every entertainment show and in every PR puff piece the studio could place. A month ago, most of the race fans under forty wouldn’t have known Robert if he’d bumped into them at the beer stand. Now he was a bigger draw than some of the active drivers.

The biggest reception Robert received in the infield came from half a dozen kids who had hauled five hundred pounds of sand, a couple of palm trees, an inflatable kiddie pool, and a forty-inch Hitachi flat-screen to the top of their Overland RV, creating one heck of a rooftop beach party. All six partyers stood and cheered as the great Redball Redding slow-rolled past them in a two-cycle golf cart.

“Good to see they haven’t forgotten you,” Miles said.

Robert caught a final glimpse of the beach party just as one of the girls removed her shirt to reveal a flesh-colored bikini top with Jett Jordan’s car number 25 positioned at the nipple ends of the fabric.

“That’s Hollywood,” Robert said. “Those kids never saw me drive a lap.”

“How you feel about that?”

“How do I feel about that? What, are you auditioning for *Dr. Phil*?”

“Sorry,” Miles said. “I’ve never been this close to a real live movie hero before.”

“Go to hell.”

Miles took a sharper-than-needed turn through the chain-link gates that parceled the garage area of the infield off from the masses. But the partition didn’t lessen the congestion. If anything, the prerace garage area had more people per square foot than the campground. Thousands of sponsors, corporate guests, media members, and fans who were willing to pay a premium for “pit passes” pushed, pulled, and elbowed their way through the two-acre garage area like Christmas shoppers at Wal-Mart. Miles blew the horn on the cart and kept his foot on the accelerator. Garage road rules: if you’re in an official vehicle and you blow your horn, you have the right-of-way. Of course, racecars don’t have horns, so the teams who actually work in the garages have different rules, as Miles and Robert discovered when Mudfish Dupree’s over-the-wall crew pushed the Browning 55 Ford onto the asphalt right in front of Miles’s golf cart. Tires screeched as Miles locked up the E-Z-Go. Robert put a foot on the dash and dug his fingernails into the upholstery.

After a second of watching the crew maneuver the Ford into the tech inspection line, Miles brought up the subject he’d been meaning to get to all morning. “So,” he said to Robert, “you think you can go down to Mississippi and check out that little situation for us?”

Robert expelled a noisy sigh and looked up at the filling grandstands. Then he said, “Miles, I’ve got a lot of cases I’m working on right now. I don’t have time to go to Michael’s baseball games, much less—”

“I know, I know,” Miles said. “And I wouldn’t want to



create an ‘impression of impropriety,’ you being a friend and all. But if it didn’t interfere with anything, you wouldn’t have a problem checking out that problem for us, would you?”

“If I checked anything out, it would be for the Justice Department,” Robert said. “They pay my salary these days.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to jeopardize your salary,” Miles said.

Robert hid his smile by turning toward the Browning team’s garage. Money was not one of Redball’s problems. He had made a mint as a driver before retiring to go to law school. He’d taken a job as a North Carolina prosecutor to fulfill a promise he’d made to his mother, and a few years later he was elected state attorney in a landslide. A few years after that the President and attorney general asked him to become a federal prosecutor. Every penny of the salary he now earned as chief prosecutor of the Sixth District of the United States went to the Robert Redding Foundation, a nonprofit he and his wife Melissa had set up to help hearing-impaired children.

Miles Hinton knew this. Miles also knew that Robert’s U.S. Department of Justice paycheck wouldn’t cover the taxes on his mansion in Charlotte, much less the upkeep on the condo in Park City and cottage on St. Croix. The jeopardize-your-salary comment was Miles’s way of telling Robert not to try that above-my-pay-grade, poor-civil-servant bullshit on his old friends.

“Okay,” Robert said, “I’ll find out what I can, but I don’t know what good it’ll do. Some kook blew himself up trying to sabotage a bridge. I’m just a lawyer. The Bureau and Homeland Security are all over it.”

“Yeah, well, we’ve committed eighty million dollars to one end of that bridge, and we break ground on Tuesday. If a bird takes a dump on the pilings, I want to know about it.”

“Send somebody down,” Robert said. “The FBI will be very helpful. Field agents can tell you everything you want to know.”

Miles had plenty of people on the scene, and Robert knew it. Roger English, Jr., heir to Street Track and Oval Course Championship Auto Racing (STOCKCAR) and majority shareholder in Speedway Properties, Inc., had perfected the art of PR rapid response. Anybody who knew the English family knew that Roger had had a team of investigators, lawyers, and well-groomed and literate spokespeople in Biloxi before the full complement of Lichwick body parts washed ashore. STOCKCAR had a lot of money invested in developing Dabearer Island, the land-mass that was to be connected to mainland Mississippi by the *Pointe aux Chenes* Bridge. No way would the most powerful people in American auto racing allow local press to run willy-nilly through the Delta without a guiding hand. Roger English and his trusty chief executive, Miles Hinton, were all over this potential PR brushfire.

“So, you’ll make some calls?” Miles asked.

Robert slumped in the seat. “I’ll do what I can.”

The Browning crew pushed the car out of the way and Miles gunned the golf cart toward a low-rise block building between the garages and victory lane. Robert held on to the seat until his knuckles cramped.

Another gaggle of fans, twenty or so being escorted through the garage area by a well-dressed tour guide holding a sign announcing them as being with Nationwide Insurance, yelled greetings to Redball as they rolled past a couple of security checkpoints. Miles blew the horn and kept the cart moving at full speed.

Several drivers jumped as Miles locked the brakes and slid the cart to a stop outside the brick building.

“You suck as a passenger,” Miles said to Robert.

“Is it that obvious?”

“Oh no, everybody digs fingernails into the upholstery when I drive.”

Robert stayed seated in case Miles, who had lost a lot of weight but still tipped the scales at more than two hundred fifty pounds, needed a push. The big guy tugged the steering wheel and rocked back and forth to gain momentum. One big heave later, Miles hoisted his frame upright. Only then did Robert take his foot off the dash.

Before he could get out of the cart, a hand landed on Robert's shoulder, and he almost jumped off the seat.

“Damn, Redball, jumpy this morning?”

Robert turned and looked into the smirking freckled face of Junior Senior, Jr., STOCKCAR's most popular driver. Junior wore a black golf shirt, jeans, and Oakley's most expensive sunglasses. The cap covering his red hair advertised 20th Century Fox's latest release, *Hot Laps: A True Story*.

Robert stood, shook Junior's hand, and pointed to the hat. “You selling movie tickets now?” he asked.

“It's a one-race deal.”

Junior's primary sponsor, Jack Daniel's Distillery, had been more than happy to relinquish their rights to the hood of the number 7 Chevrolet this Sunday. It had only cost Fox a million in product placement and promotional tie-ins.

“I'm a one-race deal, too,” Robert said, only he was a little cheaper.

Junior grinned, showing off the newly whitened caps on his incisors. “Would you be here if it wasn't for the movie?”

“Not likely,” Robert said.

*Hot Laps* was exceeding all the analysts' expectations in part because it was a family movie about duty, loyalty, and commitments to right and wrong, exactly the kind of vagaries that qualified it for foreign film status in Hollywood. The film chronicled the real-life crime-fighting exploits of Junior Senior, Jr., and Robert “Redball” Redding.

The “true” part in the title was what movie folks liked to call a “reimagining,” which meant that most of the movie was bullshit. While serving as a prosecutor in North Carolina, Robert had, indeed, fallen face first into a case involving car thieves, money laundering, murder, mayhem, and the Seniors, auto racing’s most famous family. It was also true that the case had turned on pure dumb luck, and the fact that the bad guys had the combined IQ of a gopher.

That hadn’t slowed Hollywood. Dennis Quaid played Robert as a savant superstar of the speedway and the courtroom, while Jude Law portrayed Junior as an emotionally deep hero who overcomes self-doubt and psychological scarring after his famous racing father’s untimely death. On film, Junior Senior, Jr., a brooding hunk with a heart of gold, puts self-interest aside and leads the charge to defeat the villains. In reality, Junior’s role had been minor. His family had been involved in some shenanigans, and Junior had cooperated with investigators. The fact that Junior had insisted on script approval before dropping two dozen lawsuits did more to change the dynamics of the film than any Hollywood creative licensing.

Truth be damned, the movie was a hit. Junior was a star. And Robert Redding got to spend a Sunday afternoon in Pell City, Alabama, waving to scantily clad fans and watching waves of heat rise off a two-mile oval racetrack.

Miles breathed heavily as he waddled over and shook Junior’s hand. Driving a golf cart had winded Big Miles.

“You guys ready?” Miles asked in a way that didn’t require an answer.

Junior nodded and led the way. A couple of sawhorses had been erected as a barricade outside the building, and a pimple-faced Pinkerton guard kept gawkers at bay. Forty-three drivers filed through the door of the building. Mudfish Dupree and his crew chief, Limp Dorsey, arrived in a

zebra-striped golf cart with oversized off-road tires. Tony Swagger, the least popular driver on the circuit, snuck in a back door by himself. Piston Stackheus, one of the “young guns” on the stockcar scene, shared a joke with veteran driver Bo Pickett as they walked inside. None of the drivers wore race suits—it was way too early in the day for that—but all had similar outfits: Wrangler jeans, oxford broadcloth shirts, caps, and dark glasses, the unofficial uniform of the prerace driver.

Robert veered away from the crowd and trotted toward the men’s room at the rear of the building. Miles’s driving had, literally, scared the pee out of him.

Robert could hear a Jimmy Buffett guitar riff coming from a large stage near the victory lane. This was ABC’s first televised race of the year, and they had booked Buffett to lead the telecast. The green flag was two hours away, but Jimmy always gave the Parrotheads their money’s worth. The crowd went into heebie-jeebies when Jimmy cleared his throat and said, “How’s everybody doing?”

Robert found himself tapping his toe and humming the tune to “License to Chill” as he sidled up to the metal urinal.

“Too much coffee?” a voice said from near the door.

Robert glanced over in time to see Jett Jordan unzip his fly. He looked away before Jett unsheathed Veronica’s tether. “Yeah,” Robert said in answer to Jett’s question. “You had a good morning?”

“Had a woman break down in sobs when I signed her hat at a breakfast meet-and-greet.”

“Is that a first?”

“Like this it was,” Jett said. “I’ve had a few tear up, but this gal went Tammy Faye Bakker on us. They had to sit her down and put a paper bag over her mouth.”

“You charmer, you.”

"Speaking of charmers, I saw your daughter this morning. You threatened any teenage boys yet?"

"One a week," Robert said.

Robert's daughter, Katie Redding, age fifteen, had blossomed into a nubile young woman, and every hormone-raging high school stud had noticed. His little girl was now the star tutor for every football player struggling with sophomore trig, even though Katie was a stone-deaf lip-reader. Robert showed off his concealed firearm permit and pointed out to every boy who showed up these days the room in his house where he'd killed a man. This had chilled an already frosty relationship between Robert and his daughter.

"Did my family fill you in on their morning plans?" Robert asked Jett as both men finished their business.

"Melissa said she'd see me at the Outreach service. I assume she'll see you there, too."

Robert hoped Melissa was hurrying. The thought of Penis Viking and his ilk ogling his wife and daughter made him pine for the high school boys who chased Katie through the halls of Davidson Christian Academy. He thanked Jett and nodded to the guard on his way out. Then Robert slipped into the back of the main room and found a vacant spot near the corner. Jett came in a second later and slid into an empty folding chair in the second row next to his teammate, Bobby Camber.

Bobby was the current point leader in the race for the Salem Cup Championship. Jett nipped at his bumper, standing only thirty points behind, a scenario that had the racing world abuzz with speculation. Jett owned half of Bobby's car and half of his own. Don Healey, the current king of stockcar owners, owned the other halves. None of the drivers had asked Bobby how he planned to race the guy who owned his car down the stretch, but the question hovered like an exhaust cloud over every track. This was

the first time in stockcar history that a driver and his owner had fought for the championship. Would they drive as teammates? Would Bobby yield to the guy who signed his paychecks? What would happen if they were neck-and-neck in the final race of the year? Internet chat rooms and A.M. radio talk shows buzzed with speculation.

Miles called the weekly prerace drivers' meeting to order. A slew of fans crowded the small area behind the seats, thrilled by the prospect of watching their favorite stockcar driver pick his nose and fidget in an uncomfortable folding chair while listening to Miles give prerace instructions for the umpteenth time.

"You been here long?" a familiar voice said from behind.

Robert turned, smiled, and put his arm around his wife, Melissa Redding. "Just got here," he said.

The kids weren't far behind. Don Healey, the kingpin car owner who had once taken a chance on a young upstart driver named Robert Redding, walked in with his hand on young Michael Redding's shoulder. Two steps behind Don, Katie Redding slinked in, rolling her eyes and cocking her hip to convey her utter boredom. Everything bored Katie these days. School, home, the television shows they watched, the trips they took; even the Caribbean left her stupefied. Her best friends from a year ago had become "insufferable goobers," and she hated her parents' tastes in food, music, literature, clothing, art, architecture, hair-style, and acquaintances. She even hated her name, insisting she be called Katherine, or Katerina, or Monique, anything but Katie.

"How's Miss Attitude?" Robert asked his wife.

"I heard that," Katie signed to her father.

"She's okay," Melissa said.

"I'm bored out of my skull," Katie signed. "And I'm starving."

"You didn't eat?" Robert signed. Communicating with the deaf was easy in settings like this.

The room fell silent just in time for everyone to hear Jimmy belt out the chorus of "Cheeseburger in Paradise." Miles ignored the music, cleared his throat, and launched into his speech about the speed limit on the pit road and the penalties for gaining advantage below the line. Junior yawned and stretched. Mudfish was the first to insert a finger in a nostril.

"No, I didn't eat," Katie signed. "All they had was ham. Ham in the eggs; ham in the grits; ham in the biscuits; they even cooked ham in the muffins. Welcome to Alabama."

A year ago, Katie would have scoffed down a plateful of pork. Now Katherine-Monique was a vegetarian.

"I hope you were polite," Robert signed.

"Duh. What, do you think I'm an ogre?"

"I expect you to be a gracious guest."

"Whatever."

"Would you two cut it out?" Melissa whispered as her elbow connected with Robert's abdomen.

"You may not gain position anytime the track is under caution," Miles continued by rote. "If the track goes yellow in the final ten laps, officials will determine if there is enough time to clear the problem and resume green-flag racing. If not, we will extend the race by a number of laps necessary for . . ."

The words faded into the back of Robert's noggin. Little about these meetings had changed in the fifteen years since he'd hung up his helmet and moved on with the next phase of his life. Hearing the words and seeing the boredom on the drivers' faces made it seem like yesterday. But the changes in his daughter reminded him how long it had been. Katie had been a grainy Rorschach test on an ultrasound monitor when Robert decided to give up racing. Now she bought C-cup bras online and begged Robert and



Melissa to let her get her navel pierced. And to think he'd worried about deafness hindering her development.

A rustle in the back of the room snapped Robert out of his daze. He followed the fans' eyes to the opposite corner, where he was stunned to see Alabama's senior U.S. senator, Howell Shelwank, pressing hands and blowing kisses to select constituents. Robert had met Shelwank a couple of times, not counting those silly committee hearings where everybody talked into microphones in a room smaller than Robert and Melissa's kitchen. The gentleman from Alabama had called him Redball and asked him a couple of racing questions in their private meetings. He'd also made some mind-numbing stump speech on congressional oversight of the Justice Department during the hearings.

Shelwank had the perfect background for Washington. He'd been a radio talk show host in Montgomery when his predecessor, a land baron named Oley McDonald, was caught naked in Takoma Park, Maryland, with a couple of hefty handcuffed coeds, both of whom happened to be named Patty. Shelwank, thrice divorced himself for deviances still under seal, used his hundred-thousand-watt pulpit to demand a clean sweep in the next election. The on-air line he uttered for a month was, "McDonald had two obese Patties, and who knows how much special sauce." He also mocked McDonald with a parody of the president pro tem of the senate recognizing "the gentleman from Ala-wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am-a."

When callers to Shelwank's program challenged the host to run for McDonald's seat, the talk-master took up the charge, even though most of the calls for his candidacy were made in jest—"If you're so god-*bleep* smart, why don't you run?" Three terms later, Shelwank chaired the Regulatory Oversight Committee and served loud and proud on the Homeland Security and Senate Intelligence Committees. He appeared on cable news no fewer than

three times a week, and had the mobile numbers of the Sunday talk-show hosts on speed dial.

“What’s he doing here?” Melissa whispered.

Robert shrugged. “Trolling for votes, I guess.”

Shelwank’s presence and the potential disruption it might cause prompted Miles to wrap up the meeting with an “Any questions, good,” salute. He wisely sat down and turned the podium over to Barney Hart, the founder and pastor of stockcar Outreach.

Barney had been preaching to drivers, wives, crew chiefs, and a few semi-sober fans for twenty years, a Sunday morning praise-the-Lord ritual that had become as much a part of Stockcar Nation as twenty-ounce beers and earplugs. Three years ago, Barney’s congregational numbers began to dwindle as drivers opted out of worship for a little quiet time before risking their lives at a hundred eighty miles an hour. Miles had taken care of this problem by seamlessly segueing the Outreach service into the mandatory drivers’ meeting. No heathen would dare hop up from his chair once Barney put his hands on the lectern and said, “Let’s open with prayer.” Even Faduki Yamata, a second-year driver from Okinawa and devout Buddhist, stayed planted in his seat every Sunday.

“God bless you, Miles,” Barney said as he took his spot. “And God bless all of you on this beautiful day the Lord hath made.”

Robert never understood why preachers used King James diction on Sundays. He’d never heard Barney say, “Passest thou the ketchup” at the lunch counter, but when he stood in front of his sheep, the good reverend never failed to whip out a “Lord hath made,” or a “blessed thou art.”

“It’s good to see all of you, and it’s great to have an old friend and a lover of the Lord worshipping with us today. Everybody please join me in welcoming Robert Redding back to our services.”

Barney led the applause, and everyone joined in. All the drivers turned in their seats to see Robert, who nodded and gave a quick shoulder-high wave. Jett didn't try to hide his chuckle.

"And his wife Melissa," Barney said, clapping even harder when he realized he'd forgotten to acknowledge Mrs. Redding. "And . . . no, it can't be. Is that Katie Redding and Michael?" The applause intensified. "My, oh my, I can't believe how you've grown up before our eyes."

"HMMMMMM."

Robert cut his eyes at his daughter. Katie couldn't hear herself groan, but that was no excuse.

Barney put on a painted preacher smile and gave an exaggerated it's-hard-to-believe shake of his head. "I can't speak for anybody else," he said, "but Robert, I believe you're doing the Lord's work. Keep it up."

Polite applause, golf claps, as Robert waved and said, "Thank you." Would this never end?

"Now I'd like to recognize another distinguished guest we have with us today, by asking Alabama Senator Howell Shelwank to lead us in our opening prayer."

Not only did no one clap as Shelwank marched forward, Robert heard someone in the back row say, "Oh, for fuck's sake."

The good senator pressed no fewer than ten palms in six paces. When he finally reached the podium he greeted Barney with a full-fledged man hug that lasted a couple of seconds longer than everyone's comfort level.

"Thank you, Barney," Shelwank said as he snatched the microphone like a bum going for a turkey leg. "It's a surprise and an honor to be before you this morning. Since I'm here, I want to welcome the world's greatest racers to the greatest state in the greatest nation in the history of the world . . ."

Robert tuned out after that. Shelwank prattled on for

another five minutes before asking everyone to bow with him in prayer. Then he asked God to right the listing ship of American morality and give courage to those who spoke out for all things right and virtuous in this great land. He prayed for tax cuts, a flag-burning amendment, and victory in the next election cycle. When Robert snuck a peek at the drivers, he saw Junior mouth the question on everyone's mind: "What the hell is he doing?"

Right before the obligatory "in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ we pray," Shelwank threw in an "Oh, and please see to the safety of these brave drivers." Then he paused, hoping to create the kind of ecumenical tension that opened donors' pocketbooks. Unfortunately, Jimmy and the Coral Reefers picked that moment to lead thousands of fans in a chorus of "*Why don't we get drunk and screw.*" Shelwank couldn't get the "Amen" out fast enough.

An hour later, Robert sat behind a pressboard desk on a scaffolding platform. He held an ABC microphone and was answering such inane questions as, "How does it feel to be back at the track?" He lied about how thrilled he was to be back in Alabama, and claimed not to miss being behind the wheel.

"I watch the talented Salem Cup drivers today, and I'm glad I don't have to trade paint with them," he heard himself saying.

Another couple of questions on the standings, and some general observations about downforce races like this one, and Robert felt like throwing the mike into the crowd and diving off the ledge. Terry "The Cannon" Gannon wrapped the session by saying, "Redball Redding, thanks for spending some time with us."

To which Robert said, "My pleasure, Terry, thank you," without much enthusiasm.

“Well, it looks like we’ve got company,” Gannon said in the kind of apprehensive voice one used when crazy cousins showed up at the door.

Robert turned in time to see Senator Shelwank crest the last step on the scaffolding and slip into a chair beside him.

“It’s Senator Howell Shelwank,” Gannon said. “What a surprise.”

Robert saw the producer shrug his shoulders and shake his head. Shelwank was not part of the prerace script.

“Great to be here, Terry. It’s a great day here in the great and blessed state of Alabama. Just great.”

“Well, that’s—” Gannon caught himself before adding another *great* to the mix. “This is a refreshing change from Washington, I guess.” Gannon cut a glance at the producer.

“Oh, it’s not too different, actually. We dent a lot of fenders on the Senate floor, too.” Shelwank slapped Robert on the back and laughed too loud.

The producer twirled a finger. Time to wrap it up.

“Well, thanks for joining us, today, Senator. Now let’s go back to—”

“Thank you, Terry. And a special thanks to the stockcar fans who support our attempts to rescue America from moral turpitude.”

Gannon cocked his head and stared at the senator like the RCA dog looking into the Victrola. A couple of seconds later, the producer whispered, “Terry!” and Gannon said, “Let’s go down to Jason Priestly on pit road.”

Shelwank put down his mike and was off the platform without so much as a goodbye. He cornered Robert at the bottom of the stairs, blocking the path back to Miles’s golf cart. “Redball, I have a word?”

No wasn’t an option, so Robert put his hands in his pockets and waited.

Shelwank moved within inches of Robert's face and said, "I know you've heard about what happened in Mississippi the other night with that crazy echo-terrorist."

"Echo-terrorist?"

"Crazy sumbitch had enough C-4 to take down a whole goddamn building."

"Yeah, I read something about that."

"Well, I would view it as a personal favor if you'd head down there and check things out."

"The echo-terrorists."

"I need you down there."

"Why? The Bureau's all over this. They don't need me."

"But I need you," Shelwank said. He put his hands on Robert's shoulders and leaned in until their foreheads almost touched. "This is exactly the kind of incident we need to aggressively combat. Your buddies here are breaking ground in Mississippi on Tuesday. We can't let these wackos get away with shit like this."

"They haven't," Robert said. "The wacko in question blew himself up."

"I need somebody like you down there."

"Somebody like me."

"Somebody high-profile."

"You mean somebody who has a movie out about him."

"Somebody the public trusts."

"Trusts," Robert said, shaking his head.

"We have to send a tough message to those who threaten the peace."

"Threaten the peace."

"We can't have nutjob echo-terrorists trying to blow up bridges."

"Technically, it was a piling. The bridge isn't open yet."

"Goddammit, Redball, do you know what I'm saying?"

Robert raised his hands. "I hear you, Senator, and I

agree. They can't get away with it. That's why the FBI is there."

"And why I want you to assist them in their investigation." Shelwank's grip on Robert's shoulders tightened. "I know I can count on you."

Further argument was futile. Robert was headed to Biloxi.

The cart ride to the victory podium was testy. Miles asked Robert what the powwow with Shelwank had been about, and Robert said, "Like you don't know." Miles let it go, and they listened to Jimmy Buffett sing Hank Williams the rest of the short trip. "*Hey, good lookin', what you got cookin'.*"

Melissa met them in front of the black-and-white-checked backdrop at the top of the victory podium. "What's wrong?" she said when she saw Robert's face.

"Looks like I'm going to Mississippi."

"Mississippi?"

"Don't ask."

They stood at attention and bowed their heads as Reverend Hal Palsy of Pell City United Methodist Church gave the invocation, and the choir from the Alabama Boy's Ranch sang the National Anthem. That was followed by an F-18 flyby. Only then did Robert's reason for being there roll round.

The clipped voice of stockcar announcer Dirk Manley boomed over the public address system. "And now, for the most famous words in motorsports, please give an Alabama Motor Speedway welcome to racing legend Robert 'Redball' Redding!"

The crowd erupted in cheers.

Robert grabbed a mike from a track official standing below him. "Gentlemen," he said, "start . . . your . . . engines!"

## Chapter 3

---

Twenty-six hours later, on Monday afternoon, Robert set the cruise control at eighty as he steered a rented Toyota west on I-10 toward Biloxi. Any fantasies he'd entertained about opting out of this trip had been dashed late Sunday night when he saw three phone messages and two e-mails from Washington. Roger English and Miles Hinton had worked the system beautifully. A few strategic calls, a little confab with Senator Shelwank, and, *voilà*, all of Robert's pressing cases disappeared. He was to drop everything, assemble a team—"small but effective," his boss had said—and head down to Mississippi to assist the FBI in their ongoing investigation. The deputy attorney general's exact words had been, "Nobody understands the dynamics of this thing better than you."

Robert had no idea what that meant. He considered the trip a monumental waste of time—almost as big a waste as Robert driving the car. A foot-thick file awaited his perusal, and the cushy backseat would have been perfect. Plus, he had two very capable passengers with valid North Carolina driver's licenses who could keep a rental car on the right side of the road. But Miles had been right: Robert sucked as a passenger no matter who was behind the wheel. Jett Jordan called Robert "an old grandmother"



when it came to backseat driving, and Don Healey had come close to slapping him when they went for a spin in Don's new Cooper. Don had labeled him "the best left-seat driver, and worst right-seat driver I've ever known." Melissa called it his "control thing," a source of familial tension that had led to more than a few curt exchanges. When Melissa had finally had enough, she pulled the family minivan onto the shoulder of Harris Boulevard during Charlotte rush hour and announced that she had "driven her last mile" with him in the car. The subsequent trip to the cineplex hadn't been as family-friendly as Robert would have liked. He rationalized his behavior in many ways. Chivalry dictated that a husband, father, and retired racecar champion pay and drive everywhere they went. Melissa called this argument "asinine." He'd also proffered the notion that his racing reflexes made his passengers safer. When he tried that one on his sister, she'd said, "You don't actually say that out loud, do you?"

He'd said those exact words to his two passengers, his "small but effective team," assistant prosecutor Ty Johnson and chief federal court investigator John Paul Westport. Now Robert found himself piloting a lime-green Toyota along the rutty stretch of interstate between the Mobile airport and the Montgomery House Bed and Breakfast in Biloxi. Ty Johnson sat shotgun reading from a stack of printouts. John Paul Westport stretched his legs across the backseats and read road signs.

"Did that say *Pecan, Mississippi*?" John Paul said as they passed the Highway 63 exit.

Ty, who had been Robert's right hand in the North Carolina prosecutor's office before moving with him to the Feds, looked up from a printout and said, "That's the garden spot of the state. You mean you've never been to Pecan?"

"I've never been to Mississippi."

"You and your Upper West Side buddies never made a

pilgrimage? Save the southern black man, register the vote, none of that?"

"I'm thirty," John Paul said.

"Have you been to Mississippi?" Robert asked Ty.

"That's beside the point."

"You mean you've never been here?" John Paul said.

"Not the point."

"You're giving me grief about the black vote, and you've never been here?"

"Not the point."

"What is the point?"

"The point is, as an African-American male, I have an inalienable kinship down here."

"Kinship."

"Damn straight."

"Like cousins or something."

"We're all brothers in the movement, Agent Westport."

"You wouldn't be half as black if you weren't so full of shit."

Robert let them go at it for several more minutes. They were more entertaining than anything on Gulf Coast radio.

John Paul Westport had been by Robert's side since he'd joined the Justice Department. A strapping New Yorker who had insisted on being called John Paul when he played quarterback on an 0-11 team at Columbia, Westport was now lucky if anybody called him John. Robert had nicknamed him Johnny Pea, and the name swept through the Charlotte legal community like a sexually transmitted disease. Since moving to the Sixth Circuit, John Paul had introduced himself as J. P. Westport. So far the new name had stuck.

Ty Johnson was the only African-American lawyer in North Carolina with two shotguns racked in the rear window of his Ford F-150 double-cab. Tall, strong, and Will

Smith handsome, Ty knew the words to every Rodney Crowell song, took vacation on opening day of deer season, wore cowboy boots to court, and kept the office supplied with grilled venison and fresh trout. According to office gossip he could play a mean guitar and banjo, and could belt out bluegrass lyrics in a smooth baritone voice after a couple of rounds with Jim Beam. Ty was also the sharpest assistant prosecutor in the office, which was why Robert put him on this team, and why he put up with the never-ending trash talk between Ty and J. P. Westport.

"Here you go, Johnny Pea," Ty said as he threw a file folder over the seat. "See what you can learn about this fine state between here and the hotel."

"It's not a hotel," Robert said.

"Tell me again why we're staying in a bed and breakfast in a town with five thousand hotel rooms," Ty said.

"After the hurricanes, the only hotels with roofs on them have casinos in the lobby," Robert said. "If our boss wants the statue of justice to cover her breasts, imagine how he'd feel about a casino showing up on an expense report."

"So we're staying at Mama Montgomery's."

"The Montgomery House," Johnny Pea said, reading from a page in his file. "Says here it's the former home of Confederate General Rastus Montgomery, who died in 1880. Seems the general passed on without any heirs because he blew his balls off during the war."

"It does not say that." Ty reached over the seat and grabbed the page. He read for a second and said, "Well, I'll be damned."

"You think I'd lie about a man shooting himself in the sack?"

"Yes."

"Well, not this time, brother."

"I'm not your brother."

"Just warming you up for that kinship thing."

“Fuck you.”

“The assistant director of the New Orleans Field Office rented the whole house,” Robert said. “It’s close to the scene and the town’s forensics lab, such that it is. No distractions.”

Johnny Pea leaned forward and took his page back. He read a few more lines before saying, “The current owner is . . . you’re not going to believe this . . . it says the current owner of Montgomery House Bed and Breakfast is ‘the widow Constance Saltini.’ When was the last time you heard anyone called ‘the widow’?”

“My aunt Betty calls her neighbor ‘the widow Reeves,’” Ty said.

“To her face?”

“They haven’t spoken in ten years. Something about pruning hedges and poisoning cats; I’ve never gotten into it.”

Johnny Pea flipped through a few more pages and said, “It seems that in addition to a half a million square feet of gambling, a hundred restaurants, a dozen golf courses, and a nightclub called Wild Coyotes, Biloxi is the home of the Jefferson Davis Presidential Library.”

“I can’t wait,” Ty said.

“Yeah, it’s old Jeff’s retirement home, library, museum, and the tomb of the unknown Confederate soldier. You’ll have to pay your respects.”

“Right after you table-dance at that coyote bar.”

Robert felt compelled to step in. They were fifteen minutes from the widow Saltini’s Montgomery House. A little update on the case might be helpful. “What’s in there about the explosion?” he asked.

Johnny Pea thumbed through a few more pages. “Here we go,” he said. “Bureau report’s pretty sketchy. Guy’s name was Stanford Lichwick, your garden-variety environmental nitwit. Inherited a half mil at age twenty-one

from his grandfather, who owned a couple of apartment buildings. Moved to Portland . . .”

“Figures,” Ty said.

Johnny Pea flipped the page. “Looks like Lichwick kept himself busy. Member of Greenpeace, PETA, Earth First, Oregonians Against Global Warming . . .”

“Wonder how many Oregonians are for global warming?” Ty said.

“And, the kicker: he was a charter officer of the Planetary Liberation Front.”

“The arsonists?” Robert asked.

“That’s them,” Johnny Pea said, still reading. “Report says Lichwick was the lead candidate in some SUV torchings in Eugene.”

“Looks like he upgraded,” Ty said. “But I still don’t understand why the Bureau needs us. I don’t know jack about C-4. You know anything about this planet warming front?”

“Not a thing,” Robert said. “But I know what Lichwick was trying to blow up, and why. That’s why we’re here.”

They drove another tenth of a mile before Ty said, “So, are you going to share, or do we play *To Tell the Truth*? Johnny Pea has to be Kitty Carlisle this time.”

“Kitty who?” Johnny Pea said.

“I’ll tell you if you promise to shut up until we get there,” Robert said.

“You got it,” Ty said.

“No problem,” Johnny Pea said, “I’m saving my voice for the hog calls at Jeff Davis’s place.”

“That should get you a date,” Ty said.

Robert gave them the Cliff’s Notes version. It all started during the recession of the eighties when Mississippi set a new low for per-capita income, standardized high school test scores, and overall quality of life. The state ranked fiftieth in the nation in employment, tax revenues, capital

investment, and tourism. Even Arkansas attracted more visitors.

The final straw broke when the AP compared Mississippi to Bangladesh. After that, Mississippians put aside their Southern Baptist tenets and followed the lead of that Xanadu of civic reclamation, Atlantic City, New Jersey. Casino gambling passed in a landslide. A couple of months later, developers from Nevada and New York gobbled up most of the state's shoreline.

"For a while it was an unqualified success," Robert said. "Gambling attracted more visitors to Biloxi in one year than the state had drawn in the previous decade. A region whose main attraction had been the International Checkers Hall of Fame found itself generating more revenue from tourism and gaming than any other industry in the state. During one fiscal year casino tax revenues topped a billion dollars, which made sense: Biloxi was a day's drive from Memphis, Atlanta, New Orleans, Tallahassee, and Little Rock. Residents began to think of their town as the Vegas of the South.

"That was before the Indians."

"Indians?" Ty said.

"Indians," Robert repeated.

"Tonto Indians or outsourced-phone-bank Indians?" Johnny Pea asked.

"You should fit in fine down here," Ty said.

"Native Americans," Robert said. "For about a thousand years before the first European canoed down from Canada, the Natchez farmed and hunted in this area. Then the French shot them or infected them with smallpox. The ones who survived got shipped to Appalachia. Kind of ironic that Indian gaming houses now siphon cash out of the state."

"Revenge of the Natchez," Ty said.

"Not exclusively. The Cherokees partnered with

Harrah's in North Carolina. The Choctaw opened a two-thousand-room casino hotel with two golf courses and a water park in Alabama. Seminoles have an oceanfront casino in Florida. Then the hurricanes hit, blew the hotels to kingdom come, and tourism dropped seventy percent. It all spelled disaster for Mississippi. Why drive to storm-ravaged Biloxi when you can get your poker fix at the local reservation? Throw in the offshore Internet sites . . ."

"Okay, not as many people drive through Pecan on their way to the Wild Coyotes nightclub," Ty said. "What does that have to do with Stanford Limpdick blowing himself organic?"

"The bridge he was trying to blow up is going to connect the mainland to Dabearer Island."

"Da-what?"

"It's a barrier island right out there." Robert pointed to his left and Ty and Johnny Pea looked out the window at a pulpwood farm.

"You can't see it from here. It's two miles offshore."

"So?"

"So, the island is six miles long, three miles wide, and has some of the whitest natural beaches in the world, completely undisturbed."

"Limpdick wanted it to stay that way?"

"Environmental groups have been trying to stop the bridge since it started, without much success. The bridge is the largest public works projects in the history of the state. Fed funding alone is expected to top a quarter billion."

"I'm sure taxpayers in Wyoming are thrilled about that."

"If they know about it," Robert said. "Senator Shelwank from Alabama attached funding for the bridge to a mid-night Medicare appropriations bill. Anybody who voted against it would be voting against Medicare."

"Passed overwhelmingly, did it?"

“Ninety-eight to zero.”

Johnny Pea stretched out in the backseat and propped his elbow on the windowsill. “What does all that have to do with Tonto?”

“Tonto’s ass,” Ty said. “What does it have to do with us?”

“I thought you were going to shut up so I could tell this story.”

“Sorry.”

“Normally, a bridge appropriations bill takes years to get approved. This one sailed through in months with six cosigners, because of what’s going to be built on Da-bearer.”

“Another casino?” Johnny Pea asked.

“Half a million square feet of gambling, twenty-five hundred hotel rooms, fifty-four holes of golf, seven hundred condos, a three-hundred-acre duck-hunting preserve, and a two-and-a-half-mile, four-hundred-thousand-seat super speedway.”

“A racetrack?”

“The biggest in the world.”

“Is it part of the casino?”

“Turn four suites will connect to the hotel through the world’s largest racing museum,” Robert said.

“And the people responsible for this undertaking?” Ty asked.

“Roger English is in for eighty million. Five drivers, including Jett Jordan, are in for another ten.”

“Well, at least politics aren’t in play.”

“This should be a quick trip,” Robert said.

They rode in silence for five more minutes. Then Johnny Pea began to snore.

Montgomery House Bed and Breakfast turned out to be the best surprise of the day. The two-story Greek Revival



mansion looked like something out of *Architectural Digest* or *Gone With the Wind*. Marble steps led to a wide porch that had been painted an inviting shade of peach. White rocking chairs tottered in the breeze. Anyone sitting in those rockers would be treated to a breathtaking view across a perfectly manicured lawn to the Gulf of Mexico. Three Latino men were trimming boxwoods near the walkway while a fourth pruned a few wayward branches from an otherwise symmetrical magnolia.

"The Bureau finally did something right," Ty said as he stood at the foot of the stairs and gazed at the ocean.

"Reminds me of the Seven Gables Inn in Monterey," Johnny Pea said.

"Are you a pretentious prick by nature, or do you have to work at it?"

"What?"

Ty turned his back and headed up the stairs. Robert followed.

"What did I say?"

Before Robert could ring the doorbell, a voice from the side of the house said, "May I help you?"

Johnny Pea saw her first. She had black hair, light brown hypnotic eyes, and just the right number of freckles around a thin nose. Her spaghetti-strap sundress showed off tanned, toned shoulders and a perky, well-proportioned chest. She wore gloves and held pruning shears in a way that suggested she knew her way around a garden. Johnny Pea opened his mouth, but for the first time since they'd landed, not a single word would come out.

"I'm Robert Redding." Robert stepped forward and extended his hand, realizing too late that the woman had to put down the shears and take off her gloves to greet him.

"Nice to meet you," she said. "I'm Constance Saltini."

"You're the widow Saltini?" Johnny Pea said.

The woman smiled and pushed the hair off her high,

glistening forehead. "Somebody's been reading the Internet."

"Please excuse him," Ty said. "His mother visited Cherenobyl while she was pregnant."

"And you are?"

"Ty Johnson," Ty said, shaking the widow Saltini's hand.

"Then you must be Mr. Westport," she said, turning her big browns to Johnny Pea.

"Yes, J. P. Westport," he said, taking her right hand in both of his. "A pleasure meeting you. I apologize for the . . . well . . . I was just . . . Anyway, this is a beautiful place you have here."

"Thank you. If you'd like, I'll show you to your rooms."

"That would be great," Robert said.

The widow Saltini led the way through the oversized antique door.

"Stupid is as stupid does, Forrest," Ty said to Johnny Pea.

"Shut up."

Their rooms were at the back of the second floor with views of State Route 90 instead of the ocean. Nobody complained. They weren't here for the scenery, although Johnny Pea had trouble taking his eyes off the widow Constance.

As they were unpacking, more footsteps and loud voices echoed up the stairs. They weren't alone. Robert leaned over the railing at the top of the stairs.

"Redding?" a voice called up.

"Up here," Robert said.

"Special Agent in Charge Peevey. Get your team down here," the voice yelled back. "We're setting up in the parlor in five minutes."

Ty came out of his room and shouted, "Nice to meet you, too."

"You heard the man," Robert said. "Five minutes. Let's not make too many enemies on our first day."

The parlor proved easy to find. It was the big room with claw-foot couches, red floral wallpaper, and three serious-looking men reading reports and making notes. One of the men stood by the front window rapping his chin with the eraser end of a No. 2 pencil. He looked up and frowned when Robert, Ty, and Johnny Pea walked in wearing sports shirts and khakis.

"Catching a quick eighteen this afternoon?" the man asked.

"Did you make a tee time?" Robert said.

The man grunted. His eyes went back to his report. "I'm Special Agent in Charge Peevey."

"Robert Redding," Robert said, extending his hand.

Peevey never looked up. Pencil went to chin: *tap, tap, tap.*

A second man walked over and took Robert's outstretched hand. "Special Agent Matthews," he said. "It's an honor meeting you in person, Mr. Redding. I saw you race in Dallas when I was a kid."

Robert thanked Matthews. Then, as if snapping out of a coma, Peevey looked up just in time to introduce the final member of the ensemble. "This is Dr. Terrance Natterly, a forensic pathologist from New Orleans," Peevey said. "Dr. Natterly has just come up with interosculating information."

"Interosculating?" Johnny Pea said.

"Connected to the case," Ty whispered.

Peevey ignored them. "Dr. Natterly," he said, turning the floor over to the doctor.

"Well . . . you see . . . we were fortunate to have such a well-preserved piece to work with. Given how long the body had been in the water, I was surprised by the lack of corruption."

"Whoa," Robert said, holding up his hands. "Sorry to come in late like this, Doctor, but what are you talking about?"

"Our exam," Natterly said while cocking his head and giving Robert a don't-you-get-it? gaze.

"You mean your examination of Lichwick's remains?" Ty said.

"Yes," Natterly said. "More specifically, the head. I was concerned about degradation, given how long it had been in the water and how many particles we found in the tissue. But the explosion cauterized the arteries at the point of separation, and the residue from the explosive agent made the tissue unappealing to native organisms."

"What?" Johnny Pea said.

"Limpdick sucked as fish food," Ty said.

Natterly cocked his head and stared.

"Don't mind them," Robert said. "What is so significant about the condition of Mr. Lichwick's head?"

"It's the key to time of death," Natterly said, shaking his head in annoyance at having to deal with such simpletons.

"I thought the time of death had already been determined," Robert said.

"Well, not really time of death, but time relative to the explosion," Natterly said.

"Relative to the explosion?"

"Yes."

"You mean Lichwick lived through the explosion?"

"Of course not. I mean he was dead *before* the explosion."

Robert looked at the agents to make sure this wasn't a joke. Their grim expressions told him that this was not a jocular bunch.

Ty put a hand on his boss's shoulder. "So much for a quick trip," he said.

## Chapter 4

---

“Okay, this guy calls in sick for work.”

Mississippi Lieutenant Governor Roy Coon pressed his index fingers into his temples and closed his eyes. Balance was a problem. So was the imaginary swelling behind his corneas, and the jackhammer in his frontal lobe.

“Are you paying attention?”

“What?” Roy said.

“This guy calls in sick for work.”

“What guy?”

“Just a guy. Anyway—”

“You’re telling a joke?”

“Yeah. You’re gonna love it.”

Roy pressed harder, rubbing in a clockwise manner in the hopes of relieving some pressure. It didn’t work.

“He’s calling any second,” Roy said.

“Yeah, yeah, this one’s short. Anyway, this guy calls in sick for work. His boss says, ‘You don’t sound sick.’ The guys says, ‘Oh yeah, I’m lying here fucking my sister in the ass. How sick is that?’”

State House Speaker Jimmy Don Locus’s laughter at his own joke sounded like the carpet-bombing of Baghdad. When all the air had escaped his lungs, Jimmy Don leaned forward with his mouth open as he slapped Roy’s antique

cherry desk. In Roy's mind, Jimmy Don's mouth grew wider and wider until it consumed his head.

Roy closed his eyes again and tried to find his crystal pond with lily pads and honeysuckle, the happy place he visited on days like this. Jimmy Don's incessant desk-slapping was like a ball-peen hammer to the base of Roy's skull. The speaker was an annoyance even on good days. Today if Roy had been able to lay his hands on a gun, the call they were expecting would have been put on hold.

"What?" Jimmy Don said. "You don't like my joke?"

"Don't be silly, Jimmy Don. I'll use it at the garden club fundraiser this weekend."

"You know, you should lighten up. And turn down your air-conditioning. You're sweating like a Memphis whore."

The last time Roy had fiddled with the air, he'd gotten the temperature down to fifty-eight degrees before two assistants with blue lips rushed in and threatened to call an ambulance. That one had cost him five grand in payoffs. He couldn't risk any more medical exams. If Jimmy Don would just give him the damn envelope everything would be fine.

"Why can't we get our business out of the way?" Roy asked a little more desperately than he would have liked.

"What's your rush, Roy? You said yourself Shelwank's calling any minute."

"Fuck Shelwank!"

"My, my, Roy. That's no way to speak about such a senior member of your party. What's that commandment you guys quote all the time: Thou shantest speaketh ill of a fellow gay-hating, Bible-thumping butt-fucker? You know, you should switch parties. You can say anything on our side of the aisle."

"Please shut up."

"Whatever you say, Roy."

"Just give me the envelope."

"Why, so you can skip and leave me to chat it up with Shelwank? Not this day, friend."

"Please, Jimmy Don."

"Oh, don't worry, Roy. It won't be long now."

Roy was about to grovel when his secretary burst through the oak door. "Governor—" she said.

Roy snapped out of his blurry-eyed trance and raised a hand to cut her off. "What do you mean, you can't support the bill!" he yelled at Jimmy Don. "All you're doing is pandering to your union cronies!"

"And you're not looking out for the working men and women of this state!" Jimmy Don snapped back.

"What is it, Bertha?" Roy asked his secretary.

"Ah, sir, Senator Shelwank's office is on the line."

"Very good. You can put the senator through."

Bertha scampered out of the office and closed the door.

When she was gone, Jimmy Don patted Roy's hand and said, "See, all you have to do is focus."

Even though he knew it was coming, the buzz of the phone made Roy Coon jump. He knocked over his miniature pewter bust of Ronald Reagan in a Stetson, the one he pointed out to every visitor as he told the story of how John B. Stetson learned hat making "right up there in Dunn's Falls, Mississippi." Roy fumbled to right the Gipper. Then he scratched the tingling nerves on the back of his neck.

"You gonna get that?" Jimmy Don asked.

"Yes, I'm gonna get it."

"Cause we've only been waiting all day for this call."

"I'm getting it."

Roy pressed the speaker button on his phone. "Senator," he shouted.

"Please hold for the senator," a perfunctory female voice answered.

"Why can't your people make their own phone calls?"

Jimmy Don asked. "I don't know a soul on our side who has his girl call before he gets on the line."

"White House does it, but your side wouldn't know about that."

"That's a good one, Roy. Great to see you've kept your wits during this trying time."

"Shut the fuck up!"

"Who said that?" Shelwank's voice blasted from the speakerphone.

"That was Roy, Senator," Jimmy Don answered.

"I wasn't speaking to you, Howell."

"I was just telling Roy he needed to watch that tongue of his."

"You were doing no such thing."

"Sure I was, Roy."

"That's not what we were discussing."

"Would you two shut the fuck up?" Shelwank said.

"Sure thing, Senator," Jimmy Don said.

"So, how are things in Washington, Howell?"

"Peachy. What's going on with our island?"

"Well, they break ground on the racetrack tomorrow," Roy said. "Golf course is coming along. Hotel should break ground the second the bridge is ready. And your boy arrived early this afternoon."

"Any updates?"

"Too early, but you were right: the press is already changing the focus of the story," Jimmy Don said. "Nobody's asking about Lichwick. Every question is about Redding. This one young gal from the *Times-Picayune* asked why Dennis Quaid was coming to Biloxi. When our people told her it was the real Redball Redding, she said, 'You mean that Redball dude from the movie is real?'"

"Future Pulitzer winner," Shelwank said.

"Our team estimates the questions about Redding outnumber questions about the Planetary Liberation Front



two-to-one,” the lieutenant governor said as he scratched his scalp with both hands.

“What the hell is that scraping I hear?” Shelwank asked.

“Nothing.”

“Roy’s using his fingernails to treat head lice,” Jimmy Don said.

“Well, tell him to stop.”

“The senator wants you to stop.”

“I’m not deaf, Jimmy Don.”

“Would you two stop acting like children?” Shelwank said. “Christ, you sound like a Judiciary Committee hearing.”

“Sorry, Howell.”

“Now, I want you to make sure that the word ‘terrorist’ appears in the headline of every story about that Lichwick idiot.”

“Terrorist?”

“Yeah, and if possible, ‘echo-terrorist.’”

“Are you saying ‘terrorist’?” Jimmy Don asked.

“Of course I’m saying ‘terrorist,’ you dumbass. What, you can’t understand me, Jimmy Don? I only spent a decade in broadcasting.”

“Sure, sure, I understand you, Senator. We’ll make sure everybody knows that Lichwick was an ‘echo-terrorist.’”

“Are you making shit of me, Jimmy Don?”

“Of course not, Senator.”

“Because I don’t need any shit from you.”

“No, of course not.”

“What I need is for you to keep your people in line on this one, Jimmy Don,” Shelwank said. “I don’t want some half-baked loony giving a speech on the House floor about how our bridge is destroying the mangrove crab habitat.”

“It is?” Roy said.

“No, Roy.”

"Then why would anybody say that?"

"How the hell did you win statewide election?" Shelwank shouted. "What I'm saying is, we've already twisted arms at EPA over the beach mice we're killing, and I had to push for a billion-dollar increase in the Corps of Engineering budget to get them to reclassify seven hundred acres of wetlands for two golf courses. And this ain't even in my state, for chrissake! The last thing we need is another endangered species or bird habitat biting us in the ass. Jimmy Don, your job is to keep the tree-kissers in line."

"Consider them lined," Jimmy Don said.

"Roy?"

Roy was scratching again. "Yeah, Howell," he said.

"Get the Park Service and some troopers down there and make sure nothing like this happens again. If any sandal-wearing longhairs driving Volvos show up, have them followed, questioned, harassed . . . whatever it takes."

"But Howell, it's a beach. A lot of people wear sandals."

"Goddammit, Roy, just do it."

