University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Dissertations & Theses, Department of English | English, Department of

3-1-2010

Razorback

Frank Wheeler
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, frankewheeler@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishdiss

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Wheeler, Frank, "Razorback" (2010). *Dissertations & Theses, Department of English.* Paper 32.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishdiss/32

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations & Theses, Department of English by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

RAZORBACK

by

Frank Wheeler Jr.

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Jonis Agee

Lincoln, Nebraska

March, 2010

RAZORBACK

Frank Wheeler Jr., MA

University of Nebraska, 2010

Adviser: Jonis Agee

This thesis contains the first five chapters of the novel titled RAZORBACK, written by Frank Wheeler Jr. It is a crime drama, set in the Arkansas Ozark Mountains. The main character, Conrad, is a reclusive woodworker living in the back woods. His estranged wife, Jennifer, pays him a visit after five years with little contact between them, and asks him to kill someone for her. She claims it is a matter of personal safety; the man she has been seeing socially has become violent and threatening. After some consideration, Conrad agrees. He has his own agenda, however, and he finds out that Jennifer does as well. The title comes from the wild hogs that live in the region and are hunted by the locals. The man the main character intends to murder must be killed in the same manner. That is to say that he cannot be chased down; he must be lured with bait to the spot where the hunter waits.

Table of Contents

Chapter One	1
Chapter Two	25
Chapter Three	45
Chapter Four	60
Chapter Five	75

Chapter One

Sunday, the 22nd

(Late Afternoon)

"Okay, well, you know we didn't need the cuffs cause you're not under arrest, but we do need your fingerprints. Just gotta make sure it all matches up. Understand?" Thomas asks.

Conrad nods. Thomas walks him through the process, from inkpad to paper. He's glad that Thomas is here. They've been friends for about five years now. Thomas is a good deal older, almost thirty years. He's in his late fifties, balding, has a full gray beard and an extra hundred pounds around his belly. The beard is against regulation, but everybody in the county looks the other way because it's Thomas, the first and only genuine war hero Madison County, Arkansas, has had since the Second World War. They made him sheriff twenty-two years ago, and Thomas, agreeable as he is, has stayed in favor ever since.

"And one more thing. I hate to do this, Con," Thomas says, "but I have to keep you in the holding cell until tomorrow. Bradley, insists on it."

"Shit," Conrad says, "Okay." He expected this.

"It's just a formality. Bradley wants to have a good look before we say anything, and bein' County Attorney, that's his right. So we gotta hold you, but you ain't bein' charged with anything. So just sit tight, buddy, and don't worry," Thomas says, slapping Conrad on the back.

Thomas walks Conrad into the holding cell, and they stand quietly for a moment. This is one of the drunk tanks. It's part of the original building, from when the Sherriff's station and courthouse were together in one, and before the new wing was built on, tripling the number of holding cells. This out-of-the-way cell was used, almost exclusively, for one of Huntsville's city Councilmen who found himself intoxicated and disturbing the peace every month or so. Putting the Councilman in with the smelly and dirty drunks would be unconscionable. Conrad has neither the money nor position to deserve this treatment. His spot on the Sheriff's bowling team, however, warrants private internment. The walls are twelve by fifteen, white painted cinderblock. Names and words have been whitewashed over. The bars are painted pea green and run the entire front of the cell. The floor is smooth concrete with a drain in the center. Conrad goes over to the bunk beds, sits on the bottom one and looks up at Thomas.

"I can get ya some magazines or somethin', if you want. Got this month's issue a Field and Stream. Jerry's got a couple a dirty paperbacks in the bottom drawer of his desk he don't want me to know about. He won't mind if ya borrow 'em," Thomas says.

"If you got a Fayetteville newspaper, that'd be fine," Conrad says.

"You bet, buddy," Thomas says and turns to leave. He pauses by the cell door, turns back to look at Conrad. "Bradley's gonna be here soon to take your statement. If you wanna get washed up, change your clothes, we can arrange it soon's Bill or Jerry get back. And one more thing. I gotta close the door to the cell. Just for now. Just while we're expecting him. And I don't have to lock it neither, he won't know the difference. And I really would recommend changing them clothes. I can radio Jerry to bring you some on his way in."

"Thanks," Conrad says. He watches Thomas slide the cell door shut. He gets up from the bunk as Thomas walks back into the station's filing room. Conrad goes to the mirror above the sink on the cell wall.

Jennifer's blood is on his shirt. He unbuttons the shirt and takes it off. The blood has soaked through to his white T-shirt. There really is a lot.

That would look bad during his statement, wearing his wife's fresh blood.

Thursday, the 19th

(League night)

"C'mon, Con, you can pick that up no problem," Jerry yelled from the chair beside Thomas at the score board. It was an odd one. Two pins, one in the middle and one at the far left. There was no way he could get enough curve to take both with the ball directly. But if he hit the front pin just enough on the right side, there was a chance it would be knocked into the other one on its way back. Conrad raised his blue and green six pound ball and shifted his weight onto his back leg. He stepped forward two steps and released the ball.

"Look at that," Thomas said from his seat by the scoreboard after the gentle thud on the wooden lane planks. The ball clipped the right side of the front pin and sent it spinning out to the left, knocking into the back pin. The pin teetered and rolled on its edge for two seconds, then fell. Conrad looked back at his team and grinned.

"Shit, yeah, buddy," Jerry yelled, standing up from his seat. Conrad walked back to his chair, next to Bobby, their newest teammate. They watched Thomas get up from

his chair and walk up to the ball return. Thomas had perhaps, the least amount of natural ability on the team. Not to say that he was a bad player, he wasn't, but the other members were more talented. Jerry was considered to be the best on the team, in the league, and the whole of Madison County, in truth. He could strike as many as seven or eight times in a game, and never fewer than five. Thomas could strike sometimes four times in a game, but he'd still put a ball in the gutter about once a game. Bobby never hit the gutter, could strike as often as Thomas, and picked up most of his spares. Conrad, they all said, was a little spooky to watch. Not over one game, or two, but over the years. He might only strike once or twice a game, but he'd never, in the time they'd known him, missed a spare. Every last frame he'd rolled with the team, he'd left not a single pin standing, one way or another. Not even Jerry could claim that, with all his strikes and high scores.

"You gonna have to tell me how to do that one a these days," Bobby said. Conrad sipped his beer and nodded at his teammate. Bobby, or Fat Bobby as he was sometimes known, was one of perhaps seven or even eight unmarried black men in Madison County. He arrived a few years ago after the levees gave in New Orleans. He was plump around the waist, like Tom, and a few years shy of forty. He shaved his head and wore a goatee for the kick he got out of scaring a few of the white customers at his diner. Sometimes, when the servers were busy, he'd take the plates out to the tables and watch people jump a little when he walked up.

"You're gonna have to tell me how you got that brunette I saw you with at the bar last week," Conrad said. Bobby laughed.

“She was more trouble than she’s worth, though,” Boby said. “I reckon I best leave that alone, for now, Con. No sense talkin’ bout somethin’ ain’t gonna happen.”

They watched Thomas roll his first turn of the frame. He got all the pins but one.

“Eat it up, Tom,” Jerry yelled after sipping from his beer.

Thomas gave him the finger and walked back to the ball return.

“Y’all see that? What kinda thing is that for a public servant to do.”

“You’re one to talk, Jer,” Bobby said, “after that shit you was yellin’ up to that other team last week.”

“Yeah, but I ain’t Sherriff.”

“Deputies ain’t public servants?” Conrad asked.

Jerry looked at him cross eyed and lit a cigarette. “Deputies don’t gotta get elected, Con. Long as I keep boss-man up there happy, I got a paycheck. And ‘sides, he can’t fire me, cause I’d quit the team.” In the decade Conrad had known Jerry, in Guards, then Afghanistan five years back, all the while Jerry acted the same hillbilly-cuttin’-loose.

“Maybe I’ll just throw you in the drunk tank and let you out to bowl on Thursday nights, Jer,” Thomas said, picking up his ball from the return.

“If you was to do that, Tom, my Grandma’d never let you have any a her farm-liquor no more,” he said.

“Damn, then what’d I strip the paint on my house with this summer?” Thomas chuckled.

The other three laughed as he got into a position to hit the last pin. He let the ball go and watched it connect squarely with the pin and send it flipping into the back.

"You up, Bobby-boy," Jerry said. "Betcha five bucks ya don't strike."

Bobby jumped out of his chair and charged at Jerry as though he were going to tackle him. Jerry spit his beer out his mouth and nose and fell back across the two seats. Bobby burst into laughter and slapped his knees, and Conrad joined in. Jerry shook his head and sat back up, wiping beer off his face and neck. Thomas held his palm out and Bobby slapped it on his way up to the ball return.

"Goddamn, boy, you looked just like one a them wanted posters up in the station house," Jerry said. Conrad snorted from laughter while lighting a cigarette.

"And you look like Jeffery Dahmer had a kid with a damn Nawlins nutria," Bobby said, picking up his ball from the return.

"What the hell's a nutria?" Jerry asked Conrad.

"A big-ass rat."

"They been killin' em off like a pestilence in New Orleans," Thomas said. "Ever since they come up from South America they just started to take over."

"Now hold on just a minute," Jerry said. Bobby went ahead and rolled his first turn. They watched the ball take all but the far right back pin.

"You can call me a big-ass rat," Jerry continued, "and you can call me a freak-ass-cannibal. But what makes you think you can call me South American?"

"Shut up, Jer," Thomas said. "You know with that beer spilled on you like that you look like you pissed yourself." He got up from his seat and moved over beside Conrad.

"I don't need your shit, Tom, I ain't on the clock, and you can't tell me what to do."

"Keep it up smart guy, see what happens, see if I don't make you work two double shifts this week, and make you hose down every drunk or vagrant we get while you're on duty."

"You don't scare me none, Tom, you love me too much to ever do that."

"I love you like I love the corn on my big toe. I just give up fightin' and accepted it."

"Like I said, Tom, like I said."

Bobby knocked down the last pin on his second roll. He turned around and pointed to Jerry.

"How ya like that?"

"Oh, the bet was for a strike, not no spare."

"What bet? If'n you made a bet, it wasn't with me. You musta been talkin' just to hear yourself talk. Flappin' ya gums like always."

"Shut up, all a y'all," Jerry said. "I'm a show you how it's done." He got up from his chair and sauntered up to the ball return. Bobby sat in Jerry's chair and took up the scoring pencil.

"How's the women situation?" Thomas asked, without looking at Conrad.

"Huh? Same as always, I guess. Don't have the time. Or the money."

"I think you're lyin' on both accounts. I know how much they sell that furniture for at Andy's store, down in Fayetteville. And I know woodworkin' don't take up all a your time."

"That's all markup you saw in the store, Tom. I don't get paid much at all per piece. And by the way, the only reason I make what I do is cause I spend all my time workin' on it."

"I'm just concerned is all, Con. I mean, I heard somethin' this afternoon that I didn't know whether or not to believe. Got me worried. So I figured I'd ask you how's it been."

"More rumors, huh? That's what happens when you live out in the woods, right? People see you just enough to spark the imagination."

They both looked up at the sound of Jerry striking. He jumped up and spun around, shaking his arms and hands out like a preacher feeling the Holy Spirit.

"Yessuh, the power's with me!" he yelled to everyone in the alley.

"Well, if you don't want me to ask, I won't," Thomas said to Conrad.

"Ask what? How much I ain't been gettin' laid?"

Bobby looked over at Conrad, then back to the score board.

"I heard that, Con," Jerry said. "You know how I got this cousin up in Hindsville, right? She just loves pitiful bastards like you. I could hook ya up if you want."

"Why, Jerry, I wouldn't wanna cut in on your action," Conrad said. The others laughed.

"Nonsense, compadre, anything for a buddy!"

"Well as long as you're sure," he said, shaking his head, laughing, getting up for his roll.

Friday, the 20th

(Morning)

"Oh you fucker," Conrad whispered to no one. He kneeled in the dirt in the garden behind the cabin. The morning was just light enough to show the damage. Three of the tomato plants were wrecked. No saving them. Another two had been pulled over, but they could be put right. He knew it was the hogs again. Feral hogs. He'd already shot one this summer and guessed there were at least two more that lived nearby. Johnny sat on the back porch steps, watching him. Conrad ignored him as best he could.

He looked up at the tree line about thirty feet back from the garden. Something had moved. It was still there. That damn hog was maybe ten feet back into the woods. It was waiting for him to leave so it could finish off the tomatoes. He got up slowly and walked to the back door. He didn't look back at the squat, long shadow back in the trees. Nor did he look down at Johnny as he passed him on the steps.