"Okay . . . sandals, hair, Volvos."

"And if they see an eagle or an egret or anything bigger than a pigeon making a nest on our island, tell them to shoot it and dispose of the carcass."

"I don't think they have any pigeons out there."

"Goddammit, Roy."

"What? They don't, do they?"

Jimmy Don patted Roy's forearm and gave a there-there nod.

"And one more thing," Shelwank said.

Jimmy Don leaned toward the phone and awaited final instructions. Roy grabbed a tissue and pressed it against the gash he'd scratched in his scalp.

"My contacts tell me we might have a problem with eminent domain," Shelwank said.

"What kind of problem?" Jimmy Don asked. "The state condemned the whole island. I took care of it myself."

"Lawyers are snooping around for somebody to challenge the ruling. I'm getting word that they've found a candidate."

"I don't understand," Roy said.

"That's because your brain cells are fried, Roy," Shelwank said. "Now, listen up. The public doesn't hold kindly to government seizing private property, no matter what David Souter says. They understand it if you're widening a road or building a new courthouse, but condemning land for a casino hotel and racetrack raises a few eyebrows, especially when you're displacing a bunch of poor black folk."

"But it's already done," Roy said, attempting to prove that he still had enough functioning brain cells to keep up. "The documents are signed. The property's condemned. The checks are cut. We've already got temporary housing set up for seventy-five Dabearer na . . . residents. What can they do?"

"They can sue!" Shelwank shouted. "It's Mississippi, for god's sake! You're the sue-capital of the country!"

"But—"

"The congregation at an AME church in Indiana just won a zillion-dollar judgment against the state for condemning their rickety old sanctuary for lakeside condos. Supreme Court be damned, juries don't like little old church ladies being thrown out of their Sunday school classes. Now every tort-whore in the nation's trolling for aggrieved victims of wrongful eminent domain."

"What do we need to do?" Jimmy Don asked.

"Talk to our friends in Memphis. See who's stirring the pot down on Dabearer. Roy, I want you to handle that. Got it?"

"Handle . . ."

"Call our boys in Memphis and get them on it."

"Then what?" Roy asked.

"Then let our friends clean up the problem," Shelwank said.

Roy's hands flew back to his scalp.

"Any questions?"

"I think that's pretty clear," Jimmy Don said.

"Roy?"

"Yeah, Howell."

"You understand what you need to do?"

"I got it."

"Good. And Roy?"

"Yeah."

"Get yourself together, boy. Your ship's coming in. I want you sober enough to see it."

The next sound they heard was a click, and then a dial tone.

Roy leaned forward and waved a bloody finger in front of Jimmy Don's chest. "Now give me the fucking envelope."

Jimmy Don slowly removed a white envelope from his jacket and laid it on the desk. "Just remember one thing, Roy," he said.

"What's that?"

"Rehab is for pussies."

Ten minutes later, Roy slid into the rear booth at the Grits and Gravy Diner on the Millsaps College side of Fortification Street across from the Capitol. The kid sitting across from him crushed the butt of a Marlboro into the overflowing ashtray without looking up from his newspaper.

"Says here Orleans Parish is going to outlaw smoking the same week the legislature votes on allowing gay marriage," the kid said to Roy without taking his eyes off the

paper. "Hard to believe we live in an age when it's more politically correct for a man to suck a dick than smoke a cigarette."

"I got it," Roy said. His hand trembled as he reached inside his suit coat.

"Of course you've got it, Roy. I never doubted you for a minute."

Roy slid the envelope full of cash—the tenth such envelope of what he hoped would be a never-ending stream from Debearer Island—across the table. The kid looked up from his paper and stared at the envelope as if it were a pile of dog droppings.

"What are you doing, Roy?"

"What?"

"Are we being taped, Roy? Because I can think of no other reason you would put that in front of me."

"No! God, no!" Roy was on the brink of panic.

"Pick it up, Roy."

Roy picked up the envelope.

"I went to Circuit City today and bought some killer speakers," the kid said, going back to the story about smoking and gay marriage.

"Look, I'm not . . . I mean, we're not . . . I just need my stuff."

"Three-inch cubes, man. Ever wonder how they get such big sound out of such tiny speakers?"

"I . . . look . . . I—"

"The bags are under the table."

"What bags?"

"The Circuit City bags."

"I don't . . ."

"Look in the bags, Roy."

Roy leaned down and peeked into the shopping bags. One contained Bose speakers; the other held two separate one-gallon plastic freezer bags, one filled with shiny pink

pebbles, the other filled to the zipper with white pills. Roy's trembling hand went into overdrive.

"Take what you need. Leave what I need," the kid said.

Roy dropped the envelope into the bag with the speakers and grabbed the bag with the crystal methamphetamine hydrochloride (Pink Ice) and the other filled with the painkiller OxyContin.

"You know, Roy, you should take better care of yourself," the kid said as he lit another Marlboro. "You're sweating like a Beal Street whore."

"So I've been told." Roy slid to the edge of the seat.

"Wait a minute," the kid said, grinning, and putting a hand on Roy's arm. "I got one for you . . . This guy calls in sick for work . . ."

## Chapter 5

---

Early Monday morning an eighteen-wheeler shuddered like a detoxing drunk, belching a plume of black smoke and jerking in periodic spasms as gears ground. Miles Hinton watched the big rig chug into the garage, a shiny black steel box of art, a giant rolling Jack Daniel's ad with two racecars, a pit cart, and a portable garage housed inside. Miles rubbed his eyes as the eighteen-wheeler rolled through the security gate segregating Junior Senior Racing, Inc., from N.C. State Route 136. The rig was returning from Pell City, Alabama. A crew inside the building would strip the cars to the bone, analyzing and testing every part before putting the vehicles back together for the next downforce race. The Jack Daniel's number 7 team had eighteen cars: four engineered for restrictor plate tracks, four set up for short tracks, four for one-mile tracks, two for road courses, two for two-plus-mile downforce tracks, and two for Indianapolis, which was two and a half miles with only nine degrees of banking. The car Junior raced yesterday would sit in the shop for at least a month.

Miles had seen plenty of transporters roll in and out of this building over the years. There had been the original black Pennzoil rig with the number five plastered on all

sides, the unmistakable trademark of the great Junior Senior, Sr. Then there had been the tribute trailer with Junior Senior, Sr.'s brooding mug on every panel. The sport still missed that tough old son-of-a-bitch. Miles missed him, too, especially on days like today when he found himself sitting in the offices the old man had spent a fortune building, dealing with another fuckup from the Senior progeny, Junior Senior, Jr.

Junior, Jr., plopped in a chair across from Miles and began tapping his fingers on the table. Miles looked at the rose-leaf mahogany paneling and sighed. It was too bad Senior, Sr., hadn't lived long enough to see this building. The old man had gotten himself killed during a test run in Alabama a few months before the final wing was completed. Now the marble lobby Senior, Sr., had originally drawn on the back of a napkin had two show cars, a fountain, a thirty-foot trophy case, and a giant mural of The Man his own self, Junior Senior, Sr., winner of six Salem Cup titles and the undisputed "Baddest Ass in Racing," in a black cap and dark glasses. Behind the lobby was a hundred-thousand-square-foot garage complete with engine plant, metallurgy center, fabrication shop, and an engineering lab that made NASA look bush league. Back when Bubba Jeffries was Junior, Sr.'s crew chief, insiders had nicknamed the place "Bubbaham Palace." That was before anybody had even thought of adding the upstairs offices, where no expense had been spared. Senior, Sr.'s second wife, Dolores, had commissioned a million dollars' worth of original artwork for the walls. One of those pieces, a postimpressionistic rendering of Senior, Sr., dousing his crew with champagne after locking up one of his championships, hung in the conference room just to the right of where Miles now sat. The furnishings, including the cherry conference table Junior, Jr., used as a snare, had come from Leicester Square in London.



Miles rubbed his eyes and took another deep breath. Managing the growth of their sport was tough enough, especially after their superstar's untimely death. Right after this meeting, Miles had to hop on STOCKCAR's Falcon 500 and fly to New York for another meeting. Then it was back to Daytona to see his daughter's soccer match before dinner. Such were the demands for the president of the fastest growing sport in the country. Of course, if Senior, Sr., were still alive, the bullshit conversation Miles was about to have with Junior, Jr., would have been a lot easier.

"Well, let's get on with it," Junior Senior, Jr., said.

The kid finger-drummed the solo to Edgar Winter's "Frankenstein" as he shifted in his chair.

Miles reached across the table and hit the play button on the digital recorder. The room filled with the roar of race engines.

"A little tight on entry, but it's coming to us." It was Junior's voice, obviously from the cockpit of his car. The recorder did a good job. Every word was clear.

"Got that, Bud," came the voice of Junior's crew chief, T-Bone Bennett, so named for the time he T-boned a police patrol car in Indianapolis twelve hours before he was to drive in the Indy 500. "Stay patient. Got plenty of time."

"Patience is overrated."

"Roger that."

A few minutes of nothing but engine noise, then Junior's voice again, higher and more intense this time. "I think I got a tire going down."

"We'll check it out," T-Bone said. Then, "Tire looks okay."

"Well, something's wrong!" Junior shouted. "This fucker's shaking like Janet Reno!"

Miles hit a button and the recording stopped. "A hun-

dred thousand website subscribers paid five dollars and ninety-nine cents to hear that,” Miles said. “Another twenty thousand or so spent twenty-five bucks for a scanner so they could hear it live and in person at the track.”

Junior stopped drumming. “Hell, Miles, this ain’t the first time I’ve said ‘fuck’ over the radio.”

“It’s not the first time I’ve sat at this table to talk about it, either,” Miles said, leaning forward to make his point. “Janet Reno? Jesus, Junior, do you realize what kind of stir that’s caused?”

“She just popped into my head. I could have said Muhammad Ali or something, maybe Michael J. Fox.”

“No, Junior, you couldn’t!” Miles reached into his briefcase and pulled out a folder. “So far, I’ve gotten letters from the Parkinson’s Foundation of America, the Disabled American Defense Fund, and the Families of Parkinson’s Patients. I’ve also gotten fifty calls. ‘Ignorant buffoon’ is the nicest thing they’re saying about you. One woman said . . .” He pulled a sheet from the file and read aloud, “‘Junior Jackass needs to get his head out of the Jack Daniel’s bottle and spend some time with people who’ve been affected by Parkinson’s.’”

“That isn’t very nice,” Junior said as he rubbed the peach-colored stubble on his chin.

Pitiful. The kid had the political instincts of a caveman, and Miles had spent an incalculable number of hours cleaning up behind him. Two years ago at a stockcar promotional event supporting the Special Olympics, Junior had put his arms around three young athletes and said, “It’s a real treat to be a part of this. My cousin’s a retard, so I know what these folks go through.” That five-alarm fire had raged for the better part of a month. This one probably wouldn’t be that bad. Most people already imagined Junior as an amiable ignoramus. Still, Miles only had ten thousand other things he’d rather be doing.

"So I made a poor choice of words," Junior said.

"That's what you'd call this, Junior?"

"Okay, okay, it was unintentionally inappropriate."

"No, unintentionally inappropriate is belching at a state dinner. You offended a million people with Parkinson's."

"Look, Miles, I'm sorry I hurt old Janet's feelings."

"This is not about Janet Reno!"

"No need to raise your voice."

Miles rubbed his temples and closed his eyes. "Junior," he finally said, "you're the face of your race team; you're the face of your sponsors; and, like it or not, you're the face of our sport right now, just like your father was before he died. You didn't ask for it; I didn't ask for it; Roger English sure as hell didn't ask for it. But that's where we are. You're making more money in a single year than the drivers who started our sport made in their entire careers. That carries some responsibilities."

"You know how many days off I've had in the last month?"

Miles didn't answer. Junior rocked again.

"Half a day in the last month. Daddy either went hunting or fishing every Monday. You know the last time I baited a hook? Hell, I can't even remember. So I don't need no lecture on responsibility."

"How do you think your father would have handled this?" Miles asked.

The room fell quiet. Miles knew that invoking the memory of The Man would bring the discussion back his way. Junior Senior, Sr., had been a hard-ass, especially to his son. On lap one hundred of the first race father and son ever ran together, Junior bumped Senior to make a pass. Five laps later, father spun son into the infield. Then the old man came on the radio and said, "Tell my son never to bump me on a racetrack again."

Junior, Jr., had told that story a thousand times since his

father's passing. Miles knew that the kid still chased ghosts. Pulling the what-would-daddy-do? question was a cheap shot, but Miles didn't give a shit.

"What if he were in my shoes?" Miles asked.

"He'd chew my ass out, maybe fine me a little," Junior said while staring at one of his stepmother's fancy paintings. He didn't have much conviction left in his voice. "He sure as hell wouldn't dock me any points. This ain't that big a deal."

Miles couldn't resist a smile. He pulled another sheet of paper from his file and passed it to Junior. "Here's your statement to the press."

Junior read portions aloud. "'Heat of the moment' . . . 'poorly chosen' . . . 'regrettable' . . . 'don't reflect my thoughts or feelings' . . . blah, blah, blah. Looks all right to me."

Miles wanted to shout, *Well, why didn't you write it?* but he kept his cool. No need to antagonize.

Junior's fingers went back to the table. This time he tapped the beat to ZZ Top's "LaGrange."

"That's not all, is it?" Junior asked.

"No, Junior, that's not all."

"What else?"

Miles smiled and clasped his hands together as he leaned forward on the conference table. "Junior," he said, "have you ever been to Biloxi?"

## Chapter 6

---

The human head is a lot sturdier than most people think. First-year med students realize this as they take a hacksaw to a cadaver's skull in an attempt to extract the brain. Ditto the Nepalese monks charged with cutting off the skullcaps of the dead so their souls can escape to Nirvana. Cops in Israel have known about the resilience of the human head for years. It seems that a vest full of plastique might melt the frame of a bus and blow a pizzeria to its foundation, but the bomber's head, while charred critter-crispy, will remain pretty much intact. Specialists from the NYPD, LAPD, and FBI spent a lot of time in Tel Aviv studying the severed heads of Palestinian terrorists after 9/11. Their findings were still making the rounds in the law enforcement and forensic pathology communities.

"Skin, blood, and cerebral fluids react in very specific ways to the trauma of an explosion," Dr. Terrance Natterly explained.

Robert thought Natterly enjoyed these macabre minutiae a little too much.

"The eyes provide the first clue. In almost every case of this kind, the eyelids are charred, because the victim blinks in the first nanosecond of the explosion. But if the person is already dead . . ."

"The eyes don't blink," Robert said, completing the thought.

"Exactly."

"And from this you concluded that Lichwick was dead before the explosion?"

"Of course not," Natterly said. "The eyes were only a clue. The bullet hole provided the conclusive evidence."

"Bullet hole."

Natterly removed a glossy page from his file and handed Robert a close-up eight-by-ten of a severed, burned, and partially mutilated human head.

Ty looked at the photo over his boss's shoulder and said, "Well, at least there wasn't much degradation."

"Note the yellow circle," Natterly said. "The bullet entered the back of the neck and severed the spinal cord at the second cervical vertebra. The vertebra deflected the slug. It traveled upward through the neck and mouth and into the sinus cavity, where it exited through his nose—the red circle."

Robert saw that half of Lichwick's nose was missing, but how could anyone tell it was a bullet hole? "You sure about this, Doctor?"

"Lichwick was dead before detonation," Natterly said.

"Could he have armed the explosives and committed suicide?" Johnny Pea asked.

"Shooting himself in the back of the neck?" Ty said.

"The truth is, we don't know what happened to Lichwick," Special Agent in Charge Peevey said.

"Any evidence that someone else was on the boat?" Ty asked. It was the first out-loud utterance of what they were all thinking. If Lichwick was shot before the explosion, the prospect of a second terrorist had to be explored.

"We're not there yet," Peevey said, waving his hands as if Ty's question had created a foul odor. "Anything could have happened. It could have been an accident."

"An accident?"

"He could have been arming the explosives when a gun onboard went off and killed him. He could have fired the gun and the bullet ricocheted. Who knows?"

"I guess we've got some investigating ahead of us," Johnny Pea said.

The special agents stared at Johnny Pea as if he'd just belched.

"I think we've got things covered," Peevey said. "The owner of the boat rental shop's being interviewed. Forensics is isolating the origins of the C-4. Bank records have been seized. We're interviewing anybody who was out on the water that night. That's pretty good coverage. I'm not even sure what you could contribute. In fact, I'm not sure why you're here."

"We're here—" Robert said.

"You're prosecutors," Peevey interrupted. "So far, there's nothing to prosecute."

"We're here because some people in Washington, including your bosses, want us here."

Peevey snorted. "I don't play politics with my investigations," he said.

"Then we should all get along fine."

"I don't know what you're going to do."

"Well, I plan on visiting the Jeff Davis Library and the International Checkers Hall of Fame," Ty said. He was a natural smartass, but the bureau brought out his best stuff.

"We'll do what we can to assist," Robert said.

Peevey expelled a peep that sounded like helium escaping a carnival balloon.

"Is there a problem?" Robert asked.

"No, I'm just not sure how you plan to assist, unless you're going to drive us around."

"I can drive," Robert said, nodding to Ty and Johnny Pea.

"Sure," Johnny Pea said.

"You're a fine driver," Ty added.

"I'll keep you updated," Peevey said. "We're interviewing some of Lichwick's buddies from the Planetary Liberation Front tomorrow. If we need any assistance, you'll be the first to know."

"You're flying to Oregon?" Robert asked.

"No, we have people in Oregon."

"Ooo, you have people," Ty said.

Peevey cut him a cold stare. "The PLF plan to protest the groundbreaking of that racetrack tomorrow."

"Here?" Robert asked.

"That's the plan. They've also scheduled a memorial service for Lichwick."

"Where?"

"Somewhere on the mainland beach. Then they're taking a boat over to Dabearer for the protest. We don't have an exact number yet, but we could have as many as a couple of hundred protesters."

"Mr. and Mrs. Lichwick must be thrilled," Ty said.

"I won't be asking them, and neither will you."

"Oh, don't go losing your, ahmm, head, Agent Peevey."

"It's Special Agent in Charge Peevey."

"I'm sorry. You're both special, aren't you? Did you ride the short bus up here from New Orleans?"

Peevey took an aggressive step toward Ty. Johnny Pea, still strong and fatless at two hundred fifteen pounds, jumped in front of his smaller friend. "Are we going to have a problem, here?" he asked.

"What kind of office are you running, Mr. Redding?" Peevey snapped.

"The kind that intends to cooperate fully," Robert said while putting firm hands on Ty and Johnny Pea. They were in for a royal ass-chewing after the meeting.

No one noticed the widow Saltini in the doorway. "Excuse me," she said. "I hate to interrupt."



"No problem," Johnny Pea said. His voice went up an octave.

"It's fine, Mrs. Saltini, we were just wrapping up," Peevey said. "What can we do for you?"

"Well, I hate to be the one who tells you . . ."

"Tells us what?" Peevey asked.

"Two news trucks just pulled into the driveway," she said. "I think more are on the way. A reporter from *Action News Five* is asking for Mr. Redding." Her big browns showed sympathy as she looked at Robert. "They all want to talk to you."

Robert didn't bother to excuse himself since Peevey was staring daggers through him anyway. He followed the widow through the entry hall. One of her Latino landscapers was standing in the foyer shaking his head in pity. Robert realized why when he walked onto the porch and a camera light blinded him. A microphone hit him in the chin.

"We're here with racing legend Robert 'Redball' Redding, the real-life star from the current blockbuster, *Hot Laps*." A brunette reporter wearing too much makeup chattered with a cadence usually reserved for teens-killed-in-car-crash stories. "Today, however, Mr. Redding is involved in another very real story, right here on the Gulf Coast . . . Mr. Redding, what can you tell us about the body of Stan Ford Lipowitz that washed ashore two days ago, and why have you been called in to head up this investigation?"

Ty and Johnny Pea watched the spectacle from the front hall along with Peevey, Special Agent Matthews, and Dr. Natterly. Two sound bites into the interview, Ty put his hand on Peevey's shoulder and said, "Any more questions about why we're here?"

## Chapter 7

---

Throughout the long history of the American capitalist system, corporate dinosaurs like the sports management firm of Octopus Sports rarely died in the heat of battle. Extinction for these billion-dollar behemoths was always grinding and painfully slow. A founder dies, a major account goes south, the economy weakens, management “miscalculates” the market, a covenant is broken, and before you can say “Global Crossing,” bankers are booting seasoned executives out of their offices and corporate American Express cards are being rejected at Marriott bars. In the case of Octopus Sports, once the gold standard of sports marketing firms, the chairman died of a heart attack, and six months later, Todd Feldman, famous corporate raider who made billions shorting airline stocks, bought Octopus Sports from a cabal of creditors. Adding an element of pathetic to this sorry tale, hundreds of Octopus Sports employees hung on to their jobs in the vain hopes that they were one big deal, one superstar client, away from turning the corner.

Three of those Kool-Aid drinkers painted on their best smiles and took their seats across a maple conference table from Miles Hinton and STOCKCAR’s director of marketing, a beautiful redhead named Stacy Campbell.

“Welcome to New York,” said a grinning game-show-host of a man with dyed black hair named Kirk Kirkcannon. “You can call me Kirk, two *K*’s,” he’d said moments earlier. Now he was yelling at Miles and Stacy, “So, do you come to the city often?”

“I live here,” Stacy said.

“Oh.” The three men looked at each other and then at the table. They should have known. Somebody should have told them. They were vice presidents, after all, although the title had lost some of its luster when the fraternity of VPs at Octopus Sports reached the hundred-person mark.

“Miles, you’ve never been to this office, have you?” asked Willis Strand, the only black man in the room. Willis had once handled basketball operations for Octopus Sports before the company abandoned basketball. Now Willis floated between meetings and wrote dozens of memos using words he pulled from decorative business books on his shelf. He figured the word “paradigm” had kept him employed for six months. Now he was on to “cross-pollination” as a metaphor for business integration. With any luck Willis could cross-pollinate himself into a job through Christmas. Next year, he would repeer the new paradigm right after he operationalized the offline office strategies. Now, though, he needed to make himself useful as a minority voice in a STOCKCAR meeting.

Miles shook his head to Willis’s question. “My last meeting was at Seventy-fifth Street,” Miles said.

This prompted a round of table and shoelace glances. The Seventy-fifth Street brownstone office had been the first casualty of “corporate restructuring.”

“Anyway.” The only gray-haired member of the bunch, a pudgy native New Yorker named Steve Stein, tried to get the meeting on track by slapping the table and flipping open a three-ring binder. He went through a perfunctory

history of Octopus Sports and all the great and wonderful things they had done two decades ago for aging athletes nobody remembered. “We’ve been working on several different strategies, and I think you’ll be happy with the ideas we’ve generated,” he said.

Miles and Stacy didn’t budge. This prompted Steve Stein to leap to his feet. “First, we understand that you are expanding your STOCKCAR brand into additional markets.”

Miles wanted to say, *No shit, Euclid*, but he contained himself.

Stacy showed no such restraint. “Every news outlet in the country covered our Long Island acquisition,” she said. “As I recall, the *Wall Street Journal* front page said: ‘STOCKCAR Burns Rubber in Big Apple.’ They also ran a front-page feature on our Debearer Island project. We’re close to deals in Burbank and Milwaukee. St. Louis wants us so badly the mayor showed up to a meeting wearing one of Junior Senior, Jr.’s race suits. With all due respect, Mr. Stein . . .”

“Please, call me Steve.”

“Not to be rude, Steve, but Miles and I didn’t come here to have you state the obvious.”

Miles wondered how Stacy could have been ruder. He bit his lip to keep from smiling. They had planned for Stacy to launch a few zingers, but damn.

If this had been any other pitch, Miles might have felt sorry for Steve Stein, Willis Strand, and Call me Kirk Kirkcannon. But not Octopus Sports. They were notorious bullies. Their late founder, Mitchell McKinley, had once called stockcar “the sport of low, sloping foreheads.” He had dismissed Roger English as “a carnival barker for the poor and illiterate,” while Octopus Sports spent millions on an American grand prix series. Now, stockcar was right behind professional football as the richest sports franchise

in the country. American grand prix had gone nowhere. This meeting was about payback.

"We think we can marry your events with the right corporate partners in these new markets," Stein said, attempting to right himself after Stacy's jab-hook combination.

"We have a waiting list of title sponsors," Stacy countered.

"We can fill in the blanks for you."

"That assumes we have blanks to fill."

"Surely you could use more corporate partnerships."

"We're criticized now for having too many corporate partners. We don't want to cheapen our brand. Despite what some people might think, stockcar is a lot of things, but it's not cheap."

Oh no, no, no. Stein, Strand, and Call me Kirk shook their heads and grumbled in unison. How anyone could think stockcar racing cheap was pure madness, even though Octopus Sports' president had called the league just that as recently as two years ago.

"There's also the question of the markets you are leaving."

"What about them?"

"Well, in order to add additional markets you have to take races away from people who have been staunch supporters of your sport for decades. There's potential for problems there. If you anger too many of your core supporters . . ." Stein raised his hands and shrugged his shoulders. What are you going to do?

"Was anybody in Brooklyn upset when the Dodgers moved to LA?"

They all looked at each other. Stein was the only one in the room who had been out of diapers when his beloved Dodgers abandoned Ebbets Field for sun, surf, and Mickey Mouse. Stein remembered it well. "That's not really a fair—"

"I wasn't around then, but—"

"I wouldn't compare that—"

"As I understand it, things got pretty nasty up here."

"That's not a fair comparison." Stein was slapping the table like an only child accustomed to getting his way.

"We expect people to be upset," Miles said, joining the conversation. Stacy couldn't have all the fun. "That's why we're only eliminating one track completely. Other tracks will go from hosting two races a year to one race as we expand to new markets."

What Miles didn't say was that Roger English planned to systematically move races away from tracks owned by others, and onto new state-of-the-art tracks owned by Speedway Properties, Inc., a subsidiary of STOCKCAR, which was wholly owned by the English family. As far as Roger was concerned, the biggest loser from these moves wasn't the stockcar fan, but a burly old North Carolina man named Brutus Parker, who owned half a dozen tracks in the Southeast and who had sued Roger English on more than one occasion for unfair trade practices. All the tracks losing races were Parker tracks.

"By going to new markets, we believe we will broaden, not weaken our fan base," Miles said.

Stein flipped a page in his binder and prattled on for a few more minutes. He was running out of notes.

"Naming rights," he finally said.

"Naming rights?"

"Yes, we've had great success finding appropriate corporate partners to lease the naming rights of high-profile sports venues. The LA basketball arena becomes the Staples Center, that sort of thing. We have a great reputation. Off the top of my head, I can think of three or four Fortune 500 companies that would love to bid for the naming rights at your Mississippi property."

"What's the biggest deal you've done?" Stacy asked.

Miles looked at the table. He knew what was coming, and couldn't watch.

"Ah . . . our largest . . . let me see . . ."

"Sure, the name you sold for the largest amount of money," Stacy said again.

"Ah . . . help me out here, Kirk. Was it the Home Depot Dome?"

"No," Call me Kirk said.

"It was . . ."

Call me Kirk looked at his shoes. "MMMron Field," he mumbled."

"I'm sorry?" Stacy said.

"Enron Field," he said. "Our biggest one was Enron Field."

"But we've had some wonderful successes in this area," Stein shouted.

Miles and Stacy sat still and quiet, letting the ghosts of Enron fill the room.

"Ah . . . Kirk also has some great ideas to generate interest in your off-peak events."

"I do?"

"Why don't you share some of those, Kirk?"

"Okeydokey," Call me Kirk rose to his feet and put his hands in his pockets. "Certainly you have no trouble retaining customers for your premier races. But your venues . . . your tracks . . . will need other activities, other races, that sort of thing, to generate revenue during those times when you aren't running races. Stockcar only comes one or two weekends a year. The rest of the time, your tracks need other events to—"

"Our Mississippi property has booked four open-wheel races, three legends races, a Trans-Am race, nineteen rock concerts, a country and bluegrass festival, six boxing matches, including two guaranteed title bouts, and the South's largest rodeo. And we haven't broken ground yet," Stacy said.

"We've been able to do some amazing and creative things at minor league baseball parks," Call me Kirk said as if he hadn't heard Stacy.

"I'm sorry, did you say 'minor league'?" Miles said.

"Absolutely," Call me Kirk said, gaining momentum and enthusiasm with each breath. "We helped the Toledo Mud Hens increase off-peak attendance by forty percent."

"The Mud Hens."

"Not that anyone would compare your events to the minors," Stein jumped in. "But there are some ancillary things you can do to attract fans to other events."

"Like rhino riding!" Call me Kirk shouted.

"What?"

"Yes, it's like bull riding, only with rhinoceroses. They're great! They're huge! And you can find some crazy cowboys who'll ride anything, especially the Aussies. If it bucks and runs, those guys will ride it, and people will pay to see it."

"Uh-huh."

"Think of the potential."

"What else have you got?" Stacy asked.

Call me Kirk broke into a wide grin. "Imagine," he said, holding his hands up to paint the image in the air, "a giant water tank, clear, like the orca tanks at Sea World."

"Isn't Shamu at Sea World?" Stacy whispered.

"Let it go," Miles said.

"Anyway, we bill this as the ultimate death match, the epitome of the human spirit pitted against nature's most aggressive killing machine. Headline: 'Man versus Shark—One must Die!' Of course, it's a small shark and we give the diver a spear and a hunting knife. It'll be a great show."

The room was quiet for a full five seconds. Then Miles said, "I think the blood will make the tank too murky."

"We can work out the details later."



“Ah, Willis, do you have anything you’d like to add?” Stein said.

“Well . . . ah . . . I’d just like to say that we feel confident in our principally centered ability to provide the right synergies and project a core competency toward your dis-intermediate quality vector.”

With that, the meeting adjourned.

Miles flagged a cab at Fiftieth and Seventh and held the door as Stacy slid across the seat. “Teterboro,” Miles said to the driver.

Then they heard a recorded voice they both recognized. “Hi, this is stockcar driver Junior Senior, Jr. You can’t watch me race in New York yet, but we’re coming soon! So, buckle up, and I’ll see you at the track!”

They both doubled over in laughter.

## Chapter 8

---

Mississippi Lieutenant Governor Roy Coon would have preferred jogging through an open sewer to driving a hundred and fifty miles to Oxford for dinner. He rarely left Jackson these days, and when he did it was to feed his “supplemental needs,” as he called them. Never did the words “addiction” or “problem” pass his lips even when talking to himself. To say those things out loud would be to admit he had lost control of his life, although he wondered what other possible conclusion one could draw, since he was driving halfway across the state to meet Sammy Dubose, underboss of the Delacroix crime family, in a popular public restaurant, to discuss nefarious activity in which the lieutenant governor, the speaker of the state assembly, and a United States senator were all involved. If that wasn’t a loss of control, Roy couldn’t fathom what qualified.

Sammy had insisted on Oxford, a neutral site, an hour’s drive from Memphis, which was where Sammy and his brother Richey operated their uncle Eddie Delacroix’s businesses. It was three hours by car from the state capital, a boring, depressing drive through backwoods Mississippi, past kids with no shirts or shoes playing in roadside ditches near their trailers. Roy counted nine dead dogs and one

long-deceased deer on the side of the highway between Jackson and Oxford. Buzzards would have most of the carcasses cleaned before the DOT got around to this stretch of road, which meant future motorists would be treated to a gruesome lesson on nature's circle of life. The thought of it made his stomach lurch, and he reached under his seat for a little relief. The only things making the trip tolerable were the contents in his goodie-bags.

One of his campaign staffers had been supplier zero for his habit, offering Roy a stash of pills to ease the chronic back pain he suffered after trying to side-straddle a hooker in a Las Vegas hotel room. This happened a couple of months after Roy announced his run for lieutenant governor. His back had given him fits ever since. Long speeches and receiving lines were the worst, but sitting in cars and planes weren't great, either. The only times he was comfortable were when he was flat on his back on the floor, and when he had a fistful of OCs in his system. Within a month of his initial injury, Roy was popping between thirty and fifty prescription painkillers a day, which did wonders for his back, but also left him fighting brain fog, another unacceptable condition for a campaigning pol. So he asked the same pill-peddling aide for some pick-me-ups. A year later Roy made the jump to meth. That had been five summers ago.

He'd stopped cursing himself a couple of years back, about the same time he hitched his political wagon to Howell Shelwank, the loudmouthed senator from neighboring Alabama who made Roy a part of the Dabearer project. "Stick with me, boy," Shelwank had said. "We'll change the world, and make a fortune doing it."

Little did Roy realize that Senator Shelwank's worldview included such lessons as How to Snatch Private Property Away from Lawful Landowners, and How to Mob Up for Maximum Kickbacks. Nor was Roy pleased to learn

that his most vocal opponent in the legislature, Jimmy Don Locus, was also his partner in crime. Roy had been hesitant at first, but his “supplemental needs” overrode any moral and ethical objections he might have harbored. When you supported a five-hundred-dollar-a-day habit on an eighty-thousand-dollar-a-year government salary, selling your integrity was a piece of cake.

Six months after he’d signed on with Shelwank, Roy Coon’s father had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, and Roy began second-guessing his life choices. He had only wanted to live the life of a country lawyer. His early goals in life had been an oversized rocking chair on a fat front porch, a pocket watch to wind, and bow ties and matching suspenders to hook his thumbs through while pontificating before yokel juries. He’d run for the state assembly to please his debutante first wife, who ran off with a tobacco lobbyist during Roy’s first term. His second bride had been no better. She’d been the one who’d pushed his candidacy for lieutenant governor, insisting that she was either “going to Jackson or going home.” She stuck around for two months after the inauguration, and then hopped a plane for Talus, where she was last seen in the arms of a half-naked Apache named Big Middle Leg.

Roy thought about his dad as his car fell behind a convoy of pulpwood trucks near Winona. Papa Roy had actually shed a tear the day Roy Boy graduated from law school. He’d also been caught dabbing his eyes the day the newly elected lieutenant governor took the oath of office. Now Papa Roy pissed himself at least once a day and called Roy Boy “Demetrius” on the days he called him anything at all. Two days after committing his father to the Golden Stream Assisted Care home in Starkville, Roy Coon, Jr., told Shelwank that he wanted to quit and go back to being a courtly country lawyer, the Atticus Finch of modern-day Mississippi.

"Atticus Finch is dead, Roy," Shelwank had said. "Everything he stood for's dead. Gregory Peck's dead; Nelle Lee's holding on by a thread, eating pureed sweet potatoes and mumbling to herself; her brother's dead; that faggotty friend of theirs, Truman Capote: dead. The whole damn concept's dead, Roy. Country lawyering ain't about protecting the righteous anymore; it's about getting local dickweeds out of DUI charges, and doing real estate closings for the lucky new residents of the Double Trouble Trailer Park. You want to put on your white suits and dandy bow ties and defend wronged Negroes against the Blue-Eyed Devil, join the ACLU, or sign up with one of them shake-down race-baiters or poverty pimps; god knows we got plenty of them in Washington; but you can forget about all that country lawyer bullshit. Atticus is gone, boy; gone like last year's money."

He remembered every word of that speech as he drove past the exit sign for the Casey Jones Museum State Park in Pickens, one of the state's sillier pork projects. He fantasized about the dozens of things he wished he'd said to Shelwank as he pulled into Oxford and found a parking space near the square. Then he popped a few more pills and walked through the front door of the restaurant, where he headed straight for the bar.

Five minutes later, in a cool, dark corner, with his trusty Sapphire melting ice cubes in a tumbler, Roy tried to stop his hand from shaking as he asked himself the most important question of the night: what the hell was he doing here? Meeting Sammy Dubose in Oxford was one of the dumbest things Roy had done in years, drugs and payoffs notwithstanding. If anybody recognized him . . . He didn't want to think about it. He could always claim to be in town on business. Ole Miss was in Oxford. A politician dining at the Downtown Grill was as common as catfish. But Sammy Dubose was a shady worm, not the kind of fellow

an upstanding statewide representative of the people would drive halfway across the state to meet for dinner. Roy had begged for the powwow to be held at a dive biker bar or some vegan granola joint where neither of them stood a chance of being recognized, but Sammy wouldn't have it. If Sammy had to drive an hour to eat, it would be at the Downtown Grill, where every judge, lawyer, and college administrator in Oxford could see him strut. Roy hoped to god it was a slow night.

So far, the only bar patrons were a frat boy trying to get in the pants of a gum-chomping coed, and a long-haired grad student in an ill-fitting Gap T-shirt and jeans agonizing over a writer's notebook. The town was full of wannabe Faulkners. If longhair would only look up from his notes, he might find a story sitting right in front of him.

Roy turned when he felt a tap on the shoulder. "You got us a table yet?" Sammy Dubose asked.

He was wearing sharkskin, of all things, a shiny four-button jacket straight off of Mobster.com. The jet-black hair had to come from a bottle, although Roy decided not to ask. Thanks to a pint of gel, the hair swept back away from Sammy's forehead like a dimestore Elvis wig. Roy had always thought Sammy looked like Pat Sajak's evil twin, an opinion he would also be keeping to himself.

"So, we eatin' or what?"

"Yeah," Roy said as he threw a ten-spot on the bar and grabbed his gin. "Why don't you order a drink while I get the maître d'?"

"I'll get one once we sit down," Sammy said way too loud. "I could eat the ass out of an antelope, I'm so fucking hungry."

Even the horny teenagers and tortured unpublished novelist stared. Roy trotted to the hostess stand without looking back.

At Roy's urgent request they were seated in a dark cor-

ner near the kitchen, as far away from the town square and courthouse as possible. Sammy lodged a mild protest until Roy reminded him that the kitchen provided a backdoor getaway. "Imagine if Big Paul Castellano had gone out through the kitchen," he said.

Sammy nodded and ran his hands down the front of his jacket. He liked thinking of himself as a gangster in the classic sense, not like Al Capone or Bugsy Siegel, but a modern classic like Gotti or Tony Soprano.

"So, what's so goddamn urgent?" Sammy said after sitting down, farting, and ordering a double Crown rocks.

"We got a call from our friend this morning," Roy said, suddenly aware of the sweat beads on his forehead.

"Which friend?"

"Our friend in Washington."

"Which one?"

"The one we're working with," Roy said. Christ, could he really be this dumb?

"Oh, Shelwank," Sammy all but shouted.

Roy looked at the wall and shaded his face with the back of his hand.

"You know my cousin Christian in DC says Shelwank ain't considered very bright up there."

Roy could not imagine the standards the Delacroix family used to measure brightness, but that was a subject for another time. His first order of business was to get Sammy to stop shouting Shelwank's name. Someone seeing the two of them together would be bad enough: connecting Roy Coon, Sammy Dubose, and Senator Howell Shelwank would be a full-scale special-prosecutor live-on-Court-TV disaster.

"I'm not sure we should use names," Roy said, leaning forward and wiping his forehead while keeping his voice low.

"The fuck you say," Sammy shouted. "My cousin knows

his shit. If he says Shelwank's a doofus, you can take it to the bank."

"No, no," Roy said, flapping his hands like a scared goose. "I'm not defending his intellect. It's just not a good idea to broadcast our friend's name."

"Broadcast," Sammy said through a chuckle. "That's a good one. Old Shel . . . tell you what, we'll just call him Dipshit. That okay with you?"

"Fine, whatever."

"Yeah, ole Dipshit can't get his name broadcast enough, unless it's from guys like me, huh?"

"It's not a good—"

"Hey, lassie." Sammy slapped a passing waitress on the rump.

"Don't do that!" she shouted.

"I won't if you bring me some fucking bread. I'm starving here."

She stormed into the kitchen. Roy closed his eyes and tried to make himself invisible.

"So, anyway, what did ole Dipshit say in this all-important call?"

"He's asking you to check out a potential problem."

"He ain't asked me shit. I ain't talked to him."

"That's good," Roy said. "We're at a critical stage. Any unnecessary contact between any of us could jeopardize the whole thing."

"That's what I told Richey when you called about this dinner meeting. I says, 'Richey, that don't make no sense.'"

Richey Dubose was a couple of years younger than his brother. While the two of them ran their uncle Eddie Delacroix's prostitution, gambling, theft, and extortion operations throughout Mississippi and Memphis, Sammy was supposedly the brainier brother, a thought that made Roy's head throb.



“So, what kind of potential problem we talking about?” Sammy’s voice turned cold and serious.

Roy stammered and cleared his throat. The Mean Sammy, the guy who was rumored to have hung a thieving pimp by his feet, skinned him alive, and then used his flesh as bait, had just come out for a peek. Roy needed to gather his thoughts and make himself perfectly clear.

“Some lawyers might try to challenge our eminent domain of the island,” Roy said. “It’s a little late in the process, and even if they find someone willing to sue, the likelihood of them halting construction is a long shot.”

“Whoa, Nelly! Stop construction! How the fuck could anybody stop construction?”

“They probably can’t,” Roy said, raising his hands to halt Sammy’s hair-trigger reaction. “None of the residents have shown any signs of suing, but plenty of lawyers are ready to raise a stink if one of them changes his mind. Like I say, the whole thing is probably a waste of time, but if they get the right lawyer and the right judge . . .” He shrugged. “They could get an injunction.”

“Is that like an indictment?”

“Not exactly,” Roy said slowly. “An injunction, if it happens, is a judge ordering a stop to construction.”

“No fuckin’ way,” Sammy said. “Do I need to remind you how much time and effort we got in this island?”

“No, Sammy—”

“‘Cause it’s a lot. You and Shel . . . I mean Dipshit, and the other one, Jimmy Don, or whatever the hell we’re calling him now, are pocketing three mil apiece off the concrete alone. We don’t need no fucking in-junk-work-stopping bullshit.”

“Jesus, Sammy, not so loud.”

“Fuck that! Who do we need to fuck up to make this go away?”

“Can I tell you about tonight’s specials?”

Roy's heartbeat jumped up a dozen beats a minute. How long had the waiter been standing there?

"Filet, seared and rare, Pittsburgh black and bleu, with creamed spinach and some of them garlic mashed potatoes," Sammy said as if they'd just been discussing oil futures or the Rebels' chances in the SEC West.

"And you, sir?" the waiter said, staring right at Roy, who scratched his forehead and tried to hide his face.

"The Cajun grouper," he said.

"And what side items would you like with that? Tonight we have an organic wild rice jerk medley."

"Yeah, that's fine."

"Very well. Would you care for any wine?"

"Another double Crown," Sammy said. "And can you check on that fucking bread we ordered? I asked the gal to get it out here in a hurry."

"Yes, sir."

"You want another drink, Roy Boy?" Sammy said in a voice that echoed off the walls.

Oh god, how did he get into this? "No, I'm fine."

The waiter nodded and left without a word.

"Okay," Sammy said. "Now, about this little in-fucking-junk-ton problem . . ."

Roy rubbed his temples with his thumbs, closed his eyes tight, and asked himself again: what the hell was he doing here?

## Chapter 9

---

“You cannot use that shot!” the producer shouted. “For the gazillionth time, no, no, no! I promised those people we would not use that shot.”

Going apeshit in an edit suite was not how Jackie Simon had imagined spending her evenings at this stage in her career. Most of her sorority sisters from Wellesley were now enjoying the fruits of domesticity. They’d given their last blow jobs years ago. By this time of night, they were putting the kids to bed, listening to the adult contemporary station on satellite radio, and longing for that fourth chilled Stoli. Jackie hadn’t spoken to any of her Tri-Delt buddies in well over a year. The last chat she’d had with a college chum had been when an old girlfriend named Margaret Minch called her a couple of months ago. Margaret and Jackie had worked countless hours for the Wellesley chapter of Feminists Against Right-wing Tyranny (FART) when they were in school. Now Margaret lived in New Jersey with her fat, bald culvert-and-manhole-manufacturer of a husband and their four Xbox-addicted children. That final phone conversation had lasted all of ten excruciating minutes before Jackie faked an emergency and cut Margaret off in the middle of a diatribe about her new hybrid minivan.

Jackie had also lost touch with most of her pals. She had

moved into the cheapest uptown apartment she could find nine months ago, but hadn't had a chance to make many new friends. As for office colleagues, they were either on their third martinis in trendy Midtown bars or trying to catch a little sleep on the train back to Westchester.

At least Jackie had her work. This was the life she'd chosen: thirty-six years old, twice divorced, childless, and screaming like a madwoman at a pair of smelly throwback hippies manning an edit bay with staggering incompetence.

The editing boobs, both of whom looked like Tom Hanks after four years alone on the island, exchanged uneasy glances. Then the one who answered to Bong, a twenty-something production assistant who had worn the same Phish shirt to work for fourteen straight days, said, "Rock wants it in."

"Rock wants it in," she repeated.

They nodded.

"Do you have the credit sheet?"

No answer.

"Well, do you?"

"Sure," Bong said, shuffling papers on the narrow press-board counter where TV's highest-rated prime-time news-magazine, *Outer Boroughs*, was crafted out of raw video. "Here it is."

Jackie grabbed the script and shot sheet. "Whew," she said, wiping the back of her hand across her forehead. "I thought I'd been demoted. But it says right here: 'Produced by Jackie Simon.' Did either of you guys look at this before you decided to put that shot back in?"

Bong rolled his eyes. "Look, Jackie, don't put us in the middle, okay?" he said. "Rock told us—"

"In the middle—"

"Rock told us to put it back in—"

"Because I can't see how this puts you in the middle of

anything. If I tell you to pull a shot, you pull the shot. Period! End of discussion! If somebody tells you something different, you have him come see me. Are we clear?"

"Clear," Bong said.

"No worries," his to-that-point-silent partner, known around the office as Critter, echoed.

"Good."

"So you'll talk to Rock?" Critter said.

Jackie turned her back and counted to five. When she looked back, the shot in question—a side-angle view of a father who had just found out his Purple-Heart-and-Silver-Star-winning second lieutenant son was gay, mouthing the word "fuck" over and over again through a steady stream of tears—was being deleted. She had gotten full cooperation from the family under the stipulation that the shot never see the light of day.

"Put the tape on my desk," she said. With that, Jackie Simon marched out the edit bay and made a beeline for her boss's office.

A few feet out of the door, she heard Critter say, "Jackie Simon: the woman who put the 'c' in diva."

She considered going back and ripping Critter a new orifice, but she controlled the impulse. Let them think it. Such things could be good for one's reputation in the flesh-eating swamp of network television. Besides, she was the one with the Emmys, Peabodys, and Edward R. Murrow awards on her mantel, the one with the agent, and the contract, and the standing table at Palm West. She hadn't gotten here by ignoring the shenanigans of bubble-headed pretty boys like Rock Firestone.

Jackie had been saddled with Rock since the day her boss, Bill Shoan, hired the former governor's son as a "special correspondent." Her relationship with the new guy had been cemented the moment they'd been introduced. "You've got to be shitting me," she'd said in between fits of laughter,

a bad start to what proved to be a downhill relationship all the way. Rock was the son of a philandering one-term chief executive and his lush wife, who had been a huge fan of the detective show *McMillan and Wife* before Rock Hudson's coming-out party. Rock wasn't a shortening of the equally inane Rocky. His name was Rock, and he wore it like a badge of honor. Jackie laughed almost every time she heard it during their first year together.

Since his first fateful day on the job at *Outer Boroughs*, Rock Firestone had done everything in his power to sabotage Jackie's authority. Were it not for the fact that Rock stood two notches below Bong and Critter on the intellectual evolution pole, the little shit might have succeeded. Mostly, Rock was an annoyance, one Jackie had put up with for far too long.

She marched double-time down the rows of offices and edit bays to the corner door. It was open, which was perfect. Nothing Jackie loved better than a dramatic entrance.

The moment was spoiled when she saw Bill Shoan standing behind his desk with a phone to his ear. His briefcase was open and filled with contracts, press clippings, and a couple of DVDs. No doubt Bill was on his way to an Upper East Side dinner party where he would swoon the guests with tales from the trenches.

Jackie crossed her arms, cocked her hip, and whinnied like a freshly bred mare. For the umpteenth time, she found herself looking at the photos on Bill's wall—Bill in his crew-cut twenties with Pierre Salinger and John Kennedy; Bill wearing sideburns and an ancient tux, laughing with a young Bob Woodward; Bill on the sofa in the Oval Office with that hapless rube Jimmy Carter; Bill sitting at a corner table at the Four Seasons with Joan Baez, Steve Jobs, Maureen Dowd, and Steven Bing. The importance of a television bigwig could always be measured by the pictures on his wall. "Venerable" was the word people used to

describe Bill Shoan these days. Funny how women in television never made it to venerable. Barbara Walters had been relegated to midmorning coffee klatches and the occasional special where she got to ask Tom Cruise if he was sorry he'd jumped on Oprah's couch, while grand dame reporters like Lesley Stahl were one face-lift away from bursting like the *Hindenburg*.

"I was just on my way to find you," Bill said. Jackie had gotten lost in thought while staring at a photo of her boss and Dennis Rodman. She hadn't heard Bill hang up the phone.

"Rock's at it again," Jackie said without preamble.

Bill held up his hands. "I don't want to hear it."

"You've got to hear it, Bill." She wasn't quite yelling, but her tone wasn't conversational. "The guy's retarded or something. He went to the boys in the edit bay and told them to add a shot that could have jeopardized our whole story. You've got to do something."

"I'll take care of it," Bill said without making eye contact. "Now, I've got something for you."

Jackie wasn't ready to change the subject, especially after an innocuous answer like "I'll take care of it," but she didn't have much choice.

"Take care of it how?" she asked.

He cut her off again and handed her a file folder. "I need you to head down to Biloxi, Mississippi, and check out this kid who blew himself up, some sort of environmentalist attempting to sabotage a bridge—something about a casino and a racetrack."

"What?" Now she was shouting. "Bill, I can't go to Mississippi. There's no *there* there. This was a one-day story. The cable guys bled it dry."

"Yeah, well, I'm hearing that there might be more to it. Justice just sent a guy named Robert Redding down to investigate. You need to see what he's up to."

"Redding . . . the car guy from North Carolina, the one from that movie?"

"That's him."

"Oh Christ, Bill!"

"Not now, Jackie."

"Another movie tie-in? Why don't we just stop pretending to be a newsmagazine and hire Mary Hart to do star-fucker stories?"

"I think there's a story here," Bill shouted back. "And I'm sending my best producer to check it out. Now get out of here and get packed. I want you in Mississippi tomorrow."

"A frigging racecar driver," she said.

"He's a federal prosecutor now."

Jackie grunted and opened the file. "Horses or dogs?" she asked.

"What?"

"The racetrack. Is it horses or dogs?"

"Cars," Bill said.

Jackie slapped the file shut. "Are you shitting me? A casino with one of those bootlegger tracks?"

"It's a one-of-a-kind plan," Bill said with the kind of smile he usually reserved for the closing moments of a meeting.

"Unbelievable."

"I not only want you to believe it, I want you to see it."

She turned to leave.

"Jackie," Bill said.

"Yeah?"

"What did Rock do?"

"He added a shot of a man saying 'fuck.'"

"Oh, hell. Audio?"

"No, but you don't need it. A five-year-old can see what he's saying."

"All right. I'll take care of it."

She still didn't like how that sounded.



## Chapter 10

---

The TV trucks attracted a small crowd of neighbors to the widow Santini's Montgomery House B&B. Cora Verstine returned Constance's serving tray, the one she'd borrowed two Christmases ago, and U. L. Hammond, the neighborhood hermit who hadn't been seen in months, picked that moment to walk his springer spaniel on the beach. Hugh Deaver took a far less subtle approach. He knocked on the door and asked Constance what the hell was going on.

This ruckus had an apoplectic effect on Special Agent in Charge Peevey, who digressed into a pacing, sputtering, cell-phone-dialing fit. He called the assistant director at the New Orleans Field Office, the federal courthouse in Oxford, and the Hoover Building in Washington. Most of the conversations were brief and loud. All ended with Peevey clucking like a wounded rooster and pacing the floor in the parlor, red-faced and helpless.

Once the media frenzy died down and the trucks and cars sped away, Johnny Pea thickened the tension between Robert's team and the special agents by suggesting that they TiVo all the late local newscasts. Peevey snarled and took his team to the Ponderosa for dinner, insulting the widow Constance Saltini, who had baked a rump roast and boiled butter peas for everyone.

"I have all this food. I hope you're planning on eating in," she said to Robert, Ty, and Johnny Pea.

"Of course," Johnny Pea said. "I've been wondering what smelled so appetizing."

Ty wandered toward the dining room muttering what sounded like, "You sad pitiful sack." Robert and Johnny Pea ignored him as they marched through the giant sliding doors and sat down at the twelve-place table.

"I feel so scattered," Constance said. "I apologize for not being a better host. I thought everyone was eating here tonight, so I'm afraid I've prepared entirely too much food."

She spoke Spanish to a Latina woman they hadn't seen before, but who seemed at home in the big house. Robert assumed the woman was a housekeeper or cook or both. Constance and the Spanish woman brought out a washtub-sized bowl of peas, two fresh-baked loaves of sourdough, and a bowl of green vegetables.

"What's that?" J. P. Westport whispered to Ty.

"Collard greens."

"Oh, you've never had collards?" Constance asked.

"No, I'm looking forward to trying them."

"You're in for a treat," she said with a smile.

"I hope so."

Ty choked on the pea he had just put in his mouth. Robert slapped his back.

"Are you all right?" the widow Saltini asked.

"He'll be fine," Robert said.

"Well, I'll be right out with the roast."

"Let me help you." Johnny Pea was on his feet and heading to the kitchen before Constance could object.

"You've got to get that boy laid," Ty said to Robert once J.P. and the widow left the room.

"Me! I'm his boss. What about his office mates like, oh, you?"

The swinging door from the kitchen swung open and Johnny Pea strolled in with the cooked ass of a large bovine. They ate like refugees.

Constance apologized a dozen times for her lapses in protocol. "Things just got so hectic; I haven't had a chance to properly welcome all of you to Biloxi. Is this your first visit?"

"It is," Robert said.

"We were discussing that very thing on our way in," Johnny Pea said. "None of us have been here, although some of us feel a certain kinship to the area."

"What?"

"Nothing," Robert said. "I only wish we were here under more inviting circumstances."

"It's tragic what happened to that fellow," Constance said. "So young." Her brow crinkled and her eyes turned sad, a hint that she was someone who understood grief.

Ty reached for a second helping of butter peas and asked, "What are the locals saying about what happened?"

"All sorts of rumors are flying," she said. "That's one thing about this town: no matter how big it gets, it's still small-town Mississippi. Everybody knows everybody's business. The older folks are saying the fool deserved to blow himself to smithereens—coming down here to destroy our bridge and all. Most folks feel sorry for him, or at least they feel badly for his family. It must be awful for them."

"The consensus is that he accidentally blew himself up?" Ty asked.

"Of course. Isn't that what happened?"

All three guests put food in their mouths and chewed.

"These collard greens are delicious," Johnny Pea said.

"And the roast is excellent," Robert added.

"Oh my goodness," Constance said. "If he didn't do it to himself . . ." A wide-eyed note of recognition spread

across her face. "I take it you'd be happy if this news didn't leave the house."

"For the time being," Robert said. "It won't be long before the coroner's report becomes public, but until then I'd like to keep my television appearances to a minimum."

"Oh my, I don't know what to say."

"Can you give us a little insider history?" Ty asked. "What's the big deal about this bridge?"

"Oh, it's not the bridge," she said. "It's the island."

"Dabearer."

"A wonderful place."

"Do you know a lot about it?"

"Oh sure, you can't live here long without knowing the history of Dabearer Island."

Ty and Robert put their forks down and listened while Johnny Pea dove into another helping of collard greens.

Constance gave the *Reader's Digest* version, starting on a sweltering September day in 1699 when Pierre le Moyne d'Iberville grounded his canoe on the black banks of the Mississippi, surveyed his surroundings, swatted a few mosquitoes, raised his arms, and declared the entire region to be the sole property of King Louis XIV of France. Minutes later a swarm of gnats attacked Pierre, forcing him back in the river, where he spat, snorted, and bathed himself in mud.

Bugs aside, Pierre's new territory proved quite popular. Settlers paddled downriver like winter ducks. They established outposts with funny names like New Orleans and Baton Rouge. One of the first of those permanent settlements was a commercial fishing village on a small black-water inlet. The French named it Biloxi.

The village never grew much. It didn't border the river. The land was scrubby and the weather unbearably hot. Its only asset was the string of barrier islands fifteen miles

offshore that provided great protection from potential invaders. Ship Island, Cat Island, Horn Island, and Petit Bois Island lined the Gulf like little soldiers guarding the mainland.

Dabearer Island, then known as Marais Inutile, was too close to shore to be a fort. It could have been deemed a mosquito and gnat sanctuary. One Norwegian immigrant tried farming the island. Whether or not he caught malaria is unknown, but according to legend he went insane and killed his family before drowning himself in a gator pit on the island's south side. A year after this tragedy, the French condemned Marais Inutile, and turned it into a quarantine colony for lepers, smallpox victims, and the occasional political prisoner.

The provincial governors were not without compassion, though. Sometime in the early 1730s, a group of physicians wrote a letter stating that "leaving the sick to die on such a godforsaken strip of purgatory without so much as provision for food and drink constitutes inhumane and uncivilized treatment." The governor agreed. Within a week, the French shipped over a boatload of slaves to care for the infected. Eighty percent of the slaves died in the first year. The survivors became the first permanent residents of Marais Inutile.

For the next two and a half centuries, ancestors of those first slaves lived in small tabby dwellings and fished the waters of Mississippi Sound. Then American colonists won two skirmishes with the Brits, while Marais Inutile remained unchanged. Thomas Jefferson bought Mississippi, Louisiana, and all points north to Canada from the French, but the residents of Marais Inutile rarely ventured to the mainland. By 1840 Biloxi was the seafood capital of the South, and a winter retreat for many wealthy plantation owners throughout Dixie. That year, one of the wealthiest of those land barons, a turpentine and tobacco

magnate named Braxton Plunkett, bought Marais Inutile for fifty thousand dollars. State officials were thrilled. None of them asked Ole Brax what he planned to do with the island, because nobody cared. It was like free money. As far as Mississippians were concerned, this was the most one-sided land deal since Peter Minuit purchased Manhattan for twenty-four dollars worth of baubles and beads. Two weeks after the deed transfer, Mississippi's governor and secretary of treasury hopped a train to Memphis for a month-long celebration.

Plunkett never set foot on his island. He never intended to. He bought it for his son, Beau.

Beaumont Plunkett was a frail child, rail-thin and pale as a bleached sheet. He had come into the world two months early, and had been expected to leave it after his first night. Though he survived, the child weathered such maladies as the croup, the crud, and the rot. But it was the "spells" that caused all the trouble. Beau suffered from what is now known as Tourette's syndrome, but folks in the 1840s believed the condition to be the product of evil spirits. The local priest proclaimed Beau possessed, and burned and bled him to rid his soul of the torturous demons.

Then the family doctor diagnosed Beau with fevered insanity. Treatment for this included leeches on Beau's shaved scalp, and immersing his head in a bucket of vinegar. Physicians seemed stumped when these treatments failed. The vinegar just aggravated the problem. After several months, Beau was declared "incurably mad."

Braxton Plunkett didn't give a shit what caused the trouble. The boy was an embarrassment.

"Welcome to Mississippi, Mr. President. Let me introduce my son, Beau."

"Nice to—FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!—meet you."

"Thank you for receiving us, Your Excellency. This is my wife, Estelle."

“Excellency.”

“And my son, Beau.”

“Your—CUNT! CUNT! CUNT!—Excellency.”

People began to talk. Invitations to prestigious social functions stopped coming. Even the slaves whispered about the “haints” torturing that poor boy. Braxton considered shipping the lad off to Europe, or up north to one of those Yankee asylums. None of those options was as attractive, or as cheap, as the one he settled on.

Beau Plunkett and a small staff of slaves arrived on Brax’s newly purchased island in the early weeks of 1841. They built a modest home—the largest structure on the island by a factor of ten—and set about planting a sustenance garden. Because he was the first healthy white man many of the residents had seen, Beau’s arrival was treated like the discovery of a new exotic species. Elders caucused and voted on how to handle their new neighbor. The fact that Beau’s father owned their island didn’t mean squat. Like Native Americans, the residents of Marais Inutile thought owning land was as silly as having a star registered in your name. Many of the elders had, themselves, been property. You lived with the land and off the land; you didn’t own the land. All the residents farmed, fished, and lived together without regard for plots or plats. Everyone shared the five freshwater wells. If a family killed a gator or a boar, half the island would show up for the feast.

For that reason, the island’s elder council didn’t hesitate to waltz through Beau’s front door and make themselves at home in his parlor.

“Oh my lord!” Beau shouted when he came out of his bedroom. “Who are you? What are you doing here? Sam! Sam! Come—FUCK! BITCH! FUCK! BITCH! FUCK!—quickly!”

One of the slaves ran in from the kitchen. The islanders didn’t budge. They stared at their new neighbor. Beau

stared back. Sam looked back and forth between them like a rabbit trapped between two hounds.

The largest and apparently oldest of the islanders strolled to within inches of Beau. His face was strong and ruddy, his hair a shock of white, his tough skin the hue of burned coal. He stared at the trembling teenager as if he were examining a horse.

This was the first time a Negro had ever looked Beau straight in the eye. He was petrified. The black man stared quizzically at Beau's ears and nose. Then he put the back of his hand on the boy's dainty cheeks. Beau flinched, but his feet were frozen in place. The man's hand went down, and Beau felt it clutch his scrotum. He let out a hoot, and his hands flapped at his side.

The man released him and turned to his group. "'Tis a boy chile," he said. The others nodded.

"Now, see here," Beau said when he realized this exercise had been to determine his gender. But his condition betrayed him. Just as he was about to lash out in righteous indignation, his hands flew above his head and he spun around on one foot shouting, "COCK! COCK! COCK! COCK!"

The crowd stared.

Sam stepped in and explained that his master's son was not right in the skull. The eldest nodded, and another caucus ensued. After several minutes of hushed whispers, the old man marched back over to Beau.

"My name's Ezekiel," he said in a dialect that Beau could barely understand. "You can stay on Dabearer Island."

Ezekiel hadn't actually said Dabearer Island. He'd said "the barrier island," which was what residents of Marais Inutile had always called their home. The words ran together, and in the dialect of the islanders, "the barrier island" came out "Dabearer Island."



From that moment forward, the useless swampy strip off the coast of Biloxi officially became Dabearer Island.

Beau Plunkett thrived in his new home. Ezekiel taught him how to hunt and fish, how to skin and cook alligator, how to take salt from the sea and cure meat, and which trees and roots on the island could be used as medicine. Beau taught the island's children to read and write, and he gave piano lessons to anyone who wished to learn. His home, like all the others, became communal property, with as many as six or seven islanders sleeping under his roof on any given night.

Two weeks after arriving, Beau freed his slaves. Every one of them stayed with him.

Within a year, Beau's condition had all but disappeared. About once a month he quacked and hooted at the dinner table, but the frequency of the spells decreased a hundred-fold. Not that any of his new neighbors cared. On the few occasions when Beau slipped into verbal spasms the islanders continued as if nothing had happened. For the first time in his life, Beau found unconditional acceptance, and happiness.

Two years to the day after moving into his new home, Beau Plunkett jumped the broom with Ezekiel's only daughter, a strong and beautiful girl of fifteen named Bloom-of-Ruth. Everyone turned out for the ceremony. Beau's former slave Sam officiated, which suited the bride and groom just fine. Beau still carried second-degree scars from the botched exorcisms of his youth. A traditional slave wedding seemed fitting.

Quarterly supplies from Papa Braxton's plantation stopped coming after the marriage. Beau couldn't have cared less. Bloom-of-Ruth birthed four boys in five years, and would have six more children (including twin girls) in the next decade.

This sent Braxton Plunkett over the edge. It was one

thing to have his son prevaricating with Negroes—god knew, Brax himself had taken manly relief in some unmentionable places—but to marry and birth children! The boy was, indeed, a child of Satan. Braxton planned to petition his pal the governor to cleanse their god-fearing state of all life on that disease-ridden island, including his own son and grandchildren. But the governor never heard the plea. The morning he was to leave for Jackson, Brax fell off a gelding and impaled himself on a trellis in his muscadine vineyard. He hung on for three days, but never spoke another word.

Beau shared his inheritance with friends and extended family. By 1850, every Dabearer resident had a tabby home, a corn barn, and enough livestock to keep the children comfortable. They also had property. Beau divided the island into twenty-acre squares and deeded every family a plot. Their communal way of living didn't change, but their status in the state did. When Union soldiers invaded Biloxi in 1864, residents of Dabearer, the only landowning Negroes in Mississippi, were left out of the conflict.

They were left alone after the war as well. Carpetbaggers didn't bother them. Reconstructionists left them alone. The only time the island made news was when Beau Plunkett passed away in his sleep in 1895. Mark Twain wrote a eulogy for Plunkett that was picked up by most of the nation's elite newspapers, and for a few months afterward, photographers, journalists, and some curious northeasterners sailed to Dabearer to see for themselves the island Twain described as "so small and ugly even bigotry wouldn't visit."

The attention didn't last long, which suited the islanders just fine. They and their descendants spent the next hundred years the way they'd spent the previous hundred: fishing, farming, and forgoing the marvels of progress. Their country fought seven more wars while residents of Dabearer dug

two more freshwater wells. Women petitioned for the vote and immigrants flooded ports and fueled the Industrial Revolution while the island got its first gas-powered generator. In Mississippi, Emmett Till was lynched, the National Guard occupied Philadelphia, Martin Luther King marched, Ole Miss integrated, Trent Lott went through three cases of hairspray on his way to landslide victory in the Senate, and Ingalls Shipbuilding became the state's largest employer. Dabearer got its first school.

The island also produced its first college graduate: Hosea Plunkett, a history teacher at the University of South Alabama and the great-great-great-grandson of Beaumont and Bloom-of-Ruth Plunkett.

Hosea was one of the most vocal critics of the Dabearer Development Authority. He'd led several protest marches.

Robert would want to speak with Hosea in the next day or so.

When Constance finished the story, Johnny Pea leaped to his feet like he'd been electrocuted. He grabbed three dirty dishes and the remnants of the collards before the widow Saltini could voice an objection. The Latina helper must have gone home for the night, and Johnny Pea was determined to be as helpful as he could.

"You're a guest," she said. "You shouldn't be clearing the table."

"Nonsense. Do you save these greens or throw them out?"

"I'll get a plastic bowl." She held the kitchen door open for him.

"That was some story," he said as he piled the plates in the sink and began rinsing. "How many people live on Dabearer now?"

"Nobody knows. Could be a hundred. Could be thirty. The last time a census taker went over he couldn't get a

good count, but he came back with a fever and a rash. Spent three days in the hospital.”

“The developers don’t know?”

“I don’t think so.”

“What about the casino and track? They had to buy the property from somebody.”

“Oh, they bought it from the state.”

“The state?”

“Oh yes, our legislature condemned the whole island. The state sold it to the Dabearer Development Authority and Speedway Properties. Bigger tax base, and all.”

Johnny Pea let that rumble around his brain for a few seconds. Eminent domain cases were all the rage, especially after the Supreme Court gave tacit approval to the practice. The term eminent domain came from the Latin *dominium eminens*, which, directly translated, meant “supreme lordship.” In most cases, the government, state or local, was the supreme lord. Dictionaries defined eminent domain as “the power of the state to take private property for public use with payment to the owner.” Unfortunately, nobody at the Supreme Court had a copy of *Webster’s New World* lying around, or if they did, Clarence Thomas had spilled ketchup over the words “public use.” A city council in Connecticut threw residents out of their homes because their houses didn’t have attached garages, and then sold the land to a condo developer. A mayor in Michigan condemned a tire store on a busy street corner so the city could sell the land to Sears. The most egregious case Johnny Pea had read involved the seizure of a midtown Manhattan apartment building (and the eviction of the residents thereof) to make room for the new headquarters of *The New York Times*. Public use suddenly meant whatever the “supreme lordship” thought would increase tax revenues. It was sickening. And it was legal. To hear that Robert’s stockcar buddies planned to build their racetrack

and casino on land that had been seized this way made the collard greens Johnny Pea had just eaten sit in his stomach a little harder.

“Weren’t there any objections?” he asked Constance.

“Oh sure, Hosea Plunkett tried to raise a stink, but nothing became of it. I’ve got a friend in the clerk’s office who says title searches are a nightmare. If documents ever existed, they’re long gone. A lot of the islanders—that’s how I refer to them, by the way; you’ll hear a lot worse around here—anyway, a fair number of them live ‘off the grid.’ No IDs, no Social Security numbers or driver’s licenses: God knows how many people have died over there without any record that they ever lived.”

“So the state just took the island.”

“They paid all the islanders some piddly sum, calling the place ‘blighted.’ I don’t know how you can call something blighted when you haven’t seen it.”

“Who did that?”

“Our lieutenant governor, a fellow named Roy Coon. He led the charge on the bridge. He went on and on at his press conference about what a great thing this would be for Mississippi—‘turning blight into brilliance’ were his exact words.”

“Brilliance,” Johnny Pea said.

She laughed, and Johnny Pea felt some of his anxiety loosen. The dimples were even prettier than he’d first thought.

“Yeah,” she said. “We’re not known for electing the best and brightest down here. Anyway, turns out one of the reporters asked Governor Roy if he’d ever been to Dabearer Island. He hemmed and hawed for a minute before admitting he’d never seen the place.”

“That didn’t stop him from blighting it.”

“Newspapers had a field day with that one.”

Johnny Pea wondered how he would broach this subject

with his boss. After all, it was Robert's buddies who were involved in this.

Constance poured a pot of fresh coffee into a silver pitcher. She met his eyes with her own. "How do you like it?" she asked.

He stood dumbfounded for a second before realizing she was talking about the coffee. "Oh, ah . . . cream, no sugar," he finally blurted.

She nodded toward the dining room. "Shall we?"

"Sure," he said as he wiped his hands and held the door open. This wasn't like him. John Paul Westport had been one of the most coveted trophies in the Ivy League, with a trail of brokenhearted girlfriends from Newark to Newport. Being smitten with the widow Constance was one thing, but behaving like a love-struck twelve-year-old was embarrassing. He needed to pull himself together.

"J.P. and I are going to have coffee on the porch," Constance announced to Robert and Ty.

"We are?" Johnny Pea said with some measure of glee.

"Would anyone care to join us?"

He wished he could have slapped the smirks off their faces.

"No thanks," Robert said. "I think I'm going for a walk. It's been quite a day."

"My, look at the time," Ty said. "I must retire upstairs."

"Thank you for the wonderful dinner," Robert said.

Ty nodded, and added, "Best meal I've had away from home in years." Then he grinned, stood up from the table, and patted Johnny Pea on the back. "Enjoy your coffee."

## Chapter 11

---

Jackie Simon ordered tomato juice to complement the Alaskan salmon and bell peppers she had carried with her onto the plane. As if airline food didn't suck enough, breakfast flights had cut back. Now they handed out inedible pastries and fried ham croissants—fat, carbs, and a week's worth of sodium.

"Tea or coffee?" the flight attendant asked.

Jackie grunted and waved her away. She hated commercial flights. Even though she never plopped her rump in anything smaller than a business-class seat, she deserved to be stretched out on the network jet. Those two trips to Dubai on the BBJ II had set the standard. At forty thousand feet she'd worked at a desk, lounged on a leather couch, slept in a full-sized bed, watched CNN, read the AP wire, and eaten crab-stuffed mahi-mahi off Mikasa china. The three last-minute flights to Abilene, Texas, during the last election had been on a Lear, a little smaller, but still better than this morning's long lines, surly airline employees, and plastic forks. Plus, she had to change planes in Atlanta. That alone would burn up a big chunk of the morning, a morning she could have been spent shining the bright light of journalism onto the underbelly of some corrupt politician or corporate executive. This had been

her argument to Bill Shoan. She didn't want to beg, but why the hell couldn't she have the Lear? It was the least they could do, especially since they were sending her to interview a bunch of inbred hicks in Buttfuck, Mississippi.

"You with ABS?" asked the passenger next to her, a crisp, smiling, middle-aged man who looked like a time-share salesman. He pointed to the various laminated network credentials on her backpack.

"How'd you guess?" she said.

They never asked Rock if he worked for the network. Rock would have been recognized the second he walked into the terminal, assuming the network's star would ever be caught dead at a domestic ticket counter. She couldn't remember the last time Rock had darkened the cabin of a commercial airliner. He was talent. Departure schedules and TSA checkpoints were for lowly producers, the people who found the stories, interviewed the subjects, pieced together the facts, checked the sources, wrote the scripts, and edited the tapes.

Oblivious to sarcasm, Time-Share Boy answered Jackie's question. "I saw your bag tags," he said.

Bag tags! As if she were some tourist on her way to a golf outing.

"I'm a producer for *Outer Boroughs*," she said. She couldn't let it go. This guy thought she sold ads or something. And why wouldn't he? She was sitting next to him sipping tomato juice out of a plastic fucking cup!

"Really?" the guy said, shuffling in his seat to face Jackie. "I love that show. That Rock Firestone, he's something else, isn't he? Who would've thought?"

"Yeah, who would've thought?"

Jackie pulled a Yankees cap down on her forehead and dug a laptop out of her backpack. If this wasn't a clear signal that the conversation was over, she also pulled out a three-ring binder and plopped it onto her tray table. Time-



Share would have to chat it up with the flight attendants.

Before leaving the office, Jackie had run a Lexus-Nexus and Google search on Robert “Redball” Redding, and had an intern print and bind the results. The volume of paper surprised her. Not that she planned on reading all this crap, but she did need to know something about the source of this supposed story.

She put on a headset and listened to the Kings of Leon until they reached a safe cruising altitude. Then she turned on the laptop and inserted a DVD she’d had couriered to her apartment. A&E had patched together one of their *Biography* shows on Redding to coincide with the movie opening. Typical cut-paste-and-voice-over job, but good enough for cable.

*“A champion of the stockcar circuit. Millions in earnings. Life on the edge. See how a fighting spirit and a family tragedy drove this racing legend from victories on the racetrack to winning in the courtroom. Redball Redding. Tonight on Biography.”*

Fast cut. Big crowds. Men in sleeveless T-shirts and dirty jeans, standard arrest-photo attire for wife beaters. Beer cans. RVs. Red, white, and blue.

Another cut. Cars. Fast, loud, and covered in sponsor logos. A yellow car fishtailing into a silver car. Silver car wobbling. A blue car hitting a silver car from behind. Silver car sliding up. Yellow car hitting the wall. Smoke. Fire. Cars spinning and flying.

God, what a train wreck, Jackie thought.

*“The world of stockcar racing,”* the narrator’s voice said. *“Fast. Loud. And above all . . . dangerous.”*

The shot cut to a camera inside a car. Smoke covered the lens. A skid. A squeal. A wall. BAM! Black.

“Ouch, that had to leave a mark,” she said.

Time-Share Boy looked up for a second, but quickly went back to his *USA Today*.

The narrator continued: “*For fifteen years, there was no bigger name in stockcar than Robert ‘Redball’ Redding. An awe-shucks southern gentleman from humble North Carolina roots, Robert Redding was known by friends, family, and fellow racers as one of the kindest and most competitive pioneers in the growing sport of stockcar racing . . .*”

The piece moved into the standard *Biography* template. Still photos from high school yearbooks accompanied a narrative on Robert’s childhood in Burlington, North Carolina. A couple of old high school teachers and friends had been tracked down. They looked like moose caught in a spotlight, but they said nice things—“That boy always wanted to win, even in a footrace,” “One of the nicest kids I ever taught,” “He was always driving the wheels off of everything.” Then the narration jumped to Redding’s early victories in go-karts, and the dirt track ASA series. “Personal tragedy” teased the first commercial break.

Jackie broke open the notebook and skimmed a couple of pages before she found an AP story. Five paragraphs in, she found the nut. “The young racer’s life changed when his father, Freddie Redding, was murdered in the family’s auto repair shop,” the story said. “Robert Redding found his father’s body.”

A&E went one step further, tying the murder to Redding’s decision to retire from racing, go to law school, and become a North Carolina and then a federal prosecutor. That made as much sense as anything Jackie had seen or heard. According to a recent piece in *People*, that silly movie opened with Freddie Redding’s murder, followed by a young Robert Redding announcing to his mother that he would avenge his father’s death by becoming a crime fighter. A little too *Spider-Man*, Jackie thought, but, hey, that wouldn’t stop *Outer Boroughs* from using it.

Then the narrator teased another segment about how

Redding got the name Redball. Jackie tore through her documents until she found a twenty-year-old *Daily Telegraph* piece. Something about the 24 Hours of Le Mans. Before she could finish reading, the DVD flashed to some old race footage of rally cars on a road course. She'd never seen the race at Le Mans, but this looked like it. The narrator confirmed that Robert Redding had driven in that race, as had another stockcar legend, Junior Senior, Sr.

Jesus, where did these people come from?

*"The race, a relay with three drivers per team, was eighteen hours old before Robert Redding and Junior Senior took the track at the same time,"* the narrator said. *"In their first racing lap, Redding took a shallow line through one of the turns, blocking Senior to the inside."*

Okay, Jackie thought, I can follow this.

*"Seconds later, Senior attempted an aggressive pass . . . one that ended in disaster."*

They played the scene in slow motion, cutting between several camera angles. Redding's car wobbled. For a split second it looked as though he'd saved it. Then something happened to the front suspension. The car flipped twice, spun once in the air, and exploded into a giant ball of fire on impact. Even a hard-nosed news veteran like Jackie Simon felt a chill run over her as she watched the tape.

*"No one expected the driver to survive,"* the narrator gravely opined.

Then Jackie saw the dark silhouette of a man stagger out of the fire.

*"But Robert Redding walked away. His only injuries were a broken wrist, a sprained ankle, and a bruised ego. None of those injuries kept him from venting his frustration at his fellow stockcar driver."*

Cut to a young Robert Redding, his hair disheveled and soot on his face. *"I got no idea what Junior was thinking,"*

Redding said. *"He had plenty of room, and just acted like an idiot out there."*

Wow, he was handsome, Jackie thought. If he hadn't gotten fat, bald, and stupid in his middle age, he could show well in close-up.

The show then cut to Junior Senior, a slack-jawed greaseball with a bushy mustache and giant sunglasses. The tape must have come from TWI. A British commentator asked Senior about the incident. He gave a shit-eating grin and said, *"It's one of them there racing deals. I's glad to see Redding come walking out of that redball. It could have been a lot worse."*

The narrator broke in. *"From that day forward,"* he said, *"Robert William Redding became 'Redball,' the man who had walked out of fire."*

All right, Jackie thought, this might not be so bad after all.

## Chapter 12

---

While Jackie Simon sipped tomato juice and watched her DVD, Senator Howell Shelwank rounded his back like a hundred-year-old turtle and slumped so low in his Corinthian leather couch that the collar of his jacket rode above his ears. He stared at the open file on his small coffee table with eyes so pinched the slits and wrinkles ran together. The corners of the senator's mouth turned down until the fat from his jowls hung below his chin. Without the makeup he applied for C-SPAN, Shelwank looked like a six-foot troll in a Brooks Brothers suit.

An intelligence officer with the kind of neat, expressionless face normally found in movies about clones or robots sat across from Shelwank, feet firmly planted on the floor, hands at his sides. The intelligence officer ignored the open folder. He'd already studied the contents.

"So that's Hainan Island, China, from the air, huh?" Shelwank said as he picked up one of the photos in the file.

The officer said nothing.

Shelwank chewed his lower lip for a few seconds looking at the grainy photo. "Looks like Hawaii. What's that there?" he asked, pointing to a dot on the island's southeastern shore.

"That's the Sheraton," the intelligence guy said.

“Sheraton, Marriott, and a dozen golf courses, and we’re getting our intel from a satellite.”

“Troop presence on the island has quadrupled in the last three months.”

“Well, maybe we should send a few agents down to the Sheraton to check things out. Tell them to take their golf clubs and plenty of sunscreen. What’s next?” Shelwank had already flipped to the next photo.

“Azerbaijanis migrating to Iran,” the officer said.

The senator squinted and frowned. “They look like fire ants leaving one hill for another. I guess we can assume they aren’t crossing for their health. Al-Qaeda?”

“The data point that way, yes, sir.”

“Well, maybe they’ll get buried in a sandstorm or something. We can’t seem to kill the bastards; maybe God’ll do it for us.”

“That’s one possibility, sir.”

Shelwank put the photo back and took out a sheet listing what appeared to be wire transfers. “Bank stuff?” he asked.

“Yes, Senator,” the officer answered. “Argentina’s foreign minister is manipulating arbitrage markets on gold futures. So far he’s stashed fifteen million in ten accounts in Geneva, Jakarta, and Bangkok.”

“Hmm.” Shelwank didn’t know arbitrage from an armadillo. He suspected the intelligence officer knew this, so he avoided any embarrassing questions.

The ruse went on for several more minutes. Shelwank quizzed his briefing officer on Pakistani spies, Syrian troop movements near the Golan Heights, and the pedophilia problems plaguing the current king of Morocco. The senator tried to appear interested in these topics. Only when his studious frown gave him a headache did Shelwank ask the one question that mattered.

“So, ah, were you able to check out that Mississippi thing I asked about?”

Without blinking, the intelligence officer extracted three photos and several stapled pages from the file. Shelwank grabbed them like a fifth-grade boy going for an unwrapped *Hustler*.

"Imaging apologizes for the delay. It took time to isolate the area."

"I thought we had birds shooting the coasts nonstop."

"Affirmative, sir, but it's a big ocean. The Gulf Coast is under constant surveillance, but it would take a workforce the size of Wal-Mart's to monitor every image."

"So we've got the data; we just can't sort it."

"Yes, sir."

Shelwank smiled without looking at the intel guy. "You make a good case for increasing your agency's budget."

"That's not my call, Senator."

"Of course not."

"The first photo shows the piling in question, sir."

Shelwank studied the glossy eight-by-ten. A white arrow pointed to a gray spot with an orange dot in the middle, the *Pointe aux Chenes* Bridge, or at least the piling the crazy echo-terrorist had tried to blow up. The shining beacon looked like a glowing nipple on a giant breast against the background of a midnight sea.

"Next is our first image of the approaching vessel."

Sure enough, the next photo showed a bright yellow speck.

"Showed up pretty good, didn't it?" Shelwank asked.

"Heat imagery," the officer said with what could have passed for a sigh. Explaining elementary science to morons like Shelwank was bad enough; the fact that the senator oversaw the intelligence budget for the United States was downright depressing.

Shelwank moved to the next photo. It took a second for his brain to register what he was seeing. When he finally got it, he jumped like he'd been hit with a branding iron.

"What the hell is that?" he said, pointing to a second yellow spot on the black field.

"Another vessel," the intelligence officer said.

"A second boat?"

"That's affirmative."

"There was a second boat out there that night?"

"That's what the image shows, sir."

"Who is it? What are they doing?"

"Sorry, Senator, the satellite can show us what it is; it can't show us who it is."

"Well, where did it come from?"

"Vectored in from the barrier islands, sir. Imagery hasn't isolated the origination point, but it definitely approached from the south."

Shelwank quickly flipped to the next photo, which showed the two boats within a few feet of each other, almost touching. Time codes on the photos showed that the boats were together for almost fifteen minutes.

"What the hell are they doing?" he asked.

The intelligence officer didn't answer.

The next photo showed the mystery vessel heading south, away from the now-motionless original boat. The final shot showed a bright red blob outlined with white, yellow, orange, and violet rings.

"That's the explosion," the officer said, slowly, in case the senator didn't get it.

"What the hell happened out there?" Shelwank asked.

"Mr. Lichwick made no attempt to hide what he was doing," the officer said. "He did everything but leave a note."

"I'm hearing things," Shelwank said. "Folks in Mississippi are saying Lichwick might have been dead before the bomb went off. You got anything on that?"

"There's not enough data to draw competent conclusions, sir, but Mr. Lichwick did not try to conceal his identity or intentions."



"Goddamn echo-terrorist jihad bomber."

"Sir?"

"Nothing."

"Who the hell could have been out there?" Shelwank said out loud again to himself.

"I'm sure the FBI is asking that question, sir."

"Does the Bureau know about the second boat?"

The officer hesitated, but didn't change his expression. He was like an android pausing to process the question. Information-sharing was a sensitive subject, one agents danced around as gingerly as questions about race or gender. "Not . . . yet," he eventually said.

"Good."

"Sir?"

"Is anybody else asking about this, anybody on the committee, staffers, other agencies?"

"You've made the only request, Senator."

"Good. I think it's best if we keep a tight circle on this one. There's a lot going on behind the scenes. Stuff I'm not at liberty to discuss. It's best if this isn't widely distributed." His voice rose like this was a top-of-the-hour monologue. "I'll discuss this with the director. He can decide what needs to be passed down to the field level."

"The director."

"There's a lot going on here."

"Yes, sir."

"I hope I can count on you."

"That's affirmative, sir."

"Ask Imagery to pinpoint where that second boat came from. I need to have all the information at my disposal before I meet with the director."

"The director, yes, sir."

"A tight loop."

"Yes, Senator."

With that, the officer packed up the file, locked his at-

taché bag, and exited Shelwank's office without so much as a goodbye.

Once the officer was gone, Shelwank sank deeper into his couch and put his face in his hands. His straightforward dumbass-echo-terrorist-who-blew-himself-up theory just got a lot more complicated.

"What the hell happened down there?" he said, even though no one else was in the room.

Then he thought about Redball Redding. Shelwank's plan had been to send Redding to Mississippi to distract and deflect the media away from Dabearer Island. Celebrities always sucked the oxygen out of news cycles; there was no reason to believe Redball would be any different. That, coupled with his insistence that Lichwick be referred to as an "echo-terrorist" at every turn, was supposed to keep the spotlight away from the land grab and kickbacks that were going to make Shelwank wealthy. Now it looked as though Lichwick had been murdered, which opened the door for all kinds of unwanted attention. Redding might be attracting media to a possible homicide. At the very least this had "mystery of the week" written all over it. Throw in the fact that Sammy Dubose was on his way to Biloxi by now, and it appeared as though Shelwank had made matters worse instead of better.

The senator closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. Then he asked himself another question. "Good god, Howell," he said. "What have you done?"

## Chapter 13

---

As the sun popped up over the Fort Morgan Peninsula, R. Mark Swindal, Esquire, rubbed his dry eyes and tried to focus on the handwritten accounting ledger sprawled on the dirty counter before him—his dirty counter, the counter where, four days earlier, Swindal’s former employee, one Floyd Rowdy Smick (felon), had leased a boat to the now dearly departed Stanford Lichwick. Now the boat Smick had rented was in a zillion pieces and Attorney Swindal’s life, such that it was, had plunged even deeper into the seventh layer of hell. FBI agents had successfully gone through everything he owned, all the while asking pesky things like: *How long did you have a felon on the payroll? Did you do any sort of background check? And where, exactly, are your employment and Social Security records?* The IRS should be knocking on the door any day now. Swindal had seen the devastation those dark-suited revenueurs could cause when they descended like summer locusts. Christ, you couldn’t blame a guy for skimming a little, could you?

Soon it wouldn’t matter. The cash he’d hoarded in various underground accounts was long gone. Business had gone to shit. Nobody had even thought about renting a boat since Lichwick turned a twenty-five-footer into splinters. At least the insurance check would be there soon.

Swindal had bought Biloxi Boat Rental in the mid-nineties as part of a backroom handshake deal with the president of First Mississippi Trust: a deal that had included discounted legal services for first-dib bids on foreclosures. In any other state this sort of transaction, which violated no fewer than fifty lending laws, would have earned R. Mark Swindal a summary disbarment during his perp walk to the penitentiary, but not in Mississippi. The tort capital of the world not only didn't suspend the counselor, he was widely praised for cooperating with prosecutors during the trials of a dozen bank officers and directors. The fact that Swindal walked away uncharged surprised no one in Mississippi legal circles, although when he kept a local tavern called the Quarterdeck and Biloxi Boat Rental a few drive-by ethicists raised a mild stink. But even the local papers dropped the matter after a column or two.

Ah, those were the days. His firm had handled two thousand real estate closings a year; land was cheap; deals were easy; and money flowed like the Mighty Mississippi. Then Swindal's wife caught him bending a second-year intern over the office conference table. That same day, as he nursed a shiner over his right eye where his wife had struck him with a Rotary Club gavel, Swindal got word that one of his banking partners had become a blubbering, confessing, state's-evidence-turning weenie. The Feds moved into Swindal's office the same week his wife took the house and a lump-sum settlement that would have made Ivana Trump blush. He kept his law license and dodged a rap sheet, but business slumped after armed government agents swarmed his office.

After the Feds vacated and his divorce became final, Swindal whiled away his evenings on the corner stool at the Quarterdeck sipping chilled Bombay and pinching the bottoms of his female employees. Within a year, he had settled a class-action sexual harassment suit for two hun-

dred thousand and change, which forced him to sell the bar. A year after that, he settled two more suits and dodged another prosecutorial bullet for comingling escrow funds and kiting a few checks. This finally earned him a reprimand from the Mississippi Bar. Capping off Swindal's spiral toward oblivion, Get-A-Ticket.com, the online ticket-scalping service his ex-brother-in-law said "couldn't miss," withered under the bright light of a fraud investigation. Swindal lost a cool million when the company filed Chapter 7 on Christmas Eve. *Ho Fucking Ho.*

Now he was trying to balance the books at his last remaining asset, Biloxi Boat Rental, a dilapidated shack of a business that spun off just enough cash to pay Swindal's rent and bar tab. According to the ledger, three boats were thirty days past their mandatory inspection dates, and Gulf Marine Fuel had put them on COD. The gas tanks would be empty the moment anyone rented the fleet, assuming anybody ever rented from him again. God, he needed that insurance money. What could be taking so long? That ass-wipe insurance agent had sponged enough drinks off of him; the least he could do was track down an overdue adjustment check. The whole world knew what happened to Swindal's boat. Every news outlet west of Shanghai had covered the explosion. Did no one at Confederated Mutual own a television?

Swindal whipped out his BlackBerry and punched in the insurance agent's number. He would get an answer today.

Between the first and second rings, two large, dark-haired men walked through the rental office door and stood at the counter. At first glance, Swindal thought they looked like brothers, although the bigger one had a mean grimace and could have passed for an anabolic version of Pat Sajak. Was that sharkskin he was wearing?

"Be right with you, guys," Swindal said. "I just gotta make this call."

Sammy Dubose paid no attention to Swindal. "Need the owner," he said.

"Just a sec . . ." Swindal stopped when his insurance agent answered the phone. "Jerry? Mark . . . Look, it hasn't gotten here yet . . . Yeah, I'm still waiting . . . I've already talked to the FBI several times . . . They've got everything . . . I'm sure I will, but that shouldn't hold up . . . Look, I don't care what they're saying about the investigation; that has nothing to do with . . . Yeah, but you're in material breach . . . Injunction! No way, pal: if anybody seeks injunctive relief here it'll be me."

The word "injunction" jolted the two men standing on the other side of the counter. The big one in sharkskin started clenching and relaxing his fists.

"Hold on a second," Swindal said. He put the BlackBerry against his chest. "Do you guys need something? 'Cause I'm a little busy right this sec."

"You a lawyer?" Sammy asked.

"Maybe. Who wants to know?"

"You looking for an injunction?"

"I could be. Now, if you guys will excuse—AWWW-WEEEEEE!"

Sammy hit Swindal in the sternum, sending the BlackBerry flying against the wall and the lawyer and his stool sailing backward onto the warped floor.

"Oh Christ! Whoa, whoa, what are you doing?"

Richey grabbed one leg and Sammy the other. Together they pulled Swindal over the counter, leaving tattered strips of Tommy Bahama shirt on the linoleum.

"Ohhhhhh!"

A spinning room turned to a swirling dock, which turned to a clear, bright sky.

"Hey! Hey!" Swindal yelled.

When he opened his mouth again it filled with salt water. Sammy and Richey had dunked his head in the Gulf.

Swindal tried to pull himself above the waterline, but the marathon drinking sessions of the past ten years had congealed his lower abdominal muscles. He couldn't have done a sit-up on a flat floor. Asking his body for an upside-down hanging crunch through water was like asking an octogenarian with a broken hip to run a marathon. His lungs felt like they were going to burst, so he tried kicking his legs and flailing his arms. Panic soon set in.

"Shouldn't we find out where the owner's at?" Richey asked.

"Good idea," Sammy said, and they hoisted Swindal up.

He spewed a stream of black water and vomit before saying, "Please, please, take whatever you want."

"Where's the owner?" Sammy said.

"I'm the owner."

"I thought you were a lawyer."

"I am a lawyer."

They dunked him again, and the squirming intensified.

When they pulled him back up, Sammy said, "No more bullshit now. Who owns this place?"

Swindal hesitated. He wasn't sure if he was being drowned for owning Biloxi Boat Rental, for being a lawyer, or some combination of the two.

After a two-count, Sammy said, "Okay, this time you're not coming up."

"No! No! I'm the owner! I'm a lawyer, too, but I own the place. You can have whatever you want."

"Hand over the keys," Richey said.

"The what?"

"The keys, clusterfuck. Give me the keys to the building."

"They're in my pocket," Swindal said. "Just pull me up and I'll hand them over."

"Hand them over now."

His trembling hand fumbled in the pocket of his khakis. His shirttail fell over his face, which made it hard to get

his bearings, especially since he was also hanging upside down off the edge of the dock. "I know they're"—spit, vomit—"here somewhere."

"Hurry up!"

"Okay"—hack, cough—"I got them."

Swindal yanked the keys from his pocket, but his Hugo Boss wallet came out as well. As it fell toward his head, and ultimately the water, he dropped the keys and grabbed the wallet.

"Jesus Christ!" Sammy shouted. "Get the keys! Get the keys!"

Sammy and Richey dunked Swindal back in the drink. He jerked and kicked. Then a hand surfaced, frantically jingling a ring of wet keys.

The brothers pulled Swindal's head out of the water again. "That's it. Hand them up." They pulled Swindal up just far enough for him to hand over the keys.

"Ooo, is that a Lamborghini?" Richey asked, examining a key on the ring.

"What?" Blood had run to Swindal's head, and he was losing his equilibrium.

"The key: is it to a Lamborghini?"

"Yes, yes, you—"

"What model?"

"A—ah—Gallardo."

"Where's it at?"

"Side of the building. Over there." Swindal nodded his wet head toward the east side of the rental office.

"And the boat keys?"

"In the lockbox under the counter. Please, just pull me up. You can have it all."

"Lockbox key on this ring?"

"Yeah, it's the small one."

"Good. Now, about that injunction," Sammy said as he dunked Swindal into the water for a final time.



Fifteen seconds later the kicking intensified, and the lawyer splashed his hands against the surface in a last-ditch attempt to pull his nostrils to air.

"So, why, exactly are we drowning this guy?" Richey asked.

"See, Richey, that's why you gotta let me do the thinking," Sammy said. "We need to find out who's trying to fuck up our island, right?"

"Right."

Swindal's legs went into overdrive.

"So, whoever it is, is trying to find somebody to file whatever the hell this injunction bullshit is, right?"

"Right."

Kicks became twitches as Swindal's body convulsed.

"So, this guy's a lawyer talking about an injunction. He also owns the boat shop used by that asshole who tried to blow up our bridge."

"Okay," Richey said, still not getting the entire picture.

"So, we get one lawyer out the way," Sammy said. "And any others who show up wanting to go to the island are going to get there how?"

"By boat," Richey said.

"Right, and now we run the boat rental business."

R. Mark Swindal's body went limp.

"Shit, Sammy," Richey said. "Why do they always get heavier after they croak?"

"Mystery of life, Richey boy," Sammy said. "Let's get him into a boat and get those keys."

"Where you want to dump him?"

"Far side of Dog Pass. Tide'll take him from there."

"Hey, maybe we can cruise by the island, see the groundbreaking. I heard Junior Senior, Jr., is coming."

"First things first, Richey," Sammy said as he hoisted Swindal's lifeless corpse onto the dock. "Get the keys. We've got a new business to run."

## Chapter 14

---

The service for Stanford Isaiah Lichwick took place on the beach about a hundred yards from where the decedent's head had washed ashore. No mention of Stan's decapitation during the remembrances, nor were there any references to any other of Stanford's remains or to Jolene Newberry. In fact, how Stan died never came up. Very little about Mississippi or Mississippians was mentioned, either, in part because no one seemed sure who had arranged for the service to be held in Biloxi, twenty-two hundred miles from Lichwick's Oregon home. Once the FBI released the disparate and disconnected body parts, everybody in Biloxi assumed the family would ship him out West. No one expected a beachside memorial.

Robert Redding was stunned by the number of people who made the cross-country trek to pay their last respects. Griefers included the dead kid's parents along with a couple hundred young men and women who came dressed for a beach volleyball tournament. Lichwick's live-in, Sky Hi, showed up wearing Gap shorts, a faded Jimi Hendrix T-shirt, and a strip of cloth that could have been mistaken for a burlap bereavement shawl. It was actually crocheted hemp. Sky rounded out the ensemble with faux-ruby-studded flip-flops, red and black nail polish, and a belt-

thick leather necklace holding a peace-sign medallion that looked like it had been ripped from the hood of a 1969 Mercedes.

With the noteworthy exception of the family and federal investigators, Sky was the best-dressed mourner of the bunch. Half of the hundred or so young men in attendance honored Stanford by showing up shirtless. Of those, fully fifty wore body paint: some streaked their faces like Ute warriors, while others penned protest missives on their meatless torsos. One young man near the front had the words *Last Stan* painted on his back.

"You think that's a play on Lichwick's name, or did he misspell 'stand'?" Johnny Pea asked.

"He's so skinny he probably ran out of room," Ty answered.

Another kid had the message *Today We Save the World* on his back. A third standing nearby had *P.L.Fuck-U* on his chest.

"That's nice," Robert said. He saw Donatella Lichwick cover her face, her rounded shoulders heaving with sobs.

At least the girls kept their tops on. One young lady who hadn't shaved her underarms in at least a year wore a bright green halter top and terrycloth shorts. Stenciled across her ample behind was the word *Greenpeace*, but the *peace* had been crossed out and replaced with *WAR* in bright red, slightly askew letters as if painted by some drive-by graffiti king. Just above the beltline of the terry shorts, a swirling tattoo covered every inch of skin from hipbone to hipbone, plunging out of sight toward her coccyx.

"Tramp stamp," J.P. said, nodding toward the ink on the girl's rear.

"Don't be so harsh," Ty said. "That's ancient Babylonian hieroglyphics for 'Aim here.'"

"I hope we don't see any ancient Babylonians."

Another pasty-white girl with pink-tipped hair wore a sundress that looked to be made from a Pizza Hut tablecloth. She had a chain dangling like a jump rope: one end connected to a bolt in her nose and the other to a gasket-sized hoop in her right earlobe. Those were but a few of the metal chunks sticking hither and yon out of the girl's various body parts. Robert could only imagine the piercings hidden by the dress.

"Think that nose chain ever gets snagged on anything?" Ty asked.

"I wonder how she gets in and out of airports," Robert answered.

Johnny Pea said, "She probably doesn't. She certainly didn't fly here." He pointed to the public parking lot fifty yards away, which had been converted into a makeshift campground. "I haven't seen that many microvans and pup tents since Jerry Garcia died."

"Are they sleeping in those things?"

"Constance says most of them slept on the beach. Cops had to wake them up last night before the tide came in and drowned them."

"Constance told you this, huh? How are you and the widow getting along?"

"She's cooperating fully."

"Did you pick up any news in the course of your investigation?"

"A little." J.P. looked away and smiled just as a gray-haired man wearing a beret and carrying a pan flute hugged Sky Hi.

"So, are you going to share?"

J.P. kicked sand and said, "I found out how Constance ended up owning the Montgomery House."

"Won the lottery?" Ty said.