Conrad retrieved his father's .30-06 rifle from the closet in the bedroom and walked to the back door again. He got on his knees on the old, bubbled linoleum, resting the rifle across his thighs, and peered into the backyard through the screen. The hog was still there, just waiting. He could hit it from here, no problem, but if he opened the screen door, it would bolt farther back into the woods. And sliding the screen up would squeak even louder.

He went to the front of the cabin and walked out onto the screened-in porch. He slung the rifle on his shoulder and climbed up the porch pillar and onto the roof. He took

his time on the mossy swelled-wood shingles, came to rest at the peak of the roof and moved the rifle beside him. Checked the chamber, the safety. Now he just had to wait for the hog to come out of the woods.

There might be other hogs close by. They often traveled together, the smaller females following the large males. He looked around the property briefly. The cabin sat on a hillside, close to the top. The several acres of Ozark hill country he owned rested exactly on the division between the upper and lower Boston Mountains. Across from the cabin was another foothill with a large limestone rock face at the top. The trees, ever encroaching the yard, were scraggly oaks, pungent pecans with bright green swollen lichens covering the trunks, tall, fat lindens, and cedar undergrowth he could never seem to get rid of. The drive in front of the house, connected to a county road that stretched out from Huntsville, twenty miles away. A hundred feet from the west side of the cabin, and about twenty feet lower in elevation, was the creek. The creek wound between the hills down to a small lake back behind the foothill the cabin sat on. Trees obscured even the drive a hundred yards back. Conrad spotted no more hogs and looked back to the forest edge in his back yard.

"Come on you little shit. Don't them tomatoes look good? And the carrots are mighty sweet this year. Hell, even the turnips are sweet this year," he whispered to himself. "Come on Porky. I got time. I got time."

Conrad wished he'd grabbed more bullets. He kept one round chambered in case he had to scare off any animals at night, but it wasn't his habit to bring more. Ever since he was seventeen, he'd only ever brought one bullet for the rifle on hunting trips. He'd caught hell from his dad the first time he tried it. Then he'd brought down a ten-point

buck and Dad had nothing to say after that. This was different. He could only vaguely make out the shape through the lower tree branches. The sun would be over the trees, soon. If the little shit didn't come out soon, he'd have to take the shot like this. And it wasn't a good shot.

Johnny was the one that had showed him how to hold the rifle. How to breathe for the shot. Conrad wiped sweat off his forehead with his sleeve. He felt the shingles shift a little to his left side from Johnny's weight as he crouched on the roof. His stomach twisted a little. He didn't have the patience for his brother right now.

Porky started coming out of the woods. Conrad slowed his breathing. He was big. Maybe two hundred and fifty pounds. Definitely male. A few white spots on the thick, coarse black hair that rose to a ridge on his back. Conrad looked through the scope on the rifle.

The hog trotted over to the garden, right for the tomatoes. Conrad took his shooting breath, then exhaled. There was a noise of gravel under tires a little way up the road. Porky looked up, then started trotting back to the woods. Conrad fired.

"Jesus Christ, Con, I thought I was back in fuckin' Nam!" Thomas yelled as he got out of the Sheriff's car. "You know how loud that damn thing is out here? And I had the windows down, too."

Conrad was dragging the dead hog by its thick hind legs around the house and toward the creek.

"I swear, Tommy," he yelled, "these damn razorbacks. Fuckers just won't leave my garden alone. Hold up a minute, I better set him to drain. Beer's in the fridge. I'll be right there."

"Meet me down at the boat, alright?" Thomas said, heading into the house to get the beer. Conrad tied the hog's back feet tightly, and used the double-pulley he had set up a fat branch on the large linden tree, about a hundred feet from the house, and right by the creek. He hoisted the carcass up about three feet off the ground and slid a metal washtub under it. He took a carving knife he'd grabbed from the kitchen and quickly gave the neck a wide and clean cut, right under the jaw. The blood spilled out quietly, in large volume for the first few seconds, then tapered off to a thin stream, then at last, a slow trickle. The initial splash in the bottom of the washtub spit up droplets that got in Conrad's eye. He rubbed at it.

Before he left, Conrad looked at the hole in the hog's side. It was close enough to the heart. Must have been quick.

"You ever think about just puttin' a fence round that garden?" Thomas asked. Conrad opened a beer and leaned back against the side of the small, flat-bottom, aluminum boat. Thomas leaned against the other side. He came out to Conrad's cabin a lot in the warm months. Cold months, too.

"I've thought about it. You know Cheryl Ann's kids like playin' hide and seek in it. If it weren't for that, I'd fence it in," Conrad said.

"How's she doin', anyhow?" Thomas asked. "Wasn't she just up here?"

"A couple weeks ago. She's the same. Still married to that fuck-head. But what the hell else are little sisters for if not to drive you bat-shit-crazy," Conrad said. He took a swig of beer, then lit a cigarette. Thomas took one when he offered.

"I took a peek in your workshop. Hope you don't mind. That an armoire?" Thomas asked. Conrad nodded and lit Thomas' cigarette.

"Just gotta do a little more sanding. Then it's ready to stain," Conrad said. They'd met five years ago, when Conrad had first moved out of Fayetteville and into the Arkansas hills. Thomas was one of his first customers. He'd made a dining room table for Thomas and Susan's twentieth wedding anniversary, gave them a good deal, too. They'd been friendly ever since. Thomas offered him a spot on his bowling team, as one of their members was moving up to St. Louis. Conrad had always enjoyed bowling. They'd quickly realized that they had much in common. They could talk both politics and religion, and that was rare in this county. Politically, both were confirmed cynics. And as far as religion, Thomas and Conrad were pretty much Deists, which is to say they believed in God, but that they didn't think He really gave a shit. Vietnam had convinced Thomas of that, Conrad had other reasons.

"Jesus, Con, is that blood on your shirt?" Thomas asked. Conrad looked down. There were a few small spots.

"Must a splashed me. If anybody asks, I'll say you took to me with that billy club," he said.

"Yup, and I'll say that's what happens when you have a delinquent payoff."

They laughed for a minute. Thomas scratched his head. Flicked his cigarette into the small, lilly-padded lake.

"I got a ashtray on board, Tom," Conrad said.

"Shut up. Look. I wanna ask you somethin', Con, okay? And don't get weird or nothin' like ya do ever' now and then."

"I won't get weird. Promise."

"Yup. Okay. Um, are you married, Con?" Thomas asked.

Conrad was quiet for a minute. He looked over at the mossy rocks by the shore.

"Okay. Yeah. I am. She call you?" he asked.

Thomas reached into Conrad's shirt for the cigarette pack. This one he lit himself.

"She come to town yesterday. Early evening. Sally at the post office talked to her. She asked how to get to your address. Said she was your wife. Sally gave her directions. Either she didn't find the place or she didn't try, cause as of this morning she's stayin' at Shawnie's motel out on 45. I saw her car parked outside the room, and she was in the diner for breakfast at five-thirty."

Conrad looked down at his beer. Right inside at the little fizz on the surface.

"Okay, Con, how come you never told? How come you never, in five years, said you was married?" Thomas asked. "Why'd ya never mention it once? How many times we been drunk together, man? Or baked on reefer, even? How do you not let that shit slip once in all the games we rolled?"

"Tom, why do you think I moved out here? Shit," Conrad drank the rest of the beer. He moved up to the seat in the boat, grabbed the paddle.

"What're you doin'?" Thomas asked.

"Gonna have a visitor. Better clean up."

Conrad trudged back to the cabin. Thomas said he'd check in on him and see how things went. Conrad said not to bother with it. He knew how things were going to go.

First, Conrad cleaned the ashtrays in the cabin. He didn't know if Jennifer still smoked, but either way, it had to be done. Then there was the mud on the floor in the living room. He'd tracked it in last week when he was in a hurry to clean a cut on his left hand. The tomato plants, and the peppers near them, had to be set right, or he'd forget and never get it done. There was lipstick on the mirror in the bathroom that still had to be cleaned. Carrie and Michelle, his nieces, had used their mom's makeup to draw him a goodbye picture. Cheryl Ann felt bad about leaving it for Conrad to clean. He'd waited a couple of days and decided he liked it there, reminding him of the girls.

After cleaning the cabin, Conrad went into the garage, his converted workroom, and sanded the armoire. They'd wanted walnut. That would cost plenty. He figured he'd work at it an hour before being interrupted by Jennifer's arrival. He focused on the sanding and used the lightest grade he could find for this final step. He had to replace the paper frequently. He liked the smell of the wood dust. Walnut was almost as nice as Cherry.

He tried not to think about the papers Jennifer would have for him to sign.

Conrad finished sanding the armoire at eleven in the morning. It had taken two hours. He set the sander back on the counter by the band saw, then pounded his fist quickly as he realized what he'd forgotten. Madeline's chicken coop.

His tenant, if she could be called that, was Madeline McDonald, a seventy-eight year old woman that had lived on this property since 1950, when his Great Uncle Jacob still lived out here. To Uncle Jacob, she'd been a lifelong mistress. To Conrad, she was a squatter who only bothered him for a minor repair every month or so. He'd promised her he'd have the coop behind her shack fixed by this afternoon.

Madeline's shack, where she'd lived for fifty-eight years, was on the northeastern corner of the property, down in the hollow, on the creek about a hundred yards from where it flowed into the lake. As Conrad walked down the path to the hollow, Johnny walked up beside him.

"Jenny comin' up here, then?" his brother asked.

"That's the rumour."

"Gonna have the witch put a cuss on her?"

"Best quit botherin' me or I'll have her put one on you."

"Easy, Bro, I's just askin'. You know I never seen Jenny. I think I might like seein' what your type is."

"My type is mean," Conrad said, glancing over. "You might know 'bout that, huh?"

"Bout that type, I know plenty."

He reached the shack, which was about half the size of his converted garage. The roof was corrugated tin sheeting that he'd replaced from the rusted metal last summer. The walls were rough-sawn logs that had been fitted together in 1950. The mortar

between the logs had long since crumbled, and he'd replaced it with concrete last fall. He knocked on the door and felt a paint bubble crack under his knuckle. New project.

"I hain't done yet," Madeline croaked from inside. "Give it a minute."

"I'm just gonna start on your coop-fence, Maddie."

"Conrad," she yelled through the door, "Hain't the fence, hit's the door at the top."

"I'll take a look, then."

Madeline was right. The chicken wire that fenced in the coop was just fine; it was the framed-wire door that was the problem. The board which made the top of the door had come loose from the side board. It needed another two-by-two to keep it from happening in the future. Conrad brought his tool belt, so he could at least nail the top board in place.

"See what I mean?" Madeline said from behind him. "While it's like that, them weasles and polecats and Lord knows what else can get in there."

"I can sturdy it today, but I'll need to cut a board to fix it for good. I can take the measurements now."

"Awful sweet a ya," she said, and came around into his view, offering a glass of sassafras tea. Thirty years ago, Uncle Jacob had run a cable out to her shack so she could have a refrigerator, a heater, and electric lights. He'd offered to build her a modern house, but she wouldn't even consider it. Those stacked logs were her home.

Conrad sipped his tea and looked for the right size nails in the pouch on his belt.

"That boy been payin' you visits?" she asked.

"You mean Johnny?"

"The vera one. You look like somethin' done rattled ya."

"Yeah, well, he don't know when to shut up. That ain't what rattled me, though."

"You don't say. I's wonderin' when she'd get 'round to it."

Conrad looked over at her. She stood in the shade of a pecan tree a few feet back and smiled. "It's that obvious, huh?"

"Honey, only thing bothers men that much is women. And th'other way 'round, too."

Once he had the door off the hinges and on the ground, he began to nail the board back into place.

"Seen your young'n lately?" Conrad asked, looking up, changing the subject.

Madeline, short, wrinkled and a little hunched over, straightened up.

"Matta fact last night. Wanted me to watch him swim."

He'd first seen Johnny in the woods a month after moving from Fayetteville. He'd cut down a tree branch and was chaining it to his mini-tractor to pull it back to his workshop. He was just standing there, looking right at him from twenty yards farther back in the woods. It shouldn't have surprised him. Madeline had a reputation as a medium.

Her only child died at age five. Drowned in the lake. That was why she never wanted to move away, she said. As long as he still talked to her from the lake, she'd be close by. She'd seen it on him right away. Of course she'd known about Johnny's death already, but she'd seen it, his recurrence, on Conrad.