"Her husband, Dag, was a soybean broker, but he liked

fishing more than working. He inherited the house from a grandfather. Constance refurbished the place and turned it into an inn."

"Dag?"

"Yeah, short for Dagwood, a family name."

Ty said, "I've got a cousin named Unricky. It's been a family debate for some time, but we think his mom was shooting for Enrique."

"Your point?"

"Some names need to die with the original owner."

"How'd she become the widow Constance?" Robert asked.

"Suicide," Ty offered. "Burden of carrying 'Dagwood' around was too much for him."

"Worse than that," J.P. said. "He snagged a marlin during a fishing trip, and it jumped into the boat and harpooned him with its snout."

"Ouch," Robert said.

"Yeah, Constance said he didn't suffer much. Fish got him right in the sternum. He'd fought it for two hours before it killed him."

"Well, I hope you gave the widow a comforting embrace as she recounted that tale," Ty said.

"She's a strong woman. Dagwood didn't leave much. All she has left is the B&B."

"Well, I'm happy the federal government could help her out this week," Robert said.

J.P. said, "So is she."

Which prompted Ty to elbow Johnny Pea in the side and say, "He was talking about renting the inn."

The guy with the pan flute stood on an old milk crate and raised his hands. "If I can have everybody's attention, we'll get started," he said.

The half-naked kids piped down and clustered near the

front. Ty, Robert, and J.P. kept their distance. Nelson Lichwick did his best to comfort his wife, and Special Agent in Charge Peevey continued to yak on his cell phone twenty yards inland, shooting an occasional nasty glance Robert's way.

"Any of these folks look like they know where to get their hands on C-4?" Robert asked.

"I don't see anybody who knows how to get his hands on soap," Ty said.

Beret Guy motioned everyone to move a little closer. Then he said, "I want to thank each and every one of you for coming all this way to help us remember our brother in the movement, Stan Lickowick."

"It's Lichwick, you brain-fried nitwit," Nelson Lichwick shouted from the back as his wife let out a gut-wrenching wail.

"Oh yes, sorry, Stan Ford Lichwick, a true lover of Mother Earth and a warrior in the cause."

Donatella Lichwick's howls grew louder. Two sentences into the service and she sounded like a wounded coyote.

"Looks like your criminal mastermind is leading the service," J.P. said.

The guy in the beret spoke louder to be heard over the cries of the grieving mother. "I can think of no better place to pay respects to our fallen comrade than here, on the shores of our fragile seas and within sight of the abomination Stan gave up his life trying to stop."

"Truth to power, brother!" one of the kids shouted.

This was just the sort of response the old guy needed. Within seconds, the sermon shifted to a fire-and-brimstone rant against the *Pointe aux Chenes* Bridge, offshore drilling, lumber companies, concrete mixing trucks, and leaded gasoline.

"Leaded gasoline?" Johnny Pea asked.

Robert nodded. "STOCKCAR still uses leaded fuel," he

said. "About the only places you can find it these days are China and racetracks."

Within five minutes, the beret-wearing officiator had the crowd whipped into a stomping, clapping, chanting, bongo-drum-banging frenzy. The verse of choice was, "No bridge! No track! Time to take our planet back!"

"Catchy," Ty said.

"Why would they do this to that poor mother?" Robert asked.

The rabble-rouser raised his hands once more, quieting the mob. "Now, you all know Spunk . . ."

A cheer went up through the crowd, followed by chants of "Spunk, Spunk, Spunk, Spunk."

"Yes, well, Spunk has written a song for Stan, and he's going to debut it for you today. So, Spunk, it's all yours."

Another cheer went out, and a few stragglers continued the "Spunk" chant while a shirtless skinny kid with shoulder-length uncombed hair and John Lennon glasses stepped onto the milk crate. He didn't have body art, but he did have *P.L.F. Is A-OK* stenciled on his guitar strap. He carried the guitar on his back like Johnny Cash, and when he flipped the Gibson around, the girls in the front row jumped and squealed.

Robert thought he heard Nelson Lichwick say, "Oh, for Christ's sake."

Spunk waved to his adoring fans and began strumming. The squeals grew louder, then silenced when Spunk launched into his lyrics.

*"I don't know where you come down  
but Stanford Lichwick came to town  
to show you how this earth should be  
by lighting up your SUV!"*

"Stop laughing," Robert said.

\* \* \*

The service lasted another half an hour. Sky Hi received a hefty round of applause as she was helped onto the milk crate. With the vocal projection of a squeaking gerbil and no fewer than twenty “um’s” and “like’s” in a ten-minute presentation, Sky spoke about how Stan should be remembered for standing up to powerful polluters, land rapists, and puppy killers. This was followed by a free-verse poetry reading, and another group chant of “Stan, Stan, Stan, Stan.” Then the old guy in the beret played a passable rendition of “Love the One You’re With” on the pan flute.

There was a fair amount of rocking and hand-holding, after which Sky and the old geezer with the flute picked up teacup-sized jars and held them above their heads. “Anyone in the front row who wants to take part can come up and help us deliver our brother Stanford back to Mother Earth,” the old guy said.

One guy and six girls came forward, each hoisting similar-sized jars. One girl held her jar away from her body as if it smelled bad.

“Is that what I think it is?” J.P. asked.

Nobody got a chance to answer. The old guy held his jar above his head and turned to face the ocean. Sky and the others followed.

“Surely—” Ty said.

J.P. put a hand on Ty’s arm and said, “Shhh, this is going to be good.”

All nine people waded into the black water. On the count of three they took the lids off their jars, and the swirling Gulf breeze blew the cremated remains of Stanford Lichwick away from the water and back into the crowd.

A mild stampede ensued as half-dressed mourners stumbled away from the dark ashes, swatting, spitting, coughing, cursing, and crying throughout the retreat.

Robert couldn’t help himself. He joined his team in



side-splitting laughter, although he would later feel guilty. Other than their chuckles and the cries and curses of the kids, the one sound that stood out was the soul-splitting wail coming from the mouth of Donatella Lichwick.

The crowd dispersed quickly after the debacle with Stan's remains. Most of the kids yelled things like "Ooo!" "Gross!" "Sick" and "Puke" as they trotted back to the campground rubbing ash out of their eyes and hair. A dozen FBI agents had arrived late and were waiting at the campground to interview the mourners about Stan's failed bombing attempt. Special Agent in Charge Peevey made a beeline for the old guy in the beret. Robert and his team walked back toward Beach Boulevard and the Montgomery House with their heads down, trying to suppress the remnants of laughter.

A baritone voice from the edge of the beach said, "Are you Redball Redding?"

Robert looked up and saw a black man, early forties, with more gray than black in his short-cropped hair, and a physique that said he still cared. He wore faded designer jeans and a white cotton broadcloth shirt, sleeves neatly rolled up his muscular forearms.

"That's me," Robert said.

The man took a slow step forward and extended a strong hand. "I'm Hosea Plunkett."

"Great-great-something-grandson of Beaumont and Bloom-of-Ruth Plunkett?" Ty asked.

The man smiled and said, "Somebody's been reading up on our island."

"Thorough investigative work," Ty said. "I'm Ty Johnson. I work with Mr. Redding in the U.S. Attorney's office."

Nice to meet you's all around. "Constance Saltini said you gentlemen wanted to speak to me," Hosea said.

"You aren't here for the memorial?" Robert asked.

Hosea shook his head. "I didn't know the kid. Sorry he blew himself up, but . . ."

"I heard you were a supporter," Johnny Pea said.

"And you are?"

"J.P. Westport," Johnny Pea said as he shook Hosea's hand. "We heard you'd led some protests against the island development. I assumed you supported these people."

"I've protested," Hosea said. "I'm not happy about how my home is being jerked out from under my family." Then he pointed a thumb at the thinning crowd and said, "That doesn't mean I align myself with this bunch."

"Understood," Robert said. "We'd like to get some background information from you, hopefully get a better feel for the island."

"Are you leading the investigation?" Hosea asked.

Robert glanced up the beach and saw Special Agent in Charge Peevey jabbering nose-to-nose with Beret Guy, the pan flute being waved like a weapon. "Let's just say my team is engaged in the process."

"I'll do whatever I can to help," Hosea said. "What are you doing now?"

"We're on our way to Dabearer."

"Taking a tour?"

"Groundbreaking. Want to join us?"

Hosea nodded. "I'd planned on going anyway."

"Good," Robert said. "I guess you know your way around."

"Best guide you're likely to find today."

"We're on our way back to Constance's now. You can meet us there, or—"

"Excuse me!" a shrill female voice cut through the conversation. "Excuse me!" All four men turned and saw a woman in baggy cargo pants and a Yankees cap trotting toward them.

"I didn't see her at the service," Ty said.

"Think you would have noticed?" Robert asked.

"I don't think I could have missed that voice."

"She wasn't there," J.P. said.

They all looked at him.

"What? I would have seen the cap."

"Yankees radar," Ty said.

"Don't hate us because we're a dynasty."

The woman slowed to a walk as she reached them. She was panting and sweating as if she'd sprinted from Gulfport.

"Are you all right?" Robert asked. "You need some water?"

She shook her head as she leaned over to catch her breath. Then she stuck a hand out and said, "Excuse me, Mr. Redding, I'm Jackie Simon. I'm a senior producer for *Outer Boroughs*, the ABS newsmagazine."

"*Outer Boroughs*," J.P. said. "I love that show. You work with Rock Firestone?"

"Yeah," she said, eyeing him as if he'd just urinated on her shoes. She had caught her breath now, and turned her attention to Robert. "I'd like to talk to you about this bridge story," she said. "We're looking into your investigation."

"We're just leaving," Robert said. "If you have any questions, I'll answer them on the way."

"On the way where?"

"We're going to Dabearer Island."

"To see the controversial casino and racetrack?" Jackie asked, scrambling to get her digital recorder out of the bulky back pocket of her pants.

"Well, at least you aren't entering this with an agenda."

"May I come along?"

Robert rubbed his eyes.

"I'm going over there anyway. It might as well be with you."

"Okay, sure," Robert said. "The more, the merrier."

"Good," she said. "I'm parked up at the—" When Jackie looked around, the men were walking away.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"Montgomery House B&B," J.P. yelled back. "Meet us there."

"The Monty what?" Jackie ran to catch up.

"Montgomery House Bed and Breakfast," J.P. said. "It's the former residence of Confederate General Rastus Montgomery, and more recently home of the late Dagwood Saltini. Wonderful place. Just think of the Royalton, only in Mississippi."

"Really?"

"No."

"Who are you?"

"J. P. Westport."

Ty said, "Johnny Pea was a famous football star at Columbia."

"How nice for you."

"Oh, it was nothing. So, *Outer Boroughs*, huh? That piece on the Russian mob and counterfeit sports memorabilia: Rock Firestone is great at stuff like that."

"Yeah," Jackie said. "Great."

## Chapter 15

---

After Hurricane Katrina the FBI had enough boats harbored from Pass Christian to Pascagoula to mount an effective sea blockade of Mississippi if the director had been so inclined. Never again would Homeland Security be caught off guard. Even so, Robert Redding, J. P. Westport, Ty Johnson, and their guests Hosea Plunkett and Jackie Simon embarked for Dabearer Island on a private sailing vessel, more specifically a twenty-nine-foot Hellraiser owned by Constance Saltini. Robert felt awkward hitching a ride with the widow, but Peevey had all but birthed a calf when Robert asked to commandeer one of the Bureau's boats for the trip. The special agent in charge was making life as difficult as possible for Robert in the hopes that Team Redding would pack up and head home. Fortunately for Robert, Constance had insisted that the gang ride to the groundbreaking in her boat. "I wouldn't have it any other way," she'd said.

Now Constance stood at the helm inside the small wheelhouse, a statue of poise. Johnny Pea hovered by her side, which was where he'd spent most waking minutes of this trip. Ty and Hosea stood astern chatting like old friends, while Jackie Simon gripped the starboard railing with both hands looking like she might hurl her breakfast

or dive overboard. Robert held on to the frame of the wheelhouse thinking about how much time he was wasting on this trip. A few well-placed politicians might find his presence in Mississippi essential, but Robert knew that Peevey was right: Redball, Ty, and Johnny Pea were in the way. As the special agent in charge had so indelicately pointed out, Robert was a prosecutor. So far there was no one to prosecute. Other than Stanford Lichwick, it wasn't clear who had committed a federal crime. Killing Stan, assuming it was murder, was a state offense, one the good folks of Mississippi could handle. Even though it seemed obvious that Lichwick had help planning his botched bombing (a big-time federal no-no), accessories to the crime had yet to be identified, a problem Peevey could certainly rectify. The special agent in charge and his agents had descended on the campground after the funeral like blue-suited commandos. They wrote down names and license plates, and ran cursory background checks on most of the attendees. Robert was sure more than a few of the kids at the service had outstanding warrants, which Peevey would use to club them into confessions. By the end of the week, Peevey would have Lichwick's co-conspirators rounded up, and the source of the C-4 narrowed to a few high-value targets. Then there would be something for a federal prosecutor to consider. In the meantime, Robert's only job seemed to be interviewing concerned citizens like Hosea Plunkett and giving interviews to people like Jackie Simon.

As nice a fellow as Hosea Plunkett appeared to be, and as important as it was to put on a good face for the media, Robert would rather be home with his family. His son Michael had football tryouts in a few weeks, although the boy was beginning to lean more toward the golf course than the gridiron. Scoring touchdowns was fun, but at age thirteen he was starting to realize that getting your bell rung by stronger, faster, and meaner kids didn't make a lot of

sense. Michael had made some offhanded references to hanging up the cleats for a new set of clubs earlier in the summer. Robert figured the boy would commit to putting the pads away the first time two-a-day practices were scheduled in hundred-degree heat. Katie (or Katherine Monique) Redding was already looking at colleges at age fifteen. UNC had been her first choice until she had accompanied Robert and Melissa on a business trip to Washington, where they took in a Georgetown–Wake Forest basketball game. Now she was a Hoya through and through. It didn't help that one of the boys she'd tutored in chemistry had accepted early admission to the District's largest university. Yesterday his delicate hearing-impaired flower had asked to go back to Georgetown with a group of girls from the Davidson Christian Academy field hockey team. Melissa Redding had displayed United Nations–caliber diplomacy skills by answering their precious baby with, "Are you high? You can go when monkeys fly out of my butt." Robert needed to get home to referee before the Redding catfight drew blood.

Constance Saltini powered up the twin inboard Yamaha turbo diesel, lifting the bow of the Hellraiser out of the water. Robert grabbed the aluminum frame with both hands. At least he would get to see some friends at the groundbreaking. Miles Hinton and Jett Jordan would be there, as would STOCKCAR owner Roger English. If the latest issue of *Forbes* could be believed, Roger was one of the richest men in America, with a net worth butting against the three-billion mark, making the STOCKCAR heir richer than Oprah Winfrey, Paul McCartney, and thousands of Wall Street wizards who turned their noses up at American auto racing. Speedway Properties alone generated three hundred million dollars a year in ticket sales. Throw in the licensing rights, television deals, merchandising, as well as the games, books, DVDs,

superstores—heck, Roger even had a STOCKCAR line of home furnishing—and it was easy to conclude that the *Forbes* estimate might be a little light. No one disputed that Roger English was the richest man in sports, and the most powerful figure in auto racing. Dabearer Island would bulk up his portfolio nicely.

The league's owner would be at the groundbreaking for no other reason than to let the racing world know he was personally vested in Dabearer. If the rumors were true, Junior Senior, Jr., would be on the island as well, flying into Gulfport on Roger's jet. Junior didn't do these kinds of PR stunts out of boredom. If the kid was, indeed, coming, someone was stroking a healthy check for an appearance fee. Either that or Roger and Miles had the poor dumb bastard by the scrotum.

Once in deep water, Constance pushed the throttle, and the engine shouted like a herd of angry lions. The deep-V hull slid high and the Hellraiser picked up speed as water thumped and sprayed off the sides. Everyone held on a little tighter. Jackie Simon leaned over the railing and said, "Oh god!"

"Dag modified it," Robert heard Constance say. "He wanted the fastest fishing boat in Biloxi, and everybody says he got it. Flat water he clocked it at seventy-five knots. Out here that feels like a hundred twenty miles an hour."

Robert inched his way forward and said, "Quite a boat."

"I like it," Constance said. "I don't fish, but I take her out beyond the islands just to watch the sunset."

Robert nodded and tried to appear interested. He wondered how he was going to ask the question pounding against his temples. Finally, he just blurted, "May I drive?"

Constance looked at him with an expression one might give a thirty-year-old trick-or-treater.

Johnny Pea leaned close to her ear and said, "He likes to drive."



"Please," Robert said.

She shrugged and said, "Sure," and stepped aside to let Robert take the wheel.

He was shocked to see that the throttle was only three-quarters engaged. The Hellraiser had more power to give. He quickly surveyed the displays, noting the tachometer, oil pressure gauge, and compass. "What's this red light?" he asked, pointing to a blinking bulb right of the throttle.

"Depth gauge," Constance said. "Sandbars shift quickly around here. You can bottom out a half mile from shore." She pointed to the light. "A horn blows when you're too shallow."

"How shallow is too shallow?" Robert said.

"Depends on how fast you're going. I've got it set on five feet."

"So if we enter water that's shallower than that . . ."

"You'll know it," Constance said, smiling.

Robert tested the tension in the wheel, getting a feel for the sensitivity of the steering. At this speed he needed to avoid sudden turns. He knew what a racecar felt like when turned suddenly at full speed, and he'd hit enough walls to know that you could tear up embarrassingly expensive, well-engineered machines with one flick of the wrist. There weren't any walls in the Gulf of Mexico, but a rapid turn at forty knots still wasn't a good idea.

"Thank god," he heard a voice say. Turning, Robert saw Jackie Simon wiping brown chunky spittle from her lower lip. "Think you could slow this thing down, Mr. Redding?" Jackie yelled as she stumbled forward. "I mean, Jesus, we're not late for the invasion of Normandy."

Robert could have backed the Hellraiser down. Jackie was right: they weren't late, and it wasn't like they were on a time-sensitive rescue mission. The throttle was next to his right hand. He should have inched it back. In fact, he had intended to pull back on the power before Jackie opened

her mouth. But then the little devil landed on his shoulder and whispered mischievous instructions into his ear.

That same little demon had once told him to bump Junior Senior, Sr., into the infield on lap 182 at Daytona. Both men had been fighting for the low line through turn two. Only one car would fit. Robert's first instinct had been to let Junior slip in front of him. There was plenty of race left, and Robert knew that he had the fastest car. One more lap and Robert would have driven past Junior anyway. But the impish little devil had popped onto his shoulder and said, "Nah, show the bastard who's boss," which was exactly what Robert had done, shoving the number 5 Chevy into the grass, where it spun like a fallen figure skater. Robert went on to win the race, his second and last victory at Daytona.

Now the little red-tailed asp was whispering, "Don't slow down. You know you want to redline this bad boy. Show her who's driving."

A slight grin crept onto Robert's face.

"Jesus, Redding, just slow down, will ya?" Jackie yelled. "Fuck."

That did it. Any indecision Robert might have harbored flew overboard when Jackie dropped the F-bomb. Nothing said "max her out" like an obnoxious New York television producer cursing at you. He slipped his hand onto the throttle and tightened his grip. He made a quick check of the gauges. Then he stared out the windshield and picked a line on the horizon, feeling the wheel vibrate in his hand. It was time to introduce Ms. Simon to Redball Redding.

"Whatever you say," Robert shouted. Then he shoved the throttle forward.

Yamaha made one heck of an engine. The turbo hissed as it sucked air into the injectors, and the stern-drive diesel yelled like an elephant that had backed into a bonfire. Constance stumbled as the bow lifted and the Hellraiser

shot forward. Johnny Pea caught her and held her several lingering seconds after she regained her balance. Ty and Hosea widened their stances and braced themselves against the aft railing. Both men lowered their heads to dodge the onslaught of sea spray.

Jackie Simon was the most unprepared. She lost her footing and fell to her knees, hanging on to the starboard railing with her left hand and gesturing with her right for Robert to stop. That's when her hat sailed out to sea like a lost kite, and her long brown hair flew in a thousand directions, covering her head like a canopy of seaweed.

"Stop!" she screamed. "I'm gonna be sick. Oh god!"

Then Jackie leaned over the railing and learned that expensive Midtown boutique salmon tastes like dog shit when it comes into your mouth for a second time.

Nobody spoke as they slowed to a crawl and tacked toward the northeast commercial dock on Dabearer Island. Constance had reassumed command of her boat. Johnny Pea and Ty glanced in the general direction of their boss as infrequently as possible for the rest of the trip. None of them made eye contact. Hosea stared out at the island of his birth, while Jackie continued to kneel, her head hung low, her back heaving in labored gasps.

A tall, thin man whose weathered black face disguised his age waited on the dock with his arms crossed over his chest. He wore a flannel shirt, distressed jeans, and a faded cap, typical fisherman attire. But what caught everyone's attention was the holstered pistol strapped loosely to his right hip.

"Did you order an armed welcoming party?" Johnny Pea asked his boss, breaking the thick silence that followed Robert's shenanigans with the boat.

"I didn't tell anyone we were coming," Robert said.

"That's my brother, Obadiah," Hosea said. "I told him to meet us."

"Close to your brother, are you?" Johnny Pea asked.

Hosea shook his head. "We've had our differences lately. He supports what they're doing out here: thinks it'll bring jobs and money to the island."

"And you?"

"Money's already flowing like rain down here," Hosea said. "There's a job for everybody, or so Obadiah says. All fine and good if that's what's important to you."

"What's important to you?" Robert asked.

"I teach history, Mr. Redding. I know that money comes and goes, but once a culture disappears, it's gone forever. As a descendant of the original settlers on this island, I don't want to see this place buried under the lights of another casino, with or without a racetrack."

As they puttered toward the dock, inching closer to Obadiah, who had his hands on his hips, his fingers inches from the grip of his pistol, Constance said, "Ty, could you get the tie line and bumpers out of that rear compartment?"

"Aye, Captain," Ty said.

Johnny Pea turned his back to the dock and pointed his thumb over his shoulder toward Obadiah. "So, ah, this disagreement with your brother, how heated is it likely to get?"

"Not to worry," Ty said as he stepped aside and pointed into the cabinet he'd just opened. Inside were a rifle, a shotgun, a flare pistol, and a harpoon, in addition to a bumper and tie line. "I think we can defend ourselves."

"You fish with a rifle?" Robert asked Constance.

"Like I said, I don't fish, but I do take walks on the islands."

"Armed?" Johnny Pea asked.

"Ever been chased by a wild boar, J.P.?"

"He has," Ty said. "I think her name was Ginger, wasn't it, Johnny Pea?"

"Constance, may I use one of your guns to shoot him?"

"Not until he ties that line to the dock cleat."

## Chapter 16

---

Robert didn't ask to drive Obadiah Plunkett's van, but he did snatch the front passenger seat in the unlikely event the driver needed any assistance. Ty, J.P., and Constance climbed into the back, leaving the middle seat for Hosea and the very pale, very angry Jackie Simon.

"Welcome to Dabearer Island," Obadiah said as he cranked the van and pulled onto a bumpy, one-lane oxcart path of a sand road. The pistol hung loosely, tapping the seatbelt attachment when he moved. "Did you have a good ride over?"

"Peachy," Jackie said. "Is there somewhere I can get a sparkling water?"

"We have five freshwater wells on Dabearer," Hosea said through chuckles. "Not a one of them sparkles."

"You don't have a store? Where do you get a carton of milk?"

"Cow, or goat, depending on your preference: and we get it in buckets, not cartons. Are you all right? You look a little peaked."

"Uhhmmm."

"That won't be the case much longer," Obadiah said. "When the bridge is finished, we'll have the best stores in the state."

Hosea looked out the window at a thicket of gnarled beach oaks, unspoiled vegetation so thick it walled the road from the wilderness of Dabearer Island. "That's just what we need, a Dolce & Gabbana outlet," he said. "You going to pay two dollars for a bottle of water with bubbles in it, Obe?"

"At least I'll have that option," Obadiah said, the congeniality gone from his voice. "We're finally going to have things other people have had forever. We're not gonna be a hundred years behind anymore. And there'll be good-paying jobs here, too, so you can buy what you want."

"What do you want, Obe?" Hosea said a little louder. "You've got things nobody in the world has, and you want to throw it away to step and fetch for a bunch of tourists?"

"Oh, look, an egret," J.P. said.

"I want what most people want," Obe said, his voice low and cold now. "I want a good job, a good house, a decent car—"

"This is a fine car," J.P. said.

"Absolutely," Ty added. "Comfy, too."

"And that's a good-looking nine-millimeter," J.P. said. "Do a lot of target shooting out here?"

"Only if the target's a snake or raccoon," Obadiah said as he accelerated, gripping the steering wheel so tightly his passengers could see the ripples in his muscular forearms. The van bounced and wobbled through a pine thicket.

"Yes, sir, nice van," J.P. said. "Good acceleration. They just don't make 'em like they used to."

"It's not mine," Obe said.

"Oh?"

"It's everybody's."

"Everybody's?" Robert said.

"Just like the rest of this place."

"The van is communal property on the island," Hosea said. "Folks out here look at just about everything as com-

munal: houses, boats, food, wells, livestock—everything. I remember growing up Obe and I never knew how many people were going to be sleeping in our house until the sun went down, isn't that right, Obe?"

Obadiah didn't answer.

"Sometimes it was just us; sometimes as many as fifteen people came in. Mama would feed them; if she needed anything, they'd bring it. That's life on Dabearer. Everybody shares everything. Nobody thinks about ownership. It's been that way from the beginning. That's what I was talking about when I said we were destroying a unique culture. This island is America's only successful communal society."

Jackie Simon perked up, or at least lifted her head and pushed the hair out of her eyes.

"Successful," Obadiah said as if he were spitting a half-chewed June bug from his mouth. "It's not all that successful if you're a fisherman, breaking your burned back hauling in sea bass, holding out your hands for whatever money today's catch will bring. Then you come home and find every do-nothing on the island squawking at you, mouths opened like hungry chicks. You don't think the commune's all that successful if you're on that end. Now, if you sleep till noon, drink milk somebody else got, eat corn somebody else shucked, buy shoes with somebody else's money, and drink whiskey from another man's jug, you think it's nirvana. I, for one, think it's time we gave the good ole free market a shot."

The van got faster with every syllable. By the time Obadiah finished his little speech they were pushing forty miles an hour and missing low-hanging oak limbs by millimeters. Robert grabbed the support handle above the door, put his right foot on the dash, and gave Obe a there-there nod in the hopes that he might ease up.

"I see your point," Robert said slowly. No need to an-

tagonize. Just be calm and talk him off that throttle. "I guess most of the residents agree with you, at least those who sold their land for the resort."

That got Obe out of the gas and on the brakes in a hurry. The rear of the van fishtailed, and the passengers in the middle and back seats threw hands forward to brace themselves as if they were in a choreographed line dance.

"Oh my god, I'm going to be sick," Jackie said as they slid to a stop, sand dust enveloping them in a fog.

"Hosey, I thought you said this cracker was an investigator," Obadiah said to his brother.

"Don't blame me, I just met the guy."

"Actually, I'm a prosecutor."

"Who the hell you here to prosecute?"

"Nobody. Look, did I say something wrong?"

"I thought you knew," Hosea said.

"Knew what?"

"Nobody sold anything. The state condemned this island through eminent domain. We had no say in it."

"They what? The whole thing?"

"Ah, yeah, boss," Johnny Pea said. "I've been meaning to talk to you about that."

Lieutenant Governor Roy Coon couldn't help noticing that no matter how many of these things they attended, dignitaries and politicians never seemed capable of donning appropriate attire for a groundbreaking. Invite a pol to the future home of Dixieland Gifts and Liquors, and he would invariably walk onto a dirt lot in a dark suit and leather loafers. Then there were the ill-fitting hard hats that made them all look like Barry Bonds bobblehead dolls, and the silly gold spray-painted shovels. Such scenes had become so farcical that even the tiniest local newspapers had given up covering them.

Today was not such an occasion. Sure, with the excep-



tion of Roy, who wore boots, khakis, a cotton polo shirt, and a lightweight sports coat, most of the invited guests dressed badly—politicians, Chamber of Commerce reps, and cheerful glad-handing staffers from the Biloxi Convention and Visitors' Bureau were shaking sand out of their trouser cuffs five minutes after landing—but unlike at other groundbreaking, the media and general public had flocked to this event like gulls to a shrimp boat. So big was the expected turnout that the development authority had to ferry six Biloxi city school buses onto Dabearer. They queued up at the docks and shuttled guests to a small clearing where a few tents had been hastily erected on the future site of the Mississippi Motor Speedway and La Vitesse Resort and Casino. Two of the buses got mired in a bog a hundred yards inland, forcing sixty-six citizens to walk two and a half miles, but none of them grumbled too loudly. After all, this was their one and only chance to meet and, oh my gosh, maybe get an autograph and photo with Jett Jordan and Junior Senior, Jr. Most of these fans would have crawled through a gator pit to get there.

Junior and Jett would not be coming by boat or bus. Roy had gotten their itinerary emailed to his BlackBerry. The two racing stars would drop in like sun gods in a Jet Ranger helicopter. Once on the ground, they would wave to the adoring crowd, say a few words, and sign a predetermined number of autographs (fans would need tickets just to get into the autograph and photo line). Then the superstars of motorsports would blow a few kisses, climb back into their six-bladed turbo chariot, and “slip the surly bonds of earth.” Both men would be home in Charlotte before dinner.

In anticipation of Jett and Junior's appearance, crews from *Action News*, *Eyewitness News*, *Early Prime News*, and *Never Late News* arrived early and jockeyed for the best camera angles. Each station had dispatched two on-

air correspondents along with the full complement of producers and cameramen. Not to be outdone, every newspaper within a hundred-mile radius of Biloxi had writers and photographers on site, most of whom spent the morning bitching about the bugs and snarling at their intellectually inferior colleagues from the broadcast media.

Mississippi Speaker of the House Jimmy Don Locus took full advantage of the setting, giving five interviews in his first twenty minutes on Dabearer. The money quotes he kept repeating included, "Courageous Mississippians are not letting a failed terrorist attack shake our resolve," and "Dabearer development will generate more jobs and more revenue for Mississippi than any single project in state history." That one was sure to make it above the fold. The thing about outrageous statements was no reporter would ever check them out. If you said, "Our budget increased by five percent rather than seven percent," some pimple-faced intern working a news desk would fact-check you between reruns of *The Simpsons*. Say something over the top like, "We're going to make a kajillion dollars on this deal, the biggest in the history of the world," and nobody lifted a finger.

Now Jimmy Don was sipping a Coke he had spiked with a mini-bottle of Jim Beam while Roy fought a losing battle with a swarm of *Culicoidis generis*, the Mississippi no-see-um.

"Daddy used to call those things dog-pecker gnats," Jimmy Don said as Roy slapped his neck for the umpteenth time. "Know why?"

"I would give anything for you not to tell me."

"Because you always see them flying around a dog's pecker. So I said, 'Daddy, what you doing looking that close at a dog's pecker?' And he said, 'Just trying to figure out what your momma was thinking.'"

"So you come from a long line of sickies," Roy said as he

slapped his left ear, ending the life of another biting midge.

"Oh, hell, that's not sick. I heard a really sick one the other day."

"Please don't—"

"You know what the best thing is about sex with a fourteen-year-old?"

"Oh god."

"If you slick her hair back she looks eight."

Roy leaned forward and blew a batch of no-see-ums out of his nose. "How have you managed to stay out of prison?" he asked.

"Cunning wit, Roy; that and always assuming the worst in people. It's given me an edge."

"Uh-huh," Roy said as he swatted another gnat.

"You know, they're after all that shit in your bloodstream, Roy. I'm surprised they aren't dropping out of the sky, delirious from the toxins."

"That's quite enough, Dog-Dick Boy."

"Hey, I'm not saying my mom actually did anything—"

Jimmy Don suspended his exposé on the Locus family perversions when his cell phone belched out a riff from the North Mississippi Allstars. He looked at the display screen and said, "It's Shelwank."

Walking away from the crowd and toward the trees near the beach, Jimmy Don flipped open the phone. Before he could say hello, Howell Shelwank said, "Who's there with you?"

"Good to hear your voice again, too, Howell. Roy's standing right beside me, having a little trouble with the no-see-ums, but other than that he looks well."

"Tell him to answer his phone."

Jimmy Don cupped the cell phone to his chest and said, "Howell says to answer your phone."

"My phone's not—"

A chirp went off in Roy's pocket.

"Hello."

"Good, are both of you there?" Shelwank said.

Roy and Jimmy Don looked at each other. "Yes, Howell," Jimmy Don said. "It's a beautiful day on Dabearer Island. Wish you were here."

"Shut up, Jimmy Don."

"Whatever you say, Howell."

"I want you to walk away from each other and look in opposite directions like you're on two separate phone calls."

"Technically, this is two separate calls, isn't it?" Roy said. "Or does a threesome count as one call?"

"Roy!"

"Sure, Howell."

Jimmy Don walked behind a pine tree. Roy strolled a few paces closer to the ocean, kicking sand as he walked.

"Big change in plans," Shelwank said. "We need to get the media off Redding and away from anything to do with that Lichwick idiot. And Roy, I need you to call off our friends."

"Call them off?"

"Yeah, tell them to stop whatever they're doing. We don't need any more attention, and god knows our friends tend to draw attention."

Roy's head filled with images of Sammy Dubose rubbing the lapels of his sharkskin jacket, cursing a blue streak in a crowded restaurant. He also remembered how scary Sammy looked when Roy mentioned a possible injunction and work stoppage.

"What if I can't get to them?" Roy asked. "Who knows what they're doing?"

"You're the lieutenant governor, Roy," Shelwank snapped. "You've got all the resources of the state of Mississippi, such that they are, at your disposal. Our friends are not masterminds. Find them. Do what it takes."

"What about the possible injunctions?" Jimmy Don asked.

"That's the least of our troubles."

"But things are going so well," Jimmy Don said. "I'm looking at half a dozen camera crews and at least twenty print reporters right now. They're here to see the drivers. I've already given five interviews this morning, and not a soul asked about our . . . acquisition. I even had the guy from the *Trib* calling Lichwick a terrorist."

"God-all-frigging-mighty, Jimmy Don, why didn't you just invite Woodward and Bernstein to your house for dinner?"

"I thought—"

"We need to shut down all press contact. I want the Lichwick story to die of starvation before the end of the week."

"How is that going to happen?" Jimmy Don said.

"I'm on it," Shelwank said. "Pretty soon the FBI will conclude that Lichwick acted alone, that he blew himself up because he was too stupid to arm his explosives."

"Isn't that what happened?" Roy said.

"Not exactly, Roy. That's why we need to turn down the volume on this thing. We don't need the press snooping around."

"But I thought that's why you had Redball Redding down here," Jimmy Don said. "Isn't he supposed to deflect the media?"

"Yeah, but he's also drawing more of them down there. Who'd a thought a has-been stockcar driver could attract so many goddamn reporters?"

"Well, there is that movie," Roy said. "I've heard it's pretty good. You seen it yet, Howell?"

"Goddammit, Roy, are you listening? We need reporters covering school board meetings and car wrecks, not brown-nosing Redball Redding."

"What are we supposed to do about it?" Jimmy Don asked.

"I'm working on getting Redding out of there, and I'll handle the FBI," Shelwank said. "All I need you to do is call off our dogs and lay low till this shitstorm blows over. Goddamn echo-terrorist," he muttered.

Jimmy Don snickered.

"Is something funny, Jimmy Don?"

"No, Howell, I was just coughing. Gnats are a bitch this morning."

"Look, you're going to have to trust me on this. We need Redding out of there; we need the case closed; we need the media off our island; and most of all we need to find our friends and tell them to chill."

"Chill," Roy said.

"Can you handle that, Roy?"

"I'll do what I can, Howell."

"Just get it done, Roy. Hell, slip'm some of them pills you eat like peanuts. That'll calm their asses down."

Roy slapped his sweaty forehead, killing a minimum of twenty nibbling insects.

"Are we clear?" Shelwank asked.

"As Bayou tap water," Jimmy Don said.

"You, Roy?"

"I guess so."

"Good."

Before Shelwank could end the call, the crowd started buzzing. Jimmy Don and Roy turned in time to see four men and two women getting out of a dusty van. The cameramen trained their lenses on the van, and a few of the fans actually ran toward the vehicle. One of the women who climbed out of the back was pretty, tanned, with black hair pulled back in a ponytail. The other woman looked like a Bourbon Street wino the morning after Mardi Gras. Three of the men who got out were African-American, which set off alarms in Roy Coon's skull. Either sixty percent of the black STOCKCAR fans in

Mississippi had come to this groundbreaking, or these guys were here for something else. The fourth man, a white guy, appeared to be the attractive woman's boyfriend, or at least his body language said he wanted to be.

Then Roy saw what the fuss was about. A fifth man got out of the front passenger seat. Even from a distance he could tell it was Robert Redding. Fans surrounded Redding instantly, Sharpies at the ready. In the distance someone shouted, "Redball's here!"

"Oh shit, did I hear that right?" Shelwank said.

"Afraid so, Howell," Jimmy Don said into his phone. "The man his own self."

"What's he doing there?"

Before either of them could answer, the pretty black-haired woman caught Roy's eye. She elbowed her boyfriend and nodded toward Roy, whispering something in the boyfriend's ear. The boyfriend, a big corn-fed-looking fellow with a trim waist and football shoulders, stared daggers through Roy and then whispered something into Redding's ear. Redding looked squarely at Roy and started marching toward him.

"Ah, Howell," Roy said. "He's walking over here. Looks like he's coming to see me . . . Howell? You there? Howell?"

*"If you'd like to make a call, please hang up and dial again. For operator assistance . . ."*

"Governor Coon?" Robert said, extending his hand. His entourage had followed him and surrounded Roy. "I'm Robert Redding."

Roy's politician gland immediately excreted schmooze into his bloodstream, and through pure instinct he threw out a hand, broke into a smile, and said, "Why, Redball Redding! Great to see you here; I'd heard you were in town. What a treat to finally meet you. Are you part of the celebrity festivities, or just here to see some friends?"

"Nice to meet you, too, Governor. Actually, I've been providing some support to the FBI in the bombing incident."

"Yes, of course, terrible business, that," Roy said, his brow brimming with sweat and bugs. "How is that going?"

"It's progressing," Robert lied. "Anyway, I wanted to see the island. This was a great opportunity to get a tour, and also see Roger English and some of my driver buddies."

"Of course, of course."

"It's an added bonus meeting you, Governor."

"Well, thank you, Redball—you don't mind if I call you Redball, I hope."

"No, no, not at all, Governor."

"Please, call me Roy. Everyone does."

"Well, thank you, Roy. I must say, it's quite a project we're here to see today."

"Oh yes, we're all excited about what's going to happen here on Dabearer."

"I bet you are. So, my friends here were filling me in on the history of this deal, in particular the state's acquisition of the island. I was wondering if I could ask you a couple of questions about how Dabearer Development came to own this land."

Roy's sudden gasp sucked a thimbleful of no-see-ums into his nostrils, setting off a coughing and gagging spasm. When he recovered, he saw the pale, disheveled woman remove a digital recorder from the back pocket of her baggy pants.

"I'm so sorry. Doggone bugs . . . ha, ha . . . you just never know . . . so, who might you be, young lady?"

"Name's Jackie Simon: I'm a senior producer with *Outer Boroughs*, the ABS newsmagazine."

"Well, then . . . whew . . . I mean, isn't that . . . I mean . . . whew . . ."

Robert said, "Are you all right, Roy? Why don't you lean on that tree for a second. Do you need to lie down?"



## Chapter 17

---

“So what the hell’s so special about this place, other than we’re gonna be racing there next year?”

Junior Senior, Jr., could have asked this most basic of questions when they were still on the ground in Concord, North Carolina, or at any point during the hour and a half that he was stretched out on the couch in Roger English’s Cessna Citation X. But in keeping with his practice of never planning his life beyond the next fifteen minutes, Junior had been in no shape to converse during the flight to Mississippi. He had invited some buddies over to his Mooresville house (the one *Architectural Digest* featured in its “Obscene Money Spent in Bad Taste” issue) to watch a little basketball and play a new video racing game starring a creepy computer-animated version of Junior himself. One thing had led to another, and Junior, never a paragon of restraint, fell deep into the Jack Daniel’s bottle midway through the second half. Then he called the girls. Once the “pussy posse,” as he had called it, arrived, sleep plummeted off the priority chart. The next morning Junior stumbled out of the house and climbed aboard Roger’s jet, flushed, unshaven, and smelling of stale whiskey. Fortunately, the fingernail gashes in his skin were hidden beneath a black T-shirt and pair of distressed Levi’s. He had

passed out before they got to the end of the runway, and slept all the way to Gulfport. It was only after the thick, warm Mississippi air slapped his face as he, Jett Jordan, Miles Hinton, marketing director Stacy Campbell, and Mr. English walked along the tarmac between the Citation and their chartered helicopter, that Junior thought to ask why he was being strong-armed into making this trip.

"Mississippi Motor Speedway's going to be the biggest track in racing," Stacy said. "It's our only property attached to a major resort hotel."

"Steering clear of the C-word, huh Stacy?"

"I beg your pardon."

"Casino, I meant are we not calling it a casino. Jesus, Stacy, I'd never say nothing like that other C word around you. You ain't a cunt at all."

"Gee, Junior, what a sweet thing to say."

"You know I aim to be a gentleman."

"As to your question, no, we're not steering clear of anything. There's going to be a casino at the hotel. STOCK-CAR and Speedway Properties have nothing to do with it. We're not avoiding it, but it's not part of our deal, so we don't bring it up."

"What happened, Roger, gaming commission run your background check?"

This earned him a groan from Miles and Stacy. Roger English, for all his wealth and power, had, in fact, pleaded guilty to violating several antitrust laws in the nineties. No jail time, and a fine that he paid out of petty cash, but Roger did have a criminal record, one that did not get mentioned by anyone on the STOCKCAR payroll.

"What?" Junior said. "Can't nobody take a joke around here? Jesus, we all got a box of spiders hid somewhere."

Roger never broke stride and never looked at Junior. He just shook his head and said, "No, Junior, I was approached about investing in the hotel, but I turned them down. Own-

ing casinos is not part of our family-oriented business model.”

“Everything in STOCKCAR is geared toward family entertainment,” Stacy interjected, as if speaking at a sponsor’s convention. She couldn’t help it. Marketing was who she was.

“Like you, for example, Junior,” Roger continued. “You think of yourself as a racecar driver, and most of your fans agree. But in reality, you’re a character in our show, a product element for us to brand and market. You’re our own little version of Mickey Mouse. Unfortunately, you’re not mute like the characters in Disney parks.”

“I didn’t know Moot went to Disney,” Junior said.

Stacy cocked her head and said, “What?”

“Moot Dorsey: I knew he’d quit working in Limp’s shop, but I figured he’d packed up and gone fishing. You say he’s gone to Disney, huh?

“What’re ya’ll laughing at? What’s so funny?”

The five of them climbed aboard the sleek chopper and strapped themselves into their leather seats. They were airborne and heading south in minutes. As they gained altitude, the land fell away and the wetland nature of the Delta revealed itself. Tributaries snaked through marshland weeds like blue veins on a wispy tan canvas pocked with occasional dark thickets of pines. On the Big River itself, ships chugged in both directions, carrying goods from the heartland to the sea and vice versa. On the banks, Junior could see row upon row of big-box structures jutting into the water like giant flat-roofed boat docks. These were the gaming houses, the ostensibly floating gambling dens attached by breezeways to luxury hotels with five-star restaurants, world-class spas, and golf courses that looked, from the air, like Astroturf gardens in the middle of a bog. All the casinos were supposed to be on the water, which in the beginning made them more palatable to the

Southern Baptist crowd. Riverboat gambling had been a culturally accepted part of the Mississippi for as long as people had been sailing from Minnesota to the river's mouth. Having casinos "float" gave the moralists an out; the new gaming establishments were just modified versions of the old riverboats. Some even had paddlewheels and balconies where wannabe models were paid ten bucks an hour to wear hoop skirts and bonnets and twirl daintylaced umbrellas as they waved and smiled at guests stampeding toward the two-dollar slots.

"Guess they don't have enough of them casinos jutting out in the river," Junior said to Jett as he pointed out the small porthole window toward the roof of one waterfront structure. "Do they really think a track's gonna draw high-rollers down here?"

"I hope so," Jett said. "I'm in for two million."

"Damn," Junior said. "Prospectus look good?"

"Good as any I've seen." Jett nodded toward the big box Junior had just pointed out. "Those have been earning thirty percent for almost a decade."

"Limited partnership?"

"Um-hum. I'll let you know if they've capped the LPs."

"Thanks." They reached the coast and saw a flock of pelicans sail beneath them. "You still buying that place on the water in North Palm Beach?" Junior asked.

"Didn't get it," Jett said. "But I did get that condo at the Stanhope."

"Really, looking at the park?"

"Yeah, there are only twenty-five units right on Fifth Avenue, great view."

"Sweet, I'll have to come by when I'm up. And you need to come down to my island, too."

"Yeah, I do. Where is it again?"

"Twenty miles east of Nevis. Beaches like sugar; water so clear you can count shells on the bottom at thirty feet.

We just finished the landing strip. You can get a Falcon 400 in and out of there now.”

“What did you name it?”

“Saint Senior’s.”

“Subtle.”

“That’s me.”

They started their descent, and both men looked out the window, catching their first glimpses of Dabearer Island.

“Hey, Jett,” Junior said. “Why the hell did Roger drag me down here?”

“He’s nervous. That guy who blew himself up shook him pretty good. Supposedly more protestors are coming. He needs a positive spin down here.”

“So he kidnaps me for a day.”

“You and me both.”

They slowed and the pilot nosed the chopper up for a vertical descent.

“Hey, Junior,” Jett said.

“Yeah?”

“You don’t really think Moot Dorsey went to work for Disney, do you?”

“Be pretty hard for him to do.”

“Why’s that?”

“Cause he just went to work for me.”

“You lying dog.”

“Hey, I got to bring up Roger’s record and tell Stacy she wasn’t really a cunt.”

“Nothing like being underestimated.”

“It’s a beautiful thing.”

“There has never been a time in the history of the republic when we weren’t debating eminent domain. The term, a legal one, is not found anywhere in our founding documents, but the Founders understood the principle, and the debate. They risked their lives for liberty and property, but

they also knew that individual property rights were not inviolate. If they were, we wouldn't have a country, just a collection of fiefdoms where property owners could make their own laws and do whatever they saw fit on their land. That was never what America was supposed to be, so the Founders struck balances between the powers of the state and the individual. We know those balances as the first ten amendments of the Constitution: the Bill of Rights. The fifth of those codified rights deals directly with what we know today as eminent domain.

"Most people think of the Fifth Amendment as being what gangsters invoke when they're on the witness stand—the right against self-incrimination is part of it—but the final passage of that amendment says, 'Nor shall private property be taken for public use without just compensation.' It doesn't say that the government can never take your land, your home, or your business—to make such a broad-brush declaration would have meant no roads, bridges, schools, courthouses, police stations, or firehouses—it says that if the state takes your land, you must be justly compensated."

Roy Coon felt good about this speech. He'd been practicing it in front of his bedroom mirror and in his car for weeks, assuming he would have to explain the state's acquisition of Dabearer in front of television cameras. The fact that his audience for this elementary civics lesson included two federal prosecutors, an investigator for the U.S. Department of Justice, a history professor, and a veteran television news producer who finished tops in her class at Wellesley didn't faze Roy in the least. This was the presentation he had practiced, and the one, by god, he was going to deliver.

And a fine delivery it was, if he did say so himself. He even rocked onto his toes and used hand gestures, a handsome recovery after almost passing out from shock when

Redball Redding and Jackie What's-Her-Name asked him about the island. It had taken him several seconds to gather himself, but now he was hitting his stride: Atticus Finch in an impassioned closing argument. Not the stage he had envisioned, but he wasn't about to let that slow him down.

"This 'just compensation' provision is what has separated the United States from ruling nations of the past. Two thousand years ago, if the Roman emperor needed your farm, he would take it and kick you to the curb. If you protested, you ended up on a cross. The monarchs of Europe did the same. If they wanted your land, they took it. If you were lucky, they let you live. But from our inception we have been a nation of laws, governed by the people. As such, we have always been judicious about our use of eminent domain. In the great and god-fearing United States we don't take an inch of your property without paying you for it."

"Why take it in the first place?" Hosea Plunkett asked.

"And you are?" Roy asked, extending his hand and resuming his ear-to-ear politician grin.

"My name's Hosea Plunkett," Hosea said. "This is my brother, Obadiah."

"Plunkett," Roy said.

"That's right. Our great-great-great-grandfather was Beaumont Plunkett."

"Oh my, well, yes, well, you are interested in this, then," Roy said. His brow exploded with sweat, and for a brief instant he thought he might have to once more steady himself on a tree. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that Jimmy Don Locus had disappeared, taking a stroll on the beach, perhaps. Redball's presence had also attracted a crowd of spectators, who were angling to get close to the retired racing legend. In the process, they were getting an earful from their lieutenant governor.

A couple of slow, deep breaths and Roy's dizziness

passed. He smiled at the crowd. This speech was too important, and he was too well prepared, to let an audience member distract him.

"Yes, we're very interested," Hosea said. "Why did you feel compelled to declare our island 'blighted' and take it in the first place?"

"I'm glad you asked," Roy said, although he was anything but. "States have always grappled with what compelling interests justified buying out landowners for the public good."

He had gone through fifteen verbal drafts before settling on the phrase "buying out" to describe what would otherwise be called a land grab.

"As early as 1795, a mere eight years after the Constitution was ratified, Pennsylvanians tried to take the land of some original settlers. One of those settlers sued the state. That case, *Vanhorn's Lessee v. Dorrance*, established a clear edict from the Supreme Court that 'taking private property when state necessity requires exists in every government.'"

"Do what?" Ty said. He couldn't believe the lieutenant governor had used *Dorrance* of all cases to make his point.

"Sorry, I don't believe we've met, either," Roy said.

Ty didn't introduce himself or shake the lieutenant governor's hand. "I work with him," he said, pointing a thumb at Robert. "You left out some pretty important parts of the *Dorrance* decision," Ty said. "Like, oh, the part where Justice William Paterson called eminent domain 'despotic power.' Then there's that section where he says it should not be used 'except in urgent cases.' And the part where he says, 'Where is the security, where the inviolability of property, if the legislature can take land from one citizen, who acquired it legally, and vest it in another?' Isn't that what you guys have done here, taken land from one group



and deeded it to another? And *Dorrance* is the case you cite?”

“Who exactly does own the property for this resort, Governor?” Jackie asked.

Sweat ran off Roy’s nose, and his head twitched like someone in the early stages of a stroke or the final stages of death. It took a couple of seconds for him to process the questions being hurled at him. Then he reminded himself of Rule Number 16 in the Politician Handbook: *No matter what the question, stick to your talking points.*

“I understand your concerns,” he said, nodding and furling his brow in the most empathetic way he could. “This is a very emotional issue. It always has been. And I know how upsetting it is when people realize that this project is being developed by a private entity. But in reality it’s nothing new. Eminent domain was used to transfer land—with just compensation, I might add—from citizens to private railroad companies so that rail lines could be built across America. This caused an uproar, but now nobody believes the railroads are not a vital public interest. And look at revitalization projects like the Baltimore Riverfront. That used to be a grim, crumbling area. Now it’s a vibrant, beautiful addition to that great city. And look at the domes and stadiums we’ve built with private dollars in recent years. Aren’t the billions generated from those stadiums good for a city and its citizens? Even those who are displaced during construction—and not without just compensation, mind you—benefit from jobs and improved services. It’s tough, I know, especially when you hear words like ‘blighted,’ which is a purely legal term, I assure you, but this is the right thing to do for Mississippi. Courageous choices are always hard.”

He’d worked on that closing line for two hours, varying the inflection until he got it just right.

“Mr. Plunkett claims you’re destroying an irreplaceable

culture, one of the most unique in all of North America,” Jackie said a little louder than before. “What do you say to that, sir, and what compelling public interest is there in a casino and a racetrack?”

Talking points: stick to your talking points. Ignore the bitch and stay on message.

“Jobs and increased revenues from tourism will benefit everyone, not just the na . . . the residents of Dabearer Island . . .”

Oh god, he’d made that mistake a lot in the last few days. He’d started to say “natives” but caught himself thinking that might sound too *National Geographic*. Then he realized the Yankee bitch thought he’d been on the cusp of uttering the *N*-word. What to do now? He couldn’t very well say, *No, no, I didn’t mean nigger. I was going to say “native” like some lost tribe in New Guinea.* She had a recorder. Every syllable Roy Coon had spewed was captured and preserved like the Zapruder film. What to do? What to do?

“I mean . . . gosh doggit . . . I mean . . . look,” he stammered. “Everybody’s making out on this deal, okay? We’re all better off because of this development.”

The distant *whump, whump, whump* of helicopter blades grew louder. Roy pointed to the sky and said, “Oh look. Here they come. It was great meeting all of you, really. I guess I’d better get up there before somebody sends out a search party, ha, ha. Really, great to meet all of you. Hope you’ll hang around for the festivities. It’s going to be great, the whole thing, really.”

And he was off, beating a trail toward the tents like a bank robber fleeing the scene.

“Did you get all that?” Robert asked.

“Every word,” Jackie said with a smile.

“Sorry about that thing back on the boat. You don’t seem half bad to be in television.”

“You don’t seem half bad to be a hick.”

“Don’t push your luck.”

“Don’t worry. I have to ride back to the mainland with you.”

The groundbreaking went as organizers had expected—stupefying in its dullness, and a good hour longer than any attendee’s attention span. Jimmy Don Locus reappeared just in time to grab the microphone and say a few words. He mentioned every city councilman, business executive, and political party hack by name before waxing on about “vision” and “building for the future.” No pedophilia or incest jokes, but then Jimmy Don knew how to play to a crowd. As he’d told Roy numerous times, “Once you can fake sincerity, the rest of it’s a piece of cake.”

Roy’s remarks were a little shakier. When he reached in his pocket for the index cards that held the names he was supposed to mention and the one-liners he wanted to throw out, he found a sweat-soaked gob of crumpled cardboard, black ink dripping from the corners. Winging it had never been Roy’s strong suit. Once during a moot court session in his second year of law school he had overslept and left his notes on the empty Schlitz keg he used as a nightstand. The resulting verbal spasms included the coining of several new words, among them “litigiousity,” a heretofore unknown derivative of “litigious,” and “preemptification,” which, as far as anyone could tell, meant to preempt preemptively. His professor at the time had called him “communicatively challenged,” and recommended that Roy avoid practices of law that required extemporaneous speaking. That stigma hung over him like a foul odor. Without notes or a day’s worth of practice (as he’d had for his eminent domain speech) Roy couldn’t talk off-the-cuff for more than thirty seconds without a gaffe.

In keeping with tradition, forty-five seconds into his re-

marks he referred to Biloxi residents as “Biloxiites.” A minute later, when referring to the golf course, Roy said, “Before you know it, golfers will be shooting golfs out here every day, whacking and whacking like, I don’t know, whackers.”

“What’s wrong with that guy?” Johnny Pea asked.

“He’s a junkie,” Jackie Simon said.

They all stared at her.

“What, I’m in television. You don’t think I’ve seen my share of functioning junkies?”

They all mumbled and nodded.

“Or maybe he’s mentally handicapped,” Ty suggested.

Jackie shook her head. “Nope, he’s a junkie. The eyes, the sweat, the tics, I’ve seen it a hundred times. We used to have a weekend anchor who got so bad he went into a maintenance closet during a commercial break and broke open some glow sticks to sniff the fumes.”

“Isn’t that stuff toxic?” Ty asked.

“I said he used to be an anchor.”

Roy prattled on for several more minutes, thanking everyone for coming and calling no one by his correct name, except for Junior and Jett, whom he introduced to thunderous applause. Sensing an out for his uncomfortable plight, Roy pointed into the crowd and said, “And we also have another legend in our midst. If you haven’t already done so, please say hello to Robert ‘Redball’ Redding.”

The cheers grew louder.

“Redball, why don’t you come up and say a few words?” Roy said, joining the masses in vigorous applause.

The applause morphed into a chant of “Red-ball, Red-ball.”

“They love you, boss,” J.P. said.

“Uh-huh.”

“Are you going up there?” Jackie asked.

“I’m thinking.”

"Well, if you are, I'm going to get sound. If you're not, I'm going to look for a place to hide."

"I'm going."

"Red-ball," Ty said in sync with the crowd. Robert glared at him. "Sorry, I got caught up in the moment."

Robert walked to the front, pressing hands and patting backs the entire way. When he reached the small riser that was being used as a stage, Roy handed him the microphone. Robert waved and said, "Thanks. Thank you all for that, and thanks for coming out today. I'm sorry, I don't know anything about what's going on here, or what activities are planned for today . . ."

"That's okay, Redball, we don't, either," a voice shouted from the back. The crowd burst into laughter.

"Anyway, I'm going to turn this over to someone who knows something. Roger, can you help me out here?"

Roger English strode to the front, took the mike from Robert, unfolded two legal-sized sheets of paper he'd carried in the breast pocket of his jacket, and launched into a prepared speech to the collective groan of the crowd.

Robert slipped back inside a nearby tent, where he grabbed a miniature sausage off the hors d'oeuvres table. Miles Hinton stood three feet away but never made eye contact.

"You should have given me more detail on your land acquisition down here, Miles," Robert said.

"We bought it," Miles said.

"You bought it from the state after you had them snatch it through eminent domain."

"A perfectly legal transaction."

"One you should have filled me in on before I got here. How many residents were displaced when you consummated this perfectly legal transaction?"

"What difference does it make?"

"Well, that's the number of people we now have to check

for possible connections to Stanford Lichwick, a fact we should have known ahead of time.”

“I don’t have an exact number,” Miles said, “but it’s around a hundred and twenty.”

“A hundred and twenty people.”

“Don’t hold me to that number.”

“Where are they going to go?”

“Nowhere,” Miles said. “We’re building housing for them about a mile that way.” He pointed to the trees left of the clearing. “They’re going to live better than ever.”

“I guess we know what’s good for them,” Robert said.

“Maybe not, but I don’t see any of them signing on with that Lichwick nut, not when they’re about to cash the biggest checks they’ve ever seen in their lives, and move into fully furnished condos. Do you know the people here don’t have running water? Most of them have never set foot in an air-conditioned building.”

“You know a lot about them to have no idea how many people there are here.”

“I think it’s one-twenty.”

“So you said.”

A cheer went up. Roger had finished his comments and Junior and Jett were taking the stage. The organizers had been crafty enough to ferry over a couple of show cars. As construction workers pushed the number 7 Jack Daniel’s car and the number 25 Golden Potato Hearty Chip car around the corner of the tent and into view, the air filled with shouts, claps, squeals, and a few loud “hot damns.”

But before Jett and Junior could say anything, a ruckus erupted at the beach. Foghorns blared, followed by what sounded like the opening riff of a Linkin Park tune.

“What the hell?” Miles said, dropping his soda in the trash as he trotted toward the noise. Much of the crowd followed. Robert reunited with his gang, and they walked

the hundred yards together. What they saw left them shaking their heads.

A Korean War-era sixty-footer had cut its engines fifty yards offshore. Even if Robert hadn't seen the name *Earth's Warship* scrawled across the starboard side, the forty or so people on the ship's deck, half naked and holding protest signs, left no doubt as to who they were. Nine-foot speakers had been mounted at the bow and stern, blaring the song "Numb" while protesters swayed and bobbed, raising and lowering their *Save the Earth, Stop the Madness* and *No Bridge, No Track* signs. Robert recognized a few of them from the memorial service, including the skinny guy with *Last Stan* on his chest, and the ubiquitous Sky Hi, still garbed in her hemp mourner's shawl.

They couldn't see Spunk (he must have been somewhere in the middle of the deck hidden by the crowd), but as the music faded, his voice blared over the loudspeaker. "How you doin', Dabearer Island?" This was followed by a whoop as all the protesters raised their arms in delight. "Let's let them know what we think of their groundbreaking."

Every visible passenger onboard *Earth's Warship* held up a single expressive finger and let out a war yell that would have made Geronimo proud.

On the beach, the shutters from the still cameras sounded like a swarm of locusts, and the television producers shouted, "Are you getting this?" to their shooters. Robert heard one print journalist say, "Well, the lead just wrote itself." He also heard one of the fans say, "Sweet crazy Jesus," and someone else ask, "Can't we sink the bastards?"

Then Miles came forward, tapped Robert on the shoulder, and said, "There are your prime suspects."

"The Bureau has agents looking at them."

"Not too closely, or they wouldn't be here, would they?"

“Good point. But they do have a right to peaceably assemble. I’m sure I read that somewhere.”

“Not even safe on an isolated island.”

“I think that’s why they’re here. They want it to stay isolated.”

“They don’t know what they want,” Miles snapped. “Most of them think acetaminophen’s acid in the ozone. They’d protest H<sub>2</sub>O if you asked them to, not knowing it’s water.”

Robert started to respond, but Spunk broke in and led the crowd in what was obviously their favorite chant. “No bridge! No track! Time to take our planet back!”

“Oh, that’s frigging great,” Miles said.

“Hey, Miles, what’s that?” Robert said, pointing to a spot on the water 150 yards right of the *Earth’s Warship*.

Miles squinted and said, “Looks like a speedboat. What now?”

As it got closer, Robert could see it was an eighteen-footer with a lot of horsepower. He could also see that the smaller boat appeared to be charging the *Earth’s Warship* at full speed.

“This is not good,” Robert said.

What happened next surprised everyone. The captain of the *Earth’s Warship* decided the approaching vessel was hostile and engaged the ship’s engine to steer clear of the boat. Unfortunately, his passengers had not been adequately forewarned of this evasive maneuver. A herd of protesters fell overboard, including Sky Hi, who tumbled over the stern railing holding her shawl above her head like a parachute.

The smaller boat veered clear of the ship’s stern a second before ramming it head-on. Then the speedboat circled the splashing and yelling protesters.

Robert could see two men on the small boat. One of them looked vaguely familiar: something about the



slicked-back hair and thick chest. How did he know that guy?

On a second pass, the speedboat swung around to spray the overboard protesters. A few ducked beneath the wake. Then the boat veered toward the mainland. The two men onboard saluted their victims with the same single finger the protesters had thrust skyward only moments before.

"Please tell me you got that," one producer said to her camera crew.

"Oh yeah," the shooters said.

"Who was that guy?" Robert said aloud to himself.

"My hero," said a fan in a Junior Senior, Jr., T-shirt and a black number 7 hat.

"Okay," Miles shouted. "We have food and drinks for everyone back in the tent."

The media almost ran over the fans to get to the tent where their two favorite brands of beer, Free and Free Lite, awaited. Robert looked out at the fallen protesters being hoisted back aboard their creaky ship. Then, as he turned to go back to the van, another strange sight caught his eye.

Robert saw Lieutenant Governor Roy Coon having an animated discussion with the fellow who had been introduced as speaker of the state assembly, Jimmy Don Something-or-Other. The men appeared to be arguing, with Lieutenant Governor Coon waving periodically toward the *Earth's Warship*. On its face, a couple of politicians in a heated debate wouldn't have given him a moment's pause, but as Robert marveled at just how much sweat Roy Coon was producing, the lieutenant governor glanced over and caught Robert's eye. The conversation stopped. And Robert recognized the look on Lieutenant Governor Coon's face. It was sheer, unadulterated panic, the look of the guilty.

I should do a little research on you, Robert thought as he turned and walked back toward the clearing. But not before I grab one of Miles's beers.

## Chapter 18

---

“I’ve got our angle,” Jackie said while pacing back and forth in front of a toolshed beside the ramshackle home of Obadiah Plunkett. Two barefoot black children on bicycles, two brown dogs, and a chicken watched as she waved her arms and talked to the ground. Jackie had one of those Bluetooth devices in her ear, which made it hard to distinguish her from a homeless woman walking in circles and arguing with the voices in her head. The kids stared and then looked at each other, shrugged, and pedaled away. The chicken bobbed its head a couple of times and then ran into the trees. Jackie’s only remaining audience was the dogs.

“Give it up,” Bill Shoan shouted. He was on a speakerphone in his office. Bill liked conferencing with underlings on speakerphones. Not only did it make him sound like the voice of God in those old Cecil B. DeMille movies, it also kept the employees on edge. You never knew who was in Bill’s office listening. His employees hated that, but only Jackie had the cojones to say something.

“Pick up the fucking phone, Bill, Jesus,” she said.

A long pause and a click later, Bill came on the line sounding normal. “You shouldn’t speak to me like that, especially when I’ve got you on speaker.”

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Bill. How rude of me. Almost as rude, in fact, as talking to someone on the speaker."

A sigh and then, "What have you got?"

"The Lichwick angle is a dead end. There's video coming out today of another protest. Typical stuff: signs, chants, but then a couple of guys in a speedboat charged them. Some of the protesters fell into the water."

"The protesters were in the water?"

"Fell off a boat about fifty yards offshore."

"What the hell were they doing on a boat?"

"It is an island, Bill. The only way to get here is by boat."

"You took a boat? How'd that go? Didn't you get seasick on the Staten Island Ferry?"

"Thanks for remembering."

"So this boat protest is the story?"

"No, that'll be on the Internet within the hour. There were four crews here. The footage will be worn out by the time we set up down here."

"And they were, what, scared into the water?"

"I don't know; it looked like the driver of their boat tried to dodge the one coming at them . . . anyway, some people fell overboard. The cable channels will run it a hundred times in the next twenty-four hours."

"So what's our story?"

"There are a hundred twenty people who live on this island who had their land taken away from them by the state. The STOCKCAR people and the hotel company didn't buy them out: the state condemned the land and passed it from the poor blacks who live here to the rich—"

"Not another eminent domain story," Bill said with a deflated sigh.

"But this is—"

"Jesus, Jackie, talk about overdone: Mike Wallace has done that story a dozen times. Those nitwits at Fox have

talking heads blabbing about it every week. And have you heard the rants on talk radio?"

"Look, Bill, this island is different. The people here—"

"It's red meat for rabid dogs, Jackie. That's not what we do at *Outer Boroughs*, you know that."

"Of course not: we'd never toss out red meat, unless, of course, it's trapped coal miners, or missing teenagers, preferably blond and female, or hurricane victims, preferably black and poor, or doctors who murder their wives—white, rich, and Christian—"

"That doctor story won an Emmy."

"This one could, too."

"No, Jackie, it can't; it's poor people getting big government checks so some politician can build a monument to his penis. Happens every day. We're not doing an eminent domain story."

"One of the politicians is a junkie."

"Which one?"

"Lieutenant governor."

He laughed. "Please tell me you don't want to do a story on some obtuse politician's drug habit. You're better than this, Jackie."

"Look, you sent me down here to follow this Redding guy."

There was an uncomfortable pause before Bill Shoan said, "Yeah, well, this might have been a tail-chaser. Look around for another day or so, then head on back. Redding's not going to be there much longer anyway."

"He's not?"

"Probably leaving tomorrow."

"Does he know this?"

"I have no idea."

"So how do you know?"

Bill chuckled and said, "Jackie, you know better than to ask something like that."

Jackie knew Bill ran in powerful circles, but Redding seemed like a pretty independent guy, the most on-his-own federal prosecutor Jackie had ever seen, in fact. Plus, if the reception Redding had gotten from the Bubbas at the groundbreaking was any indication, this guy was rock-star famous among racing fans. For Bill to know Redding's schedule before Redding did was, well, a little chilling.

"Jackie? You there?" Bill asked.

"I gotta go, Bill. We're having crawfish and cornbread."

"You're doing what?"

"I'll call you tomorrow."

Obadiah introduced everyone to his and Hosea's mother, Betty, right after the woman pried herself out of Hosea's enveloping hug. Betty Plunkett was a fit woman, thin but not frail, with perfect posture, and arms that most fitness models would take drugs and undergo the knife to have. The only hint of age was her steel-gray hair, which she kept closely cut. In her long cotton sundress, faded and frayed, but without a speck of dirt, she reminded Robert of the women in Burlington his own mother had always referred to as "sturdy."

"Come in the house," Betty said to Robert and his crew after shaking everyone's hand. "I heard you were coming, so I put in more cornbread."

Johnny Pea threw out every polite excuse he could think of, but to no avail. Betty Plunkett would not tolerate anyone coming into the house without being fed. J.P. had gone his entire life without eating a crawfish, and after he saw how they were prepared and served, he wanted to keep that record intact. The decapod crustaceans, which looked like a cross between tiny lobsters and giant roaches, were poured into a boiling cauldron suspended waist-high over an open fire. Salt, vinegar, and cayenne pepper were added to the torture bath. When they came out, the little crea-

tures' eyes bulged and their claws were drawn close to their pink shells as if they froze in a defensive posture as they tumbled to their scalding deaths.

Once the cauldron was drained, the crawfish were dumped onto a large round wooden table with a soda-can-sized hole in the center. That was the entrée presentation: no bowls, serving dishes, or utensils. Robert, Ty, Johnny Pea, Constance, Hosea, and Obadiah sat on homemade wooden stools. Jackie was still on the phone. Obadiah got things started by grabbing a crawfish by the tail, breaking it in two, peeling away half a tail shell, and sucking meat from its rear. He threw the remnants of the carcass into the hole in the table. Robert snuck a peek and saw a large pail on the floor, a catch basin for discarded crawfish remains.

"Be careful where you break 'em," Obe said as he cracked another crustacean. "You get too close to the digestive tract you'll get a mouthful of fish shit."

J.P. coughed and covered his mouth.

"Obadiah Plunkett, you watch your mouth," Betty said as she slapped her son's shoulder. "These folks don't want to hear your foulness."

Obe looked at the table and said, "Yes, ma'am."

"You should apologize to our guests."

But before things got any more awkward, Ty softened the moment by saying, "That's all right, Ms. Plunkett. We've heard worse most of the day today. Besides, Johnny Pea here is a shit-eater from way back."

Betty tried to look offended, but she couldn't hide the smile. Soon she was laughing with the rest of them. When the chuckling died down, Betty said, "Let me get the pones."

A cast-iron skillet full of cornbread was referred to as a "pone" on Dabearer, and a "mess" of any food item signified whatever quantity was needed to feed everyone in attendance. Two pones of whole kernel cornmeal sweetened with molasses and cooked in a covered skillet that Betty

had buried in a pile of smoldering hickory embers turned out to be mess enough for all of them. And the mound of steaming crawfish on the table could have filled the stomachs of a dozen starving Somalis.

"Where your people from, Ty?" Betty asked as she sliced the second pone.

Ty finished chewing his food and said, "Little town called Grassy Creek, North Carolina, in the mountains on the Virginia border."

"How many of you?"

"I was an only child, raised by my grandparents in a house a lot like this one. We had chickens, a cow, couple of pigs. My papa grew muscadines and made wine."

"I didn't know that," J.P. said.

"You never asked."

"Your grandfather was a bootlegger? Ow! Careful, those things have claws. That could have put an eye out."

"I know they had to be proud of you," Betty said, ignoring the assault with a deadly crawfish. "Are you the first of your people to go to college?"

"Yes, ma'am, I am, and they are. My grandma passed ten years ago, but my papa's still going. He'll be ninety-five next September."

"Still got his health, does he?"

"Must be the wine," J.P. said, still rubbing his eye. "Ow! Jeez, didn't your grandmother teach you not to throw food before she died? Ow! God, okay, that drew blood."

"He lives alone," Ty said, "drives himself to town—in fact he just bought a new pickup truck, and goes fishing almost every day. I go deer hunting with him at least twice a year."

"You're a good boy. That's the right thing to do. My boy Hosea, he's a good boy; he comes to see me every week, all the way from Mobile." She reached over and patted her son on the back. "He was the first person on this island to

go to college, and then blamed if he didn't go off and got himself a doctorate and a job as a teacher."

Obadiah grunted and chewed his food with a little more vigor. He avoided eye contact with his brother and his mother.

"So, Betty, what do you think about the hotel and race-track?" J.P. asked as he blotted the gash above his eye.

Constance, who was sitting to his right, kicked him in the shin.

"Ow! *Et tu*, Constance?"

Obadiah looked up and stared daggers through his brother. Hosea didn't back down. His gaze shifted between Obe and his mother.

Betty shook her head and said, "No reason to spend much time thinking about it one way or the other. Folks used to be sent here so nobody would see them again. Now they want to come here and pay to stay. There's nothing I can do about it, so it doesn't matter what I think. It's like asking me what I think about the sun coming up tomorrow. My opinion's not going to change anything."

"What are you going to do?" Robert asked.

"I'm going to take the money the state's offered and move into one of those pretty condominiums. That's the way it is. Talking about it might get folks stirred up, but that's like rocking in a chair: it gives you something to do, but it don't get you very far."

Hosea did not look satisfied with his mother's answer. "You could sue to have the project stopped," he said.

"Why?" Obadiah jumped in. "So she can keep hauling water in from the well, shoveling ashes to cook, so she can tell everyone what a big shot her college boy is? You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"It's not about me, Obe. I'm not keeping her anywhere. I couldn't if I tried. Neither could you. She stays because this is where she wants to be."



“Yeah, as I recall your place got a shower, a refrigerator, an air conditioner, a big-ass television with a hundred and fifty channels, and little stereo speakers in every corner. Pretty easy to talk about suing somebody to keep us from getting those things.”

“Some things are bigger than air-conditioning and satellite TV.”

“Sure, as long as you ain’t the one giving up that shit.”

“Obadiah Plunkett, you get away from this table till you can clean up that tongue,” Betty shouted.

Obe started to get up, but he froze when the screen door opened. A giant of a man walked in. He looked to be in his late twenties, stood six feet six inches at a minimum, and weighed at least two hundred eighty pounds. He wore overalls and a T-shirt that hadn’t been white since it came out of the J. C. Penney wrapper three or four years ago. Without uttering a word, the man grabbed a stool, saddled up to the table, and cracked open a crustacean.

The guests looked at him; they looked at each other; and they looked at Betty, Hosea, and Obadiah. The new arrival closed one eye and peeked into the body cavity of his crawfish to see if he’d missed any meat.

“Zibeon Jones, where are your manners?” Betty said while wagging her finger at the new arrival. “Can’t you speak to anybody?”

“Hahyahdoin’ wasgonon,” the big man said as he nodded to Robert and the others.

They looked at each other again, and then stared at Ty.

“Don’t look at me, I didn’t understand him.”

The big man ignored them and went back to the small pile of crawfish he had raked to his side of the table.

“Zibeon lives down the trail,” Hosea said. “He comes by every so often to eat with Mama.”

Then Hosea turned his attention back to his brother. He pointed at Zibeon and said, “That’s what I’m talking about.

You think your new neighbors will walk in and sit at your table once that bridge opens?"

Obe cocked his head and said, "No, thank god. That's the difference between you and me, Hosey: you think Zibeon Jones coming in here to leech dinner is something worth saving. I think we can't rid ourselves of this stuff fast enough. I want a door with a lock on it. I want to see Mama move into someplace nice. And I'm going to do whatever it takes to make sure that happens."

Hosea opened his mouth to respond, but the screen swung open again. Jackie Simon marched in saying, "Hey, did a huge guy in overalls just come in here?"

After dinner Hosea took them on a tour of the island. The house Beau Plunkett had built in the nineteenth century still stood, weathered and warped, but a sturdy monument to the godfather of Dabearer Island. Hosea pointed out the parlor where his great-great-great-great-grandfather Ezekiel had first met his future son-in-law, Beaumont. A gas-powered generator had been installed in the rear of the house, and lights and appliances had been installed in recent years. Four teenagers were sprawled out on the musty couches in the parlor and were watching reruns of *Love Connection* on an ancient twenty-inch television.

"Only refrigerator on the island's back in the kitchen, if anybody wants anything."

Nobody did. They suspected that expiration dates might be ignored in a one-refrigerator culture. Besides, they would be back in the climate-controlled Montgomery House later that night where the fridge was full.

A half mile or so down the dirt road the sand mounds got larger and the pines gave way to stubby gnarled sea oaks, thick and prickly, with branches that twisted back in on themselves like Scottish gorse. Oats grew out of the sand swales, waving in the Gulf breeze as the guests got

out of the van and took labored steps through the powder, up an embankment toward the water. The sun was setting to their right, and the sky gave off the pale orange glow of dusk on a southern shoreline. A couple of pelicans hung lazily in the wind, and the squawking of gulls could barely be heard over the sound of the waves rushing onto land.

When they finally reached the pinnacle of the dune, Jackie was the first to speak. "Oh wow," she said. "I had no idea. I mean . . . wow."

"They're magnificent," Robert said. "They are—"

"Mustangs," Ty said. "Feral mustangs: you can tell by their size and the bone structure of their hindquarters."

"These are the ancestors of the horses Beau Plunkett brought over from the mainland," Hosea said. "Once the population reached a certain point, some were set free. This is the result."

The horses stood in a cluster on the beach, high-stepping as the waves washed over their ankles, and shaking their heads to catch the sea mist. Then, suddenly and for no apparent reason, they broke into collective gallop, heading eastward, maintaining a tight formation, their hooves kicking up a mini-sandstorm. A hundred yards later they stopped. A couple of the younger colts nibbled playfully on the elders' necks, hopping with excitement as the water hit their legs.

"Beautiful," J.P. said.

Hosea nodded. "I hope they stay that way."

They toured the northeastern third of the island, where most of the hundred and twenty residents kept small two- and three-room dwellings. The main floors were perched three to five feet off the sand by sturdy hardwood posts. All the living quarters were wooden, but most of the barns were tabby, a mixture of mud, sand, and shell that was harder, more versatile, and a darned sight prettier than stucco. Some of the homes did not have doors. Those that

did had them propped opened to catch the evening breeze.

In a flat grassy area between two of the houses, they saw a group of kids playing baseball. All of the defensive players had gloves, but no one on either side wore shoes. A few yards later, they saw a woman in her late teens or early twenties carrying a bucket of water from one of the wells. She watched them as they rode past, her eyes conveying a sense of cautious curiosity, a wariness seen in someone who had grown to distrust those she had never seen, especially white people being chauffeured around her island.

They stopped for a quick potty break at one of the out-houses near the dock. Jackie passed, choosing to take a stroll behind a nearby bush instead. "Be careful you don't lean on anything back there," Ty said as she disappeared. "You never know what kind of rash you'll get."

Then they met Obadiah, said their goodbyes, and boarded the Hellraiser for the trip back to Biloxi. It wasn't far to the mainland. From the northwestern dock they could see the lights of the hotels. But they felt as though they had visited another world.

It was dark by the time they pushed away and throttled up the engine. Constance took it easy on the way back. The floodlights on the bow and wheelhouse provided about a hundred feet of visibility, not enough to cruise in with any sort of speed. The moon was out by the time they reached the giant pillar, the tallest of the structures that would soon support hundreds if not thousands of Chevy Silverados, Ford Fiestas, Honda Odysseys, and Dodge Caravans as people flocked to Dabearer Island, and then left along the same route, taking their memories and leaving behind their sunscreen bottles, beer cans, and Big Mac wrappers.

An orange beacon glowed atop the pillar, just as it had the night Stanford Lichwick navigated those same waters. Robert thought about that night as they puttered past. The

moon and stars shone brightly tonight, but that night it had been foggy and overcast. Only a nut like Lichwick, or a seasoned veteran of those waters, would have been out on a boat that night: a fisherman, maybe, finishing the previous day's work or getting a jump on the next. And an armed fisherman, who would, in his own words, do anything to make sure the bridge and all that it brought was completed, would have probably reacted unkindly to Lichwick and his C-4 if the two had somehow crossed paths.

He thought back on his impressions of Obadiah Plunkett. Opportunity was there: Obadiah probably trolled these waters all hours of the day and night. He had motive: he'd been passionate in his admission that he would do anything to ensure the development of Dabearer Island. And he carried a pistol on his hip at all times. Robert didn't want to jump to any conclusions—he was, after all, a prosecutor—but he would pass on what he'd seen and heard today to Special Agent in Charge Peevey.

Twenty minutes later Constance steered the boat underneath State Route 90 and tacked toward the dock, where one of the ubiquitous Latino employees waited to tie them up and store the boat. When Constance cut the engines, Robert heard his cell phone ring. When he saw *D.O.J.* on the display screen, he checked his watch. It was awfully late to be getting a call from the home office.

"Redding," he said. "Yes . . . yes . . ." then, "You're kidding, right?" A few seconds later he said, "Great. I was just beginning to make some headway," and then, "No, no, I understand. I'm looking forward to seeing my family."

When he hung up, J.P. said, "What's up, boss?"

"We just got called back," Robert said. "Looks like our stalwart investigative skills are no longer needed. We're going home."

There was a moment of silence. Then Jackie Simon said, "Well, I'll be damned."

## Chapter 19

---

“The boss is hot,” J.P. said as he shared an early cup of coffee with Constance in the kitchen of the Montgomery House.

She giggled.

“What’s funny?”

“I was thinking about Redball being hot. Get it? Redball, hot?”

He wanted to lean across the small Spanish tile table and kiss her for hours on the most beautiful lips he had ever seen. He wasn’t sure, since he’d never been there, but he thought he might be falling in love with the widow Constance. He hadn’t slept with her yet, and for the first time in, well, forever, he didn’t mind. He wanted to have long, passionate sex with her, but he didn’t want to screw things up by moving too quickly. This was a relationship he hoped would last longer than his next orgasm. That was love, wasn’t it?

“Could you fulfill me?” she said.

“What?” he said, almost falling off his chair.

She held up her coffee cup. “The pot’s right behind you. Could you fill me?”

“Oh . . . yeah . . . sure . . . of course . . . yeah.” He reached back and grabbed the coffeepot.

“Why is Redball hot?” she asked with another tickle in her voice.

“We’re being jerked around. Somebody in Washington wanted a former stockcar driver down here to put a good face on the government’s investigation. Now we’re being told to go home. No explanation, just pack your things and head out.”

“Any idea why?”

“Yeah, we’re in the way, just like we have been since we got here. We’re lawyers. My title is ‘investigator,’ but I’m not an FBI agent. I come in after the arrests and make sure evidence and timelines are right. I don’t have the expertise to do what Peevey and his guys are doing.”

She said, “I’m sure you *and I could make beautiful babies.*”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that.”

“I said I’m sure you and Ty would drive bureaucrats crazy. Are you having trouble hearing this morning?”

“No, no, that’s what I thought you said.”

“I really hate to see you go.”

“What did you say?”

“I said I. Really. Hate. To. See. You. Go.” Constance made a megaphone out of her hands and shouted at him. “I’d. Love. For. You. To. Stay.”

“What’s all the yelling about?” Robert said as he walked into the kitchen and made a beeline for the coffeepot.

“We were just talking about leaving,” J.P. said.

“Yeah, sorry to cut out so soon, Constance,” Robert said. He had calmed down since getting the news the night before. It irked him to have been used like this, but he had already accepted the inevitable and was looking forward to getting home to Melissa and the kids. As intriguing as the who-shot-Stanford-Lichwick question was, it was no more important than the case Robert had pending against the knucklehead who had passed counterfeit hundreds

with Ben Roethlisberger's picture on them. That guy's defense, as caught on interrogation videotape, was, "Hey, dude, a Benjamin's a Benjamin." That was but one of a dozen cases Robert had waiting in his in-box. This trip had been fun, and he was glad he'd gotten to be a part of the spectacle that was the Dabearer Island groundbreaking, but—

"I was thinking I might stay," J.P. said.

"I'm sorry?" Robert said.

"What is it with you men? Are you all deaf?"

"My daughter's deaf."

"Is it hereditary?"

"I'm thinking maybe I can take a little personal time, stick around for a few days," J.P. said. "You know, keep an eye on things, unofficially."

"Did. You. Hear. That. Okay?"

"You know I have a foundation that customizes homes for families of deaf children."

"Speak. Up. I. Didn't. Hear. You."

"Wow, that's funny, Constance. Who knew?"

She looked sheepishly at her coffee. "Sorry, I normally don't, it's just that in the short time you've been here, I feel so close to all of you, like you're family."

Johnny Pea petted her arm. "Boss, I'd really like to stay if you don't have any objections."

"It's good to see you showing some initiative, Agent Westport. Let me think about it, as long, of course, as it's okay with Constance."

"I was just shouting about how much I would love to see you guys stay," she said with a wry smile.

"Who's staying?" Jackie Simon said as she stormed into the kitchen. Jackie had an uncanny ability to enter a room listening and talking at the same time. It was like she was a game-show contestant: *I can join that conversation in two words, Alex.*



“Nobody yet,” Robert said.

“So when are you heading back?” Jackie asked.

“A little later this morning. Why?”

Jackie ran her fingers through her hair and said, “I need to talk to you about something.”

“I know. We never really got a chance to discuss your story. Sorry, I won’t be much help.”

“No,” she said. “This is something else.”

She had grappled with herself most of the night, wondering what her journalistic responsibilities were when it came to telling Redding about Bill Shoan. Bill was her boss, which meant sharing details of her conversations had to violate some ethical rule or another. That was the thing about journalistic ethics: stuff that most people would consider morally reprehensible—posing as a mourner to get an interview with the grieving mother of a fallen soldier; suing to get autopsy photos of a starlet who stuck one too many heroin needles between her toes—you won Pulitzers for that stuff. Revealing office chitchat to network outsiders got you exiled to the Boise affiliate, or, god forbid, sent to the leper colony of public television. But Jackie liked this Redball guy, even if he had caused her to lose her breakfast yesterday. And she both loved and hated what she’d seen on Dabearer. The fate of a hundred twenty people was one thing, but the thought of those wild horses losing their habitat for the sake of some gaudy casino attached to an asphalt arena where cars made left turns, well, that was exactly the kind of injustice she had gotten into journalism to expose. The fact that Bill had killed the story pissed her off even more when she realized that her boss had an inside source he wasn’t sharing.

“What’s up?” Robert said when they were in the parlor. She told him.

Redding took the news about Shoan better than Jackie

had expected. He only spouted five or six words worth a million in FCC fines, the most expensive starting with *f* and ending with *uck*. He paced the parlor, rubbing his chin and mumbling to himself. Then he pointed an accusing finger at Jackie and said, "So this network guy knew we were going to be pulled out of here, what, three hours before I got the call?"

"More like four. He's a legend in television news, by the way."

He paced some more. "This was the guy who sent you down here to interview me for a story?"

"Well, it was a little more than just an interview. I was supposed to see what kind of segment *Outer Boroughs* could do on the bombing. I figured with that god-awful movie out it was just a star-fucker story . . . sorry, no offense."

"None taken."

"Bill was all hyped about me jetting down here to get this story. Then he calls yesterday and says it's a tail-chaser, that you're heading home, and that I should do the same. It's weird. He's never pulled me back like that."

"When do you leave?"

"I'm not," Jackie said. "Something's going on down here. I'm not sure what it is, but I'm going to hang around for a couple of days and see if I can't figure it out."

"I think I might be able to provide you with some help," Robert said.

He put his hand on Jackie's shoulder and led her back into the kitchen.

"Johnny Pea, after careful deliberation, I've decided that you should stay a few more days."

"Thanks, boss, that's great," he said as he slid a little closer to Constance.

"But there is one catch."

"What's that?"

"I need you to keep an eye on Ms. Simon here. She's going to be doing a little unofficial snooping, and she might need some help, off the record, of course."

"Of course," J.P. said.

"Quarterback at Columbia, huh?" Jackie said. "How'd you do?"

"We were oh-and-twenty-one with me taking snaps."

"Good, maybe we'll get along after all."

"Jackie, one more thing," Robert said.

"Yeah?"

"Did you really think the movie was god-awful?"

Robert went to his room and packed after telling Ty that they were abandoning Johnny Pea. Ty had asked if Agent Westport was staying for good, and seemed genuinely disappointed when Robert said no.

Their flight left Gulfport in a little less than two hours. Robert had thought about calling for his jet, or, more accurately, the time-share he owned. For a million-six he'd upgraded to a one-eighth share in a Hawker 800, which meant that as long as he paid his sixteen-thousand-dollar-a-month maintenance fee, and two thousand dollars per flying hour, he could pick up a phone and have a jet, complete with a smiling crew, stocked galley, and fresh flowers, waiting on him at any airport in the country. The 800 was an extravagance. He'd been in a Hawker 400XP, which seated seven, and had a cruising speed of five hundred miles an hour. But the 400 only had a sixteen-hundred-mile range. That was four hundred miles short of the distance between Redding's home in Charlotte and their condo in Park City. Melissa had hit the roof when he upgraded, saying, "So what if we stop once for gas!" but Robert loved his new jet and had no intentions of going back. He only flew commercial when he was on government business, and only then when it was necessary to

keep up appearances. He could have zipped back and forth from Charlotte to Biloxi every day and slept in his own bed if he'd wanted, but that would have been tacky, especially since DOJ regulations would have required Ty and Johnny Pea to either take the cheapest coach commercial flight they could find, or reimburse Robert for their portion of the expenses of his plane, roughly three grand apiece. Those two had trouble buying a round of beers at dinner on their salaries. So Robert had done the right thing and slummed on U-S Air. He had, however, bought first-class upgrades for all three of them on his personal American Express card. Spartan civil service had its limits.

"I heard you were leaving." Peevey stood outside Robert's open doorway, his hands folded across his chest and a look on his face that, on anyone else, might have been confused with gastric distress.

"I think everyone knew my travel plans before I did," Robert said.

Peevey took a tentative step inside the room. "You know I don't like how this was handled," he said. "Any of it. From the outset we've had shadowy forces nudging this investigation in one direction, and then pulling it in another. That's why I've been less than my usual gentlemanly self to you and your team, Redding. I thought you were aligned with those dark forces."

"Ever talk to anybody about your dark shadow fears—your wife, maybe a therapist?"

"I've watched you very closely these last couple of days," Peevey said. "While I disapprove of the complete lack of discipline and professionalism your team exhibits, I've come to realize that you are just as much a pawn in this as we are."

"A *complete* lack of discipline."

"You were sent here as a public relations stunt. Now

you're being pulled out. And we're still no closer to figuring out what happened to that kid than we were three days ago."

He sensed that this was as intimate as Peevey got with anyone, which made Robert wonder what Mrs. Peevey had to be like.

"You'll clear this one," Robert said in a tone he hoped hadn't come out as halfhearted as it sounded to him.

"Oh yeah, we'll clear it," Peevey said, shaking his head in disgust. "The question is, will we ever find out what really happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"I got a call this morning from the special assistant undersecretary to the deputy director."

"Wonder what font they use to get all that on a business card."

"Anyway, he says we have four days to wrap this up, or it's going in the books as an accidental suicide—in his words, 'a botched domestic terrorist attack that resulted in only one death: the terrorist's.'"

"And the gunshot evidence?"

"Stuffed in a box, sealed with 'Classified' tape, and shoved in a basement no one's visited since J. Edgar died."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to work my ass off for four days and see what I can find."

"One of my guys is staying," Robert said.

"Why?"

"To help you if you need him," Robert said with a little smile. "I also want to see if we can shine a light onto some of your dark forces before anyone realizes what we're doing."

"Are you leaving the black guy or the retard?"

"The retard, but he's a lot brighter than he lets on."

"It'd be tough for him not to be."

"I'll be staying in close contact. If you need anything . . ."

"Well, now that you mention it."

"What?"

"We pulled all Lichwick's financials. For the most part there's nothing out of the ordinary for a flunky with a trust fund. But then we came across a series of deposits."

Peevey stepped out the door and came back in with a file folder he handed to Robert. Robert opened it to the first page, and saw a series of highlighted lines on a checking account ledger. The name on the account was SLINC.

"Somebody misspell 'slink'?" Robert asked.

"It stands for Stanford Lichwick, Incorporated."

"You're shitting me."

"No, the kid paid his fifty bucks and got his corporate seal. From what we can gather, it was a shell company to protect donors who didn't mind giving money, but didn't want their names attached to PLF. We might have missed it if we didn't have a thousand agents looking into these kinds of things. Usually it's an Islamic school or import/export company funneling money from sheiks to suicide bombers. But Lichwick's accounts triggered a red flag in the computers, so here we are."

Robert looked at Peevey. "And you want me to . . ."

"Check out the first three deposits of the current year," the special agent in charge said.

Robert looked at the numbers. Then he looked at the corresponding name for those deposits. And he almost dropped the folder on the floor.

"I don't believe it," he said.

"We checked it both ways," Peevey said. "There's a corresponding withdrawal on the other end that was verified by the bank."

"I guess you'd like me to check this out personally?"

"I thought it wouldn't hurt to ask."

Robert looked at the file again, hoping what he was seeing would somehow vanish from the page. But it didn't. He felt the morning's coffee work its way back up into his throat, and he thought for a second he was going to have to sit down. The page remained unchanged, the name staring at him like an unwelcome black penalty flag.

"I'll do it," Robert said to Peevey, but also to himself. "If anybody has to make this call it should be me."

He wasn't looking forward to it. This would be a very unpleasant visit with a very old, very dear friend.

## Chapter 20

---

The boys from Octopus Sports were always in a hurry. They hurried to their weekly golf meetings, where one's importance was measured by the number of urgent text messages you got while sitting at a conference table debating the best shirt deal for your overweight senior tour client; they hurried to power lunches with fathers of eleven-year-old tennis players, girls who were already in the Octopus Sports "system"; they hurried to football combines and junior high soccer games, anywhere the next great star might be found; then they hurried back to their offices, where they hoped to find a human resource officer did not await them with a severance check.

This morning Willis Strand, Steve Stein, and Call me Kirk Kirkcannon hurried through the streets of Biloxi. They had been sent by their new boss, Todd Feldman, who had given them a very simple directive: "Get a STOCK-CAR deal."

Todd hadn't said *or your asses are out on the street* because he didn't have to. Another hundred Octopus Sports employees had just gotten pink slips. The Bangkok office, which had handled all the cricket clients, had been closed, news many employees got when the new tenant showed up. On top of that, Todd had just completed a hostile take-



over of a chain of day-care centers called We Love Kids. Wall Street expected him to lay off a third of that workforce and cut nonpayroll expenses in half by going with the same institutional food provider that serviced thirty prison systems across America. The chain's stock jumped two and a quarter the day the deal closed.

"Where is this boat place?" Stein shouted from the driver's seat of their rental car. He had just run two red lights, screeched through a hairpin turn, and scared Mrs. Knutt's third-grade class off the sidewalk and back onto their field trip bus. A special counselor would have to be brought into school to help the kids cope with the trauma.

"Says here it's two streets ahead on the right," Kirk said from the passenger seat.

"This is why GPS upgrades make sense," Stein said.

Kirk shrugged. "Cutbacks," he said.

"Yeah, we stand in line at the rental counter for twenty minutes so we can drive around lost in this oh-so-roomy Kia for half an hour. Real good use of executive time."

"Well, Steve, you can always mention it to Todd."

"I think I'll do that," Stein lied.

"There it is," Willis Strand said from the backseat as he pointed to Biloxi Boat Rental.

Stein whipped the car into a ninety-degree turn without applying the brakes. "Jesus, that dump?" he said when he saw the boat rental office. "I hope their boats are in better shape than their building."

"I hope we can get a charter on short notice," Kirk said.

"Doesn't look like they're bursting with business," Stein said.

They piled out of the Kia like circus clowns unfolding from a toy car. Willis Strand stretched his six-five frame, straightened the lapels of his blazer, and said, "Just so all our oars are rowing in the same direction on this thing,

I'm not sure I'm conceptualizing our aspiration statement as it relates to the objective-based strategy."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Willis, will you cut the word-a-day calendar bullshit?" Stein said.

"Okay," Willis said, "what the fuck we trying to do here?"

They walked toward the splintered front door of the rental office, and Stein said, "We're trying to take advantage of a volatile situation. The groundbreaking on Da-whatever Island was a PR disaster. Environmental protesters splashing around in the water, yelling for help: it was beautiful. We couldn't have asked for a better scenario."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I've seen the video a dozen times already."

"It's not the video," Stein said. "It's the commentary. The newspeople are lapping this up like kids with Klondike bars. Perky Caldwell's opening line in last night's newscast was, 'Does STOCKCAR threaten the environment? Some think so.' Can you believe it? That was her opening line."

"But why are we going to this island? And did you bring any bug spray? These gnats are eating me alive."

"We're going to talk to the developers, show them that we have their best interests at heart, and that we can stop the bleeding before"—they walked through the front door of the boat rental shop at that moment—"a bird-loving judge issues a temporary injunction and shuts down all construction on that island."

The two guys playing cards behind the counter looked up at them. One of them, a big, scary fellow, looked vaguely familiar to Steve Stein. He stood up and rolled his shoulders like a fighter who had just heard the bell.

"You think we could be that lucky?" Call me Kirk said. "I mean, an injunction? How great would that be?"

Willis smiled, nodded, and said, "Yeah, then we come

in as the knowledge angel, put wood behind the arrow, and get them to open the kimono.”

“You just can’t help yourself, can you?” Stein said.

The big guy took a step toward them and cracked his knuckles.

“How you doing?” Stein said to Sammy Dubose. “We’re needing to hire a boat and a driver to take us to Da . . . what the hell is it again?”

“Dabearer Island,” Kirk said.

“Yeah, yeah, Dabearer. You guys do that sort of thing?”

Sammy looked at his brother and they both smiled.

“What? Did I say something funny?”

“Yeah,” Sammy said. “Me and my brother’ll take you out.”

“Do you both need to go? We don’t want to pay more than we have to.”

“We both need to go,” Richey said.

Sammy nodded. “Regulations.”

“Okay,” Stein said, gesturing toward the door with his hand. “Lead the way.”

An hour later, Steve Stein and Kirk Kirkcannon lay face-down on the deck of a twenty-six-foot Robalo, their hands, feet, and mouths bound with duct tape, no land in sight. Sitting upright on the railing, Willis Strand had been bound with nylon rope. The thugs had run out of duct tape, prompting the smaller one to say, “Dang, Sammy, we gotta use the tie line on that’un there.”

To which the one called Sammy had replied, “That’s all right, Richey. We ain’t gonna be tying up anywhere no-ways.”

Stein’s bladder released at that point, leaving a growing dark stain on the front of his tan trousers. Not that it mattered.

Willis was balancing on a small chrome handrail with

his feet on a tackle box. Behind him, his hands were bound to what looked like a thirty-pound anchor. Sammy stood in front of him holding an oar to Willis's chest.

"Who else is trying to shut down our island?" Sammy said to Willis.

"Your what? I don't . . . what are you talking about?"

"Shut down construction on Dabearer: who else is involved?"

"You're blamestorming, friend. We're straw men," Willis said. "We're just trying to socialize some soft-skill ideas out there."

Stein writhed on the deck and screamed, "Stop with the buzzword bullshit, you idiot!" but it came out, "whmmm hmmm whmmm whmm hmm whmmm whmmm!"

Richey kicked Stein in the side and said, "Shut up, Blue Hair."

Blue Hair? Who was he calling Blue Hair? Stein was prematurely gray, sure, but . . .

Sammy cocked his head, poked Willis in the chest with the oar, and said, "Soft-skulled what? Who you calling soft-skulled, numb-nuts?"

"No, no, I didn't—"

"Cause I'm the one got your ass perched on the edge of being shark bait."

"No, I didn't . . . We're just niche marketers, best of breed, trying to tee up some customer-directed strategies to hit the bleeding edge."

"Whmmmm! Whmmmm!"

"You know, chasing nickels around dollar bills, thinking outside the box, that's what we do."

Sammy looked at Richey, who gave him a how-the-fuck-am-I-supposed-to-know? shrug.

"So who sent you?"

"Our boss, Todd Feldman," Willis said, glad to finally be asked a question he understood.

“Is he a lawyer?”