Madeline said that was the way it was with these woods. She said it holds folks for long after they should be gone.

Before he left her shack, Madeline insisted on giving him something. She disappeared inside and Conrad swatted something buzzing at the back of his neck. She came back out, holding a small, smooth river stone on a leather string necklace. She moved to put it over his head.

"What's this for?"

"For ya troubles. Been blessed by Jesus Christ Hisself. He told me you's gonna need it."

"The necklace?"

"You's gonna need His blessin', Conrad."

"When did He tell you this, if'n you don't mind my askin'."

"Just now He did. He gives me His blessin's to give out to folks. Not a day goes by you shouldn't thank Jesus, Conrad, that you a Christian, and your soul's saved. Jesus Hisself blessed this stone, and my boy handed it to me from the mouth a the creek."

"Okay," he said, letting her put the necklace over his head. "Thanks. I'll keep it safe."

"No, Honey, it'll keep you safe. The Lamb knows, Conrad, which is wheat and which is chaff. 'Member that, now, and be on ya way."

Back at the cabin, he got a drink of water and looked out the kitchen window. It wasn't yet one o'clock. If she came in the evening, he'd have plenty of time.

He decided on the hog. He changed his clothes and went down to the creek. Porky was drained out. The blood he would mix with last winter's fireplace ashes, and spread out on the garden soil after the first frost. Conrad got another tub for guts.

Sunday, the 22nd

(Late Afternoon)

"How's your mother?" Conrad asks Bill. He is in the shower in the Sheriff's station locker room. Bill is standing guard by the entry to the showers. Has his hand on his pistol grip.

"Just clean yourself up," Bill says, "Don't need to talk to me."

"I'm not under arrest, Bill. It's okay."

"I'd appreciate it, sir, if you'd respect professional distance while you're in custody," Bill says. Conrad laughs to himself.

"Does professional distance include you watchin' me lather my balls?" he asks.

Bill turns red and shuts his eyes.

"Hey, Bill, didn't you get married? I heard that somewhere."

"Last summer. We got married last summer."

"How old is your son, now?"

"Almost a year."

Conrad chuckles to himself, leans his head against the shower tile.

"You nearly done in there?" Bill asks.

"Gimme another minute, the water's nice."

"You have one minute. Tom said the County Attorney's on his way. You need to get dressed," Bill says. He turns back to give Conrad the hurry-it-up-look.

The water reminds him of Jennifer. She liked extremely hot showers, baths, Jacuzzis. She'd go limp and just soak forever. Let all the stress she carried in her shoulders melt away. It was the only time she'd let her guard down.

Conrad dries off, puts on the change of clothes, and walks back to his cell, escorted by Bill. He stands in front of the mirror and begins to comb his wet hair. It looks black when it's wet. Normally it's a medium brown. His face is flushed from the hot shower. As much time as I spend in the sun, Conrad thinks, preparing to shave, you'd think I wouldn't be so pale. But then, he had worn a beard until a couple days ago.

"Okay, Con," Thomas says from outside the cell. "I got a cable long enough so's we can bring the television in here from the break room. Nothin' fancy, just the basic channels. We can set it up after Bradley leaves."

"Thanks," Conrad says as he taps the plastic razor on the sink. He shaves and thinks about Jennifer again. He used to salivate over watching her shave her legs.

"I wish you'd reconsider, Con," Thomas says.

"'Bout what?" Conrad asks.

"This lawyer business. I just wish you'd have a lawyer present, that's all. Just to make sure he don't pull any shit," Thomas says.

"I do appreciate your concern, Tom. We both know I have nothing to worry about. Why would I need a lawyer? I'm not even under arrest."

Friday, the 20th

(Late Afternoon)

Jennifer. Jesus Christ. He'd been thinking about her while he skinned and gutted the hog. She'd moved to Fayetteville with her family when she was a teenager. They'd met in their sophomore year of high school. She was on the girls' basketball team. The night they played Fayetteville East, Conrad saw her in her tight yellow shorts, and he saw her flush bright red when she was called on a foul. He saw her sit on the bench, close her eyes and rub her temples. He'd shifted in his seat.

He was not forward with girls in high school. He only grudgingly asked classmates to movies, or to dances. Usually they were surprised, he was so quiet most of the time. Conrad was always nervous and fidgety when he asked. The morning after the girls' team beat East Fayetteville by sixteen points, he forgot all about being nervous. He asked her if she wanted to go out to the lake after classes. He said there was going to be a little get-together, and he'd give her a ride if she wanted, the place was kind of hard to find. Jennifer was taken aback. She looked at him for a minute, said okay and smiled. After she walked away, Conrad's knees had almost buckled. He'd had to steady himself against the lockers in the hallway.

She'd laughed at him when she found out they were the only ones at the lake. She hadn't been worried at all. They drank beer he'd stolen from his parents, and smoked cigarettes she'd stolen from hers. They waded in the water, threw horseshoes in the pit, chased ducks away from the shore. She'd dared Conrad to pull a snapping turtle out of the water. He did it, then jumped and ran when the thing nipped at him. After it had

gotten dark, she made him take her back. But she'd laughed, good Christ, she'd laughed. He'd never done that before, made a girl laugh like that. Maybe she was just being nice about it, but even so, he thought it meant something.

Conrad looked up from the hog and Jennifer was standing ten feet away.

"Connie?" she said. She was five foot eight, just an inch shorter than Conrad. She'd taken her shoes off to walk down the path to find him. He looked down at her bare feet with red-painted toenails, standing on the moss that grew in the shade. Her ankles were the thin, delicate things he'd remembered. She had her small, white leather purse on her arm. She wore khaki pants and a white blouse. Her hair was lighter than from five years ago. She was now blonde. And she'd straightened out the curls, too. The freckles were covered with makeup. She looked grown up, or like she was trying to be grown up. She also looked underfed. Her face was the thinnest he'd seen since a month after her mother's funeral when she was eighteen.

"I'm sorry, Tom said you were in the town, but I didn't know when you'd show up, so I thought I'd get some work done," Conrad said. "I'm almost finished. If you just wanna go on inside, I'll wash up and be there in a minute."

Conrad reached his hand out to her, but she frowned a little. He saw his hand was covered in hog's blood. "Oh, yeah. Right," he said. At that moment, he became self conscious of his beard. It was the longest she'd ever seen on him, probably, coming down to the base of his throat. Five years of growth with only a little trimming. He'd cut his hair by himself, just keeping it long enough to slick back with some wax, or sweat.

"That dinner?" Jennifer asked, looking at the carcass hanging from the tree branch. Conrad nodded. "Who's Tom, anyway?"

"Someone I know. He said you came in last night. Go on inside and get comfortable. Air conditioner works. I'll just take a minute and finish up here."

As Jennifer walked up the path to the cabin, Conrad watched her small, pale, bare feet. He watched the backs of her calves. Her purse bumping on her right hip. Her hair brushing her blouse collar. He wet his lips. She looked back at him as she got to the front porch. Conrad stuck the knife back in the hog, right between the ribs.

Chapter Two

Friday, the 20th

(Late Afternoon)

The traffic had been bad for Fayetteville when Jennifer headed out yesterday. She'd smoked two cigarettes waiting behind an old Buick with an antique motorist peering out between the wheel and dashboard. The cabin was almost forty-five miles northeast of town. Because of the way the roads wound through the hill country, and a few wrong turns, it took more than two hours to reach Madison County Rd. 1405. It was late enough when she reached the turn off, Jennifer had decided to head back to Huntsville and spend the night in a motel on the highway instead.

She'd laid her clothes out on the bed. She needed to plan everything. She brought a white blouse with her that looked a lot like one she used to have when she and Conrad had still been together. As she recalled, he'd loved her in that blouse. After eating dinner in her room, she tried to remember the smile. There was a kind of smile he loved. She knew it drove him crazy. She stood in front of the bathroom mirror and practiced it. She practiced how she would look interested when he told her about the carpentry he was doing. She ran through what she was going to say to him. Sometimes she did this for tough clients. As it got later, she paced across the room. She couldn't sit down and her hands shook a little. It wasn't that she needed a drink. She just wanted this to be over. She knew she could work this just right over the next three days. Before going to bed, she dug her wedding ring out of her purse and put it on.

The drive up to the cabin had taken Jennifer deep into a thickly wooded region of the Ozarks, tangled up in kudzu vines. A faded metal sign spattered with light red clay-dirt marked the turnoff from the county road onto the mile-long gravel driveway. She'd parked her small, gray Audi next to Conrad's rusted, blue pick-up, took her shoes off, got out and walked across the mud and gravel to the flagstone walk. She heard a sound from down by the creek on the west side of the cabin and decided to check there first. As she walked down the path to the creek, he turned to look at her. Hog's blood covered his arms and hands, the front of his gray T-shirt, all the way down to his green canvas shorts and leather sandals. His face and neck also had patches and smears of red. Their exchange had been curt and brief, and unnerved her a little.

Now, as Jennifer walked up the steps to the cabin, she wondered if she should have stayed in town another day. No, she thought, that wouldn't work. It had to be today. The stairs creaked only a little. She remembered them in much worse condition when last she was out here. Christ, that had been forever ago, maybe ten years. The screening around the porch was new. That was nice. Conrad did love the night air. Jennifer opened the front door, and that was fixed, too. It didn't stick anymore. She'd had to fight with it to close it shut. The cabin was cool inside. She went straight for the kitchen. There was an empty glass on the counter, cloudy from mineral deposits. She opened the freezer and took a handful of ice, then poured water from the tap.

She was still a little shaken by the way he looked. Not a glare, or other expression, Conrad was usually pretty blank, but his overall appearance. She'd noticed he was very thin, it showed in his face, in his cheeks. The circles under his eyes were like from the first years of their marriage, when he'd worked fourteen hour days for his

uncle's construction business. Then there was the blood. Seeing Conrad covered in blood had made her anxious, like when she couldn't sleep the night before. She chided herself for it. Isn't that what you came out here for, she asked quietly.

Jennifer drank her glass of water and looked around for the ashtray. She didn't know if he still smoked in here. It was on the counter beside her. She fished though her purse for her cigarettes. She sat at the folding card table in the corner opposite the fifty-year old, white and chrome refrigerator. Jennifer smoked and waited for Conrad.

She'd sat up late last night, thinking of what to say. She'd said nothing in five years, and neither had he. It was all planned out when she left the city, but for some reason, it seemed different in the hills. She'd had breakfast as soon as the diner attached to the motel opened. She hadn't gotten an hour of sleep. The coffee was strong and bad, and made her stomach ache.

Jennifer crossed her legs, then uncrossed them. She tapped the end of her cigarette on the small, thick glass ashtray. She crossed her legs again and looked back at the front door to the cabin. Conrad had brought her up here when she was in college. At the time, it was one of the most pleasurable experiences she'd had. He took her away from the city so she could relax over her fall break. He cooked for the two of them. They'd gone for walks in the woods. He'd even taken her down to meet Madeline at her shack. She'd taken a liking to Madeline right away. The old woman read her palm and said that Christ had blessed her life, and she would always know love. She'd touched her face with her wrinkled hand and said a little prayer in a language Jennifer didn't understand. That day Conrad gave her a walking stick he'd carved with an angel at the

top that had taken him three days to finish. She knew he didn't care for religion, but she liked the pictures on cards and in church windows and the small statues people bought to put on their mantles. She used to like that kind of thing.

Jennifer heard a noise from the backyard. She got up from the card table in the kitchen and looked out the window. Conrad was in the garden, picking vegetables. She went out the back door, cigarette in hand. He looked up at her from behind a squash plant.

"There's string beans, tomatoes, bell peppers, zucchini, and squash. That sound alright?" he asked. "Corn ain't quite there yet."

"That's too much, Connie," she said.

"No. I'll just save what we don't eat tonight for my lunch tomorrow. You haven't eaten already, have you?" he asked, pausing to consider the possibility.

"Nope. I figured you'd feed me," she said, still on the back porch steps.

"And how. Do me a favor, here. Won't ya grab that little red basket I got in there on the kitchen counter. That's what I use for haulin' these inside," Conrad said.

Jennifer went back inside and looked for the basket. It was not on the counter. It was on top of the refrigerator. She brought it back out to him. She stood at the edge of the garden and extended her arm.

"Those peas look ready to burst outta the pod," Jennifer said. She looked around at his work. Besides those he already mentioned, she saw carrots and radishes. Potatoes and turnips. Greens of all kinds. Hot peppers, even. Not just the green ones, but also the long and thin red ones. What were they, Cayenne?