“Whmmm! Hmm! Whmmmm!”

“Yeah, but—”

Sammy pushed the oar into his chest, and Willis Strand tumbled overboard and disappeared.

Steve Stein shat himself, which sealed his fate.

“Phew, godalmighty, Blue Hair,” Richey said as he waved his hand in front of his nose. “Sammy, this one’s already let his stuff go.”

Sammy shrugged. “Fuck it, go ahead and toss him.”

“Whmmmm, whmmm, whmmm, hmmm, whmm, whmm, whmmmm, hmmm!”

Richey grabbed Stein by the arms and pulled him to the railing. The eldest of the Octopus Sports vice presidents flopped like a beached mackerel.

“Little help here, Sammy?”

“Oh, jeez,” Sammy said as he walked over, grabbed Stein by his duct-taped ankles, and hoisted him over the starboard railing.

Stein hit the water, rolled into his back, and wiggled to keep his head above water. At that moment, he realized why the big one called Sammy looked familiar. He was the guy driving the speedboat in the news video, the one who had, according to Perky Caldwell, the most trusted woman in news, “forced many environmental activists to scramble for their lives in the waters off the coast of Mississippi.”

“Aw, hell, Richey, did you not weigh him down?” Sammy said.

“I figured you wanted to talk to him.”

“God, if you want something done right . . .” He walked to the port side and cracked open the tackle box Willis Strand had used as his final inglorious podium. He quickly tied a couple of hooked lures to a fishing line and slid the

line through to make a noose. When Sammy walked to starboard, Steve Stein was floating on his back, holding his head up by moving his feet in an inverted dolphin kick.

"Here you go, Blue Hair," Sammy said as he threw the line out into the water like a lasso. The noose bobbed near Stein's shoulder. "Put that around you and we'll haul you in."

Thank god. They had finally come to their senses. Once they took the tape off, Stein could explain everything and offer to pay these morons whatever they wanted for his life. He splashed over to the line, but realized he couldn't get his arms in without sinking. So he ducked his head under and, with a hard push of his legs, came up with his head in the fish-line noose.

"Good," Sammy said. He pulled the noose tight and Stein's eyes bulged. Then Sammy tied the tackle box to the other end and threw it overboard.

Steve Stein was spared the horrors of drowning. The weight of the tackle box pulled the line so tight it cut through his carotid artery. As he disappeared beneath the surface, the water turned black with blood.

Sammy and Richey focused their attention on Kirk Kirkcannon. He hadn't moved. His eyes were the size of golf balls and his face matched the white gulls that were hovering above Steve Stein's growing bloodstain. Sammy ripped the duct tape off his mouth, and Kirk puked on the deck.

"God, what is it with you guys? Can't you fucking die like men? Who's going to clean this mess up?"

"I'll clean it," Kirk said. "Just don't kill me. I'll do anything. I'll clean, I'll cook, whatever you want."

"I want you to tell me who else is coming down here to screw up our island."

"Nobody," Kirk blurted. "Feldman sent us to get a deal

down here, but nobody's coming to screw up anything."

"Feldman's the lawyer?"

"Our boss, Todd Feldman. You know, Feldman Lill-estrom? He was on the cover of *Forbes*."

"The lawyer."

"Yeah, he's a lawyer, but that's not—"

Richey produced a .45 from his belt, and Octopus Sports' stable of vice presidents was now decreased by three.

"We got anything to weigh this one down?" Richey asked Sammy.

Sammy leaned over the starboard railing and saw that a half gallon or so of Steve Stein's blood had attracted four good-sized tiger sharks. "No need," he said to Richey. "Just haul him over here. We're about to have some very happy fish."

The brothers were watching the tiger sharks fight over the meatier portions of Call me Kirk Kirkcannon when Sammy's cell phone rang.

Richey said, "Who's calling now?"

Sammy looked at the display screen and said, "Oh hell," before answering.

"Sammy, it's me," Roy Coon said.

"I realize that, Roy. What do you need now?"

"Our friend called, and—"

"Which one?"

"Shitfuck, or Fuckbrain . . . Oh hell, Shelwank, Senator Howell Fucking Shelwank, senior United States senator from Alabama: that friend."

"What did he want this time?"

"He said I should tell you to back off, lay low, don't do anything else to draw attention to our island."

"Like what?"

There was a pause on the other end. Then Roy said

slowly, "Like that little episode with the boat yesterday—you know, the one that's been on CNN every thirty minutes for the last twenty-four hours?"

"Scared them little bastards right into the drink, didn't we?"

"That you did, Sammy. Our friend would appreciate it if you stopped doing that sort of thing for the time being."

Sammy looked over the railing and saw the sharks devour the last of Kirk Kirkcannon.

"Tell him we've got it handled," Sammy said. "I don't think we'll be having any more trouble for a while."



## Chapter 21

---

If Robert Redding had owned a pair of ruby slippers he would have clicked the heels when he walked through the door of his North Carolina home. He had bought the palatial spread from the Charlotte Hornets' shooting guard when the franchise moved to New Orleans. It had needed some work, including repainting the pool floor to remove the lesbian mermaids, and turning the disco into a game room. But Robert loved the place, and hated leaving it, even for a few days.

He'd spent most of his life on the road. When he was racing, he traveled Wednesdays and Thursdays for sponsors. Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays were spent at the tracks where he lived in a forty-five-foot Prevost motor coach parked on the infield asphalt. Tuesdays he spent in the garage meeting with teammates and analyzing the performance from the previous week. That left Mondays, one piddly weekday to enjoy the comfort and quiet of home.

The prosecutor job gave him more time on the homestead, but there were still the trips to Washington and odd overnights to Atlanta or Raleigh. Even those short trips annoyed him. He believed that anyone who said they loved traveling didn't do it very often. That was why he was so thrilled to hear the imported antique English door slam

behind him and hear his shoes tapping on the marble floor of his foyer. Whatever the address, there was, indeed, no place like home.

"Dad's back," Michael Redding yelled from somewhere near the kitchen. His son was the first to greet him. "I saw you on television last night," Michael said.

"You did? What show?"

"Some news thing," Michael said as he gave Robert a quick embrace and then shrugged and turned away. One semi-affectionate hug was all you could expect from a thirteen-year-old boy no matter how much he missed you.

"Really?" Robert had steered clear of the television since yesterday's debacle at the groundbreaking. He was afraid he might have made the B reel.

"You've been all over the cable channels," Melissa said as she walked into the foyer wiping her hands on a dish towel. She kissed him and smiled. "It's good to have you home."

"Great to be home."

"The brakes on the van are squeaking again."

"Did I mention that it was great to be home?"

"I recorded the segment about you on *Hardball*."

"I was on *Hardball*?"

"Slow news day."

"Anything else I should know?"

"Your daughter's not speaking to me. She won't listen to a thing I tell her."

"Honey, she's deaf."

"Don't start."

"Okay, jeez, just trying to add a little levity. Where's the love?"

"Sitting in her room, which is where she's been living since you left."

He put his bag in the bedroom and slipped into his study, where he saw the flashing light on the television re-

corder. Flipping through the catalogue, he found the news segment. It was only six minutes, so he turned it on.

Chris Matthews came on screaming, *"You've got this deserted island, I don't know, it's like Gilligan or something down there, ha, ha, and they're building this race-car track and attaching it to a casino. I've never heard of anything like that. Howard Kurtz, have you ever heard of anything like that?"*

*"No, Chris, I—"*

*"I mean, a casino and a car race! What are they going to do, bet on who drives into the wall first?"*

*"I—"*

*"The guy at the craps table can't yell, 'Pay seven,' because nobody could hear him over the cars."*

*"Well, Chris—"*

*"Then you've got these environmental activists down there protesting what they say is the destruction of this island. One of them blew himself up trying to sabotage a bridge. What do you make of that, Ron Reagan?"*

*"Chris, I think what you have here is—"*

*"Don't you have a clash of cultures? Don't you have one group that doesn't want a single tree cut down, ever, and another that wears Brut, drinks beer, and has permanent oil stains on their fingers? Isn't that what this is about?"*

*"That's a big part of it—"*

*"Rita Cosby, jump in here."*

*"Chris, my sources tell me that the most interesting part of this, and the most troubling for some, is the presence of a federal prosecutor at the groundbreaking ceremony where the—"*

*"A former racecar driver! He's a former racecar driver, who's now a prosecutor."*

*"That's right, Chris. Robert 'Redball' Redding—"*

*"What kind of name is Redball? Howard Kurtz, have you ever heard of anybody named Redball?"*

*"My understanding, Chris, is that—"*

*"I mean, is he like that superhero that bursts into flames, what is it, the Fantastic Four, or whatever? Ron Reagan, jump in here."*

Robert turned the television off and grabbed a beer out of the mini-fridge he kept in his study for just such occasions. He needed a little Miller Lite mellowing before braving the stairs and talking to his daughter. And to think how many tears they had shed when she was born.

Katie had come into the world with a condition called atresia and microtia, a congenital birth defect in which the ear canals did not form fully. It was not a rare condition, but in most cases it only affected one ear. In Katie's case, the inner and outer canals of both ears hadn't formed, leaving her profoundly deaf. Like most parents in such a situation, Robert and Melissa spent weeks blaming themselves for something they'd had no part in creating and could do nothing about. Then they spent the first two and a half years of Katie's life trying to protect their beautiful special-needs baby from the outside world.

That changed when Katie turned three. Not only did she exhibit all the strength, cunning, and stubborn determination of any three-year-old, she also figured out how to manipulate her parents. When she wanted to paint in the living room, for example, she simply turned her back on them. When they scolded her for painting when they had told her not to, she welled up and signed that she hadn't heard them. Robert and Melissa thought it was heartbreaking until the day Robert caught her snickering afterward. She had played them like a xylophone at age three.

After Michael was born, they had a decision to make: they could either treat Katie like a disabled person, or force her to adapt to the hearing world. They chose the latter, and she thrived like they could never have imagined.

She aced the admissions test for the best private (hearing) school in the region, and had been an A student ever since. At fourteen, she had been voted class president.

That same year she got her first boyfriend, a development that led to Robert's recurring acid reflux. Boy number one, Harry or Hickey, something like that, Robert couldn't remember, lasted six agonizing months. When Katie broke up with him, he lashed out, calling her an "earless freak," which led to a parent/teacher conference after Katie bloodied his nose and pulled out several clumps of his hair. That was the last time anyone at Davidson Christian Academy uttered a peep about her disability.

Katie had been through two more boyfriends, but tennis, track, science club, and her burgeoning tutoring business cut into the social constructs of high school romance. Then in the summer of her fifteenth year, she grew five inches, three bra sizes, and the braces came off, revealing a smile that would stop traffic. In September of that year Robert jumped to prescription antacids. Now Katie was seven weeks away from Sweet Sixteen, and fighting with her mother about everything from the nightly dinner menu to which XM station should be played on the in-house intercom.

God, he hoped she wasn't having sex. His job included prosecuting Internet predators, which forced him to read the statistics on teenage promiscuity, especially when it came to what the kids called "casual hooking up." But not his baby girl. No, no, never. Like most fathers of daughters, Robert lived in the placid town of Denial, a wonderful place where little girls remained virgins until Daddy gave them away at the altar to neurosurgeons or protestant ministers who were just back from stints in the Peace Corps.

Robert threw his empty beer bottle into the recycle bin and took a deep breath as he climbed the stairs. His daugh-

ter's door was closed. He pressed the button that triggered flashing lights in her room. The door cracked, but Katie turned away and walked toward her bed.

When she turned around and saw Robert, her scowl transformed into a smile and she hugged him for a solid fifteen seconds. "When did you get in?" she signed.

"Just a few minutes ago."

"I saw you on television. Chris Matthews called you a superhero."

"I know. So, how were things while I was gone?"

"What did Mom say? Because whatever she said, she's the one who's being unreasonable. I don't ask for much, you know that, but it seems like whatever I do she already has her mind made up that the answer is no. Then she criticizes me for everything. I mean, she told me yesterday that I dressed like a flapper when I had on a Gap skirt that cost a lot of money, and she didn't even bother to ask where I'd gotten it or anything, and I told Jenny and she couldn't believe it, because it's a really pretty skirt, and it hurt my feelings, and—"

He grabbed her hands before carpal tunnel set in. "Whoa, whoa," he said. "It's okay, sweetie."

Then the tears came. She buried her nose in his shoulder and sobbed for a good minute. He stroked her hair, something he'd done since she was an infant and that he would continue doing until she was gray and he was in diapers again.

"She doesn't mean to hurt your feelings," he said. "She's looking out for you, doing the best she can. You know that. You also could cut her some slack. A little give from you would earn you a lot of give from her."

She sniffled, and rubbed her eyes on his shirt. "Don't tell her I cried over a stupid skirt," she said aloud. Her enunciation had gotten better with practice, but she still had trouble with inflection.

"I won't, because you didn't," he said, and he kissed her forehead.

"Daddy?" she said.

"Yes, sweetheart."

"What's a flapper?"

They ate pork chops on the Italian sandstone patio. Robert grilled, and Melissa made salads and made a pitcher of iced tea and lemonade. By sunset the Redding family seemed peaceful and content. Michael told a story about one of the players on his football team who got in mountains of trouble when he told his parents he was spending the night at a friend's house. Instead the kid hitched a ride to the Greenville Coliseum to see a Drive-by Truckers concert.

"I hope nobody thinks that's cool," Melissa said.

"Duh, Mom," Michael said. "Not only did the kid get kicked off the team, he's grounded for, like, a year, and his dad sold his Xbox, his laptop, *and* his iPod. I mean, it's like he's got to go live in a cave or something."

"Oh my," Robert said. "You mean he might actually have to read a book?"

"No, no, it's not that bad. They didn't take away his television."

"Whew, that's a relief."

Melissa, who tried to keep up with all the comings and goings of her children's peers, was mortified by the story. "I can't believe it," she kept saying. "Don't you ever consider doing such a thing?"

"Don't worry, Mom," Katie signed. "I won't be hitchhiking to any rock concerts."

"I'm glad you're home to hear all this," Melissa said to Robert.

"Yeah, Dad, gosh, I don't know how you could have lived without hearing about my doofus former teammate."

"That's not what I meant," Melissa said.

Katie tapped on the table. Everyone looked at her, and she signed, "I'm glad you're home, too, Dad, just because I'm glad you're home."

"She wants a nine-hundred-dollar dress," Michael said.

"Shut up, butthead."

They all helped with the dishes. Then Melissa got online, and the kids turned on the television in the living room. Robert sat down with his children.

"What are you watching?"

"Another news thing," Michael said with a sigh.

"It's *Outer Burroughs*," Katie signed. "The number-one newsmagazine in the country, dorkbreath."

Robert rubbed his eyes and asked, "What breaking news story are they bringing us tonight?"

Michael waved at the screen and said, "Something about a gay soldier who saved a bunch of guys in the desert. Now they're trying to fire him or something."

"It's a story about a man who wanted to serve his country so much that he hid his true identity. Then he became a hero, only to have the country he served turn its back on him."

"Wow, honey, that's quite an insightful analysis."

"Insightful my . . . foot," Michael said. "She's repeating what that Rock Firestone guy just said."

"Why don't you go drink rat poison?"

"I used it all when I refilled your shampoo bottle."

"Daddy!"

"Hey, who'd like to ride down to Southern Pines with me tomorrow?"

"You're leaving again?" Katie signed.

"Not for long. I've just got to meet some friends. Who's in?"

"What about school?" Michael said.

"Let's call it a field trip."



"Oh, I'm in," he said.

"I don't know, Dad," Katie said. "Another race? I mean, jeez."

"You don't have to go."

"I've really got some stuff I need to do at school."

"Well, I don't," Michael almost shouted. "Can we take the Vette?"

Chevrolet kept Robert in a steady stream of custom personal-use Corvettes, a deal the attorney general frowned on until Robert got him a ride in the pace car during the Richmond 500.

"We can take it if Katie doesn't go."

"Go, go," she said.

"Sweeeet!"

"Watch," Katie signed as she pointed to the television. "That dad just learned that his son is gay."

"I'm not sure you guys should be watching this," Robert said. "It's what, eight-thirty? That shouldn't be on at this hour, should it? I don't get it."

Michael patted his father on the arm and said, "It's okay, Dad, I'll explain it to you later."

"Whoa, dude," Michael said, pointing to the television. "Did that guy just say what I think he said?"

"Was there sound for that?" Katie said aloud.

"No, just his lips moving," Michael said. "But unless he said 'fudge,' I think I got it."

"It wasn't 'fudge,'" Katie signed. "The lower lip curls under a little for the *dg*."

"Okay, how about some ice cream?" Robert said.

"That poor dad," Katie signed. "I can't believe they aired that."

"So let's call it a night, huh?"

"Dad, it's not even nine o'clock."

"Yeah," he said looking at the television. "The family hour."

## Chapter 22

---

Crowds for the Bridgestone Truck racing series would have been considered enormous if they were at a basketball game or rock concert. But truck crowds were puny compared to the throngs that showed up to watch stockcar's more popular races. Anywhere from 150,000 to 400,000 people could be expected at a Salem Cup race (depending on how many spectators a given track could seat and how many RVs could be squeezed into the infield), but a truck race might draw 20,000 loyalists, a big number, but measly by stockcar standards. A lot of it had to do with timing: Cup races were always on Sundays, while truck races were Thursday or Friday affairs. Also trucks didn't go as fast as Salem Cup cars, although it was hard to tell the difference between a 165 mph lap and a 190 mph run from Section 115, Row 26. The big difference, however, was marketing. Roger English had made a conscious decision to put Salem Cup at the top of the stockcar totem pole, so schedules, television deals, prize money, and advertising campaigns revolved around that series. The Sunday drivers were promoted like rock stars, and Cup races were must-see events, even for drive-by fans who thought a manifold was a zoo animal you saw with the seals and sea lions.

Truck fans were the truest of true believers, diehards from the days when dirt-track daredevils rubbed fenders and traded paint in half-ton Fords with running boards and three-speed shifters on steering columns. They were the fans who knew what a track bar was, because they were the people who worked nine-to-five adjusting them; they were the ones who spent a day's pay on Moon Pies, Carling Black Labels, and racing magazines, figuring they'd gotten all the nourishment they needed from the deal; the people who knew every up-and-coming Trans-Am, go-kart, and late model driver on every backwoods, dirt-caked, paint-chipped, side-of-the-road oval from Miami to Minnesota; who followed lap times and sponsorship deals the way Wall Streeters followed the futures market. These were the people who had "it," the innocuous pronoun used to describe a passion for racing that defied rationality, a blood oath to the sport and the bootleg culture that spawned it. They were the core of stockcar, die-hard crazies with racing in their veins, people who would be more likely to visit a Mapplethorpe exhibit at the Guggenheim than miss a race.

When the Reddings pulled into Southern Pines Speedway, Michael counted fifty-six powder-blue mechanics shirts with names like *Jimbo*, *Bobby*, *Bubba*, and *Jed* embroidered on the pockets. He would have counted a hundred more before the Corvette passed through the infield tunnel had Robert not put a stop to it. In typical thirteen-year-old fashion, Michael had been counting out loud.

"What time's the race start?" Michael asked.

Robert looked at his watch and said, "Half an hour. That's why we need to get in here. Things are about to get busy."

"I said I was sorry." Michael had overslept, and then forced his father to stop for a potty break in Norman. Southern Pines Speedway was only ninety miles from

the Reddings' front door, but they were an hour behind schedule.

Robert sped through the infield, showing his racing credentials to a couple of security guards, both of whom recognized his name but not the face. He parked the Corvette in the driver's lot, and he and Michael got out in time to see and hear the conclusion of the classics race, a fifty-lap pregame affair featuring cars from the sixties and seventies. A pack of two-door, three-ton metal monstrosities with engines that were bigger than some New York apartments and that were, on average, nine inches longer than Melissa Redding's minivan, screamed through turn four on the final lap. When they took the checkered flag, Robert recognized the rolling ship that had finished first.

"That car that just won is a 1971 Mercury Cyclone. That's what I raced the first year I turned pro. Your great-uncle and I bought it from Speedy Janzen the year he got out of racing. It was something. Four-twenty-nine Super Cobra straight-bore eight, it was like having a jet on a go-kart. Tight as a freight train, too."

"What on earth are you talking about?" Michael said.

Robert put a hand on his son's shoulder. "Never mind." Every so often he needed to be reminded how different Katie and Michael's upbringing had been to his own.

They walked past the garages as the last of the trucks were being pushed out of tech inspection. Calling them trucks was something of a ruse, like calling the space shuttle a six-passenger plane. Trucks in the Bridgestone series had no doors, no lights (although the decals were deceiving from a distance), and no windows. The windshields were shatterproof polycarbonate, and every panel was handcrafted, wind-tested, and engineered to the tighter tolerances than some fighter jets. Then there were the obvious eyeball differences: the trucks on the track were a foot shorter, four to six inches wider, and their front

and rear wheels six inches closer than the Toyota Tundras and Dodge Rams in the parking lot. And where Ford boasted in its ads about the clearance on its four-wheel-drive F-150, the Fords on the racetrack rode so low they couldn't clear a soda can without causing major body damage. The beds of the Silverados in the lot were filled with coolers, toolboxes, lumber, ladders, and the occasional dog pen. A Chevy racing truck had a cover welded over the bed, a spoiler on what would be the hatch if there were such a thing on a racing vehicle, and a steel tube roll cage running from the top of the cab to the tip of the tail.

The spectators were a few minutes away from hearing the other major difference. A passenger pickup averaged 160 horsepower. The trucks taking the green flag in twenty minutes would pump out 720 horses, a blast of power so primal that the sound itself had feeling.

"Redball Redding," a voice shouted from behind them.

Robert turned to see five T-shirt-clad beer guts shuffling toward him. They all wore hats that advertised the brand of motor oil that Robert suspected stained their blue jeans.

"How are we?" Robert said, greeting his adoring public with a grin and an extended hand.

Michael looked at him as if to say, *Who are you, and what have you done with my father?* It never ceased to amaze him how quickly his dad, one of America's top prosecuting attorneys, someone who felt comfortable enough to cross his legs and stretch out on the love seat in the Oval Office, could transform into a how-are-we? grease-rack shit-kicker.

"Dadgum, 'er Big-un, wha'chew doin' here?" the biggest of the beer guts asked. "And why ain'chee out hawkin' 'at movie?"

"Rather be right here where I know what I'm doing," Robert said.

They all laughed too loudly, elbowing each other in

their meaty sides and gyrating as if it were the funniest line ever uttered. Michael didn't recognize nervous laughter, because he couldn't imagine anyone who wasn't guilty of a crime being nervous around his dad.

"Looked like they did awright on the race scenes," another one said after they regained some semblance of composure. "That one pit scene with the tar oun didn't make no sense, but otter-n-at, they done awright."

What cave did these guys crawl out of? Michael hoped they didn't notice the astonished look on his face.

"Zat'che boy?" a third one asked.

Michael had stopped attempting to translate, but he assumed the question to be a variation of "Is that your boy?"

"It is," his father said with an exaggerated nod. "This is Michael. He's thirteen now."

"Ooooo-weeee," the final member of the tribe said while putting his hands atop the shelf his belly formed in his T-shirt. "He'a tarrin' up a mini's ur da sprinters, is he? Won' be long for him to be a racin' wid dim big boys. What'che say, boy? Yee-ount to race your ole man's number?"

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" Michael said.

They stood there stone-faced and silent for a moment. Then the first one said, "Don't tell us yee boy's gone citified dar, Redball."

"He's into football right now," Robert said.

That broke the tension. They all nodded and grunted their approval. A young teenager could knock heads on the football field until he caught the racing bug. It happened occasionally. He still had time.

"Guys, we need to run," Robert said, which prompted each of them to pull out an article for autographing. He signed two caps, a program, and two checkered Southern Pines Speedway flags. Then he wished them well, waved, turned, and put a hard hand on Michael's shoulder.

“What kind of display was that?” Robert asked through gritted teeth as they marched double-time around the corner of the garage.

“I didn’t understand them.”

“You were making fun of them, looking down on them. They knew it. And *I* knew it!”

“Jeez, Dad, you were yukking it up with them with that fake Appalachian twang. I really didn’t understand what any of you were saying.”

His father spun him around and put both hands on his shoulders, pulling him so close their noses almost touched.

“Don’t you ever look down on those people, or anyone else, for that matter,” he said with a cold, quiet voice that made Michael shiver. “Those men are the reason you live in the house we have and go to the school you attend. They’re the ones that bought your iPod, and that LCD television you show off to your friends. Poking fun at them is like poking fun at me . . . at the memory of your grandfather, who was more like them than he is like you.”

That last line brought tears to Michael’s eyes. Robert regretted saying it the moment it left his lips. He softened his grip on his son and said, “Look, bud, no man is better than you, but no one is beneath you, either. We might have more money than those people, and you might think their country accents sound dumb, but most of them are rock-solid, better than those pissants I met out in Hollywood, I’ll tell you that.”

Michael wiped his eyes and said, “Sorry, Dad.”

“Good. And by the way, that Appalachian accent’s not fake, the one I use at home is.”

The trucks were on pit road now, and the prerace stock-car ritual was in full swing, but with a little less flair than the Sunday spectacles. No bomber squadron flybys or fireworks, no platinum-selling recording artist giving a pre-

race concert: a local brass ensemble had been asked to play the National Anthem as the Southern Pines High School ROTC presented the colors. An Army chaplain from Fort Bragg said the prerace prayer, and the "Gentlemen, start your engines" command was given by a six-year-old named Lorena Rodriguez, daughter of Specialist Ramon Rodriguez, who had been killed in action two weeks before. When little Lorena handed the mike back to the track staffer, there wasn't a dry eye in the stands.

Three seconds later the rumble from forty trucks firing their engines shook the ground. Robert led Michael toward a room at the end of the garage. It was a sterile concrete-walled enclosure with linoleum on the floors. It was also where Robert was to meet his interview subject of the afternoon.

"Redball, how you doing, son?" a voice shouted as Robert pushed his way through the heavy glass door.

"Not bad, Brutus, how have you been?" Robert stepped forward and shook the hand of a man who could have been in his late fifties. His hair was gray, semi-long, and Fifth Avenue groomed, and his clothes and perfect posture made him look like he'd stepped out of the casual wear section of a men's magazine. No way would anyone guess that he was a seventy-three-year-old former racecar driver.

"Who's this?" the man asked.

"This is my son, Michael."

The man extended his hand. "Michael, I'm Brutus Parker. It's nice to meet you."

"You're the guy who owns this track?"

"I am," Brutus said with a broad smile.

"Mr. Parker was a hall-of-fame racecar driver," Robert said.

Brutus laughed. "We didn't know what a hall of fame was back then," he said. "I wasn't half as good as your fa-



ther, and neither one of us was as good as we thought we were.”

Michael nodded and said nothing. He was never sure how to respond to aw-shucks humility from his dad’s peers. Thankfully, he was rescued when the crowd came to their feet and the engine sounds went from a low, loud rumbling to an outright eruption, the kind of sound trailer-park residents described as “like being under a train” after spring tornadoes scooped up their aluminum homes and blew them into the next county.

“Just went green,” Brutus said with a grin.

“Is there somewhere we can talk?” Robert asked.

Brutus nodded. “You men come with me. Can I get you anything, drink, sandwich? We’ve still got Joe Bob’s Barbecue.”

“We’re fine,” Robert said.

Michael wanted to say, *What’s this “we” shit, Kimosabe? I’m starving*, but he kept his young mouth shut. One ass-chewing a day was about all his young psyche could stand.

Once upon a time Brutus Parker had been Roger English’s best friend, a confidant and pseudo older brother when Roger’s father died suddenly in the family’s Daytona Beach home. That had been a trying time for everyone, but especially for Roger, the heir apparent to the business. Brutus had stepped in and helped with the family’s affairs, mostly by threatening to shoot and dismember the cadre of vultures circling the English family assets. A few months later, when STOCKCAR was threatened by an offshoot league and a potential revolt from drivers who didn’t think Roger, Jr., had the minerals to run the business, it was Brutus, one of the most respected men in racing, who stepped in and rescued the league. Brutus was older than most of the drivers he shoved into the walls on the weekends, so when he told them, in language that left

no room for misinterpretation, that every racecar driver would support STOCKCAR or he'd make sure they never got another dollar in sponsorship money, the drivers threw their full support behind young Roger. STOCKCAR took off like the Redstone rockets being launched a few miles down the road, and Roger, Jr., became wealthier than his father could have ever dreamed possible.

Brutus was the one who pushed Roger into the track-building business. The junior English would have been content owning his one facility in Florida and organizing races at tracks owned by others, had Brutus not bulldogged the development idea. In that respect Brutus was recognized as a genius, a visionary who understood that the economics of vertical integration applied to racing the same way it had to the railroads a century before.

Roger would have balked had Brutus not said, "If you don't do this, I'm going to the bank and doing it myself." That threat, and Roger's unquestioning knowledge that Brutus would follow through on it, was the catalyst for Speedway Properties. When Brutus retired from racing, he became partner and president of the development business.

No one knew for sure what drove the two men apart. Money seemed the logical culprit. Brutus made it in truckloads when he expanded Speedway Properties to North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Virginia. Then, suddenly and without explanation, Brutus and Roger split, sparking a bitter soap-opera battle for control of the tracks and the races held on them. Brutus walked away with four tracks, including Southern Pines Speedway, and, with the help of some savvy investors, he formed a new company that built four more in Texas, Kansas, Pennsylvania, and California.

Roger never disguised his vitriol for his former partner. In fact, for years the mere mention of Brutus's name in Roger's presence sparked a tidal wave of profanity. The two only worked together (begrudgingly) because they

needed each other. Roger's league needed Brutus's tracks, and Brutus needed Roger's STOCKCAR races.

This worked fine until the race schedule hit the forty-week mark. With drivers, owners, staff, and sponsors screaming that the season was too long, Roger had to cut six races. To the surprise of no one, Brutus's tracks were the ones that lost dates. That trend continued as Roger expanded Speedway Properties into new markets. For every new track that opened, another track, a Brutus Parker-owned track, lost a race.

Brutus held press conferences, brought legal action, rallied supporters to his side, but the trend continued. Mississippi Motor Speedway, when it opened, would steal the final date from Southern Pines.

Robert had heard this tale many times in his racing tenure, but he didn't interrupt Brutus as the older man went through the historical high points one more time. They were in the owner's room, a 750-square-foot luxury sky-box with a kitchen, bar, full bath, two couches that could be converted to beds in a matter of seconds, and six flat-screen televisions. There were also a dozen leather theater seats overlooking the start-finish line. Michael had parked himself in one of those and was listening to the action on one of Brutus's scanners as Robert sat on a barstool and listened to Brutus.

"It would be enough if you just called what's happening a crying shame," Brutus said, "but that doesn't do it justice."

Robert nodded gravely. He'd extracted more confessions by showing interest and sympathy than he had with any coercive technique. Most perps just wanted somebody to listen.

"Speaking of justice," Brutus said, "you should know better than anyone about the laws Roger's breaking. If this isn't restraint of trade, it doesn't exist."

Unfortunately, trust-busting cases weren't that cut-and-

dried. In the modern legal world a monopoly depended on the eye of the beholder. The Microsoft case that fizzled in the late nineties was example number one, but there were many others.

"So where do you stand with your suit?" Robert asked.

Brutus laughed and filled a highball glass with ice. "About where I expected to be: nowhere. Roger owns politicians, prosecutors, and judges in thirty states. One phone call and a suit like mine gets shuffled in the never-happen docket. Now, *that's* something you should be looking into."

"Bring me evidence of bribery, and I'll be all over it," Robert said.

Brutus poured bourbon over the ice and said, "Just open your eyes. You were in Mississippi this week. How do you think something like that got through Congress, not to mention all the permitting and other regulatory agencies? Palms were greased, it's obvious."

Robert wanted to say *obvious and evidence are two different things*, but he let it go. Brutus had given him a perfect opening to take the conversation where he wanted. "Speaking of Mississippi," he said.

"I wondered when you were going to get to it. You aren't here to catch up on old times and watch a truck race, are you?"

"Not exactly," Robert said. "The FBI pulled Stanford Lichwick's bank records."

"It's about damn time. I figured somebody'd be knocking on my door the day the dumbass blew himself up."

"So you admit to funneling money to Lichwick?"

"Who do you think bought that boat those fools fell off of the other day? You looked good on TV, by the way. The camera always did like you."

"What did you think Lichwick was going to do with the money you sent him?"

“Didn’t know and didn’t care,” Brutus said. “Wait, I take that back. If I’d known the moron was going to try to blow something up, I would have flown down there and kicked his fool ass myself.”

“What, then?”

“He said they were going to launch a bunch of protests, maybe find someone to sue over the eminent domain thing. That’s another thing—how the hell do you think Roger got that deal done if not by lining some pockets?”

The whole land seizure scenario on Dabearer had been troubling Robert since he left, but he didn’t want this discussion to veer off track.

“So you were funding environmental protests in the hopes they might halt construction?”

“No,” Brutus said as he sipped the bourbon and sucked air over his teeth. “I’ve been at this a long time, Redball. I knew those kids weren’t going to stop anything. But I thought they might stir up enough trouble that somebody like you would go down there and take an objective look at the deal.”

Another sip and Brutus stared out the Plexiglas window at lap fifty-six of the truck race. “I guess I was wrong,” he said.

Robert turned around on his stool and watched the race for a lap without uttering a peep. Then he said, “One more thing, Brutus. How’d you get in touch with Stanford Lichwick?”

“I didn’t,” he said. “Lichwick called me. Didn’t your boys pull his phone records? Jesus, how’re we supposed to have confidence that the FBI’s keeping terrorists out of our midst when the bastards don’t have enough sense to pull Lichwick’s phone lugs?”

“Good question,” Robert said. It was one he planned to ask the second he left Southern Pines.

## Chapter 23

---

“I’m telling you, there are no North Carolina numbers on Lichwick’s lugs,” Johnny Pea said. “Peevey and I went through them yesterday. There’s nothing there. Nothing on his home phone, the girlfriend’s phone, neighbors’ phones, nothing. They called out for pizza a lot, usually a few hours after calling a marijuana dealer named Frog.”

“So he didn’t hesitate to call his supplier,” Robert said.

“Or a dozen other felons. Peevey figures we’ll have at least twenty parole violations when we track down the blockheads who chatted with Lichwick the week before he died.”

“Any of them look good for the C-4?”

“Oh yeah. Remember that video we got last year on a guy named Yusef Sashimi?”

“Is that the genius who taped his ‘How to Bomb a Logging Company’ seminar?”

“One and the same.”

“I thought he was in Buenos Aires.”

“Looks like the Argentines puked him back up here. Anyway, Sashimi was calling Lichwick three, sometimes four times a day. Lichwick called him a dozen times as well. Peevey’s got a bead on Sashimi, so we might have our C-4 supplier by the end of the week.”

As Robert had predicted. But it didn't make sense that Lichwick hadn't called Brutus Parker. Brutus knew Robert would check out the story. Why would he lie?

"I need you to check some more numbers," Robert said.

"Shoot."

Robert gave him Brutus's office, home, and cell numbers.

"What am I looking for?"

"It's like porn, Johnny Pea. You'll know it when you see it."

"That stuff on the office computer is not my fault."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"I'll call you when I get home."

"Good idea, you go home. No need to go to the office, especially my office."

"Just run the numbers."

"Will do, boss."

Melissa met them in the garage. "We've got a problem."

"How are you, dear? Oh, fine, hon, how are you? Your son had a great day, and mine wasn't bad, either."

"She's impossible."

"Do I need to ask who *she* is?"

"I already told her she couldn't take another tutoring job. She knew it. She's already got more than she can handle, and I'm run ragged. If I'm going to run a taxi, I want a fare meter and a turban."

"Please don't say that outside the house."

"Would you listen to me?"

"Hi, Mom," Michael said. "The race was great."

"Go to your room."

"What did I do?"

"Go!"

"Sheez, I'm the *good* child, remember?"

"Now," Robert said, pushing him through the door.

"Okay, sheez."

"All right, now, what's this about?"

"She accepted another tutoring job from some boy."

"That's my industrious little girl."

"In music appreciation!"

"Oh."

"I put my foot down, and you know what she said?"

"Beethoven was deaf?"

"This is not funny."

"Okay, what did she say?"

"She said he was paying her standard rate."

"To be tutored in music appreciation. That's my industrious little girl."

"I told her that there were names for girls who accepted money for such things, and 'tutor' wasn't among them."

"Ouch. How'd that go over?"

They heard several muffled thuds coming from Katie's room above them.

"That's the suitcase coming out of the closet. She says she's moving out."

"Well, at least it's nothing serious."

"Are you going up there?"

"Can I make a couple of calls first?"

"Oh sure, take your time. No rush. Our fifteen-year-old deaf baby's just packing to leave home."

"Five minutes."

"Yeah, right."

He closed the French doors to his study, but that didn't muffle the sounds of drawers slamming and suitcases being thrown. Robert sighed and called Johnny Pea.

"Have I got something for you?" J.P. said.

"You've solved the case, and I can focus on negotiating a cease-fire between my wife and daughter."



"Not quite. Troubles at home?"

"Nothing a cage and some boxing gloves wouldn't solve."

"You know, people pay good money to watch things like that."

"Really, how much?"

"Depends on . . . Wait, I'm not speaking from personal experience or anything."

"Should I check the corporate credit card in addition to your office computer?"

"I can explain that."

"Tell me what you found first."

"Strangest thing," J.P. said. "We pulled the lugs on the Brutus Parker guy you requested, and, sure enough, Lichwick's number shows up six times."

"So, Brutus called Lichwick."

"Nope, other way around. Lichwick called Parker."

"From where?"

"His house twice and his cell four times."

"I thought you said you checked Lichwick's home and cell numbers."

"That's the strange part: we did. The outgoing calls don't show up on Lichwick's records, but they do show up on the receiving end."

"How's that possible?"

"It's not, unless somebody screwed around with Lichwick's lugs before Peevey pulled them."

"Who the hell could change phone records?"

"The phone company."

"Yeah, but why?"

Johnny Pea didn't answer.

"Ask Peevey to track down and question anybody who could have fiddled with those records."

"Uh, boss, I'm not sure Special Agent in Charge Peevey's too keen on doing me any favors."

“Why’s that?”

“Constance took us all out on the boat last night. The moon was beautiful.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing you haven’t done.”

“You didn’t.”

“I just got it up to forty knots.”

“At night?”

“Did I mention how beautiful the moon was?”

“Apologize, and buy him a pack of Number Two pencils or something, but find out who erased Lichwick’s phone records.”

“Got it.”

“How is your relationship with Ms. Simon? Did you throw her overboard last night?”

“She didn’t go with us.”

“Lucky girl.”

“She was still digging into the eminent domain angle, last I saw her. She says the more she digs, the shadier the deal looks.”

“What’s she doing now?”

“No idea. When I mentioned that we were looking at phone records, she slapped her forehead, yelled, ‘Fuck, what was I thinking?’ and ran out. I haven’t seen her since.”

“Well, at least she was gracious in her departure.”

“I’ll let you know if I hear from her.”

“Do that.”

“And boss?”

“Yeah?”

“About that office computer . . .”

## Chapter 24

---

In the honorable traditions of Lyndon B. Johnson and Daniel D. Rostenkowski, Alabama's Howell Hammond Shelwank had come to Washington with no money, a mountain of credit card debt, and child-support lawyers breathing down his neck. But through the magic of breathing the DC air, he was now a multimillionaire.

It started with a small investment in some useless land in Idaho near the Wyoming border. No one paid any attention to the purchase until a group of hikers found a colony of endangered Ozark big-eared bats in a rock outcropping on the property's western tip. So rare was such a discovery (*Plecotus townsendii ingens* weren't known to reside outside of Oklahoma, Missouri, and Arkansas), the government bought the land and turned it into a science and nature preserve. Alas, the bats didn't live past the first October snow, just long enough for the deal to close. Shelwank walked away a million dollars richer even after kicking cash up to the Delacroix crime family for their role in transporting the bats from the Ozarks to the Tetons.

With his newfound wealth, Shelwank purchased half interest in three condominium complexes in Gulf Shores. Miraculously, after Shelwank became a silent partner, the

rental rates rose by a factor of ten, and occupancy never dipped below ninety percent. When Hurricane Dennis slapped the buildings to their foundations, Shelwank and his associates collected ten million more from FEMA than they had paid for the buildings eight years before.

Now Shelwank owned rental properties on Bald Head Island, North Carolina; Longboat Key, Florida; and Kapalua, on the island of Maui. He also held a minority interest in a Muscle Shoals hotel that stayed astonishingly booked with foreigners who never seemed to show up for their prepaid reservations.

Conservative estimates put Shelwank's fortune in the eighteen to twenty-two million range, but that number would double after Dabearer Island, assuming the honorable senator could get a handle on the mess his inept partners were creating down there.

"One thing I ask you to do, Roy, one thing," Shelwank shouted into the phone. "I say, 'Roy, head on out and make sure those Dubose boys don't fuck up and draw attention to themselves,' and what happens? They play chicken with a cruise ship and damn near drown a bunch of kids. Oh, and did I say they did this in front of a dozen television cameras? No, I don't think I did. Those Dubose boys never let you down, do they?"

"I didn't have a chance—" Roy tried to interrupt to no avail. He was in his car on his way to Starkville to visit Papa Roy at the Golden Stream Assisted Care home. Unfortunately, the phone reception was perfect. Jimmy Don had seen to it that cell towers were erected on every barn and church steeple in north Mississippi, another kickback deal his partners were involved in. As much as Roy would have loved to tell Shelwank that he was losing him, the senator knew better. Besides, Roy couldn't get a word in sideways. Shelwank was on a roll.

"Don't draw any more attention to our island. Isn't that

what I said, Roy? I said no more cameras, no more interviews, no more anything until things simmered down. Isn't that what I said? I'm pretty sure that's what I said."

"We were already on the island. What was I supposed to do?"

"More than you did, Roy, which was nothing. Absolutely nothing! In the meantime, I've sanitized Lichwick's phone records and all the surveillance photography from the bridge that night—"

"There's photography from the bridge?"

"Satellites, Roy. We're the U.S. fucking government, son, what do you expect?"

"Do they show anything?"

"No, Roy, I just broke fifteen laws sanitizing pictures of fish."

"What's the big deal?"

"No need to tax that steel-trap mind of yours, Roy. Suffice it to say I've taken care of you again."

"Well, what was so important about Lichwick's phone records?"

"You see, Roy, you don't understand the first damn thing about how investigations work. When the FBI gets into something, every eensy-weensy detail gets an anal probing. That's what they do over there at the Bureau, 'investigate' shit. The more they investigate, the more money they can claim they need when budget time rolls around. Fortunately, I'm in a position to know what's happening in intelligence and law enforcement circles, so I was able to eliminate anything distracting from Lichwick's records. We need to keep the agents focused on them echo-terrorists that bastard hung around with. The way I got it figured, the lead agent down there'll make a couple of arrests by the weekend and the whole thing'll be behind us."

"So what do I need to do?" Roy asked.

"Well, Roy, you did such a bang-up job distracting the

media from our island and quieting the Dubose boys down—”

“That wasn’t my fault, Howell.”

“Yeah, anyway, I want you to get out of town, and see if you can’t kidnap a few reporters on the way.”

“Kidnapping! Jesus, Howell—”

“Relax, Roy, godalmighty, you’re one uptight sumbitch. I don’t want you to literally kidnap anybody. I want you to lure a bunch of reporters out of town with you.”

“How am I supposed to do that? We’re in session. I can’t just say, *Sorry, boys, I’ve got to run out for a while.*”

“I’ve taken care of that, too,” Shelwank said. “You’re going to Pell City, Alabama.”

“What, did I win that trip?”

“No, Roy, you’re going to our beautiful racetrack to drive Toyota’s new racing Camry.”

“I’m driving a racecar?”

“It’s a promotion, Roy. You put on a race suit, wave to the cameras, and drive the car around for a couple of laps, slowly. Then you get out, shake a few Jap hands, tell them what a fantastic car they’ve made, what an asset they’re going to be to STOCKCAR, and what a treat it’s going to be to have their cars racing in Mississippi when our track opens—”

“I thought we were trying to turn attention away from the island.”

“Goddamn, Roy, that dope’s made you dumber than a castrated mule. We’re trying to get the media off our island so they don’t ask our niggers how we ended up with their land.”

“Natives,” Roy said. “I call them natives, usually, but I’ve been trying to break that habit.”

Shelwank sighed and said, “Roy, I’m going to speak slowly now, so listen close.”

“Okay.”

"I want you to go to Pell City on Saturday and take as many reporters with you as you can roust out of the bars. The more of them sumbitches you have with you, the fewer'll be left to ask silly questions about Lichwick or our island. So round up a posse, Roy. I want you to make a good showing."

Roy had parked his car in the freshly painted lot and was walking past the entry sign for Golden Stream Assisted Care, an L-shaped iron rod with a beautiful hanging wooden block painted white with a golden waterfall in the background. "I guess I got it," he said, still uncertain about driving a racecar.

"No screwups this time, Roy."

"I got it."

In the background Shelwank heard someone say, "Sir, I'm going to need you to give me that phone."

"Who was that, Roy?"

"I gotta go, Howell."

"Who—"

*"If you'd like to make a call, please hang up and try again. For operator assistance, please remain on the line."*

## Chapter 25

---

“I’m sorry, sir, rules say you can’t take cell phones back to the rooms.”

One look at the large black woman behind the counter and Roy’s sweat glands spewed a torrent of salt water. Roy always turned to goo in the presence of authoritative black women, a hang-up from his youth when the Coon family employed black nannies, housekeepers, and “yardies,” as Roy had called them when he was young. The employee who’d had the most profound impact on him had been Beulah, a giant of a woman who had taught Roy how to make his bed, iron his clothes, clean the dishes, and say “ma’am” to every female he ever encountered. Like many passive, effeminate boys in the South, Roy had become torn by his love, fear, adoration, and loathing for Beulah. The social status of coloreds in those days added to the confusion. When he was nine, Roy had wanted nothing more than to sleep with her, not for sex, but to draw up in a fetal position and nestle his head into her giant breasts. Then, when he was ten, she caught him masturbating in the bathroom with one of Papa Roy’s new magazines. Beulah had beaten him with a hickory switch the size of a redwood. Later she had come to his room with chocolate milk and a slice of pound cake. Pleasure—punishment—



pain—guilt—reward: the story of his life. All his adolescent confusion about race, class, sex, and manhood could be traced to his memories of Beulah.

Now, sitting in the swivel chair behind the counter at the Golden Stream Assisted Care facility, was a woman who could have been Beulah's daughter, or clone, or ghost. She wore a white nurse uniform, and a name tag that said, *Shantasia*. But if those hands went to her hips and the words *Roy Boy Coon, you sit down and splain yo-self* came out of her mouth, Roy would know that Beulah had been reincarnated.

"Sir?" she said, holding out her hand.

"I'm sorry . . . Shantasia? . . . is that right?"

"Shantasia, yes."

"Are you new here?"

"I've been at our Memphis facility for nine years," she said. "I've only been here three weeks."

"Well, welcome," Roy said, extending a sweaty, shaking hand. "I'm Roy Coon, the lieutenant governor of the state, and my father—"

"Roy Coon, Sr., yes, I'm very familiar with your father."

"I hope he hasn't caused any trouble."

"Pinching a few behinds and talking dirty, but nothing we can't handle."

Sweat erupted onto Roy's forehead. "Ha, ha . . . well . . . you know how old men can be . . . I mean . . . ha, ha."

"He speaks highly of you," she said with a smile.

"Really?" Roy relaxed for the first time. He didn't think Papa Roy knew his name anymore. To hear that his father actually spoke fondly of him . . . Roy had to take a deep breath to catch the tears that were welling in his eyes.

"He misses you when you're not here," she said. "He asks about you, and tells everyone in the rec room how his

son was a lawyer who went on to become the lieutenant governor.”

No holding back now. Roy covered his face with his hands and let the emotions flow.

“Course, he forgets that he’s told that story to everyone in the building, so he repeats it five times a week.”

They both laughed, and Roy wiped his eyes with the sleeves of his shirt.

“It’s wonderful to meet you, Shantasia,” he said. “I think I’m going to go see my dad now.”

“Ah, Governor?”

“Yes?”

“The phone.”

“Oh,” Roy said, taking his BlackBerry out of his pocket. “Is this a new policy?”

“I’m sorry, it is. Some new wireless monitoring equipment we got. Depending on the frequency, a ringing phone will come back in here as a cardiac arrest.”

“We wouldn’t want that,” he said as he handed her the BlackBerry.

“No, we wouldn’t. Thank you, Governor. Have a good visit.”

“Thank you. I will.”

He walked around the corner and down the hallway with a newfound spring in his step.

Once Roy was out of sight, Shantasia fondled the device, looking at the display screen. Then she stood up and walked into the employee break room, where a boxy woman in desperate need of a hairstyle sat at a table sipping coffee.

“Did you get it?” Jackie Simon asked.

Shantasia held up the phone, and said, “You better hurry. These visits can be long, or they can be very, very short.”

Jackie grabbed the bag from beneath the table and whipped out her laptop. Within seconds she was downloading outgoing and incoming calls, text messages, e-mails, address books, spreadsheets, bank records, and calendars. Thirty seconds into the download, Shantasia looked around nervously.

“Almost there,” Jackie said.

“Man, I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“Think of it as doing the right thing for the greater good.”

“Yeah, while the fool’s old man lays back there not knowing what day of the week it is.”

“Got it,” Jackie said.

“Give it to me. Give it to me.”

Jackie pitched the BlackBerry to Shantasia, who fielded it like an All-Star shortstop.

“Now, the rest of the money.”

“I know,” Jackie said as she reached into her bag and took out five hundred dollars. “And not a word to anyone, right?”

“You kidding? My ass would be unemployable. You ain’t got to worry about me.”

As she said that last line Shantasia got a sad, faraway look in her eyes. Jackie thought she saw the glint of a tear.

“Greater good,” Jackie said as she loaded the laptop back in the bag and stood up to leave. “Remember that.”

Shantasia nodded and smirked. “Yeah, right,” she said as she walked out the door and back to her station.

Roy slipped into his father’s room and saw that Papa Roy was sleeping in a chair by the window, an Elmore Leonard novel lying open on the blanket draped across his lap. Roy slid into the chair next to the television and watched his dad sleep for a good five minutes. Then something, maybe

a change in barometric pressure or the sound of his son breathing, woke Papa Roy, and he blinked his milky eyes to focus on the figure in his room.

"Who's there?" he said.

"Hi, Papa, it's me, Roy Boy," Roy said.

"Who?"

"Roy, Papa,"

"I know a Roy," Papa Roy said.

"I know you do."

"Oh, what do you know?"

"I know that you're Roy Coon, and I'm your son, Roy, Jr." This was the thousandth time Roy had gone through this ritual with his father. It broke his heart every time.

"Demetrius! How are you, boy? Come over here where I can take a look at you."

Roy heaved himself out of the chair as if he were the eighty-year-old. He walked slowly over to his dad and waited while the old man examined him. Then Papa Roy removed his withered hand from beneath the blanket and motioned for Roy Boy to lean over.

Roy did as instructed, and his father said, "You need to see somebody about those sweats, boy. You look like a floozy I met one night in Memphis."

Roy Boy kissed his father's forehead and said, "I'll do that. I love you, Dad."

"Will you see if they'll bring me some milk? They won't ever bring the milk."

"I'll get you some milk, Dad."

"You're a good boy, Demetrius. I've always said that about you."

Roy looked out the window and thought about all he'd done. "I'm glad you think so, Dad," he said. "I sometimes wonder."

"Wonder about what?"

Roy's lip quivered. When he looked back at his father he

saw that the old man was staring at him with a curious frown, as if he'd never seen anyone cry.

"I'll be right back with that milk."

"Thank you, Roy Boy," his papa said. "You're a good son."

## Chapter 26

---

Birds in nearby trees sang triumphant songs of peace and joy while crisp morning air tickled the senses and bathed the skin. Streaming rays of sunrise danced like nature's shining ballerinas through the slats in the bedroom blinds, and particles of dust dipped and swirled like soaring eagles on an open plain. Such were the effects sex had on John Paul Westport. Everything looked, felt, and sounded sweeter as he cracked one eye and drew his first conscious breath of the day hoping to drink in the smells from Constance's side of the bed.

The events of the previous night had come as a pleasant and unexpected surprise. J.P. had resigned himself to pinning for Constance from an emotional distance, being stuck with the kind of unrequited love found in Jane Austen novels: a lot of talk, a lot of tension, the kind of relationship Antebellum-era couples called "courting." The only problem was that in the 1830s couples courted when the man was seventeen and the girl was thirteen. By the time a woman hit her twenties, she was married, pregnant, and praying her husband made it home from the sawmill. J.P. was a month shy of thirty-one. He assumed Constance was at least his age if not a year or two older, although that was a question for another time. Intercourse was one thing:

asking a woman her age required a level of intimacy he wasn't sure they had achieved yet.

Still, the day couldn't have gone much better. After giving Special Agent in Charge Peevey the lowdown on Lichwick's phone records, J.P. had intended to pry into Obadiah Plunkett's life. Jackie Simon had departed for parts unknown, and there was, after all, the who-shot-Lichwick? question still dangling out there. J.P.'s plan had been to talk to the local sheriff and to people on the docks about Obe's temper.

All those plans sank to the bottom of the Gulf when Constance approached him with a picnic basket and a bottle of wine.

"I really need to work," he'd said.

She pooched her lip and said, "Can't it wait?"

"Well, I'm supposed to look into the Lichwick case, but . . . aw, what the heck, that's what the FBI's for, right?"

They'd spend the afternoon eating, drinking, and talking. They'd walked barefoot on the beach and shared stories about their travels (she'd studied in Italy; he'd closed all the bars in London and Dublin), their families (she was one of six children of a schoolteacher and postmaster; he was the underachieving only child of Rhode Island real estate lawyers), the books they'd read (she: *Late Wife*, by Claudia Emerson; he: Frank Miller's *Sin City*), their favorite movies (hers was *Casablanca*; he fancied anything produced by Jerry Bruckheimer), and their tastes in music (okay, they both loved Miles Davis and hated 50 Cent).

They had eaten dinner on the deck at the Oyster House, where she'd kissed him, not like a sister or an oh-you're-so-sweet friend, but a slow, soft-lipped embrace he was used to getting after he'd slept with a girl a couple of times. She'd also touched his cheek in a way that stirred him in unmentionable places while scrambling the cognitive lobe of his brain. They held hands on the way back to

Montgomery House, and they were tearing at each other's clothing before they made it inside. Had it not been for Special Agent in Charge Peevey and his bevy of agents, they might have made love on the stairs, in the kitchen, on the couch in the parlor, and (J.P.'s personal fantasy) on the ten-foot, twelve-person breakfast table where Peevey and his boys ate oatmeal and drank coffee every morning.

He felt more fulfilled in Constance's bed than he'd ever been in his life, so this had to be love, right? If she'd asked him, he would have quit his job and thrown away his Ivy League education to become her gardener. That made it love, didn't it? That deep-down, gut-tightening yearning to never leave her side: what was that? As near as he could figure, J. P. Westport couldn't think of anything or anyone else. He opened both eyes, and rolled over, hoping to express his affection physically once more before going downstairs. That would make four times in nine hours; what was that if not love?

He was surprised to find her gone. The sheets where they had performed nude gymnastics were thrown back in a wad, and the trail of clothes they had strewn from the door to the foot of the bed was missing. J.P. sat up and stretched. He figured Constance was downstairs cooking. Then he heard muffled voices outside the window.

He got up and peeked through the blinds, where he saw Constance standing on the lawn with three Latino men, none of whom looked like the landscaper or handyman. J.P. tensed. Their body language said they weren't discussing the weather. The men surrounded her on three sides like lions on the hunt. The one in front was pointing his finger and standing too close to her as he talked. Constance had her hands on her hips, her back rigid. He started to open the window and shout. But that changed when the lead man in the group grabbed Constance by the shoulders.



J.P. charged out of the room taking the stairs three at a clip, his manliness bouncing like a mud flap as he sprinted outside. He leaped off the front porch, an ancient Greek Olympian en route to his prize: focused, determined, and white-ass naked.

The three men stood frozen with wow-there's-something-you don't-see-every-day expressions on their faces. J.P. hit the one who'd dared put hands on the love of his life with a form tackle he'd learned in college (when you threw twenty-five interceptions a season, you became a tackling quarterback).

"J.P., no!" Constance shouted, but it was too late. The man hit the ground with a thud followed by a groan. His buddies recovered from their initial shock and ran to his aid. One hit J.P. with a roundhouse punch that missed his head but caught him in the shoulder and neck. J.P. rolled with the punch and leaped to his feet. The two other men stood ready to pounce, but they hesitated, torn and disgusted. If they engaged J.P. they would be wrestling a naked man, something no one in the group appeared eager to do.

"Stop it!" Constance said as she jumped in the middle of the fray. "All of you, stop it!"

"Are you all right?" J.P. asked looking at her.

"I'm fine."

"I saw him grab you."

One of the men pointed to J.P.'s hinter regions and said, "*El es diminuto.*"

Constance said, "That's quite enough, Estoban. It's a little chilly this morning, that's all."

"I can hear you. I'm right here," J.P. said.

"We were discussing business," Constance said. "I'm sorry you got the wrong idea."

"I thought you were in trouble."

"You're very sweet."

Estoban helped the man J.P. had tackled to his feet. The man rubbed his side and stared at J.P. with a mixture of alarm and what could only be described as the heebie-jeebies.

Constance waved the men away with the back of her hand and said, "*Llamare. Encontraremos una solucion.*"

They retreated without taking their eyes off J.P.

Constance patted him on the back and said, "I can't believe you ran out here like that. My rescuer."

"That guy grabbed you."

"Oh, that was nothing, a disagreement on when to have the house painted, that's all."

"I saw him put his hands on you, and—"

"You are the sweetest man," she said, and she kissed his ear.

When they walked into the house, Peevey and Special Agent Matthews were at the bottom of the stairs. "Oh, you sick, twisted bastard," Peevey said as he turned his head and shielded his face with his hands. "Towel, Westport, towel!"

"Sorry."

Constance trotted to the dining room to get a tablecloth for him, but before she could return, the phone rang. The men heard her saying, "Thank you for calling Montgomery House," as they stood uncomfortably in the foyer.

Matthews cleared his throat and began humming as he looked at the ceiling. Peevey turned his back on J.P. and faced the stairs.

"How'd the Yankees do last night?" J.P. asked.

"I didn't hear," Matthews said.

"Oh, I guess I'll have to look it up."

"After you put something on, I hope," Peevey said to the stairs.

Constance ran in with a cream tablecloth and the phone. J.P. threw the cloth around himself like a toga.

"It's for you," she said, handing him the telephone.

He tied the toga around his waist and grabbed the phone.  
"Hello."

"Westport, what the hell are you doing?" Jackie Simon yelled. "I tried your cell."

"Sorry, I don't have my cell on me right now."

"Or anything else, for that matter," Peevey shouted.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. What's up?"

"I need an email address. I'm sending over some sensitive material."

"Just send it to the one on my business card."

"No. You're not gonna want this on government email."

"What is it?"

"Phone records, emails, and addresses. It's not what it is: it's how I came to be in possession of it that could cause problems."

"What have you done?"

"Something with clothes on, I bet," Peevey shouted.

"Are you being heckled?" Jackie asked.

"It's nothing. Hang on a second. I'm going to let Constance give you her e-mail address. Send it here."

Constance took the phone and walked into the dining room, leaving J.P. alone with his hecklers.

"Gentlemen," J.P. said, nodding, as he headed up the stairs.

"If public indecency were a federal crime, I'd cuff you myself, you sick bastard," Peevey shouted.

J.P. answered by slamming the door to his room.

## Chapter 27

---

Robert was sorting a week's worth of mail when Ty burst into his office.

"You're not going to believe what Johnny Pea found."

"My daughter's innocence and naïveté?"

"Oooo, sounds like somebody's had a rough couple of days."

"What is it with mothers and daughters? I calm them down, go out of a few hours, and they're back at each other's throats."

"Just how the gentler sex expresses love, I guess."

"Comments like that are why you aren't married."

"Oh, and you make marriage sound so inviting."

"You got something?"

"You're never going to believe what Johnny Pea turned up."

"You mean he's actually working?" Robert figured J.P. was so smitten with the widow Constance he wouldn't notice if Lichwick's shooter walked up and confessed.

"Hard to believe, I know," Ty said. "But somehow the boy stumbled onto a gold mine."

"Show me."

Ty opened a file and pulled out vid caps of the two unidentified men as they scared the protesters off the deck of

*Earth's Warship*. One still shot captured Sky Hi in mid-fall. "Know how we've been thinking those two guys looked familiar?"

"It's been driving me nuts," Robert said. "How do we know them?"

Ty whipped out a second series of photos, these taken with a high-powered lens from a second-story Memphis window. "Recognize them now?" Ty asked.

"Is Pat Sajak on steroids?"

Then Ty took out a third set of photos, these from the library file at the FBI's Organized Crime Division. Sammy and Richey Dubose were younger, and Sammy was twenty pounds lighter with highlights in his hair, but that wasn't how Robert made the connection. The pictures were part of a Delacroix crime family organizational chart. Their uncle Eddie Delacroix, Louisiana's most notorious crime boss, was at the top. Sammy Dubose was on the second rung, a "capo" in *la cosa nostra* lingo (Robert wasn't sure what Cajun crooks called their captains). Richey was one rung below Sammy, connected to his brother by a vertical line.

"I can't believe it," Robert said.

"We never got a good look at them, even in replay, but—"

"Sammy and Richey Dubose: I can't believe it. What the heck are they doing in Biloxi?"

"Well, it looks like they were invited."

"Invited?"

Ty pulled up a chair and spread out copies of Roy Coon's phone records, calendar, and address books. "The highlighted calls are to Sammy Dubose's cell phone."

Robert perused the call logs. "Who made these calls?"

"Lieutenant Governor Roy Coon."

He didn't look surprised. "I knew something was screwy about that guy," Robert said.

“Coon also had dinner with Sammy Dubose in Oxford last week. Waiter and hostess confirm they were having some intense discussions.”

“I wonder what Coon’s connection is to Dubose.”

“That’s where it gets good,” Ty said.

“I love it when there’s more.”

Ty pointed to another phone number. “Recognize that one?” he asked.

“Why would I?”

“It belongs to your buddy Howell Shelwank.”

Robert studied the sheets. “These calls are on the day of the groundbreaking,” he said, pointing to a series of numbers.

Ty smiled and nodded.

“So, Shelwank calls Coon, and minutes later Coon calls Sammy Dubose.”

“Looks like he got Sammy’s voice mail,” Ty said. “Six calls in a row, less than a minute each.”

“What the heck is going on?”

“I don’t know, but I’m betting it has something to do with the acquisition of Dabearer Island. Plus, there’s something else.”

“What?”

“We were able to identify the speedboat Sammy and Richey Dubose drove at the protesters. It belongs to Biloxi Boat Rental.”

“Isn’t that where Lichwick leased his boat?”

“Same place.”

“What is wrong with those people?”

“Person. The place is owned by one guy, a lawyer named Richard Mark Swindal.”

“A lawyer named Swindal?”

“Some things you just can’t make up.”

“So, what does Mr. Swindal have to say about his recent spate of unsavory clients?”

“That’s the problem. Swindal’s missing.”

“Any idea where?”

“People who know him figure he’s skipped town one step ahead of the jailer. Guy’s a real winner: kiting checks, comingling funds, kickbacks on flipped foreclosures, and that’s before he settled the sexual harassment suit.”

“Do we have reason to believe his friends are wrong?”

“Two reasons, actually: the insurance company sent Swindal a check for the boat Lichwick turned into kindling. He hasn’t cashed it yet.”

“Is that a big deal?”

“Not everybody donates his salary to charity.”

“Ouch, that was low.”

“Swindal needed the cash. In fact, he’d been hounding his insurance agent for days. Now the check’s just sitting somewhere.”

Robert rubbed his chin and said, “What’s the second reason?”

“His Lamborghini.”

“That missing, too?”

“No, that’s been seen around town.”

“Hard to miss, huh?”

“According to several witnesses”—Ty pointed to Richey’s picture—“little brother’s cruising the Mississippi casino strip in the counselor’s car.”

Robert was going to ask Ty about another grouping of numbers on Coon’s records, but his own phone rang. When he picked up the receiver he immediately heard the tension in Miles Hinton’s voice.

“Redball, I’m hoping you can help us.”

“Gee, what a shock, Miles,” Robert said. “I’ve spent the last week of my life being bounced back and forth like your personal ping-pong ball, and you still need my help.”

“This is important.”

"Hmmm, wonder where I've heard that before."

Miles sighed.

"Okay," Robert said. "What is it?"

"Stacy and I met with three agents from Octopus Sports earlier this week."

"Why? You hate those thugs."

"Business discussion."

"Yeah, right."

"Anyway, the guys we met—vice presidents, I'm told—traveled to Biloxi a couple of days ago. According to their bosses, they were making a site visit to Dabearer."

"And?"

"And nobody's heard from them since."

Robert sat straighter and stared at Sammy Dubose's phone number. Three Octopus Sports agents and the owner of Biloxi Boat Rental had all vanished in the last week, events that coincided with the Dubose brothers showing up in southern Mississippi.

"How long have they been missing?" Robert asked.

"All four called their offices when they landed in Gulfport. That was two days ago. They haven't used their phones, credit cards, or ATMs. The families contacted locals and the FBI, but it's a low priority. A cop down there told one of the wives that they were probably sitting at a poker table."

Robert looked at Ty, who was examining the vid caps of Sammy and Richey. "I'll call our people down there," Robert said.

"I appreciate that."

"And Miles?"

"Yes?"

"The next time you decide to steal an island to build a racetrack, leave me out of it."

"It was a perfectly legal transaction."

"Uh-huh."



\* \* \*

He put the next call on speaker. John Paul Westport sounded winded when he answered his cell.

"Did we catch you in the middle of someone—I mean something?" Ty asked.

"Just on my way to the Jefferson Davis Library to pick up a few souvenirs. Can I get you anything?"

"If they've got Jeff's cracker ass on a T-shirt, bring an XL."

"Agent Westport, I want to commend you on the fine work product you've produced during your extended stay," Robert said. "I have to ask, though, how'd you get the lieutenant governor's phone records?"

"Oh . . . umm . . . well, funny you should ask, boss."

"Funny ha, ha, or funny peculiar?"

Johnny Pea got through the story about Jackie Simon procuring Roy Coon's phone without anyone interrupting him, which wasn't a good thing. Robert was a banterer. Their office conversations sounded less like strategy sessions and more like radio chatter between a driver and his crew chief. Only when the boss got quiet did you need to worry.

"Funny how that all came together, huh?" J.P. said after finishing the tale.

There was a long pause before Robert said, "You mean to tell me this information was downloaded from a stolen cell phone?"

"Oh, no, no," Johnny Pea said. "More like a temporarily misdirected BlackBerry."

Another pause, then, "Johnny Pea, do you realize how many laws that woman broke?"

"Sure, sure, but I'm sure ABS will throw up some non-sensical First Amendment defense. She's probably not gonna serve any time."

"That's not the point!" Robert shouted. "Evidentiary

procedure, J.P.! This stuff's useless. I'm not sure that possessing it isn't a crime."

"Look, I didn't steal the stuff," J.P. said. "I didn't put Jackie up to it. Hell, I didn't even know where she was. She called this morning and asked for an email address. Next thing I know, this stuff's in Constance's in-box."

"Oh, great, so we have a second civilian in the passing-of-illegally-obtained-personal-information chain."

"I can deputize her if you want."

"I assumed you already had," Ty said.

It was Johnny Pea's time to pause for a second. Then he said, "You know, Jackie was right about Coon being a junkie. That six-six-two number he calls a couple of times a month belongs to a known meth dealer. DEA's been monitoring the kid for a while."

"Great, another piece of evidence we can't use."

"Just thought you'd want to know."

"Knowing and proving are different things," Robert said. "And we can't prove a damn thing, because we don't have a shred of admissible evidence."

"We might after Jackie airs her story."

"Oh, no, no, no," Robert said. "Do we know what Coon's doing now?"

"Not right this second," J.P. said. "He's off to Pell City, Alabama, tomorrow for some sort of a racecar exhibition."

"A what?"

"Yeah, Toyota's having some promotion for their new car. Coon's supposed to drive a couple of laps and pose for pictures, a PR thing. Supposedly, a lot of the reporters who've been camped out here are going."

"Coon's driving a racecar?"

"That's what his office is saying."

Robert was quiet for a second, and then said, "If that's true, I might have a way to clean up this mess."

"I'm all for that," J.P. said, hoping his boss would forget

who had made much of the mess in the first place. He was pacing in the Montgomery House parlor now, fingering candle holders and coasters while he waited for Robert's instructions. When J.P. passed an antique standing desk, he opened the center drawer and ran his hands through a stack of receipts, being a busybody while killing time. His focus shifted to a small black ledger, which he opened. J.P. glanced at the first page, said, "What the hell?"

"What?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe nothing. I just saw something I need to ask Constance about later," J.P. said. "So what's the plan?"

"I need you to meet me tomorrow," Robert said.

"Not too early, I hope. I'm taking Constance out tonight."

"Focus, Agent Westport."

"I'm taking her to see *Hot Laps*."

"Oh, well, good, okay. Enjoy that. Have a good time. Just be fresh in the morning."

"You're coming back to Biloxi?"

"No," Robert said. "You're driving to Pell City."

"And don't forget to bring the Jeff Davis tees," Ty said.

Five minutes after hanging up with J.P., Robert dialed Miles Hinton's personal number. Big Miles answered on the second ring. "That didn't take long," he said. "Have you found our Octopus Sports boys?"

"Not yet, but I think I've figured out how to get some questions answered."

"I knew I could count on you."

"Well, I hope you're ready to pitch in," Robert said.

"How so?"

Robert smiled and said, "Tell me what's going on tomorrow in Pell City."

## Chapter 28

---

Robert took the Hawker 800 from Charlotte to Pell City, Alabama. Yes, it was government business, and yes, he would catch hell for the “appearance” of waste that always accompanied flying on a private jet, but it was his plane, and he was paying the tab, so let them bitch. Besides, he’d waited in enough airport security lines in the last couple of weeks, and the commercial schedules between Charlotte and Birmingham didn’t fit. Plus, he was taking a passenger. Melissa couldn’t promise that she and Katie wouldn’t break out swords and duel to the death while he was away, so Robert had hoisted his grumbling daughter out of bed and insisted that she fly to Alabama with him. She had sulked all the way to the Concord airport. Now, as the plane crested twenty-five thousand feet, Robert poured himself a second cup of coffee and did his best to broker a peace deal between the warring factions.

“What do I have to do to stop this nonsense?” he signed to his daughter. He could have let her read his lips, but Robert wanted to speak in sign. He didn’t want any part of this conversation to be misinterpreted.

“You could start by divorcing your wife.”

“You mean your mother.”

“Whatever.”

"That's not going to happen. Besides, if it did, she'd get custody."

"And I'd be a milk-carton runaway."

"What is it with you two?"

"She doesn't listen to me."

"You don't listen to her."

"Ah, Dad, I've got an excuse."

"Not funny."

"She treats me like a baby, like I don't know anything. I might be deaf, but I'm not stupid."

"Nobody thinks you're stupid. But your mother and I aren't dumb, either. We've both been around the track a few times, and we know where the bumps and potholes are."

"Could we stop with the racing metaphors? It's bad enough that you're dragging me back to Slugville, Alabama."

"That's quite enough, young lady. You might not like the things your mother and I tell you, but we are your parents, the only ones you'll ever have, and you will respect both of us."

"Okay, okay," she signed before crossing her arms and turning away.

Robert rubbed the bridge of his nose and looked out his own window at the beautiful foothills of Appalachia. Maybe this second-career thing wasn't such a hot idea after all. He'd fulfilled the promise he'd made to his mother—he'd put plenty of bad guys in prison—but the two most important women in his world were at each other's throats, and his son was becoming a "citified" snob who thought a jet, a Vette, and a pet were his birth-right. Maybe it was time for a family meeting, and a career reevaluation.

In the meantime, he needed to get focused on the morning. A lot was riding on what he was about to do.

The flight took just over an hour, and the limo was on the tarmac at Anniston Airport before they rolled to a stop. By the time the copilot opened the hatch door, a red carpet had been rolled out from the open back door of the Lincoln.

"Welcome to Alabama," the driver said as Robert and Katie deplaned.

They both thanked him, and then Katie signed, "Nice touch," to her father.

"I asked the driver to put Cherry Coke in the little fridge."

"Thanks, Dad."

On race weekends, the thirty-five-mile drive from the Birmingham airport to the Alabama Motor Speedway in Pell City could take anywhere from fifty minutes to four hours. Those two weekends a year all the open pastures were packed with tents, campers, and every conceivable model of RV. Then there were the roadsides: like a Turkish bazaar, every inch of curb on race day was occupied with a gauntlet of ware-peddling vendors, boisterous merchants hoping to sell towels, T-shirts, toys, tags, flags, caps, coolers, Koozies, decals, and life-sized inflatable stockcar driver dolls to the swarms of passing fans. The shops were pickup truck beds, the backs of trailers, and folding card tables that more often than not encroached onto the streets.

Today was different, one of the normal three hundred and sixty days a year when the roads in and out of Pell City were as empty as a theater showing a Woody Allen film. The only people Roy Coon saw after he exited the interstate and drove south on State Route 27 were a farmer on a hay baler and the driver of a pulpwood truck who had abandoned his vehicle to urinate in a ditch a few yards from the road.

As Roy drove south, he asked himself for the zillionth time what the hell he was doing. He'd done what Shelwank had asked. A dozen reporters were either at the Alabama Motor Speedway or on their way. The problem was they were coming to watch him drive a racecar: him, Roy Coon, a guy who rarely merged into the left lane on I-55 in Jackson, and who broke into a nervous sweat whenever an eighteen-wheeler rolled up behind him. He hadn't always been this way. In college, he'd owned a 1966 Plymouth Belvedere with a straight-bore Hemi that would zip through the hundred-mile-an-hour mark without so much as a hiccup. But after flipping that car in a ditch in Blacksburg and spending the better part of a May in a Meridian hospital, Roy puttered along the highways like a retired granny. The thought of crawling into something with seven hundred horses and twice the maximum speed of the fastest car he'd ever driven caused the muscles in Roy's chest to spasm and his vision to blur.

He reached under his seat and grabbed a handful of pills from a plastic bag, throwing them into his mouth with the kind of fluidity learned through practice. Then he reached for the can of soda he'd bought at the airport. That's when his phone rang.

His entire body jumped at the chirp from the BlackBerry, and his right hand went to his throat. The pills stuck somewhere north of his Adam's apple.

The rental car veered toward an embankment as he struggled to swallow, steer, brake, and answer the phone at the same time. He slammed the brake pedal and the car fishtailed on gravel and clay, coming to a stop in a cloud of dust. Then Roy fumbled for the drink and the phone.

Two huge gulps of soda dislodged the OC's from his esophagus. He gave a satisfied "Ahhhh" and then answered the phone. Unfortunately, what should have been "Hello" came out as a depths-of-hell belch.

“What in god’s tarnation was that?” Howell Shelwank’s voice reverberated through the earpiece.

“Excuse me, Howell, is that you?”

“Roy, I don’t want to know what that was.”

“I’m sorry, Howell, I—”

“Don’t! Just tell me you’re at the track.”

“About a mile away.”

“And the press?”

“A dozen commitments, but who knows how many’ll show up?”

Shelwank grunted.

Roy said, “Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“What I want is for this whole goddamn thing to go away.”

The senator sounded forlorn. Roy thought he saw an opportunity to plead his case. “Howell, are you sure I need to actually drive this car?” he said. “Can’t I just watch and give interviews?”

“No, Roy, the whole reason you’re there is to refocus the story. The media’s going to be snooping around our island until something else comes along. You driving a racecar shifts the spotlight.”

“But it shifts it onto me in a very dangerous racecar.”

“That’s a good thing, Roy: not the dangerous part, obviously, but the fact that the story will be about you and not the island.”

“Gee, maybe I’ll ram the wall or something. That would create a distraction.”

“I hope you’re not giving me shit, Roy.”

“I just don’t see the point in me driving a racecar.”

“The point is we’ve got a bunch of weed-smoking, orgy-lovin’, no-bath-taking echo-terrorists camped out and causing problems near our island,” Shelwank said, any hint of melancholy gone from his voice. “The press loves that



shit. Your job is to separate the media from the moonbats before some industrious cub reporter starts looking into our land deal.”

“And driving a racecar’s the best way to do that?” Roy asked.

“They ain’t going to flock to your office to hear you rail against the Head Start program.”

Roy sighed. “How long you think it’ll be before things get back to normal?” he asked.

“Not soon enough,” Shelwank said. “I’ve got the FBI taken care of. They’ll close the Lichwick case the second they find the nutjob who sold him the C-4. Now, as long as the Dubose boys don’t do anything else stupid, we might just get out of this thing.”

“I told Sammy to back off. I told him what you said.”

“Yeah, but did he hear you?”

“I told him.”

Shelwank grunted and said, “I’m getting reports of four missing persons in Biloxi.”

“Missing? Who’s missing? I haven’t heard anything about people missing.”

“That’s because the dope’s making you deaf, Roy, just like Rush Limbaugh.”

“What happened? Who’s missing?”

“First report is the guy who owns Biloxi Boat Rental, a lawyer named Mark Swindal.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Roy, if my last name was Coon I wouldn’t be casting stones. Anyway, this fellow Swindal’s missed a couple of closings and hasn’t been seen in a few days. He doesn’t have any family, but people in town are beginning to ask questions.”

“No big deal,” Roy said. “Plenty of times I’ve needed to get away.”

“Well, there’s a news flash.”

“I wouldn’t worry about some lawyer who’s taken a little time—”

“That’s not the big concern,” Shelwank said.

“What is?”

“Three vice presidents from that Octopus Sports outfit showed up in Biloxi this week trolling for business on our island.”

“Oh no.”

“They were last seen driving like maniacs and scaring the hell out of a bunch of school kids on Bay View Avenue. That was three days ago.”

Roy felt the early rumbles of nausea percolating in his upper abdomen. The combination of pills and this news was having a deleterious effect on his digestion. “Oh no,” he repeated.

“That’s why I need a good show out of you today,” Shelwank said. “I need the press out of sight while I find out what happened to those boys.”

“What do you think happened to them?” Roy asked.

“I hope nothing. But I’m not hopeful of my hope.”

“Oh no.”

“Get to the track, Roy.”

“Oh.”

“A good show,” Shelwank said. “We need it.”

Five minutes later, Roy steered his rental car through the infield tunnel of the Alabama Motor Speedway. A guard stuck his head in the window and directed Roy to an asphalt field on the west end near the pit road. This was where forty-two transporters parked side-by-side on race weekends. Today it looked like an empty runway.

A man in a sports coat with gelled black hair waved and walked over as Roy gathered himself and got out of the car. “Governor Coon,” the man said too loudly as he ex-

tended his hand. "I'm Sean Fluffer, Toyota Racing public relations. Great you could join us today."

"Sean, it's my pleasure," Roy said, slipping effortlessly into spin mode.

Sean put his hand on Roy's shoulder blade: old buddies of bullshit bonding through the time-honored backslap. "If you'll come this way, Governor, there are some wonderful people here who want to meet you."

"Of course, of course."

They walked over to a hip-high concrete wall separating the common area from what was obviously the pit road. Three Japanese executives in blue salary-men suits stood next to a bright green racecar with the subtle grill markings of a Toyota Camry. Roy's brow broke with sweat and his heart rate jumped by panic attack proportions as he realized that this was the car he would be driving.

"Governor, meet Mr. Nick Yoshi, deputy vice president of U.S. racing for Toyota."

"Yoshi-san," Roy said, while bowing like only an American can.

"And Mr. Yoshi's assistants, Joe Tokaimoto, and Eddie Akari," Sean said with the kind of breathless tone reserved for presenters at the Academy Awards.

"Kanichiwa," Roy butchered. He wondered if they had focus-grouped the names Nick, Joe, and Eddie before sending these guys over as STOCKCAR representatives.

"I hope you drive careful with our car," Nick Yoshi said with a smile, pointing to the racecar.

Roy almost collapsed. He took two quick breaths before saying, "Well . . . ha, ha . . . I don't plan to test the speed limits out there . . . ha, ha."

The Japanese men frowned and looked at each other. He'd obviously said the wrong thing.

"I mean, well, you know, I want to give it a good run, but I'm no expert."

About that time a Lincoln limousine pulled to a stop a few feet away.

"Speaking of experts," Sean said, "our other honored guest has arrived."

The Japanese men smiled and nodded among themselves. Roy looked panicked. "Other honored guest?" he asked.

"Yes," Sean said, but before he could say more, the limo driver opened the back door.

No one recognized the young girl who got out. But when the man accompanying her stepped out of the limo, Roy Coon said, "Oh, good lord almighty, Jesus."

A gaggle of journalists appeared out of nowhere. They snapped Robert's picture and asked such questions as, "Redball, what are you doing here?" "Who's the girl?" and his personal favorite, "Who do you like for the Virginia race this week?" Robert answered every question, no matter how inane, as he walked toward Roy and the overdressed men from the car company.

"Well, Redball, who would have thought we'd be seeing each other again so soon?" Roy said with a nervous quiver.

"Small world, I guess," Robert said. "So, I understand you're going to drive a few laps today."

"Well . . . ha, ha . . . I guess they've got me doing something like that . . . ha, ha . . . I don't really know what all—"

"Just keep it between the walls," Robert said, and he walked away.

A minute later Robert was in the garage, leaning against a toolbox and talking to his old friend and former crew chief Joe Cummings. Joe had been a last-minute addition

to today's festivities. Robert had asked Joe to set up the car and act as car chief for the day, even though Joe Cummings was so overqualified for this exhibition it was like asking Lorin Maazel to conduct the Pell City High School band. But Joe had come, because Robert had asked him.

"How'd you set up the car?" Robert asked.

Joe wiped his hands on a towel and said, "Just like you said. Front end and spoiler are too high to pass tech, and the tires are softer than you'd want to race on, but she'll have plenty of downforce."

"How many laps on the fuel?"

"About fifty at speed. How many you think we'll need?"

"Not that many."

"Good. That setup's gonna get looser than a college girl on spring break the longer she's out there."

"What'd you tell the Toyota guys?" Robert asked.

"Nothing. You said to keep it between us."

"Jeez, Joe, I didn't realize you'd keep it from the guys who own the car."

"Hey, between us means between us," the crew chief said. "Least that's what they say at the meetings."

"How are those going?"

"One day at a time. Be that way the rest of my life."

"You'd let me know if you needed anything, right?"

"No. You've bailed me out enough already. From here on out everything in my life's on me."

"That can be a lonely drive," Robert said. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"Funny," Joe said, nodding out the door and toward the bright green car on pit road. "I was going to say the same thing to you."

Lieutenant Governor Coon met with the dozen reporters and cameramen in the media center only a few paces from the pit road. By then Roy's vision had cleared and he was

breathing at what would have been a normal rate for someone who had just jogged three miles. What in the bayou backwater was Redball Redding doing here? And did it have anything to do with Dabearer Island?

"Governor Coon, you're here to draw awareness to the fact that STOCKCAR's coming to your state," said a red-faced overweight reporter in a too-tight cotton shirt, probably a freebie from a boondoggle golf outing.

"Actually, we're here to test out Toyota's new racecar," Roy said with a grin. This elicited mild chuckles from most of the press. But the fat guy never cracked a smile. Roy imagined him to be a twice-divorced deadbeat dad who lived alone in a shabby apartment with misfit furniture from Rooms to Go and a refrigerator stocked with moldy lettuce, expired salsa, and enough beer to keep the Hell's Angels happy for a week.

"Can you comment on the disruptions at the Dabearer Island project of the last several days?" Fat Boy asked.

Roy smiled and cleared his throat, a place-setter he'd learned early in his first campaign. "Good question," he lied. "I know you all like to write about those incidents like they're some sort of world-ending disasters, but that's not the case at all. We've had some outside agitators come down to Mississippi and attempt to cause trouble. I'm sure we'll have other difficulties as the project goes forward. But have no doubt, it *will* go forward. And we *will* have great, great stockcar racing in Mississippi."

"Governor, Governor," a stringy-haired woman with no makeup who was wearing cheap thick-framed glasses, a T-shirt, and a sweater tied around her jeans to hide what was obviously an ample backside shouted as she raised her hand like that annoying girl in second grade who knew every answer.

"Yes?" Roy said with a gentle nod and a smile that communicated just the right amount of sexiness. Roy had al-

ready surmised this one to be a hard-ass lesbo, so it didn't hurt to pour on the charm.

"Are you saying that the state of Mississippi will ignore the concerns raised by environmental groups like the ones protesting Dabearer Island?"

Good, a tree-hugger. They were easy to dismiss, especially if the question and questioner made it onto television. At least no one had asked about eminent domain or any missing persons.

Roy opened his mouth to answer the question, but he froze when something in the back of the room caught his eye. Walking through the door of the media center was—he couldn't believe it—Jackie *Outer Boroughs* Simon, the twat who had cornered him at the groundbreaking. There could be no mistake now: Redding hadn't come to Alabama to see Roy drive a racecar.

"Ahhhhhhhh," Roy stammered in response to the question. "We—of course, I mean the royal we, as in all we Mississippians—take pride in our environmentalitarianism. We'll . . . I mean . . . nothing's going to stop . . . I mean . . . we got an environment, and we've got people for that. Does that answer your question? Good. Thanks for coming. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got a car to drive."

He didn't quite sprint out of the room, but his speed-walking set a short-distance record. He never made eye contact with Jackie Simon as he bolted, and she never attempted to stop him or ask him anything. It was as if she were waiting on something only she knew was coming.

Once among friendlies, Roy wiped his forehead with his sleeve and said, "Whew, well, that was painless enough. Now, about this driving thing . . ."

Five minutes later he was outfitted in a powder-blue fireproof jumpsuit, matching gloves, and racing shoes that looked like high-top ballerina slippers. Roy had slipped

the suit on over his clothes, which caused it to bulk in all the wrong places. He looked like an overweight, middle-aged reveler on his way to a Halloween party dressed as Superman without a cape. The final and most spectacular indignity came when Roy was handed a thin, sanitary hairnet, the kind of cover that made neurosurgeons look silly as they headed in to remove an intracranial tumor. The bonnet made Roy look like a lunchroom worker at an elementary school.

"What's this for?" he asked as he slipped his hair into the paper.

"Most driver helmets are custom-fit," the track employee who was outfitting him said. "Unfortunately, we have to put you in one of the driving school helmets." The guy pointed to the hairnet and said, "That will help it fit, and keep you and it clean during your run."

Roy nodded and sighed. Logic did little to lessen the humiliation he felt in his Superman suit and hairnet.

"So, are you ready to go?" asked another of the dozen track workers there to assist him.

"Sure," Roy said.

When they walked outside, a television camera light blinded Roy. He put his hand in front of his face and thought he heard the cameraman say, "Jesus, what's that on his head?" Before anyone could ask a legitimate question, the public address system squealed with earsplitting feedback. Even though there wasn't a soul in the massive grandstands surrounding the track, a booming voice shouted over the speakers, "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome to the Alabama Motor Speedway, driving the new Toyota Camry, Mississippi Lieutenant Governor Roy Coon!"

The twelve track employees clapped, as did Sean Fluffer and two of the three Japanese executives. Even those who meant well sounded halfhearted in their applause. If ev-



everyone in attendance had screamed, cheered, and stomped their feet, the sound would have been lost in the emptiness of this vast arena. None of that stopped Roy from smiling and waving as if there were half a million people in the stands. He walked over and shook hands with Nick, Joe, and Eddie, who smiled and gave curt Japanese nods. Then Roy waved once more to nobody. As he climbed over the pit wall, he heard one reporter say to another, "Think they got any beer in the media center?" At that point Roy thought his day of ingloriousness had reached its peak.

But he was wrong, a fact he realized when two of the track workers strapped him into the HANS device, a horseshoe-shaped yoke perched atop his shoulders to keep the head and neck from moving. HANS (head and neck safety) devices saved lives, not just in STOCKCAR but in all racing leagues, but that didn't make them any less cumbersome or any more attractive. With his communication earpieces in place, his racing-school helmet shoved snugly onto his head, the HANS device clipped to his shoulders like a plow yoke, and his Superman suit riding high in his crotch, Roy Coon looked like Neil Armstrong with hemorrhoids, hopping around on the surface of the moon looking for some Preparation H.

When he got to the car, Roy leaned over and reached for the door handle. Then he realized it wasn't there. He looked, he felt, he reached, and then he stepped back and saw that the door handle wasn't missing: there were no doors. Fender to fender was one solid piece. He would have looked around and asked for help, but the HANS device locked his head in place. He would have had to turn his entire body like a robot. With embarrassment stepping aside for ignominy, Roy stood still with his hands on his hips. He'd stand there all day if he had to. Somebody was going to help him. He would not take one more step on this asphalt purgatory without some assistance. It was one

thing to be out here in front of the cameras wearing a fluorescent biohazard space suit, but it was something else altogether when the fucking car he was supposed to drive didn't have any fucking doors!

Another of the track workers ran up and unhooked the thick-stranded net that covered the driver's window. "Climb in here, Governor," the man said.

Roy looked at the tiny window and tried to visualize his climb. Did he go feet first or head first? And what did he do once he got in?

"Just step onto the seat," the track worker said with a note of nervous encouragement in his voice.

Roy hoisted his right leg toward the open window and missed badly. He hadn't stretched his hamstrings in at least five years. Getting his foot waist-high was going to take some work. On the second try, the heel of his foot caught on the window. Unfortunately, the helmet and HANS device made him top-heavy. He swung his arms in a circular motion as he listed backward, and two workers ran to his aid, but it was too late. Roy tumbled onto his butt, his foot sliding down the side of the car as he hit the asphalt.

One of the track workers tried unsuccessfully to suppress a laugh. Another said, "That's all right, Governor. Don't worry about it; it happens all the time."

"Uh-huh," Roy grunted.

"Let us help you, here," the first worker said as they lifted Roy off the ground and aimed his feet at the window.

Roy's next instinct was to dodge the steering wheel. Then he realized the steering wheel wasn't there either. A lone phallic rod protruded up from the floorboard, but there was no wheel attached. Once inside, Roy flopped into the seat, a cavernous hard shell that seemed to suck him in.

“Drivers have their seats custom-molded,” one of the track workers said to him. “We used one of Redball Redding’s old ones for you.”

Roy winced at the mention of Redding, something he hoped the track guys didn’t notice. Thankfully they didn’t appear to be looking at him. They were too busy clipping harnesses together and checking the interior of the car.

As much as he could with the yoke around his neck, Roy looked around in surprise at the spartan interior. The exterior was perfect: a shiny dust-free rolling billboard with the Toyota logo painted on every available panel. The interior, while spotless, looked like the engine room of a submarine. A roll cage surrounded him on all sides, with a thick steel bar bisecting the cockpit. No heads-up displays or holographic systems: just a row of toggle switches, a tachometer the size of a dinner plate on the dash, some other gauges that were as impossibly small as the tach was large, and a straight-shift gear stick that looked three feet long protruding up from the floor.

“Why don’t you run through the gears before we fire it up?” one of the track guys said.

Roy nodded, pushed the clutch, a pedal he found to be terribly small for a car this powerful, and grabbed the gear shifter. Shifting took work. Getting it into first required him to shove the yardstick-long handle almost to the dash; second gear was down near his right knee; third and forth were almost in the passenger seat.

Passenger seat? When he got to fourth, he saw the right seat for the first time, and stared as if to say, *what the heck is that doing here?*

“That’s a special modification,” the second track guy said, nodding to the right seat. “They want to give right-seat rides to show off the car.”

Roy nodded again.

“Okay, you ready?”

“Ready for what?” he said.

Helper number one leaned in and grabbed the seatbelt harnesses. He placed one over Roy’s right shoulder and another over his left. The buckle was a pie-plate-sized hunk of steel with five portals for the straps: two shoulder harnesses, two lap belts, and a fifth strap that came up through his legs and snapped into the buckle between his navel and his placid and ever-shrinking penis. When helper number two grabbed the strap with both hands and put all his weight into tightening the belts, Roy felt as though he’d been sucked into a sinkhole.

All his fears were coming true: this was, indeed, the most boneheaded thing he had ever done.

While track worker number one strapped him into what he was certain would be his death chamber, the other one put the steering wheel through the open window and connected it to the column. For the first time, Roy said out loud what he’d thought several times: “You’ve got to be kidding.”

The wheel was the size of a spare tire—okay, one of those mini-tires, but still enormous for a car. It looked like something you might see on the helm of a racing yacht in the America’s Cup. Roy could barely move his legs without bumping it.

“Bigger’n you’re used to, huh?” Number One said.

Roy nodded again. If he opened his mouth, he was afraid he might scream, *Let me out!* or something equally embarrassing.

Number Two reached across him and fingered something strapped to the dash near the roll bar. Roy’s eyes followed the hand, and his heart jumped into his throat when he saw a fire extinguisher.

“Hopefully you won’t need this, but if you do, just grab the handle and pull,” he said. “Got it?”

Roy didn’t move.

“Or just drop the net and get the hell out. That’s what I’d do.” He elbowed his buddy and they both laughed.

Oh Jesus. Oh Jesus. Oh Jesus.

“Okay, let’s fire it up.”

Number One flipped three of the toggle switches and looked at the small gauges, the ones Roy couldn’t read now if his life depended on it. Two more toggles and Roy heard something clicking. Maybe it was the fuel pump or the starter, something not working properly so they would have to call the whole thing off.

The track guy waited a couple of seconds before hitting the final switch. When he did, the engine burst to life with an eruption unlike anything Roy had ever heard or felt. He screamed, but no one heard him.

The only thing Roy could think was that an enormous wild animal had to be trapped under the hood attempting to break free. Number Two leaned to within inches of Roy’s face, so close that Roy could smell the onions the guy’d had scattered in his hash browns this morning. His nose was so close to Roy’s helmet that it was impossible to focus on any other part of his face. Number Two shouted, but Roy didn’t hear a thing.

Then Number One tapped Number Two on the shoulder. Number One had donned a headset with fist-sized earpieces and a microphone. Roy had seen offensive coordinators in the NFL wearing those things, but Roy didn’t realize STOCKCAR used them. Of course it made sense. If anybody was going to hear Roy scream it would be through the miracle of radio.

Suddenly a voice in his ears said, “Governor.”

Roy jumped and looked out the window where he saw Number One waving to him and pointing to the headset.

“Governor, that button at two o’clock on your steering wheel cues your microphone. Why don’t you give it a try?”

Roy pressed the button on the manhole cover disguised as a steering wheel. "Can you hear me?" he said in a voice three octaves higher than normal.

Number One gave a thumbs-up and said, "Perfect. Now, take a second and get a feel for the throttle."

"The what?"

"The accelerator. Get a feel for the accelerator."

"Okay."

Roy felt the gas pedal with his right foot. It, too, was out of proportion: smaller and closer to the brake than anything he'd ever driven. Once his foot found the pedal he pressed it, and the engine roared like something out of *Jurassic Park*. He watched the needle on his giant tachometer jump up to 5, and he saw Number One out of the corner of his eye swiping his hand across his throat, the universal signal for "cut it." Roy let off the gas.

"Jeez, Governor, try not to blow the engine before we get out of the pits."

Roy cued his mike and said, "Roger that."

"Okay, Governor, now, you want to be careful pulling out of here. There's a lot of horsepower. We have more crashes pulling out of the pit than anywhere else on the track. Just ease it out, and take your time getting up to the speed you want."

"Roger that," Roy said again. Then he gave them a *Top Gun* thumbs-up and grabbed the gear stick with the kind of authority his grandmother had exuded when she was wringing the neck of a chicken.

Number Two leaned in the cockpit and connected the window netting.

"By the way, what's that for?" Roy asked.

Number One cued his mike and said, "Keeps any body parts from flying out the window if you flip and roll the car."

"Flip and roll?"

“Don’t worry, that hasn’t happened in at least six months. Just focus on the track. Have fun!”

Roy took a deep breath, hoisted the gear stick into first, applied a small amount of pressure to the “throttle,” and slowly released the clutch. The rear tires spun, and the tail of the car slid left and then right. He almost panicked and let go of the steering wheel, but his boyhood instincts kicked in, and he straightened the car before he reached the exit of pit road.

The banking surprised him the most. When he got to the first turn, he stayed as low as possible, but it still felt like the car was going to tip over on its left side. He shifted to second gear and then third as he went through turns one and two. By the time he hit the back straightaway he was in fourth and gaining confidence by the second. He had to be pushing ninety, maybe a hundred miles an hour, so fast that the adrenaline surged through his body like the drugs on which he had become so dependent.

He hit turn three at eighty-nine miles an hour, fast enough to take a slightly higher line, which put him half-way up the embankment. “Wooooooo!” he screamed. Now he understood the obsessive fascination people had with this sport. He drove hard into turn four and got the car north of a hundred miles an hour again on the front straightaway.

“How’s she handling, Governor?” Number One called in his ear.

It took Roy a second to find the mike button. When he did he shouted, “This is unbelievable!”

After a short pause, Number One said, “You’re looking great. Four or five laps, and then bring it in.”

“Roger that.”

Katie was reading in the media center when Johnny Pea showed up. His flight had been ground-delayed in Gulf-

port, which put him half an hour behind. When he finally arrived, he looked like he'd driven in from Birmingham with the car windows open.

"Hey, Katie," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Good question," Katie signed. "Dad insisted."

He nodded, and pointed out the window. "Is that Lieutenant Governor Coon slowpoking it around the track?"

"Yeah," she said. "Who is he, anyway?"

"A guy your father and I are talking to about a case," he said, unsure how much Robert shared with his almost-sixteen-year-old daughter. "Where is your dad, by the way?"

She pointed to the restroom. "Changing."

"Changing?"

She didn't get a chance to answer. Robert came out of the restroom and Johnny Pea had to take a step back to catch himself. The chief federal prosecutor for the Sixth District of the United States was dressed in a white racing suit with the orange logo of Union 76 plastered on his chest.

"Hi, boss," J.P. said.

"You're late."

"Flight got delayed."

"So, how was the movie last night?"

"Not bad. Constance thinks you're better-looking than Dennis Quaid."

"Give her a big kiss for me."

"I'll do that."

There was an awkward pause. Then Johnny Pea said, "So, ah, what's up?"

"Oh, nothing, just going out for a little drive," Robert said as he pulled on his racing gloves to make sure they still fit.

"Driving. Good, okay. So, ah, anything I can do to help?"



“Actually, I need you to help Jackie set up some things in this room after I leave.”

“Set up.”

“Yeah, she’ll fill you in.”

“Jackie. In this room. Okay.”

“Oh,” Robert said, “and I do have one thing to ask you.”

“What’s that, boss?”

Robert turned to his side and put a hand on his hip.  
“Does this suit make me look fat?”

## Chapter 29

---

On his fourth lap, Roy experienced what drivers called having “the car come to him,” an insider’s way of saying triple-digit speeds were starting to feel normal. A pool of sweat settled near his lower back and he had to blink away the burning perspiration from his eyes, but that didn’t dampen his focus. Roy picked sight lines along the track far more distant than the normal lines he would choose on the highway. Once he hit his marks he lifted out of the throttle as the car tilted onto the embankment of the curves. Then, as he reached the middle of the turns, he would accelerate again, pushing the car through the apex with a jolt of velocity.