"Kick your shoes off again and come stand right over here. You can catch these peppers," Conrad said. Jennifer rolled her eyes and slipped out of her shoes. She walked into the garden. Conrad used grass clippings from the yard to smother the weeds. The ground she stood on was hot and dry. She noticed that he'd watered that morning around the plants. She stood beside him and he placed eight peppers in the basket.

"That's way too much, Connie," Jennifer said.

"I told you, I'll eat it tomorrow. I've always liked fresh vegetables."

Jennifer flicked her cigarette butt out into the yard. He looked at her, glanced over at the thin line of smoke coming up from the grass, but didn't say anything.

When Conrad had gathered up a small mountain of vegetables, they went back into the cabin. He set the vegetables on the counter. Jennifer looked up at him and gave the kind of smile she remembered he liked: simple, trusting, appreciating the moment.

He swallowed hard. "Gimme just a minute and I'll shower up."

"You don't have to on my account," Jennifer said. "You already washed in the creek, you don't smell bad or nothin'."

"I smell like the inside of a wild pig, Jennifer. I'll be done in just a few minutes," Conrad said, and left the kitchen. She watched him walk back into the hallway where the bathroom and bedrooms were. She heard the door shut and the faucet turn on.

"Okay then," Jennifer said to an empty kitchen, "I guess I'll just start washing vegetables."

Friday

(Evening)

"If you're gonna smoke while I cook, do it on the porch, please," Conrad said.

"What the hell does that matter?" Jennifer snapped before she could catch herself.

"I don't wanna taste Marlboro Lights in my pork steak," he said.

Jennifer brushed his shoulder as she left.

She sat on the back steps and talked to him through the screen door.

"Cheryl Ann was just up here, wasn't she?" she asked.

"She and the girls were, yeah."

"Jeremy don't come up here anymore?" she asked.

"Cause that fuck-head's afraida me for some reason or other," he said.

"Jesus, Connie, I can't imagine why!" Jennifer raised her voice in sarcasm. She flinched immediately after. Conrad could be delicate. She had to remember.

"Yeah, I know," he laughed. "But I already apologized for that. And he ain't got a scar or nothin'." Conrad was quiet for a moment, then said, "So I guess it was Cheryl Ann that told you 'bout that little episode."

"Yup," she said. "You know he hasn't cheated since."

"That she's found out," he said back.

"That she's found out, I know it," Jennifer said.

Briefly, Jennifer thought about the note she'd left by her phone. Bright red marker on a small yellow legal pad. By tomorrow morning, she wouldn't have a choice anymore. She crossed her legs, closed her eyes, and began rubbing her temples.

"So when's the last time you saw her?" Conrad asked.

"Um," Jennifer mumbled, opening her eyes. "Last week. She brings the girls over a lot since I put the pool in the back yard. Sometimes we have lunch together."

"Yeah, that's the only other time I see her. When I drive in to Fayetteville to make a delivery to the store," Conrad said.

"Oh, that's right," she said. "That's Andy's store, isn't it?" She knew it was Andy's store. She'd been inside several times.

"Yup. He just bought out the rest of it from his father. It's all his, now."

"That's gotta be weird, huh? Workin' for the guy that, you know, stole Emily from you and all," Jennifer said, exercising caution.

"Well, I don't work for him. Sometimes he says it feels more like he works for me. And anyway, that business with Emily's ancient history. They got four kids now," Conrad said. Jennifer crushed out her cigarette on the step, stood up and went back into the kitchen.

She leaned against the counter, near Conrad, who was standing at the stove, spatula and fork in hand. She had unbuttoned the top button of her blouse while he was in the shower. Then buttoned it back. Then unbuttoned two, and finally settled on one. When Conrad came out of the bathroom, she nearly yelped in surprise. He'd shaved his beard. Not trimmed, but shaved the whole thing off. Combed his hair, even.

"Oh, I was fixin' to tell you, Connie. Except I forgot when I saw you all spiffed up. Madeline came out to see you while you were in the shower."

"Did she, now?"

"She was going to tell you something, but she couldn't stay 'cause she had somethin' on her stove. Said she'd be back up in an hour or two. She seemed glad to see me, though. Ten years and she looks almost the same."

"That was the year after my Great Uncle Jacob died. I think she aged it all at once then."

"She still lives down in that shack?"

"Yeah. She's stubborn, that one."

"Do people still come out to see her like they used to?"

"No. Mostly, she goes into town. There's a used bookstore in Huntsville, run by some old hippies. When they heard about the real-genuine-witch back in the woods, they must a shit. They drive out and pick her up on Saturdays and have her do readin's in their shop. I guess she draws lots a folks. Hell, the mayor's wife, she loves her and wouldn't hardly miss a Saturday."

"No kiddin'?" she laughed.

"Honest. Least that's how Maddie tells it. They even tried to have a workshop on herbal medicine or some other thing. Bunch a new-age-hippie-types showed up from Fayetteville and other parts. And she goes and tells 'em the first thing to do in order to heal someone is to submit to the 'supreme authority of Jesus Christ.' They liketa had a riot in that store." They both laughed at that. "Kind a funny, how she's famous again."

Jennifer watched him flip the steaks with a metal spatula, then cover up the skillet again. She looked at his hands, they were cracked and calloused. Small abrasions and cuts from working outside. She thought briefly about how she used to love them.

"What do you mean, again?" she asked.

"I never told you?"

"Don't think so. I'd a remembered."

Conrad glanced up at her quickly. "Well, do you know what a power doctor is? Or was, I guess, there ain't any left now."

"Power doctor?"

"Healin' power. Like the televangelists do. Only they were supposed to be the real thing. Maddie was famous throughout the region for bein' able to stop folks from bleedin'."

"Just bleedin'?"

"Sure, them doctors could usually just do one thing. That was hers. She could stop your bleedin' just by talkin' to you. Did over a phone once. State Senator's kid had hemophilia or somethin', and got a pretty bad cut, so he had her sent for. They drove her to the nearest phone, in Huntsville. She didn't even need to see the child. That's what my Uncle said, anyhow. She lost it, though, when her boy drowned."

Jennifer thought about this for a moment. She watched Conrad shift on his feet. He glanced over at the doorway to the basement stairs. It was like he thought somebody was standing there.

"That almost done?" she asked. "I might like it rarer than you do."

"This'll be plenty tender. But these damn wild hogs you gotta cook enough to kill the, well, you don't wanna know, do you? That's why I'm keepin' it covered, for the moisture. Don't worry, it'll be plenty tender," Conrad said, glancing over at her. She gave him the smile again.

"Here, try it out," he said, handing her a small steak knife. He made a slit in the middle of the steak. "Put your finger in it. Don't be shy about it. If it burns, take it out."

Jennifer felt the steak. She had no idea what it was supposed to feel like.

"Is it ready?" she asked. Conrad put his finger next to hers.

"Perfect."

He took both steaks from the skillet and set them on respective plates. The vegetables had already been prepared.

"Go have a seat at the dining table," Conrad said.

The table had been made by his great uncle. It was handsome red oak, with a knot in the grain on the corner next to where she sat. With all the sections put back in the middle, it could seat upwards of twelve. She looked farther down the edge and saw the scratch along the beveled edge. That had happened when she'd come out here in college. She'd tripped getting up and dropped her water glass. The lip had caught the edge and cracked, but she'd made it worse by trying to catch it. She'd cut her hand and scratched the table both. She'd apologized, but he just took her into the bathroom and run the water faucet over her hand. He told her not to worry about the table a bit. She'd loved watching him clean the cut on her hand. Not the blood, but his face, his concentration on her. The scratch in the table was now almost unnoticeable. It looked like he'd worked in a lot of polish since then.

Conrad served the meal, and sat across the corner from her. He asked about her company. She started into their latest achievement. They were well on their way to being a respectable advertising firm. She only had four employees, but had just gotten an account with Little Johnny's Foods, the largest grocery chain in northwest Arkansas.

"You know the one, it's got the sign with the cartoon picture of the little boy with freckles and cowlick-hair and a lollypop in his mouth," Jennifer said.

"I know the one," he said.

"We beat out competition from Kansas City, St. Lois, and New Orleans, and not just 'cause they wanted a local firm," she said, beaming. Now she could afford to give her employees the upgrade to their benefit package she'd wanted to for years. Conrad thought that was noble of her. She agreed, and laughed at herself.

What exactly was he doing, she wanted to know. What kind of carpentry for Andy?

"Well, its called woodworking," Conrad said. "Mostly I make furniture. Tables. Chairs. Dressers. Cabinets sometimes. I got an armoire back there I just finished today that I've yet to stain. Andy has me handle mostly the made-to-order stuff. As I'm sure you're aware, there's a lot of new money coming into Fayetteville. The locals who got lucky wanna show their pride in the area, while the new folks movin' in from the bigger cities, well, they want something quaint and 'handmade by the hard working artisans of the Ozark region,' like Andy advertises in his store. Apparently I'm an artisan, now. How 'bout that?" Conrad said and chuckled.

"I wanna take a look at some of your work," Jennifer said. Actually, she'd seen quite a bit of it in Andy's store.

"Well, I got the armoire back in there. And a couple a bar stools. Other than that, just what we're sittin' on," Conrad said. Jennifer looked down at her chair. Then she pulled out the chair next to her to get a better look. They were thick, colonial style pieces, the wood dark- stained; she guessed it was walnut. Andy had said that Conrad

had a small walnut grove on his property around the cabin. The grain showed through the stain in parts like a miniature zebra stripe. The edges of the back were smoothed down and the frame for the seat had been beveled all around. The legs were round and tapered. She couldn't imagine how long it had taken to build.

"Oh my God, Connie, these are wonderful!" she said. Her office in downtown Fayetteville was two blocks from Andy's store. Some days, she'd find herself, on a lunch break, walking through the aisles, trying to guess if any of them were his. Sometimes she'd just ask Andy. Mostly he did custom orders, but usually there were a couple of Conrad's pieces on the sales floor. She would run her fingers over the polished surfaces, and when the wood was left unpolished, she tried to see if she could feel the grain with her eyes closed. She'd always noticed how expensive they were. Sometimes five, even six hundred dollars for a single chair. For a set of six, you'd have to pay two grand or more.

"Well, thanks for that compliment, Jen. I guess enough people like the work I do," Conrad said.

She thought he blushed a little. Jennifer remembered how he'd acted when they were kids. The present he'd given her on her seventeenth birthday he'd made himself. She'd taken him up to her room in her parents' house a good many times by then. He'd seen the mess of books and papers across her desk. So he'd made her a bookshelf small enough to sit on the edge of her desk. It was a simple flat and long construction that ran the length of one side. He'd etched her name in the side of it. Jennifer's first reaction had been to take it as an insult. Are you calling me a slob, she wanted to say. She'd hesitated and looked at the wood: dark and evenly stained cherry. Her name in the side.

It was pretty. She'd decided that she liked. Yes. She did like it. It was very sweet of him to go to all the trouble of making it. And it matched her desk perfectly. How wonderful. She thanked Conrad sincerely and told him she loved her present. He'd flushed bright red and turned his head away. He was so shy in that moment. She'd noticed that he was shy with other people a lot, but almost never with her. When he was shy about something with her, she wanted to grab him by the ears and kiss him. That was the moment, Jennifer remembered, when she'd decided that she would lose her virginity to Conrad. That was the exact moment, when he was blushing and turned away with a big grin on his face. She might have done it right then, had her parents and brother not been home.

The pork steak was good. Better than she'd expected. After they finished the meal, and there was a lull in the conversation, Conrad got up to clear the table. As he did this, Jennifer went to the refrigerator. She'd seen the vodka bottle in there earlier. She made drinks, just pouring it over ice into the clouded and spotty glasses.

"Have some," Jennifer said. She reclaimed her place leaning against the kitchen counter, near the sink, where Conrad was cleaning the plates. He took a sip from the glass she held up to his mouth. He coughed a little.

"Strong. Usually I have it with tomato juice," he said.

"That's a good way to ruin vodka," Jennifer said. She sipped from her glass. This wasn't her brand. It was cheaper domestic, but it would do.

Conrad was quiet. He seemed on edge. He would glance at her quickly and then look away. He'd kept scratching at the back of his neck every five minutes or so during

dinner. Jennifer knew this meant he was waiting for something. For her to say something, maybe. He shut off the tap in the sink.

Then came the knock on the back screen door as Conrad dried his hands on a dishtowel. Jennifer turned as Madeline walked through the doorway.

"I's a hopin' to catch y'all together," she said, grinning wide.

"You caught us, Maddie," he said. Jennifer offered her a drink.

"Don't mind if I do," she said, moving over to sit at the card table in the kitchen. Jennifer got another glass with ice, and poured her a drink. She handed it to her, then sat down on the opposite side while Conrad put the dishes away in the cabinets.

"Pull up a chair here, young'n," Madeline said to him. He complied.

"Did you get to see the girls when they were here?" Jennifer asked.

"Oh, surely. I do love them kids. Conrad brings 'em down ever' time they come. Had 'em makin' bead necklaces, like the kind I sell up in town. That Cheryl Ann, though, she won't set foot in my home."

"She don't know no better, Maddie," he said. "She just listens to the wrong folks is all."

"Don't matter a damn. Ain't why I come. Gimme your hands, children," she said.

"You want to do a readin'?" Jennifer asked.

"No, child, I want you to give me your hand."

Madeline extended her arms across the table, one to Conrad, and one to Jennifer. They both took one, looked at each other a moment, then back at Madeline.

"If it ain't been said yet to y'all," she said, "the Lord God holds divorce to be a sin."

Jennifer had to bite down on her lip to keep from laughing.

"Once you come together in His eyes, child," she said, looking directly at Jennifer, "you ain't no longer two, but just one, and that cain't be divided up without leavin' both parties a lackin' they wholeness."

"Maddie," Conrad said politely, "I really do appreciate your…"

"Hush you, child," she interrupted, "You don't tell me nothin' 'bout it. I 'member when you was a baby, playin' on the grass, Jake's dog a sniffin' your dirty diaper. You let me say what I come to say."

He looked at Jennifer, a little concerned.

"I didn't come up here tonight to preach at you, though. I come to give you the Lamb's blessin'." Madeline closed her eyes and pulled the two hands together. She placed Jennifer's hand over Conrad's and began a prayer.

"Lord of hosts, Whose blessin' it is I now bestow, from You, to Your Son, to my boy, unto me, and now to these young people a sittin' here, I ask this of You."

Jennifer thought about the first time Madeline had done this, when she was twenty. She remembered feeling butterflies in her stomach, pins and needles in her fingers and toes. She looked at Conrad, now, and felt none of this.

"Bless this union, Lord God, let these young people cling tightly to each other and never part, for partin' leaves each forever weakened, and unable to weather the storm."

She was conscious of the ring on her finger. It felt odd, after not having worn it for so long. It felt big and loose, like it might fall off if she didn't pay attention.

"Teach these young people, Lord God, the value of Your gift. Let them live in Your light, Lord God, and never fear harm from the Serpent."

She looked down at his hand under hers, rubbed her thumb along his knuckle. She thought about touching the furniture in Andy's store. She imagined his skin looked like wood grain, and she could follow the pattern of creases, trace them out and see that they led to something.

"In Your Name, Lord God, and the Name of Your Son, and also my boy, amen."

Madeline departed immediately after the prayer, saying nothing more. The two sat at the table and looked down at their hands, still joined. Jennifer felt a little jolt when Conrad pulled his away and stood up from his chair.

"Come on," he said. "I wanna show ya somethin'." He hooked her elbow with his arm and walked to the front door of the cabin.

Jennifer sat on the metal and canvas folding chair Conrad had placed for her in the front yard, about ten feet from the porch. She sipped at her drink while he walked back into the house and shut off all the lights. Jennifer couldn't see anything in the dark.

"Now look at this," Conrad said, sitting down in a chair next to her. She could just make out that he was pointing straight up. "Nearest neighbor is two miles up the road. No other light sources out here."

After a minute, Jennifer's eyes adjusted. She saw. The sky was not black. It was blue with starlight. She'd forgotten about that. Never this bright in the city.

They smoked cigarettes and talked for a while longer, pressing the end of one the other to avoid having to adjust their eyes from a lighter's flash. Jennifer told him about

her brother, who was having his fourth child in a few weeks. That was something she'd found attractive about Conrad in college. He never wanted kids.

Jennifer hadn't known for sure in high school. She knew she probably wouldn't, but that was just probably. When she'd asked Conrad, he'd just said nope. She hadn't gotten upset. It was kind of funny. Then she started at Arkansas State and made up her mind for good. It was a mess she never wanted to deal with.

"You like bein' an uncle?" Jennifer asked.

"Sure. The kids are great. Real sweethearts," he said. "And the best part is, Cheryl Ann always takes 'em home at the right time."

"What time is that?" she asked.

"Every time," he said.

Jennifer laughed. Conrad put his arm on the back of her chair. Then he started a little and moved it away. He hadn't meant to do it.

He got up and walked into the cabin. He turned the lights on. Jennifer looked back at the front windows. She could hear him walking around in the living room. Jennifer sipped at her drink. There was only a little left, and the melted ice diluted that. She got up and walked into the cabin. Conrad was back in the bedroom. He'd unfolded the couch-bed in the living room. She could hear him rummaging through the bedroom closet, probably looking for sheets to make the bed. She walked into the kitchen and went straight to the freezer. She poured another tall drink.

Friday

(Near Midnight)

Jennifer stood in the bathroom and looked in the mirror. Her glass sat on the sink. She wanted to do something with her hair, but couldn't decide what. She was starting to hate this blonde.

"I think there's a new toothbrush in there if you need it. Cheryl Ann brings hers up with her, but I always keep one just in case she forgets," Conrad said from the living room. Jennifer had been sweating when they were outside. She took off her blouse, wet a small towel and wiped under her arms. She peeked her head out of the door.

"Where's that toothbrush at, Connie?" she yelled.

"Hold on a minute, I'll show you," he said. Jennifer looked over at her blouse, folded on the back of the toilet. She picked up her glass and took a long sip. She leaned against the sink.

Conrad opened then bathroom door and started to come in. He stopped and looked at Jennifer for just a second.

"Oh, Jesus, I'm sorry," he said. He turned his head and looked out into the hallway. Jennifer set her drink on the sink and reached for her blouse. "Shoulda knocked. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You seen it all before. Maybe a little more of it to see now, though," Jennifer said. He didn't respond. She could tell he was flushing red again. She buttoned her blouse up most of the way.

"Can I ask you somethin'?" he asked.

"Yeah. Okay. And you can look, now, by the way," she said.

Conrad turned around to look at her. “Where’d that bruise come from?” he asked. He glanced down at her stomach, which was now covered. “I mean, it looked pretty big, and there was some scrapes on it.”

Jennifer laughed. She sipped her drink again.

“Well, that’s what happens when you forget you’re thirty and not eighteen,” she said.

“How’s that?” Conrad asked.

“Volleyball, Connie. The league I’m in. I dived for one last weekend. Like I used to in high school,” she said. “Kind of shitty reminder I ain’t a kid no more.”

“You don’t have to tell me that. I tried swimmin’ cross the pond back there last August, like I used to summers I stayed here. Ain’t even a quarter mile ‘cross at the widest point, and I liketa drowned. Guess I gotta quit smokin’.”

Conrad was finishing making the bed. Jennifer walked into the living room and watched him smoothing the pillowcases. Squaring the blanket just so.

“You can have the bed in my room. This is where I sleep when Cheryl Ann’s here. The girls sleep on cots. Cheryl Ann’s back gives her trouble, so that bed’s better for her,” Conrad said. He stood back from the couch-bed and looked at it. Jennifer didn’t say anything. She’d finished her drink in the bathroom. She sat on the armrest of the couch. She looked up at Conrad.

“You don’t have to do that,” she said.

“Nonsense. You’re a guest. I made up the bed in there, too. It’s no trouble to do it. Besides, this is where I always sleep when I’ve company,” he said.

Jennifer stood up straight, took a deep breath, and began unbuttoning her blouse.

"Connie. What I meant to say was, well, I didn't come out here to sleep in a separate bed. That's what I meant. How does that strike you?"

Chapter Three

Sunday, the 22nd

(Evening)

"Bradley's on his way in," Thomas says. "But don't call him Bradley to his face while he's here. Yessir and nosir will do just fine."

"Sure enough. You questioned me at the cabin already, Tom," Conrad says, "What more is there to know?"

They both sit in Thomas' office. Conrad nurses a mug of chicory-coffee. Thomas sits behind his desk and picks his nose discreetly.

"Fuck if I know. I figure he's just gonna cover some details he can't live without. Mostly, though, I think he wants to sniff you out, Con. That chicory too strong?" Tom asks. Conrad shakes his head no.

"I like chicory," Conrad says, "I always forget that I do."

"Rhianna brings that shit into the station by the truckload. She says they eat it with a spoon down in Shreveport. Anyhow, I can never tell which can's hers and which is for the rest of us folk ain't been corrupted by Louisiana," Thomas says. He sniffs, yawns, and rubs his eyes. Conrad notices the dark circles under them.

"You and she still, um, you know?" Conrad asks after another small sip.

"Well, ya see, she's gettin' married in a couple a months. So no. Probably no."

Conrad leans back in his chair and sets the mug on Thomas' desk.

"How come Bradley don't trust the statement you took?" Conrad asks.

Thomas laughs. “Cause he’s a fucker, Con. That’s how come. Ever since that business with Ronnie last year, Bradley’s been buckin’ to get rid a me. Or at least cover his ass all the way. He plum forgot who’n the hell got him the job anyhow. Maybe he figures if he can get me on somethin’, make a big stink about it, get him some headlines, then he can run for mayor a Huntsville. State Senate, maybe. Shit. I call it mutually assured destruction. He’s just a fucker, Con, that’s all.”

The door to the station opens and closes. Conrad picks up his coffee mug again. Bradley walks into Thomas’ office.

“Well, how’s the world treatin’ ya, Mr. Sherman?” Thomas asks. Bradley Sherman, Madison County Prosecutor, says nothing. He is tall and slightly broad shouldered in his sleek gray suit. His tie is a solid dark blue. Cufflinks are small emeralds set in gold. Black hair is slicked back. He looks like Fayetteville money, Conrad thinks. Bradley’s red-cheeked-boy-face forces an expression of calm and concentration. He looks like he thinks this is an important moment.

“Thomas, I’m going to have to ask you to leave during this,” Bradley says.

“Can do, Mr. Sherman,” Thomas says, getting up from his desk. He does not look at Conrad. He closes the door behind him.

“Conrad,” Bradley says, “may I call you Conrad?”

“Most folks do.”

“This is an informal matter, I just want you to understand, and you have not been charged with anything. There were a couple of questions I wanted to ask you, however. Sort of filling in the things the Sheriff’s office forgot to ask. Just details, really.”

“No problem,” Conrad says, “Ask away, sir.”

"Just call me Brad. That'll be fine."

"Okay. Brad. You can ask me whatever you need to."

"Also, I would like to remind you of your right to counsel. Thomas said you refused legal representation. You haven't been charged, but I would consider it only fair if you wanted to have an attorney present during this conversation," Bradley says.

"What would I need one for, Brad? I ain't been charged with nothin'. I ain't done nothin' wrong."

"Point taken. You may change your mind at any time. I want you to understand that," Bradley says. He opens his briefcase, takes out a yellow legal pad, and uncaps a ballpoint pen.

"I understand," Conrad says. "You can ask anything. I'll do my best to answer."

"Very well. My first question is regarding the ownership of the rifle."

Saturday, the 21st

(Early Morning)

Conrad slipped out of bed without waking Jennifer. She was a heavy sleeper. She may sleep till noon, much as she drank, he thought as he pulled on jeans and a T-shirt. He'd forgotten how much she drank. Or maybe she'd stepped it up since they lived together. He grabbed his fishing rod from by the refrigerator and walked out of the cabin at three minutes after six, according to the clock on the stove.

Conrad walked behind the cabin and toward the woods. The creek also led to the lake, but the path in the woods was quicker. He picked two worms out of the compost heap on the edge of the yard, and snatched up the old white plastic cooler that sat beside it. He dropped the night crawlers into it and proceeded to the lake.

Jennifer hadn't mentioned any papers for him to sign. Shit. What did that mean, exactly? What did she want, now?

He got to the shore of the tiny lake and walked along until he reached the spot where he knew the catfish would be. A large one jumped out of the water and made a good-sized splash. This time of morning, all he'd have to do is drop the hook in and pull it right back out with a two-pounder clamped down on it. He set the cooler on the muddy shore. He looked over his shoulder and saw Johnny sitting on a large rock nearby. Conrad sat on the bank and guided the first worm on to the hook. He cast the line out near the spot where the fish were jumping.