Every nerve in his body was on edge, every synapse in his brain on high alert. His heart thrumped so hard it hurt, and every muscle in his body burned with tension. This had to be the high that skydivers and bungee jumpers experienced. Roy had often wondered what compelled otherwise intelligent men to pay good money to jump out of stable, well-running airplanes, or to tie rubber bands around their waists and drive off suspension bridges. Now he understood. This was, as he had heard a base-jumper once say on television, “bitchin’ sick.”

As he accelerated through the exit of turn four and hit

his mark on the front stretch, a voice he didn't recognize crackled in his ears. "Governor, this is Joe Cummings. I'm your car chief for the day."

Roy slipped his thumb to the mike button and said, "Okay, Joe."

"How's she riding?"

"Incredible," Roy said. "It's like driving a rollercoaster without the rails."

Joe laughed and said, "Well, wind it out for a couple more laps, and then bring her in."

"Roger that," Roy said as he lifted out of the throttle and drove halfway up the embankment of turn one.

There was a slight bump in the pavement between turns one and two that had scared the bejeezus out of Roy the first time he'd hit it. By lap four he anticipated the bump and the wiggle it would cause. He hit it like a pro, and picked his line through the next turn. He decided to try to push the car a little harder through three and four, so he pressed the accelerator on the backstretch. When he got to turn three, he didn't lift as much as on previous trips. He was stunned that the slope of the banking didn't slow him down. But he was shocked when the front end of the car continued to troll up the track after he'd turned the wheel.

"Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!" Roy yelled. No one heard him. He couldn't even hear himself. He quickly got out of the throttle and touched the brakes. When he did the rear tires fishtailed and he had to steer the car into what he thought was going to be a spin. Thankfully, the brakes worked even better than the accelerator, and the car slowed to an acceptable pace before he exited the turn.

As he entered turn four he cued the mike again and said, "I think that's enough."

Joe Cummings's voice came back in his ear saying, "That's great, Governor. Good job. Bring it in slowly. You can stop it right where you started."

"Roger that," Roy said with a little less confidence in his voice than he'd had before almost driving into the wall.

Robert stuck his head in the office beside the media center. Jackie and Johnny Pea appeared ready. Both sat at a table and watched a monitor in the corner. On the screen was a grainy shot of the interior of the Toyota with Roy Coon's wild, round eyes darting from side to side as he drove through turn four.

The rest of the room was set up like a studio. Boom microphones were suspended above the table, lights and reflection umbrellas stationed near the back wall, and two digital and two beta video cameras were positioned to capture every angle of the chairs Jackie and Johnny Pea now occupied.

"You guys ready?" Robert asked.

"The room's set," J.P. said.

"How about the car?"

Jackie shook her head and said, "Not as crisp as I'd like, but usable."

"No problem with the audio, though," Robert said.

"Oh, no," Jackie said. "Audio's fine. I just wish I'd had time to mount one of our remote units in the dash, or get a couple of close-angle cameras around the doorframe."

"Jackie, it's not a movie."

"Yeah, yeah," she said, nodding and frowning. "You know I can't speak for the network on this."

"That's why whatever we shoot today belongs to me," Robert said. "You, Jackie Simon, not the network, have exclusive rights to it once we're done."

"ABS lawyers are going to raise hell."

Robert nodded and said, "And you're going to win another Peabody."

One of the track workers stepped into the room and said, "Mr. Redding, they're ready for you."

"Thanks," Robert said, and then: "See you guys in a few. Make sure you secure video and audio. Nothing leaves this room."

"Got it," J.P. said.

"Hey, Redball," Jackie said.

"Redball?" Robert said. "Why, Ms. Simon, I didn't realize we were that familiar."

"Yeah, it's the water down here or something. Anyway, good luck out there."

"Don't worry," he said, nodding out the window. "Out there's the only place where I'm sure I know what I'm doing."

Roy was amazed by how long it took to stop a car that was traveling in excess of a hundred miles an hour. He started tapping the brakes the second he exited turn four, but he still came perilously close to missing the pit road and running headlong into the grass. He continued pressing the brake pedal as he guided the car down the row of pit boxes. In the distance he saw his two original helpers standing near a couple of traffic cones, along with Joe, Nick, and Eddie from Toyota, and another man with a headset that Roy assumed was this Joe Cummings fellow, his car chief for the day, whatever the hell that meant.

It was only as he slowed to below forty miles an hour, and then thirty, inching ever closer to his pit box, that Roy realized how exhausted he was. Every muscle in his body was drained. Sweat poured into his eyes, so much so, in fact, that he took his right hand off the wheel and wiped his brow with his racing glove. The hairnet felt like a used shower cap. Streams of perspiration ran out of his helmet and down his suddenly limp neck. His legs and hips felt like the congealed goo Roy had seen nurses feeding his dad.

"Whew," he said to himself. "Man, that was something."

He aimed the grill of the car at the giant stop sign his track buddies had put at the end of his pit.

"That's it, Governor," Joe's voice said in his ears. "Bring it to the stop sign if you can, put it in neutral, and leave it running."

That was a good idea, since Roy had no idea how to shut the car off. He inched to within a yard of the sign, stopped, and pulled the giant shifter into neutral. "Whew," he said again.

The guy Roy assumed to be Joe Cummings stepped into view and gave him a thumbs-up. Then the track worker who had strapped him into his seat reached in and unclipped the window net. Then he leaned into the cockpit to help Roy unbuckle. The track worker flipped a clip on the steering wheel, slid it off the column, and laid it on the dash. Then he unclipped a couple of the harnesses holding the HANS device in place.

"Think I could get this helmet off now?" Roy shouted, but without the microphone nobody heard him over the rumbling engine.

The helper's hand flew around the cockpit, loosening straps and unlocking buckles. Before Roy realized what was going on, four hands reached inside and grabbed him. They were helping him out. Roy did his part, sliding as high in the seat as the silly neck yoke would allow, and aiming his helmeted head toward the open window. He felt hands moving under his armpits, and then onto his buttocks. In a matter of seconds he found himself riding atop the shoulders of the track employees like a triumphant football coach on his way to midfield. The small crowd on the pit road applauded, and three camera crews were making their way over the small wall to capture Roy's glorious return to safety. Roy couldn't help himself. He waved with both hands like the Rose Bowl princess and actually blew kisses to the cameras.

Then he saw Redball Redding, and he froze, hands in the air like a convenience store clerk in the middle of a holdup. Redding had on what appeared to be a race suit, one that actually fit. He was carrying a helmet under his arm as he strode confidently toward the car. With his hands still above his head, Roy said, "What the hell's going on?", another utterance that no one heard.

With television cameras rolling on both sides of him, Roy's eyes darted back and forth in panic. He still couldn't move his head because of the HANS device, and the rest of his body seemed frozen in a state of shock and fear. Before he could mount any form of objection or defense, his feet were being shoved into the passenger window.

When his butt hit the small right seat, Roy waved his arms in front of him in a signal to stop. Then he saw the camera lens in the window beside him, and he hesitated just long enough for the track workers to strap him in. His eyes were wide, and he felt nauseated when a familiar voice boomed in his earphones.

"Ready for another run?" Redball Redding said.

Roy jerked his eyes to his left and saw—oh, my ever-loving god!—Redding in the driver's seat next to him. Roy opened his mouth to scream, *No, please, don't*, but all that came out was a quiet high peep that was swallowed whole by a massive roar as Redball revved the engine.

The driver's hands danced around the cockpit, flipping a switch here and there, checking this strap and that. When Redding reached under the dash and hit one switch, Roy suddenly heard himself saying, "Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit."

Then he heard Redding laugh and say, "Watch that, Governor. I just opened both mikes."

"Oh," Roy said. "Well, ah, what exactly are we—"

Redball attached the steering wheel and revved the engine above seven thousand rpm's.

“Ahhhhhhhh!” Roy shouted, throwing his hands to the sides of his helmet where his ears should be.

“All strapped in?” Redball said.

“Oh god, no!” Roy shouted.

Joe Cummings stood in front of the car with his hand up and three fingers splayed. Then he lowered one finger so that two were up. A second later, one finger was in the air. One second later, Joe stepped aside, and Roy Coon released a scream from the depths of his soul.

“Wonder what happens if you puke in one of those helmets,” Jackie Simon said as she stared at Roy Coon’s face on the monitor.

J.P. shrugged and said, “We might be about to find out.”

They watched in silence for another second before J.P. said, “So, that father saying ‘fuck’ on *Outer Boroughs* the other night: what was that all about?”

Redball kept the rpm’s high to elevate the oil pressure. Race engines needed to be raced, and the cruising laps that Roy Coon had just run had been anything but strenuous. By the time they rolled out of turn three and into the backstretch, they were hitting the triple-digit mile-per-hour mark.

Roy’s hands grabbed the roll bars, and his right foot pressed on the floor against an imaginary brake pedal. He didn’t scream again until Redball took a high line through turn four, ridding them up the seventeen-degree embankment at a hundred and fifty miles an hour.

“That’s the one thing you don’t get from watching the sport on television,” Redball said. “You have no idea how steep some of these banks are.”

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

“You know, most airplanes take off at about a nine-



degree angle of ascent. These turns are twice that steep, so it feels like we're rolling over on the left side of the car."

They hit one hundred seventy as they passed the start-finish line. That's when Roy knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was going to die. The human brain can only process what it has learned or experienced, and all of Roy Coon's senses were shouting that they were going way too fast to make the curve speeding toward them.

"BRAKE! BRAKE! BRAKE!" Roy screamed.

If anything, Redball sped up as they entered turn one. He veered the car to the right until the wall was only inches from Roy's window. As the car tilted high on the embankment, Roy made a whimpering sound followed by what sounded like the opening stanza of the Lord's Prayer.

Then Redball turned hard left and drove the car to the bottom of the track as they exited the turn. It was then that Roy learned what the HANS device was for. His cheek and jaw pressed hard against the right side of his helmet. Had he not been strapped motionless in the seat, Roy knew that his head would be pinned against the right side of the car.

As they rocketed down the embankment and into the back straightaway, the oddest thought entered Roy's mind. He thought that his earlier analogy about driving a roller coaster had been exactly right. It was his timing that had been wrong.

On the second lap, Robert said, "Did you know you can pull as many as four G's in these turns? Any more and we'd have to wear G-force suits to keep from passing out from lack of oxygen."

"Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done."

"Anyway, let's take it a little higher this time and see how that feels."

He slid the car so close to the wall that Roy could feel the heat coming off the concrete outside his window. But rather than dive low at the apex, Redball kept the car high on the track. Roy felt himself tilt so far to the left that he was sure they were going over. When they sprinted out of the turn, he felt his stomach drop into the bottom of his seat, and his vision blurred.

"You okay there, Roy?" Redball asked.

"Ohhhhhhh!"

"Setup is so important on downforce tracks like this," he said. "The only things keeping us from flying over that wall are the aerodynamics of the chassis, and the grip in these tires. It's a very scientific process. You should see how much work goes into squeezing another second-per-lap out of these cars. Of course, during a race the car changes as conditions change. A full tank of gas makes it heavier, which makes it slower and a little tighter. The longer you stay out, the faster and looser you get, which is great except for the tires. We've got soft tires, which means more grip at high speeds, but they wear out in no time. We could blow that back right one any second and be in the wall before you know it."

"On Earth as it is in Heaven."

"So, Roy," Robert said as they shot out of turn four and crossed the start/finish line for the fourth time. "What did you and Sammy Dubose talk about at dinner the other night?"

"Whoa! Whoa! Oh God, please slow down."

"Dinner, Roy. You and Sammy, what'd you discuss?"

"I—ah—oh God—how'd you know?—oh, I'm gonna be sick."

"I know a lot, Roy," Redball said as he drove high through turns one and two again. "For example, I know that you and Howell Shelwank have become regular phone pals."

“Oh lordy, lordy, please!”

“I also know that you seem to talk to Sammy Dubose quite a bit after you’ve spoken with Shelwank. Is that coincidence, Roy? And what do you, the senator, and the gangster have in common?”

“BRAKE! Jesus, we’re gonna die!”

“Oh, we’re not going to die, Roy. But we do have enough fuel to stay here for—oh, I don’t know—thirty, forty more laps. We can either chat about Shelwank and the Dubose brothers, or I’ll see if we can set a new track speed record.”

“God, no!”

“What’s going on, Roy? What are you doing with Shelwank and the Delacroix family, and what does it have to do with Dabearer Island?”

Roy felt as though he might lose consciousness. “If I tell you, will you please slow down?”

“Only if you tell it all, Roy: Shelwank, the Delacroix family, Dabearer, Lichwick, and your meth pusher in Jackson. I want all of it.”

“Oh god,” Roy shouted through sobs. “How’d you know about the dope?”

“Jesus, Roy,” Redball said. “Just tell me everything. I can’t help you if you don’t help me.”

As they entered turn one pushing two hundred miles an hour, the right rear tire shimmied up the track and the rear of the car wobbled.

“Ahhhhhhhhh!” Roy screamed.

“Wow!” Redball said. “Roy, that’s what we call getting loose. A couple more like that and we might lose it. I’d hate to hit the wall with you in here, but hey, with these new safety features we’ve got better than a fifty-fifty chance of walking away. Course, that’s for the driver. I’m not sure we have any stats for a right seat. Who knows?”

You might have been right, Roy: we might get killed out here after all.”

“Give us this day our daily bread.”

“Talk to me, Roy.”

“Forgive us our trespasses.”

Redball took a low line through turn three, pulling as many G’s as he could.

“Ohhhh god!”

“It’s time, Roy. God can help you later, but only I can help you now.”

“It was all Shelwank!” Roy shouted. “All if it. Everything. Dabearer. The Dubose boys. Everything.”

“Are you saying that you and Howell Shelwank, United States senator from Alabama, are involved with Sammy and Richey Dubose, known capos in the Delacroix crime family?” Robert asked.

“Yes, yes, yes!” Roy shouted. “And Jimmy Don Locus is in with us, too.”

“Who’s he?”

“The speaker of the Mississippi assembly,” Roy shouted.

“And what kinds of activities are the three of you engaged in?”

“Everything! Christ, we’re getting kickbacks on every brick that goes onto Dabearer Island, plus all the concrete and steel going into the *Pointe aux Chenes* Bridge.”

“You, Howell Shelwank, and Jimmy Don Locus are all receiving illicit kickbacks from the construction at Dabearer Island?”

“Yes, yes! Now. Please. Slow. Down.”

“In a second, Roy. What did you have to do to receive these funds?”

“We took the island!” Roy shouted.

“Took?”

“Eminent domain! We pushed it, and we got it. That’s

why Shelwank needed Jimmy Don and me. We're from different parties and could squeeze the votes. Shelwank's from Alabama. He couldn't push a land deal in another state."

"So the three of you pushed through the acquisition of Dabearer Island through eminent domain for personal gain. Is that correct?"

"Yes! God, yes! Please stop this fucking car!"

"Okay, Roy. But when I do, you've got some more explaining to do."

Roy said nothing.

"And don't think you can back out of what we've discussed here," Redball said. He tapped the tiny dash-mounted lens. "Say 'cheese' for the camera, Roy."

"Oh, Lord Jesus, please help me," Roy said.

"I'm sure He will, Roy," Redball said, patting Roy on the knee as he applied the brakes in the exit of turn four and made a left onto pit road. "I'm sure He will."

Twenty minutes later Roy Coon was out of his race suit and sitting at the table Jackie and Johnny Pea had set up earlier. The lights and cameras were running, but Jackie did not look pleased.

"Goddammit, can't we clean him up a little?" she asked.

"He doesn't look that bad to me," J.P. said.

"He looks like we turned a fire hose on him."

J.P. shrugged and said, "Sweat has a certain confessions-of-the-guilty appeal, doesn't it?"

"Let me handle shot production," Jackie said. "You continue to do . . . whatever it is you do."

In fact, Roy Coon looked like he'd been beaten with a fire hose in addition to being soaked by it. His face was a mixture of pale white and splotchy crimson. Not a single strand of hair on his head seemed to go in the same direc-

tion. His entire jaw quivered like someone who had been vomiting, crying, or both.

Fortunately, Roy was sitting upright. That had been a question mark when they'd first pulled him out of the car. It took four track workers five minutes to drag his limp ass out the window, and another five minutes to get him out of his race gear. The whole time Roy kept mumbling something that sounded like, "I didn't mean it, Papa." Nobody paid any attention until he was in his seat at the table and the lights and cameras were on.

"Please state your name and occupation," Robert said from the other side of the table.

"Roy Coon, Jr.," Roy said. "I'm the lieutenant governor of the state of Mississippi, for the next few minutes, at least."

For the next hour Roy told it all. Shelwank had recruited Roy. Shelwank and Jimmy Don had made a fortune on FEMA kickbacks after the hurricanes, and Jimmy Don knew the financial strain Roy was under. With a drug habit and an invalid father to support, Roy was desperate for cash. When Shelwank and Jimmy Don called, Roy was more than ready to listen.

"It seemed easy and harmless enough," Roy said. "Shelwank could get us the federal funding for a big ole bridge, if I could deliver the votes to get Dabearer Island condemned. Then we'd have us the biggest casino in the world, and the best damn racetrack in history. The natives of Dabearer would get paid more than any of them'd ever seen; the state would make out; and we'd revitalize our coast. It would've made sense even if we hadn't been getting well in the deal."

"So Senator Shelwank proposed the plan?"

Roy nodded. "He said if we didn't do it somebody else would. I think his exact words were, 'Kelo's a license to steal, so we might as well be the ones doing the stealing.'"

"Did you know what he was talking about?"

"Yeah, that dumbass Supreme Court ruling that anybody can snatch land if it means improving your tax base. Hell, there's tons of property in Mississippi that would be better used as condos. Shelwank said if we didn't take it, somebody else would. He made it sound like it was our duty or something."

"How well were you and the senator getting?" Robert asked.

"I don't know about Shelwank and Jimmy Don, but I figured I would clear five and a half million in the next three years."

"You think your cohorts were doing better?"

"I'm sure they're doing better. They made three times that after Katrina. I know they weren't taking a pay cut on this deal."

Robert repeated the Miranda litany to Roy, explaining his right to shut the fuck up if he was so inclined.

"No, I'm ready," Roy said. "I want to rid myself of this once and for all."

"And you understand that I, as a federal prosecutor, have made no promises concerning your future at this point."

Roy nodded and said, "I just want to do what's right." Then he paused and said, "I do have one request, though."

"What's that?"

"I want to see my papa one more time before I go away. And I want you to promise that nobody will ever tell him about this. He doesn't know who I am ninety percent of the time, but I don't want him to hear any of this from anyone. Those few times he does remember me, I don't want him to remember this."

Robert nodded slowly. "I'm sure we can work something out," he said.

So Roy went on and on explaining the intricacies of

how the Delacroix family, through their agents the Dubose brothers, shook down contractors and union bosses, and how Sammy Dubose passed portions of those proceeds back to Roy Coon, Jimmy Don Locus, and Howell Shelwank. He also explained how Shelwank panicked when eco-terrorist Stanford Lichwick blew himself up and attracted national media attention to their quiet little cash cow. It had been Shelwank's idea to bring the Dubose boys into the picture, just like it had been his idea for Roy to come here today and drive this stupid frigging racecar.

"What were the Dubose boys supposed to do?" Robert asked.

"They were supposed to keep lawyers and troublemakers off Dabearer," Roy said. "Howell didn't want anybody snooping around looking into our deal."

"So you told Sammy to harass the environmentalists?"

"No," Roy said. "They did that all on their own, just like most things. Sammy seems brain-damaged or something. Shelwank told me to shut them down, so I called Sammy and told him to back off. Who knows if he listened?"

"You know that four people have been reported missing from the area in recent days," Robert said.

"I didn't until this morning. God, I hope they're all right."

"You don't know anything about their disappearance?"

"Oh lord, no. I got involved in this because I thought nobody would get hurt, and most people would be helped by what we were doing. I mean, I thought Sammy might scare some one-eight-hundred tort pimp away, but I wouldn't have done anything if I'd thought somebody would get hurt."

Robert patted Roy's hand and nodded solemnly. "We don't have much more to go over," he said.



“Whatever you need,” Roy said, “as long as we have a deal on my papa. He’s all I care about now.”

“We have a deal,” Robert said.

Federal marshals took Roy Coon into protective custody under strict orders to keep his whereabouts a secret until the other arrests could be made. Once the paperwork was complete and the recordings were logged into evidence, Robert walked out of the small room and found his daughter sitting in the media center with tears in her eyes.

“What’s wrong, sweetpea?” he asked.

She wiped her face and pointed her thumb at the make-shift interrogation room. “I was watching through the door,” she said.

“So you saw what he said?”

She nodded and began to cry again.

“It’s okay, Katie,” he said as he hugged her. He had no idea why his daughter was crying for Roy Coon, but this was not the time to ask.

She shook her head. “No it’s not,” she signed. “What that guy said about his father. I’m sorry, Daddy. I won’t let you down anymore. I promise.”

## Chapter 30

---

Screw regulations: Robert was letting Johnny Pea and Jackie Simon ride to Washington with him for this one. They dropped Katie off in Charlotte, refueled, and had the Hawker on the ground at Reagan National shortly after two P.M. Ty Johnson met them at the Concord airport and took Katie's seat for the remainder of the trip.

"You sure I can't get a camera crew to meet us?" Jackie asked.

"Not if you want dibs on the stuff we already have," Robert said.

"Hey, I thought we had a deal on that stuff."

"We do, unless you get on my nerves by making silly requests."

"What kind of deal is that?"

"The best one you're likely to get today. Anyway, at least you'll be a witness."

A Department of Justice car met them on the tarmac and transported all of them to the Capitol, where they picked up three senior officers of the Capitol Hill police and three special agents from the FBI.

It was an impressive posse that marched through the halls of the Capitol and into Howell Shelwank's office. It had once been the quarters of such senatorial stalwarts as

Richard Nixon and John Tower. Now it was Shelwank's den of iniquity. Because it was a Saturday, the good senator's regular secretary was home in Middleburg cooking meat loaf for visiting in-laws from West Virginia. This was not unusual. Had it not been for the Debearer Island debacle, Shelwank himself would have been firing up a Cohiba on the tenth tee at Burning Tree Club about now. In usual temp fashion, the girl behind the outer office desk barely looked up from her computer as Robert led the agents, officers, and Jackie through the door. The girl never uttered a peep and the rhythm of her gum-chewing never wavered as the stern-looking posse marched past her and charged into Shelwank's private sanctum.

"Redball!" Shelwank said as he stood up from his leather chair. "What the hell?"

"How are you, Senator?" Robert said.

"Fine, but—"

"No, no," Robert said, holding up a finger to signal Shelwank to pipe down. "You really don't want to say anything. Not a word, because these fine gentlemen—the ones with the guns on their hips—are going to arrest you."

"I don't—"

"No, no, no. Not a word. Don't make a scene. You know exactly why we're here, and none of us have time for any bullshit. Now, we can take you out the basement if you want it that way. But if I hear so much as a syllable of bluster, you're perping it down the marble stairs in cuffs. What's it going to be?"

Shelwank looked into the grim faces in front of him. After a moment of weighing his options, he sighed, put his hands out in front of him, and said, "Goddamn echo-terrorist."

The agents escorted Shelwank to the DC federal courthouse for processing, where he railed against the outra-

geous politically motivated actions of his enemies. Everyone knew he would plead not guilty and the speeches wouldn't stop until the day he was sentenced. But none of it mattered. Shelwank was toast, and he knew it.

"Nice tactics in the office," Jackie said as they rode back to the airport.

Robert smiled and said, "Just doing my job, ma'am."

"So where do I find 'perping it down the stairs' in the prosecutor's handbook?"

"A little improvisation never hurt anyone."

"Tell that to Whoopi Goldberg."

"I'll mention it the next time she comes to a stockcar race."

"See, if you'd let me bring a crew, we could capture that quick wit for posterity."

The DOJ limo cleared security and drove back onto the tarmac at Reagan, where a man who looked like he came out of central casting for the next *RoboCop* movie stood at parade rest next to the Hawker. He wore a dark suit and glasses, and didn't flinch when the car almost ran over his foot, nor did he move when Jackie, Ty, and Johnny Pea walked past him. Jackie made a face to see if he'd move. They all snickered, but the guy didn't budge. It was only when Robert walked toward the hatch that the man marched over.

"Mr. Redding," he said.

"I'm Robert Redding. And you are?"

"Someone you don't know," the man said without a hint of a smile.

Robert cocked his head and stared with a what-the-hell-do-you-say-to-that? look until the man handed him a folder.

"What's this?"

"Information Howell Shelwank has been requesting for the last seven days."

"Requesting from whom?"

"Someone who made sure he didn't get it," the man said.

"Super-duper secret, huh?"

"I think you'll find it interesting."

"But I can't tell anyone where I got it, right?"

"I was never here."

"Uh-huh."

"Except," the guy said, still without changing expressions.

"Yes?"

The man reached inside his coat and pulled a checkered flag out of his pocket. "Would you mind signing this for my son? His name's Martty, two *t*'s."

Robert, Ty, and J.P. read Shelwank's intelligence file on the trip from Washington to Biloxi. Jackie pitched a snit fit when they wouldn't let her see it until Robert threatened to put her out in Beersheba Springs, Tennessee. Knowing he was serious, Jackie settled down and sulked the rest of the trip.

"So why was Shelwank tampering with Lichwick's phone records?" Ty asked.

"He wanted the whole thing to go away as quickly as possible," Robert said. "He tried to cover up anything that would drag out the investigation or move it into areas where he and his buddies might be exposed. As with all cover-ups, he drew more attention, not less."

"They never learn," Ty said.

Jackie looked away from her window long enough to say, "I'm giving two-to-one he tries the I-am-not-a-crook line."

J.P. sat quietly staring at the photos in the file.

"Something wrong, Johnny Pea?" Robert asked.

He shook his head. "Looks like there was a second

boat out there the night of Lichwick's Roman candle," he said.

"A factoid Special Agent Peevey will find quite handy as he continues his investigation," Robert said.

"It didn't originate on the island," J.P. said.

"What?"

"The second boat: it came in from the Gulf beyond the barrier islands, but it originated in Biloxi Bay. It wasn't Obadiah Plunkett, or at least it looks like it wasn't."

"More good news for Peevey. He should be able to track down vessels that came in and out the bay that night."

"Uh-huh."

They landed in Gulfport in the stillest, hottest part of the day. Once again a government vehicle picked them up and drove them to the Montgomery House, where Special Agent in Charge Peevey was preparing to mount a full-scale assault on Biloxi Boat Rental.

"They're both on the premises," he said. "Locals have them under surveillance with orders to notify me of any changes."

"Well, let's go get them," Robert said.

Peevey stared holes through him. "I'm afraid I can't have civilians accompanying us on this raid. And I don't need a team of prosecutors getting in the way, either."

"In the way," Robert said. "Gee, you're welcome, Special Agent Peevey. No, no, it was nothing, really. Dropping this case in your lap, complete with confessions and corroborating evidence, no big deal at all. All in a day's work. Just trying to be part of the team, you know."

"You're welcome to come as long as you remain a safe distance away," Peevey said. "These men are armed and dangerous. I don't want any casualties."

"What's a safe distance?" J.P. asked.

"At least two hundred yards," Peevey said while check-

ing his walkie-talkie and the Velcro attachments on his Kevlar vest.

"We might as well stay here," Ty said.

"That is what I would recommend," Peevey said as he checked his 9mm.

"How about the harbor?" Constance said as she came into the parlor with a pitcher of lemonade. One of her Latina employees followed with a tray of glasses.

"Where?" Ty asked.

"We can watch from the bay," she said. "On the Hell-raiser."

Peevey snorted, clucked, and stretched his neck like a kid in a necktie, a tic he had developed since meeting Robert Redding and his band of prosecutorial misfits.

"I think that's a great idea, Constance," Robert said. "Don't worry about us, Agent Peevey. We'll be observing your operation from the bay."

If Sammy Dubose hadn't known better, he would have sworn his brother was cheating. Richey was up almost five hundred bucks in their day-long Texas Hold'em game. Such a run of luck would have normally led Sammy to suspect sleight-of-hand. But Richey was too stupid to cheat at Go Fish. The little twit had just gotten lucky, which meant Sammy would have to sit at the table a couple of extra hours to recoup his holdings.

"Hey, that's a straight flush, isn't it?" Richey said as he won his sixth hand in a row.

"You know goddamn well it is," Sammy said as he slammed the deck onto the rickety counter at Biloxi Boat Rental.

"Where you going?"

Sammy grabbed a ring of keys off a hook on the wall. "I'm going to check on the boats."

"Why?"

"Because they're worth a lot of money, Richey," Sammy said. "When we're done here we either got to strip them or sell them whole. I need to see what we got."

"But what about the game?"

"Don't worry, I'm not through."

Sammy stormed out the dockside door, slamming the screen behind him, while Richey counted his money and fingered the deck of cards lying on the counter.

"Number one is outside," a voice crackled on Peevey's radio.

"Confirmed," Peevey said as he peeked up from the crouched position he'd assumed behind the Town Car. "Wait for my signal."

"What signal are we going on?" another agent hiding behind another car asked.

"I give the go," Peevey said.

"Did he say go?"

"No, I said I give the go."

"Go, go, go!"

"NO! NO! NO!" Peevey shouted.

"Confirmed, we are a GO! GO! GO!"

"Oh for Christ's sake," Peevey said as he joined the other agents in charging the front door of Biloxi Boat Rental.

Johnny Pea looked through the binoculars and said, "Huh, that's weird."

"What?" Ty asked.

"They're going now."

"Is Sammy outside?"

"On the dock."

"Why would they go when they're separated?"

"Element of surprise, I guess. But you'd think they'd want them together so they could surround them easier."



“Makes too much sense, Johnny Pea,” Ty said. “That’s why we’re not in the FBI.”

Sammy was calculating the value of the fire extinguishers, toolboxes, life vests, and tie lines under the seats of the Robalo when he noticed a quick motion out of the corner of his eye. When he looked up, Sammy saw a dozen armed men with big white FBI letters on their bulky vests running toward the front door of his boat rental office.

“Richey,” he shouted, but he knew it was too late. His brother was pinched.

Sammy grabbed the key and fired up the Robalo. He threw the tie lines onto the dock and pulled the throttle hard into reverse before the first of the agents made it to the dock. Sammy squatted low in the wheelhouse and gunned the twin diesels. As he pushed the boat toward open waters, his last thought was: Goddammit, now I’m never going to get that money back from Richey.

Richey had counted the money three times and come up with three different totals, the lowest being four hundred forty dollars and the top count being five-fifteen. He figured the correct count was somewhere in the middle. That’s the way it usually worked.

He was going to go for count number four when he thought he heard Sammy shout his name. Then he heard one of the boats firing up.

“What the hell?” he said as he stuffed the cash in his pocket and climbed off his stool.

That’s when the front door flew off its hinges and three men with shotguns charged inside.

“Hands up!” one of them shouted.

“Don’t move!” yelled the second.

“On the ground!” screamed the third.

“Hands up!”

"Don't move!"

"Get on the ground, now!"

"Get those hands where I can see them!"

Richey shook his head, shrugged his shoulders, and said, "Well, which the fuck is it?"

"Oh shit, Sammy's getting away!" J.P. yelled.

"He's what?" Robert said as he grabbed the binoculars and almost decapitated his investigator with the strap.

"Oh shit!" Robert shouted as he saw Sammy charging away in the Robalo.

"I guess our special agent in charge never considered a waterside escape, huh?" Ty said.

Nobody got a chance to answer. The Hellraiser shot forward, and the men grabbed for any available railing. Jackie tumbled onto her butt and slid all the way to stern. J.P. went to one knee with his hand on the portside railing, and Ty found one of the fishing seats. Robert grabbed the vertical post near the bridge with both hands. With sea spray stinging his face like a swarm of bees, Robert opened his eyes just wide enough to see Constance at the helm, one hand on the wheel and the other on the fully engaged throttle.

Robert inched forward until the casing of the wheelhouse blocked the onslaught of the sea. He braced himself against the starboard wall and grabbed one of the railings on the dash. In the distance he saw the stern of the Robalo. No doubt they were gaining on it.

"Ah, Constance," Robert shouted. "You sure you don't want me to drive?"

Constance looked at him, smiled, and said, "No thanks. I've got it."

Peevey ran to the edge of the dock with his pistol in one hand and his walkie-talkie in the other. "Who's on the water? Who's on the water?"

"On the what?" a voice replied.

"The water! For god's sake, who's covering the water?"

"Ahhh, the Coast Guard?" the voice said.

Peevey jumped up and down on the dock like a two-year-old throwing a temper tantrum. Then, in a cosmic moment of comic irony, the waterlogged and termite-infested boards that Mark Swindal had been too cheap to replace finally gave way. The plank Peevey was jumping on creaked one time, and then snapped, sending the special agent in charge feet-first into Biloxi Bay.

Special Agent Matthews, Peevey's trusty sidekick, rushed to his boss's aid, getting on his hands and knees and pulling the special agent in charge out of the water and back onto the dock.

"What happened?" Matthews said.

"Number one's fleeing in a boat," Peevey sputtered. "And we don't have any pursuit."

"So who's that chasing him?" Matthews said, pointing on the horizon.

Peevey got to his knees and looked out onto the water, where he saw Constance Saltini's Hellraiser hot on Sammy Dubose's tail.

"Oh for Christ's sake!" Peevey said before leaning over the edge of the dock and putting his head in his hands.

"So, Constance," J.P. said after righting himself and making his way to the bridge. "Not to ask a dog-chasing-car kind of question, but what are we going to do if we catch him?"

"Hey, you guys are law enforcement. I'm just driving the boat."

"Prosecutors, actually," Robert said. "We're prosecutors. And are you sure you don't want me to drive?"

She ignored him and steered the Hellraiser directly behind the Robalo to avoid the chop from Sammy's wake.

The turbochargers whined under the deck as she pushed the throttle as far as it would go.

They saw Sammy turn his head, but no one saw the gun until a bullet shattered the windshield.

"Holy shit! He's shooting at us!" Jackie screamed from her Buddha position on the floor.

Constance never flinched. "Damn it," she said. "That's a two-hundred-dollar windshield."

"Like I say," J.P. said, "what are we going to do if we catch him?"

"Well, we do have guns on board," Constance said.

Robert and Johnny Pea stared at each other with "duh" looks on their faces. Then they sprinted for the stern storage compartment. Ty beat them there. He had the shotgun out and loaded before Robert and J.P. had unsheathed the remaining weapons. Robert got the Browning hunting rifle—a fact he found ironic, since it had been exactly one week since he and Miles Hinton had talked about Mississippi while waiting for Mudfish Dupree's crew to push the Browning 55 Ford out of their way in Alabama. That left J.P. holding a flare pistol in one hand and a harpoon in the other.

"Good luck with those, Johnny Pea," Ty said.

"Hey, you're the hunter in this group."

Another bullet ricocheted off the top of the bow.

Constance shouted, "Ah, boys, you can return fire at any time."

Ty stood on the port side of the wheelhouse, and Robert took up a position at starboard. Ty fired first. No one was sure what he hit, but he definitely got Sammy's attention. The thug winced and ducked, then turned and fired two more shots from his pistol.

Robert got two shots off from the Browning that clearly hit somewhere near the bridge, as wood and sparks flew around Sammy's hands.

Sammy must have realized he was outgunned and that it was only a matter of time before he would lose the race with the Hellraiser. He veered off course and made a run for Goat Island.

"What's he doing?" J.P. said.

"He's trying to make it to shore," Constance said.

"Will he?"

"Oh no," she said. "But he doesn't know it."

Ty fired again, this time hitting one of the seats. Foam flew over the deck, and Sammy made another turn. He pushed the throttle wide open and steered straight toward the island.

"Oh my," Constance said. "He shouldn't do that."

She inched the throttle back on the Hellraiser.

"What are you doing?" Robert said. "He's getting away."

"No, he's not," she said.

About that time the depth horn blared and the red warning light flashed.

"Four feet," she said. "I set it shallow."

They stared as Sammy looked back over his shoulder, raised his left hand, and gave them the middle-finger salute. One second later, the Robalo ran aground on a sandbar. The bow pitched forward and down, and both screws came out of the water. It looked like the boat had hit an invisible concrete wall. The stern lifted five feet in the air, and the hull bent in a way that would have brought tears to the eyes of the engineers who designed it.

As with most fishing boats, the captain's chair had a seat belt, but no one ever used it. Sammy had driven the Robalo from a standing position, just as Constance had in the Hellraiser. So, when Sammy ran aground, it was like he'd hit a brick wall in a car at forty miles an hour with no seat belt, airbag, or dash to break his forward progress. Sammy flew through the windshield and broke his neck on

the bow railing before tumbling head over feet into eighteen inches of water in the tributary of Biloxi Bay.

Jackie Simon staggered to her feet and joined the others in the wheelhouse.

“Bet you wish you had a camera crew now, huh, Jackie?” J.P. said.

“I’m going to be sick,” she said before making a beeline for the starboard railing.

They stood quietly for a moment, watching the squawking gulls swirl over Sammy Dubose’s lifeless body and listening to the wrenching heaves of Jackie Simon recycling her lunch.

Then Constance elbowed Robert in the ribs and said, “Aren’t you glad I was driving?”

## Chapter 31

---

Crime scene pathologists, including Biloxi's own Dr. Terrence Natterly, found enough DNA from all three vice presidents of Octopus Sports on the Robalo to determine, beyond a reasonable doubt, that the men had met unnatural deaths. They didn't have to work that hard to find out what happened to Mark Swindal. Thirty minutes into his interrogation, when the subject of Swindal came up, Richey Dubose said, "Hey, it was Sammy's idea to drown that fat bastard. All I did was hold one of his legs."

Once the shooting and chasing stopped, forensic accountants charged to the scene, pocket protectors at the ready. After a thorough examination of the books, they found serious control deficiencies in the Government Accounting Office plan for the *Pointe aux Chenes* Bridge. These lapses allowed a generally accepted knucklehead like Howell Shelwank to game the system and siphon millions into his and his cronies' pockets. As for the hotel, casino, and racetrack construction on Dabearer, those were just good ole-fashioned kickbacks. The Delacroix crime family collected, and then paid finder's fees to Shelwank, Roy Coon, and Speaker of the Assembly Jimmy Don Locus.

Robert and his crew didn't make it to Jackson to cuff

Jimmy Don, but the tale of how it went down filtered back to them before nightfall. A frequent guest at the Full Package Strip Club, Jimmy Don was arrested while in the company of a lap-dancing transvestite. Jimmy Don swore that he was there on official business and that he was late for a vote and therefore could not be arrested. A local deputy had to explain that the exemption he was quoting came from the U.S. Constitution and applied only to congressmen and senators on their way to Washington. Pervert assemblymen in Jackson could be hauled in any time of the day or night.

Jimmy Don wept as he was led out the front door and helped into the patrol car. As a minor consolation, all the she-men performers at the Full Package lined the sidewalk and blew kisses as he was driven away.

News of the shootings in Biloxi Bay had a scattering effect on the remaining members of the Planetary Liberation Front who didn't have enough cash or incentive to leave. Protesting in defense of the environment was one thing: hanging around in a town with gunfights and FBI raids was something altogether different. The ecowarriors scampered like roaches in a spotlight after Sammy Dubose's death.

Robert and Ty flew back to Charlotte with Jackie Simon, who insisted she had a few more details to work out with Mr. Redding before returning to New York. Robert suspected that the real reason was the Hawker 800. Jackie seemed to enjoy the private-jet lifestyle.

Johnny Pea asked and received permission to stay in Biloxi for one more night. He would take the last U-S Air flight out of Gulfport on Sunday evening and be back in the office early on Monday morning. Everyone assumed that J.P. was staying for Constance, and in that regard they were right. What nobody knew was why.



They sat on a white wooden bench swing that hung from a giant water oak in Constance's garden. The stars were beautiful. A cool ocean breeze danced across the grass as they swayed back and forth to the rhythm of singing cicadas. Johnny Pea put his arm on the back of the swing, and Constance took the opportunity to snuggle near his chest.

"Quite a day, huh?" she said.

"It was that."

"I wish you didn't have to leave tomorrow."

"Really?" he said coldly.

She sat up and looked at him. "Of course, really. What's wrong?"

J.P. sighed and reached into his pocket. He pulled out copies of the satellite photos the intelligence officer made sure Shelwank never saw. He also had the ledger he'd snatched from the standing desk in Constance's parlor.

She stiffened when she saw the ledger.

"Where'd you get that?"

"Oh, just found it lying around. As for the photos, if I told you where I got those, I'd have to kill you." He smiled and said, "But you know a lot about killing, don't you?"

She slid a few inches away from him, and said nothing.

"Rule of thumb for smuggling," he said, "never keep an accounting ledger. And if you're going to lie about when you souped up your fishing boat, don't keep receipts lying around the house."

"It's not what you think," she said.

"I think it looks like you're making out pretty good," he said. "What happened that night? Did Lichwick stumble onto a drop, or did you run into him with a boat full of contraband?"

"It's not like that," she said.

"So what is it like, Constance? And what are you smuggling anyway? Pot? Coke? Crack? Hash?"

"*Trabajadores*," she said.

"Trifecta what? Is that some hybrid out of Tijuana?"

"It means workers. I don't smuggle drugs, J.P. I can't believe you'd think that. I bring in people from the south."

"Mexicans?"

"Oh no," she said, shaking her head. "They can cross on foot; they don't need boats. Guatemalans, mostly, but some Hondurans, a few Colombians and Brazilians."

"So all the people you have working here . . ."

"Transitional," she said. "I bring them in and give them work until they can move on to their final destinations."

"They have final destinations?"

"Sure. Who do you think pays me? The *trabajadores* can't. Contractors, farmers, ranchers, even the casinos are in on it."

"Jesus, you're a coyote."

"I'm someone who survives," she snapped. Now she was on the opposite side of the swing, her shoulders rigid. "You think it's been easy living in Hurricane Hell? At least if the house had blown away the government would've put me up in the Ritz for a year and thrown gold coins at me. But no, everything around me got leveled, and I didn't lose a shutter. I lost every penny of business, though. A year, J.P. I went a year with nothing."

"So you became a human trafficker."

"I became a conduit for immigrants, people who risk their lives to come here and slaughter cattle, clean toilets, and hammer shingles in hundred-degree heat while Americans drink beer and bitch that their government hasn't done enough for them."

"That's an interesting immigration policy. We could call it the Saltini Doctrine."

"You have no idea," she said.

"I have one idea. I have an idea that it was your boat that rendezvoused with Lichwick just minutes before he was shot in the head and blown to itty-bitty bits. What hap-

pened, Constance? Did he threaten to expose your enterprise, or did he just get in the way?"

"I thought he was stranded!" she shouted.

She lowered her head, and the black hair that had made his heart leap from the first moment he saw her fell in front of her face. He could tell from the way her shoulders trembled that she was crying.

"I picked up nine that night," she said. "A big load, but not the biggest I've brought in. As we passed Dabearer and headed for the mouth of the bay, I saw a boat by the piling. The men on board wanted me to ignore it, but I thought it was a stranded fisherman or lost tourist. When I got to him, the kid went nuts. He held up this huge block of plastic and said he'd blow us up if I didn't get away from him."

"So you shot him?"

"Of course not," she said. "I almost had him talked down."

Then J.P. saw what had happened. "One of the men," he said.

She nodded and took a deep, cleansing breath.

"Who?"

She looked up at him, the tears in her beautiful eyes shimmering in the moonlight. "You met him," she said. "Well, 'met' is a stretch. You tackled him."

"The guy in the yard that morning?"

She nodded again.

"Where is he?"

She shrugged and said, "Guatemala City by now. He left that night."

"And the explosion?" he asked.

"It's amazing what a farmer can learn after a couple of revolutions and a coup or two."

J.P. sat still and quiet for a full minute. Then he said, "I guess you played us perfectly. Get the FBI close so you

could follow the investigation. Get me even closer, so you could steer us wherever you wanted us to go.”

“No,” she said. “Okay, the FBI, yes. But not you. I didn’t count on you.”

“Didn’t count on me actually being an investigator?”

“I didn’t count on falling in love with you.”

Now it was his turn to look away and take deep, cleansing breaths.

“J.P., please,” she said.

He stood up slowly, like a man who had been hardened by thirty years of life in a single day. Then he faced her, and dropped the black accounting ledger in her lap.

“Peevey has the satellite photos,” he said. “Not sure what good they’ll do him, but you never know. Without the other piece of the puzzle I never would have figured it out.”

She gazed up at him, lines of pain running deep from her nose to her hairline. “What are you going to do?” she asked.

“I’m going to bed,” he said. “I traveled fifteen hundred miles and helped kill a man today. I don’t know about you, but that sort of thing wears me out.”

“I love you, John Paul.”

He turned his back and walked up the stairs to the porch.

## Epilogue

---

Robert opened the kitchen fridge hoping to find a refreshing pitcher of iced tea. Instead, he found that his beverage options included something called WhoopAss Energy Drink and a newfangled Coke with cherries, limes, and a hint of espresso mixed in. He went to the sink and poured himself a glass of Charlotte tap water.

Katie and Melissa were in the sitting room laughing at something on television, while Michael listened to his iPod and read a Christopher Moore novel.

“What’s so funny?” Robert said.

Melissa motioned for him to come. “You’ve got to see this for yourself,” she said.

He walked into the sitting room and was shocked to find the girls watching the stockcar race.

“What the heck are you doing?”

“You have to hear this,” Melissa said. “Junior just won.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” Katie signed. “And he’s in rare form.”

On the screen, legendary stockcar announcer Dirk Manley was on pit road thrusting a microphone toward the smiling freckled face of Junior Senior, Jr., winner of the Virginia 500.

*"Junior—"*

*"Whooooooo!"*

*"Junior," Dirk tried again. "Junior, it seemed like a strange day out there for you, but you got the car you needed at the right time and made the best of it. How was it out there?"*

*"Yeah, I didn't know what we had out there most of the day," Junior said. "We was wobblin' around like a bus station drunk for a while. But T-Bone and the boys kept working on the Jack Daniel's Chevrolet all day, and we got it right at the right time."*

Dirk appeared to stumble off camera, and a fountain of beer and sour-mash whiskey showered down on Junior's red head.

*"Junior—"*

*"Oh hell, that burns!"*

*"Junior, what about the late caution? Some of the guys who made green-flag stops were left hanging. Was staying out part of your plan, or did you get lucky?"*

*"Nah, we'd planned on staying out as long as we could. I know what those guys who got caught coming in early feel like, though. This sport'll make a midget out of you in a heartbeat."*

"Wow, bus station drunks and midgets: maybe he'll make a deaf joke before it's over," Katie signed.

"Oh no, honey," Melissa said. "That would be insensitive."

*"So Junior—" Dirk tried again, but to no avail. Junior's crew appeared to have shoved him out of the way, but not before Junior confiscated Dirk's microphone.*

Soaked with whiskey and beer, Junior Senior, Jr., looked directly into the camera, held the stockcar microphone like a war correspondent reporting from the front lines, and said, *"I want to thank all our fans out there for*

*supporting us, not just the Jack Daniel's number 7 team, but all of STOCKCAR. I know we've had a whirlpool week . . ."*

"Whirlpool?" Katie signed.

"Let it go," Robert said.

Junior grinned at the camera and continued. *"It's not ever' week that the President of the United States holds a press conference to talk about one of our racetracks, specially one that ain't even open yet. And it ain't often we have all of Congress calling for investigations into our business. But those of you who've been with us know us, and know that nobody in STOCKCAR had nothing to do with taking no land from nobody."*

"Was that a quintuple negative, or did I miss a few?"

"Katie, just watch, please."

*"Anywho, ever'thing worked out. Them people's getting their land back and the whole damn thing's on hold until some committees have a look at it. I'm just glad we don't have committees running our race team, or we'd be in a bigger mess than them folks in Mississippi."*

*"Anywho, I know you feel as bad as I do for Jett Jordan and Roger English, and the rest of the hardworking folks in our sport who put their own money into that deal only to have a bunch of bandits take 'em. That ain't right, no matter who you pull for on Sundays. So I just want you all to know that I'll be thinking about everybody who got stuck in that deal. It just ain't right, and I'm thinking about 'em."*

*"God bless ya'll. God bless STOCKCAR, and God bless America."*

"Well, there you have it," Katie signed.

Before the network broke for commercial, Robert's phone rang. He looked at the number and laughed.

"Who is it?" Melissa asked.

“Miles Hinton.”

“Are you going to answer it?”

Robert hit the mute button on the phone and plopped onto the couch between his wife and daughter. “Not today,” he said.



## About the Author

**STEVE EUBANKS** is a recovering golf professional and award-winning sports writer. He is the editor-at-large of *Sports Unlimited* magazine, and his work has also appeared in *Sports Illustrated*, *Golf Digest*, *Golf for Women*, and *Racing Fan* magazines. He is the author of a previous "Redball" Redding novel, *Hot Laps*, as well as twenty-five books on sports, business, and combinations thereof. Steve lives in Peachtree City, Georgia, with his wife and family.

Visit [www.AuthorTracker.com](http://www.AuthorTracker.com) for exclusive information on your favorite HarperCollins author.

## Books by Steve Eubanks

DOWNFORCE  
HOT LAPS

# Copyright

This book is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogue are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

DOWNFORCE. Copyright © 2007 by Steve Eubanks. All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins e-books.

Adobe Acrobat eBook Reader July 2007  
ISBN 978-0-06-147169-8

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



## About the Publisher

### Australia

HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) Pty. Ltd.  
25 Ryde Road (PO Box 321)  
Pymble, NSW 2073, Australia  
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.com.au>

### Canada

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.  
55 Avenue Road, Suite 2900  
Toronto, ON, M5R, 3L2, Canada  
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.ca>

### New Zealand

HarperCollinsPublishers (New Zealand) Limited  
P.O. Box 1  
Auckland, New Zealand  
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.co.nz>

### United Kingdom

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.  
77-85 Fulham Palace Road  
London, W6 8JB, UK  
<http://www.uk.harpercollinsebooks.com>

### United States

HarperCollins Publishers Inc.  
10 East 53rd Street  
New York, NY 10022  
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.com>