"Buddy-boy, I don't know what you meant yesterday, but she's somethin' else," Johnny said. "I mean, goddamn."

"Mind ya business."

"What else I got to mind, now, but you?"

"Why don't ya talk to that boy down in the lake. How 'bout that?" Conrad said.

"Don't get angry now, little brother. I don't mean nothin' by it. It's just I can't figure how's come you left a woman like that'n back in your bed."

He'd asked if she was still on the pill. That was the first thing that came into his mind after they'd started kissing. He'd been getting signals from her all night. He wanted her, sure, but he didn't want to be stupid about it. She just whispered that she'd been fixed a couple years back. That hadn't surprised him. The fact that she'd told him had.

"The Army turn ya queer?" Johnny poked at him. "I heard that happens sometimes."

"She wants somethin', I know it. I cain't figure what, though," he said, ignoring his brother. He looked over at Johnny, who was now standing beside him on the shore.

"Little brother, there's some things you never did get figured out."

Johnny here and now was the same Johnny when he died at seventeen. He was the exact image of that gangly, pimple-faced kid with messy hair. Conrad had been ten.

"Don't call me your little brother. I'm near twice as old as you ever got."

"Don't matter if you live to a hundred. You're always my little brother."

The line tugged. Conrad got to his feet. He waited for another tug. When it came, he gave the line a good, hard jerk to set the hook and started reeling it in.

Jennifer had been vocal last night. Sighed and moaned and even yelled out a couple times. That was like from before. Not right before he'd left, but from farther back. When they were dating. When they were first married and for nearly that whole year. When he came back from Afghanistan, it was more quiet. By the time he'd left Fayetteville, there was only silence.

"What do you think she wants, then, if it ain't no divorce," Johnny asked.

"Read somewhere a Mr. Freud asked that same question: What does any woman want?"

"He ever come up with a answer?"

"I don't know about him, but for my part, I think that wantin' itself is the important part. She wants, and when she gets what she wants, she has to find somethin' else to want. And so on. It's in her nature."

"Bro, I don't think that sounds much different from most a the good ol' boys I know."

"Shit," Conrad said, "ain't that the truth."

"That what Jennifer like, though?"

"I don't really know her anymore, to tell you the truth."

"Well she sure seems to want to get reacquainted."

Conrad unhooked the wriggling catfish and dropped it in the cooler. He secured the lid over it. He took the second worm, worked it onto the hook, and cast out the line again. He listened to the fish flop around on the hollow, wet plastic.

Jennifer had never lost her appeal. Because of her he knew what the Bible meant by lust. Wanting to possess someone utterly. That wasn't the only reason they'd married, though. He'd just liked being around her. She put him at ease. He was seldom at ease with others.

"I don't like seein' ya like this, kid," Johnny said. "You was a real prick to that Maddie yesterday, not bein' more sociable. And you ain't hardly laughed none since Tom was up here. She got your guts tied in knots, Bro."

"I don't care for it none, neither."

Conrad jerked the line when it tugged again, and reeled in the second struggling catch. He grabbed it with both hands, and, avoiding the spines, worked out the hook and dropped it in the cooler next to the first.

"Better get to know each other," Conrad said, placing the lid back on the cooler.

Sunday, the 22nd

(Evening)

"I'm the owner. It's my rifle," Conrad says. "It was a gift from my daddy on my sixteenth birthday."

"The rifle belongs to you. Okay," Bradley says. He writes on the legal pad, taps the end on the top of the pad, then writes some more. "I have a question about the sequence of the events."

"Okay, go ahead," Conrad says.

"The Sheriff did an exhaustive job of gathering details on this subject. I just want to clarify something. You said that you heard the noise. Then you looked through the sight on the rifle. You saw the… well, as we've yet to determine exactly what happened,

we'll refer to it as 'the incident'… transpiring in front of the cabin. You fired. How long did you wait? I mean, did you hesitate at all?" Bradley asks.

Conrad knows he's being sniffed at for sure, now. Just like Thomas said. He'd gone over this several different times earlier.

"I fired immediately. I am a good shot, you know," Conrad says.

"How do you mean?" Bradley asks.

"Washington County Junior Marksman Champion three years running. That's how I mean. If I'd taken my time, I could've just given a wound. I was in a hurry. So it ended up like this. Understand?"

"I think so," Bradley says, scribbling on his pad. "The truck. Your truck. Fresh tracks were found while investigating this afternoon. Who moved it?"

"I told Tom earlier. Jennifer moved it. While I was gone she moved it down by the creek."

"Sure. Okay, one last thing. What were you hunting for? You said you had gone out that morning hunting on your property. What was it you were going to kill with that rifle? You know that elk season's a couple months away, still."

"Huntin' razorback. They been gettin' in my garden. You know how they are this time of year," Conrad says.

"Razorback? They said they found the carcass of one feral hog on your property already," Bradley says.

"I killed one the day before yesterday. There's a pack of 'em live near the cabin. In one a the hillside caves all around there, I think. I figured I knew which cave, so I was

gonna see if I was right. You know the State's just lifted all restrictions on huntin' razorback."

"I did hear about that, yes," Bradley says, looking up from his legal pad, his forehead wrinkling a bit.

"You ever chase a razorback through the woods, Brad?"

"Can't say that I have," he says, eyes narrowing.

"Nobody does. Can't catch em that way," Conrad says. "You gotta wait for them to come to you."

Saturday, the 21st

(Late morning)

Jennifer awoke to the smell of battered fish in a skillet. She checked her watch on the lamp table. Nine-fifteen. She heard the radio in the kitchen. Conrad listened to the news on the public radio station.

The bedsprings creaked as she sat up. The blanket was a patchwork quilt, threadbare in spots. Her head didn't hurt as much as she'd anticipated. She drank the glass of water Conrad left for her on the table, then stretched her arms and aligned her spine. Last night had gone exactly the way she'd wanted.

She pulled the quilt around her and stood up. Jennifer found a clean T-shirt of his to wear, and walked, barefoot, to the bathroom. While looking in the mirror, she heard the floorboards creak out in the hallway. He would know she was awake. She gave a moment's thought to her hair. It looked better messy. The boards in the hallway creaked

again. Jennifer looked back. She could tell from the light under the door crack that he was stopped right outside. The boards creaked more quietly as he left. She decided just to wear the T-shirt out to breakfast. That, with her disheveled hair and lack of makeup would show vulnerability. She noticed, on her way out the door, Conrad's book of crossword puzzles, with a pencil closed inside the front cover, sitting on the edge of the bathtub. The bottom edges of the pages were warped from getting wet. She laughed at a memory of him falling asleep while reading in the bath, and cursing at his destroying a library book. Jennifer closed the door behind her and walked down the hallway. She could be vulnerable. She could do that.

"Don't you drink coffee, anymore?" Jennifer asked, sitting at the card table in the kitchen. Conrad used to drink it all day long. Two cups with breakfast and a large thermos for the workday. She'd liked getting him to try new kinds. She remembered his favorite had been a Sumatran blend. She couldn't help but think that it was because there was a small picture of a tiger on the label.

"Tea. But there's coffee in the cupboard. Cheryl Ann drinks it when she's here. Coffee maker's up there, too. And filters," he said.

"No, tea's alright. I like tea."

Jennifer looked around the kitchen. There were a few pictures hung on the wood-paneling. From here she couldn't make any of them out but the one above the table where she sat. It was a young Conrad, maybe ten, and the older boy she recognized as his brother, Johnny, standing in front of their great uncle, rifles poised on their hips, a stag lying limp in the foreground. The linoleum in the kitchen was as old as the

refrigerator, at least fifty years, bubbled in places and rolling up in the corners. The pattern was faded badly, but it looked clean. The wall paneling was mostly bare. A white plastic clock next to the refrigerator. A calendar from Fat Bobby's Diner, showing a picture of a large caramel covered sundae speckled with walnuts, sprinkled with cinnamon, and topped with a flaming sugar cube. Conrad never cared much for decoration, she thought.

He was working by the light from the window. Before, when he'd had a day off from work, he wouldn't turn on any lights at all. Even in their garage, where he'd set up his hobby shop, building bookshelves or maybe a desk, he'd just open the garage door. To read, he'd sit by the kitchen window in the morning. Dining room window in the afternoon. When she'd get home from her job, he'd be on the couch in the living room. She told him once that he was like a sunflower, that way.

"Is that catfish?" she asked.

"And scrambled eggs in the other one," Conrad motioned to the skillet on the back burner.

Jennifer laughed. "I don't believe I've ever had catfish and scrambled eggs together."

"Rosie and Helena say 'you're welcome,'" he said.

"Rosie and who?" she asked.

"The hens. I keep a few chickens around. These were from Rosie and Helena."

"The fish have names, too?"

"I didn't ask. They couldn't have answered, neither, with the hook still in."

They sat at the card table and began to eat. Jennifer remarked on his skill as a cook. Conrad had always found as much pleasure in cooking and gardening as hunting or fishing ever gave him. Jennifer saw how that could be. They were all things which could be done in silence. She slid her hand over his.

Conrad looked up at her hand, glanced at her face, then went back to the battered catfish. Jennifer sipped from her mug of tea and studied him. He looked intently at his plate and chewed

"Eggs have a little spice. I'm gettin' the aftertaste, now. Curry?" she asked.

"Just a sprinkle. The tiniest bit. If I'd put any more in, I liketa ruined them," Conrad said. He sipped his tea and got some eggs with his fork.

Jennifer squeezed his hand quite gently, almost imperceptibly.

"There's something that's been nagging me for a while," she said

"What's that?" he asked, looking up from the scrambled eggs.

"Why'd you leave? I mean, why'd you leave Fayetteville?"

Conrad looked back down at his plate. He stopped chewing and swallowed. He sat back in his chair. He looked straight at Jennifer.

Conrad didn't speak for a minute.

Jennifer hated that. How he always took his time to speak. He could never just say something outright if it wasn't a yes or no answer. She hadn't hated it at first. Not until after they were married almost a year. That was something she'd loved in the beginning. Most of the boys she'd dated before him hadn't been able to shut up. Always talking themselves up. Posturing.

She'd dated Andy Holcomb, briefly, before Conrad. He was always trying so hard to impress her. He was full of plans. He was going to go to play drums for Metallica, or at least open for them with the local band he was in at the time. Taking over his father's furniture store turned out to be enough. He'd broken up with her because she wouldn't go all the way with him. That was just fine with her. That was the case with a lot of the boys she'd dated in high school. Nobody had known her when she'd started there in tenth grade. The boys eventually spread the word around that she was a tease. Jennifer often wondered what had been different with Conrad. Maybe it was that he didn't know how to pretend to be anybody but himself. That had made her decide on him. Maybe that was it. She didn't know.

Conrad spoke. "Well. I thought a long time on why I left. I didn't really figure it first, just knew I had to. Then I settled on one idea that satisfied me for awhile. Then I'd think some more on it and somethin' else made more sense. Then I finally hit the nail on the head with the last one. Thing is, I don't think I really wanna tell you the whole thing. Don't think you'd get it."

Jennifer opened her mouth to contradict him. No words came out. Probably, she shouldn't argue right now. She got up from the card table and walked up the counter where the pack of Conrad's cigarettes were. She took one, lit it, and leaned her back against the counter.

"Can you tell me what you mean?" she asked.

"I ain't prepared to."

She looked out into the garden. She saw a wild rabbit hop past the mustard greens toward the leaf lettuce. Jennifer lit another cigarette.

"How did you sleep?" she asked. She had no idea what to say.

"Not great. I also had a question kept naggin' at me," he said.

Jennifer looked back at him. She crossed her arms and straightened her posture.

Conrad took another bite of catfish and chewed. He swallowed, took a sip of tea, and said, "I know you've had boyfriends. When I was in the Army, and then after I come out here."

"Who told you that?" she asked.

"Cheryl Ann told me three years ago. I asked her. And I asked her not to lie."

Jennifer nodded. "Okay, yeah. I was lonely, you know," she began.

He interrupted, "I'll not speak on it. Not my place. I know you can't be alone. I knew that when I left. I knew what it would mean." Conrad took another bite. "That question kept nagging me was this. Why would you come out here to see me after five years with no words between us? I mean, what was it compelled you?"

"I wanted to see you, Connie," Jennifer said.

"I know you did. What I can't figure is why?"

She lowered her head and closed her eyes. She began rubbing her temples.

"Jen, I been expecting divorce papers every time I pick up my mail at the Huntsville post office. Every time I open that little box in the wall, I expect to find you're ready to cut me loose for good. Jennifer, I know one thing for certain," he said.

She looked up at him. Her eyes were beginning to water. She hated that small, stinging feeling, but it would help.

"I believe, unless I have profoundly misjudged your character in the time I've known you, that you wouldn't come out here for one last fuck before divorcing me."

Jennifer took a drag on her cigarette. She felt a tremor in her hand.

"Yeah, Connie. You know me. But you don't know everything," she said and sat down at the table. "I haven't divorced you because it serves my interests not to do so. I know you'll never come back. And I like to date."

Conrad watched her tap ash into the tray.

"It's convenient for me to date men with the understanding that I'm married and they can't expect anything serious. I find this arrangement much easier." Jennifer crushed her cigarette out. "I've even left your shit exactly the way it was, for the most part, when you took off. I tell them, the men I date, that you're out of town. You're out of town a lot." She shuddered a little at the last thing she'd said. She hadn't meant to go so far. But then, if he wasn't already mad, what else could do it?

"Uh-huh. You still haven't explained why you're here," he said.

"I'm here because of Howard," Jennifer said, reaching for another cigarette.

Chapter Four

Sunday, the 22nd

(Near midnight)

Conrad lies on the floor of the holding cell, arms and legs outstretched, staring up at the ceiling, smoking a cigarette. He strains to read the names that have been scrawled above him, in pen, marker, or scratched into the concrete under the white paint. Ash from the tip of the cigarette falls onto his upper lip.

"Wanna 'nother drink, Con?" Jerry calls from the office up the hallway from the holding cell.

"Nope. I'm just fine, thanks," Conrad says, then laughs, "Fine and dandy."

Jerry brought him a glass of Coca-Cola an hour ago. He said it was a homemade recipe. After taking a sip, Conrad realized "homemade" meant that it contained an ingredient from the still Jerry's grandma kept in the hills just west of Huntsville. He had to lie on the floor half an hour ago from the dizziness.

Conrad keeps laughing. He can't stop it. First, he sees Johnny, leaning on the bars. This is the wrong fucking place to show up, he thinks. Conrad tries, without success, to make out whether or not there are marks on his neck. Either his vision, or Johnny, is too blurry. After a minute, Conrad's brother is gone and someone else arrived.

Jennifer sits on the bunk bed, looking down at him. He swears he can see her, just sitting there. Her head and neck and blouse are still covered in blood.

“Go home. I don’t wanna talk to you,” he says. He laughs some more. She doesn’t move. Just looks down at him. “Okay, fine, you wanna smoke, Baby?” he asks.

Jennifer gets up from the bunk and walks over to middle of the cell. He notices that her hair, still blonde while she was sitting, changes back to the curly dark brown he’d known from before. The blood stays.

She must not be wearing shoes, Conrad thinks. Her footsteps are so quiet. He wants to look over at her small feet, but can’t manage to move. She lies on the floor beside him and looks up at the ceiling as well.

“Jesus Christ, Baby,” Conrad says. “You made me fuckin’ nuts, ya know?”

“I know,” Jennifer says. “But you did it to me, too.” She reaches over and takes the cigarette from between his lips, puts it to her lips, drags, and places it back in Conrad’s mouth.

“Member the first time we got drunk together?” he asks. “I mean really drunk. Not that funny-ha-ha-buzz we’d get in high school. I mean when we killed the vodka and tequila bottles on your spring break. We were nineteen. The year ‘fore we got married. ‘Member that?”

“I remember,” she says.

“And you were scared cause you thought my parents were gonna come down to check on the noise. And I kept tellin’ you that they was at Wednesday night service. I think it was Friday, but, I mean, what the hell, you were drunk enough to believe me. And anyway, it calmed you down.”

Conrad coughs and drops his cigarette. “Shit. Shit on me,” he says, and reaches to pick it up. The movement makes him queasy.

"Them fuckers you was friends with. They got to go to Mexico for their break. You wouldn't admit it, but Baby, you were jealous as fuck. What was that one cunt's name, that one gave you shit about it? That one in your accounting class, with the hair you hated?"

"Gloria," Jennifer says.

"Member what I said? I said 'Shit, Baby, we don't have to go to Mexico for that. We can get a smashed and smoke as much weed and have as much drunk-sex as we want right here.' 'Member I made you laugh? Fuck. I loved makin' you laugh. Fuck me, I loved that."

Conrad reaches down by his side and feels around for Jennifer's hand. He brings it up to his face to kiss her fingers. The blood on her hands is still wet. He figured it would have dried out by now. Good common sense said it ought to be dry and brown and flaking off. But then, she always did lack some common sense.

"You panicked in the morning, member? You went to take your birth control pill and you didn't know what day it was, so you couldn't tell if you'd skipped any. It took ten minutes to prove to you it was only Saturday. You kept pulling my blanket up to cover your mouth, like you were gonna scream into it, only you didn't make a sound. You were so fuckin' scared. Had to hold you to calm you back down."

"I was scared, Connie. You always held me when I was scared."

He turns slowly onto his side to look at her and the motion makes him sick. Vomit rises in his throat. He scrambles to the toilet and throws up. Moonshine is never friendly coming back up.

When he looks back to apologize, Jennifer is gone.

Saturday, the 21st

(Late morning)

"Howard," Conrad said, "is he your boyfriend?"

It sounded strange to Jennifer, hearing him say Howard's name.

"Yes. I mean, no. It's complicated, Connie," she said. She swallowed hard, walked back over to the table and sat down across from Conrad. She couldn't read him. Usually she could, if not his face, his posture, breathing, tone. He was just listening now, resting on his elbows with a patient half-smile. Jennifer scooted her chair over to sit by the corner of the table, next to him. That way he could see her legs. He'd always loved her legs.

"I got into trouble. Connie, I got serious with somebody not right."

There was so much she could not tell him.

She'd been seeing Howard a little over a year. They'd met in a Fayetteville nightclub that wasn't for college kids. There were only a handful of those, and Jennifer knew them all very well. She could give an up-to-date list of the bartending staff in each one. It was important for her job.

She'd thought Howard a fine physical specimen when she first noticed him. That was a phrase from college she still used. Her biology teacher had said that a pig they were about to dissect to locate various internal organs should give them no trouble as it was fine physical specimen. Jennifer and one of her girlfriends, also in the class, thought

this phrase was quite funny, and began referring to the men they found attractive that way.

Had she not been working a client, she'd have approached Howard that night. He was maybe six-two, broad shouldered, he carried maybe two hundred and fifty pounds all together, and most of it looked like muscle. His blonde hair was slicked back, and he had scar on the end of his sharp chin that said 'fist fight'. His face was fairly oval, aside from the chin, and his eyebrows, though groomed, were thick. Set under them were light hazel eyes that looked almost gold. Fitting, she'd thought. He had this calm look that said he could easily afford to wait for whatever he wanted to come to him, because it would never take long.

"How are you in trouble?" Conrad asked.

"You know that bruise on my stomach?" Jennifer began, "Well, it ain't from playin' in the Fayetteville Ladies' Volleyball League. What you seen last night is faded about four weeks. And this one's just the latest."

Conrad listened. He glanced down at her bare legs. Maybe, she thought, he was looking for others that were fading. He wouldn't be able to tell in the dim kitchen light.

"Tell me what he's done," he said.

Jennifer had first approached Howard a year and two months ago. She spotted him from the bar in one of the town's nicer restaurants while he was on a date with a chatty, wide-eyed, and overly tanned blonde fresh from college. When the blonde left to go to the restroom, Jennifer acted. She got up from the bar and walked right over to

Howard's table. She said nothing, but handed him matchbook with her phone number written inside the cover. She gave him a smirk that said something like, 'Boy, if you only knew the trouble I could get you into.'

Howard had been stunned by her forwardness. He just looked at her, gaping as she stood in front of him in the middle of the restaurant. He took the matchbook from her, blinking. Then he gave her grin right back. She turned and walked back to the bar to pay her bill, conscious of the promise in the rhythm of her hips. Jennifer felt Howard's eyes on her body as she left. When she got into her car, she laughed out loud.

He'd called a week later. After dinner and drinks, they spent the night together. She liked the sound of the bedsprings straining under his weight. She liked his forcefulness. When he pinned her wrists to the mattress, she screamed. Conrad had never known to do that.

Their first night together had been in his apartment. She'd noticed how clean everything had been. White carpet with no spots anywhere. No clothes on the floor anywhere. Nothing out of date, wilted, or moldy in the refrigerator. The walls were white also, with evenly spaced photographs in uniformly sized brushed nickel frames. Most of the photographs were of Howard, sometimes with friends, in front of different national monuments. Mt. Rushmore. The St. Louis Archway. The Grand Canyon. Some were of sporting vacations. Bungee jumping. Rafting. Climbing in what looked like the Rockies. There was one of Howard in front of a Bullfighting ring, wearing a sombrero.

Howard didn't smoke. When she lit up, he'd snapped his fingers at her, turned a little red in the face, and led her by the elbow out on the balcony of his apartment.

Jennifer didn't like this treatment, and used his potted geraniums as an ashtray. Still, he was decent enough in bed to forgive something like that. He wasn't really spectacular, but he knew what to do most of the time. Or rather, she thought, what he did happened to be right for her. Probably, there wasn't much consideration on his part. It wasn't like that with Conrad. Not ever. It had been fun when they were kids, but that was before she really knew anything about sex. It had been enough just to have him. Now she knew better. Conrad was flawed. He was impatient, clumsy. And he always wanted to talk about it. Like it was a puzzle he could figure out. Nothing ruined her mood more than talking about it.

Jennifer had decided to keep one of her off and on boyfriends in spite of Howard's standing order. He knew she was married. That was okay with him, so long as he was her only extra-marital friend. Jennifer agreed to the condition, laughing a little inside.

When Howard had found out about Sam, her other boyfriend. He'd had come over to her house uninvited while she was entertaining. They were in the middle of foreplay, Sam's finger actually inside her, when Howard kicked the bedroom door in. The door was hollow and cardboard inside, so it snapped in half. He took Sam, in a head-lock, from out of her bed and threw him into the hallway. Howard kicked him along the floor through the house to the front door. Jennifer grabbed her bathrobe and followed them out into the front yard. Howard sat on top of him and punched him in the face and chest. Sam begged for him to stop, but Howard redoubled his efforts.

Something powerful happened inside Jennifer in that moment. She didn't understand it. She knew, though, that she wasn't about to cut Howard loose. That was

unthinkable, now. Maybe the image was reminiscent of a scene from her childhood. Seeing her father get into red faced drunken fights in the trailer park on weekends. Whatever the reason, watching Howard break ribs on her front lawn had made Jennifer want him so much more.

"He's going to kill me, Connie," Jennifer said. That was all she needed to say.

"He said that?" Conrad asked.

"He said it, yeah. Said that if I ever tried to leave him, he'd kill me. His exact words," she said. Jennifer's eyes watered some more. She wiped at them. She rubbed at her temples, tapped her cigarette on the ashtray. Conrad wrinkled his forehead, leaned forward, and widened his eyes a little.

"Tell me what he did. How did he hurt you?" he asked.

Howard had gotten out of jail on a Saturday. That day he was back at Jennifer's house. His father bailed him out. Howard was from money. His grandfather held a controlling interest in a prolific copper mine. His father had become a lawyer, and worked largely at defending the company from employee lawsuits. Howard, himself had become an accountant, and worked for the firm that handled the mining company's business. He'd gotten into trouble before. Howard's father had wanted him to run for office, until he'd gone to college. 'That was when he saw true colors,' Howard would say proudly. His arrest record was a popular topic among the local well-to-do's. DUI's, and Possession of Narcotics, and Battery, and Contributing to the Delinquency, and

whatever else, you name it. Jennifer had looked up his history after he was arrested on her front lawn. He always got off with community service and a fine. End of story.

Howard walked right in to her house not an hour after his release, came up to her in the kitchen as she was pouring a drink. Jennifer had wanted, at first, to run out the back door and climb over the fence. When she saw him taking off his black leather belt, breathing heavily, focusing on her like there was nothing else in his world, she decided to stay.

She'd offered herself to him in the kitchen. He bent her arms behind her back and shoved her over the counter. Her forehead knocked into the coffeemaker, spilling a little. He yanked down her sweats and then cut away her underwear with a dirty steak knife that had been in the sink. Jennifer shuddered at the grease on the flat of the blade slipping on her skin. He made her apologize for not coming to his arraignment, for not calling him while he was in jail, and for fucking that other pussy-ass-bitch on the side. She apologized unreservedly, then yelled at him to do it harder.

After he was done, Howard had wandered into the living room and picked up a picture of Conrad off the mantle above the fireplace. He didn't say anything, just stared at it. When Jennifer had walked up to him and asked him to put the picture down, Howard had slapped her face with the back of his hand.

"It was just a hard slap the first time. But that was only the first time," Jennifer said. "He does it every now and then. Random-like, so I don't forget, I guess."

Conrad nodded. Jennifer shifted in her seat, thinking about Howard's breath on the back of her neck.

"Have you ever told anyone about this? About him hitting you?" he asked.

"I'm telling you."

"Why didn't you tell someone sooner?" Conrad asked.

"I don't know, Connie. Okay? I'm telling you."

After Howard's arrest, Jennifer had told him that she was separated from her husband. Howard said that he'd suspected that already. Said he wasn't going to push the issue. She'd tell him when she was ready. Jennifer enjoyed her time with Howard. He didn't hit her often, and the first time was the only one in a place that showed. Jennifer didn't think about all that much. Watching her parents go back and forth, she'd grown up accustomed to the sound of skin smacking skin.

Whenever it happened, she felt a kind of cleansing. That was something she remembered from childhood. After her dad or mom hit her, she wept, but she felt that she'd deserved it, like they'd said, for being such a hateful child. After it happened with Howard, she felt the same thing. Not that she'd deserved it from him, per se, but that it served her right, in general. Howard was like a dumb animal that God used to exact a tithe from her.

She loved Howard as one loves a big slobbering puppy. She loved his energy and his vanity. He'd taken her to his health club once, to show her, in his black skintight shorts and red tank top, precisely how many hundreds of pounds he could lift. He had his own weights in his apartment. His own gym, really. But he wanted her to see how the other members looked at him. She'd put her hand on the meatiest part of his shoulder to feel the tissue under his skin expand and contract.

When she and Howard slept beside each other, which only happened on occasion, Jennifer would lie awake and, if they were at her place, smoke. She would inch closer to him. She would lie almost on top of him. He never woke up at these times. She could set her ashtray on his back or chest. She could stick the filter end of her cigarette in his belly button and giggle quietly. She had even rolled tissues into tight columns and fit them into his nostrils. He stayed asleep through all of it. Jennifer was amazed at how something so physically powerful could be defenseless, so vulnerable. She could do anything at all to Howard at these times.

"I've just been so scared, Connie," Jennifer said. "I didn't know what to do. I know he was serious when he said he'd kill me."

Conrad closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. That was easy to read. He was conflicted.

"I remembered how I felt when we were together. I remembered how safe I felt. Even when it was bad. Even then I felt safe with you. I guess I've been so scared, I just needed to feel safe again," she said, inching over the corner of the table, closing the distance. Conrad looked up at her with a dry expression that she identified as appraisal.

"What else?" he asked. Jennifer sat upright.

She wiped at her eyes again.

Howard had taken her to a five star hotel in Little Rock, the Wild Spruce, almost every other weekend for the last seven months. He liked to get away from Fayetteville society as often as possible. He was much better behaved in Little Rock than at home.

Maybe it registered with him that his father's sphere of influence didn't extend that far. Maybe that was the attraction.

Howard always got a room with a hot tub in it. It didn't have to be the best room, but it had to have the hot tub. They would soak for half the day. They would eat, weather permitting, at a sidewalk café. She watched Howard watch other women walk past. He was incapable of hiding what he wanted.

When Jennifer learned that Howard had been sleeping with other women, she felt stupid for having dropped her other irregular boyfriends. This latest bruise, the one on her stomach was a result of just that. Howard followed her from work one night. She'd gone to visit Charles, one of her former clients. They'd been on and off for a couple of years right after Conrad left. Howard didn't follow her up to the apartment. He waited until she came back down to her car, and followed her home. He didn't hit her with his fist. He bent a brass candlestick on her stomach. Doubled over on her living room floor, she couldn't help but laugh a little through the growing pain. The candlesticks had been her least favorite wedding present.

"Okay, Connie, here's what else," Jennifer said, looking down at the table. "Howard's out of town. He's at a conference in St. Louis. He should be getting back this morning. Maybe a little after noon."

Conrad looked over at the clock. "It's just after eleven now."

"He'll get home," Jennifer said. "He'll check the apartment to see if I'm there like he asked me to be when he got back. He won't find me so he'll go to check the

messages on his machine. He never checks his messages on a business trip. He hates anything that takes him 'out of the zone,' as he says. He'll get my message."

"What message, what did you say?"

"I told him, Connie, that it's over."

Howard had taken her out on his speedboat on the southern most branch of Beaver Lake, just north of highway 412, a month ago. They'd argued about his behavior in a restaurant in Fayetteville. He'd snorted coke in the bathroom, then come back to the table, began calling everyone who walked past a cocksucker, and yelling if they turned to look. Howard wanted to make it up to her with the boat trip.

He insisted that she try fishing. She waited with the line in the water for close to an hour, squinting through her sunglasses at the sun bouncing off the water. When her line caught on something, she motioned for him to come see. He took the rod from her and reeled in what he said was a small mouth bass. She wouldn't have known the difference.

After Howard caught a couple of his own, they tied the boat up to a little dock on the river that led to a small park. He'd brought charcoal and lighter fluid. A fillet knife and aluminum foil to put over the grill bars. Two bottles of wine and plastic cups, paper plates and clear plastic utensils. He pulled a tablecloth over the picnic table and told her to come over to the grill.

Howard started the fire in the park's grill. He took Jennifer's bass out of the cooler and held it in front of her, one foot from her face. 'I don't ever want you fucking anyone else,' he'd said. 'I can't tell you how angry that makes me.' Then he pulled his

fillet knife from his pocket. ‘And if you ever try leavin’, well, shit.’ He then stuck the fillet knife into the fish under the gills and slit belly to tail. He pulled the guts out in front of her and threw them into the river ten feet away. Jennifer became sick from the wet, ripping noise. Moisture from the fish had gotten on her clothes. She couldn’t say it was blood, exactly, because it wasn’t red. It was clear and smelled bad. The odor was on her clothes the rest of the day.

“Are you going to call the Fayetteville Police, now?” Conrad asked.

“What good would that do? His daddy’s got ‘em in his pocket anyhow.”

“Washington County Sheriff’s Department? What about them?”

“Who do you think got the Sheriff elected? Connie, there’s no law in Fayetteville that will protect me from him,” Jennifer said.

He looked down for a moment, then back up at her. He took a deep breath and said, “Well, he doesn’t know where I live, does he? You didn’t tell him that, did you? I mean, you can… you can hide here for as long as you need.”

Jennifer swallowed hard again. “Okay, Connie, here’s the thing. He’s going to go right over to my place when he gets the message. I won’t have answered my phone, obviously, and my cell’s turned off right now. He’ll go looking for me there. And he’ll find the note I left by the phone.”

“What does the note say?” he asked, scooting his chair back from the table.

“I wrote it to my brother, Randy,” she said. “I said that if there was an emergency, and there wasn’t phone reception up here in the hills, that he could send someone to this address.”

She noticed the cigarette had burned up to the filter. She lit another.

"He has this address," Conrad said. "You told him it was over between the two of you. And he knows, he will find out very soon, that you're at this address."

"With my husband," Jennifer said. "In the message, I said I was going to work things out with my husband."

She reached over and touched his shoulder. She felt his body move with each breath. There was bone directly under the skin where she touched. He'd always been a little bony.

He pulled a cigarette out of his pack on the table. He reached over and took Jennifer's from between her fingers and used it to light the one he'd just put in his mouth. He put her cigarette back between her fingers.

"Then you want me to kill him," Conrad said.

"I want you to kill him."

Chapter Five

Monday, the 24th

(An hour or so after midnight)

"Jerry said you was throwin' up a bit ago," Thomas says through the bars. Conrad looks up from the floor. He'd lain down near the cell's toilet and hadn't bothered moving since.

"He called you in?" Conrad asks, propping himself up on his elbows.

"He called me. I came in. I wanted to talk anyhow, Con."

"Bout what? You havin' them dreams again?"

"Nope. Not if I drink enough before sleep." Thomas brushes sleep from his eye.

Conrad sits up as Thomas opens the cell door. He scoots back to lean against the cinderblock wall. Thomas closes the door behind him and walks over to the bunk bed. He sits on the floor and leans against the green painted metal frame bolted to the concrete floor.

"What happened with Ronnie last year?" Conrad asks.

"Got any cigarettes left? Otherwise, I know Jerry got some."

"I'd advise you not to let Jerry anywhere near me right now. I think he tried to poison me. I maybe coulda handled one drink of it, but he kept offerin'. Three was enough to put my guts in that bowl right there," Conrad says, motioning to the toilet.

"Three'll do it. Goddamn. You shoulda seen Rhianna last New Years, Con. She 'bout pulled a gun on Jerry after she'd finished heavin' it all up," Thomas says and laughs. Conrad pulls his cigarettes out of his pants pocket and gives one to Thomas.

"You know Susan, she don't want me to smoke around her. Ever' time she finds a pack in my clothes she tosses it out." Thomas lights his cigarette. "She pissed since I give up tryin' to quit."

"Tell me what happened with Ronnie last year," Conrad says.

"Shit, Con, I didn't come down here to talk about that. Jerry said you was talkin' to people in here. Said he heard you yell the name 'Johnny' a bunch a times. And 'Jennifer.' I can understand a preoccupation with her right now, but if you're talkin' to Johnny, you're in worse shape than I thought. "

"I'm fine and dandy, Tom. Just haven't been moonshine-drunk in a while. Not since high school. Kinda funny how I drink a lot less now'n I did back then."

"Give it a few more years, Con. After this mess I suspect you gonna make up for lost time." Thomas rubs his eyes, then his temples. Right now he just looks tired, gray, and a little rotund. Conrad tries to think what he must have looked like twenty-some years ago working drug cases in Fayetteville. And a decade before that, carrying a rifle in the jungle.

They sit and smoke for a minute. Conrad lets his body go slack against the wall. He closes his eyes and rests his arms out to his sides, palms up. The cigarette between his lips droops. Ash falls on his shirt. Smoke curls up along his face and creeps into his hair.

"Why the fuck does little boy Bradley care what happened with Ronnie?" Conrad asks. "That's something I been wonderin'. You said he was a pimp, huh?"

"Part time. Just his girlfriend. Sold weed, too. Tried makin' meth and burned his eyebrows off. Shit, Con, it don't matter. Bradley's got a bug up his ass anyhow," Thomas says. "Tell me about Johnny. How come you talkin' to him?"

"Fuck if I know. Ask Jerry how much antifreeze he put in this batch."

"How old was he? When you talked to him tonight, how old was he?" Thomas asks. Conrad opens his eyes. He drags on his cigarette and exhales through his nose. That way he doesn't have to lift his arms off the floor.

"Seventeen. That was the year he done it. I don't 'member talkin' to him. And he didn't say nothin' to me. Just looked at me. Not sayin' nothin'. I must a been blacked out when Jerry heard me yellin'."

Conrad laughed as he saw a mouse scurry across the concrete.

"You see that, too?" he asks.

"Yeah. Bill's supposed to set out some more traps. He's a lazy-ass, though. Least wise it comes to maintenance. He won't replace a light bulb without my gettin' on his ass for a week," Thomas says.

"Long as you seen the little fucker, too. Just makin' sure. Why does Bradley care what happened with Ronnie last year, Tom? Why's he got a bug up his ass about it?"

"Boy, you don't know when to shut the fuck up and mind ya business. All you need to know about Bradley is this: Think before you speak. Be consistent with what you say. Don't give him shit. He'd hang us both up if he thought it'd get him elected State Senate."

Conrad takes a last drag on his cigarette and throws it in the toilet. Thomas does the same. He reaches into his pocket, pulls out an old collapsible whittling knife, and starts cleaning under his fingernails.

"I loved her like nothin' else, Tom," Conrad says. Thomas looks up from his fingernails. "But what the Christ does that matter anyhow?"

Thomas nods. "I tell ya Susan sold another painting at the fair this year? A few, really, but one actually got some money for it. And it weren't her boyfriend that bought it this time, neither."

Conrad looks over at him. Folds the knife shut.

"It don't matter, Con. Don't mean shit whether or not you love somebody. They gonna do what they gonna do. But that ain't nothin' you don't already know."

Saturday, the 22nd

(Afternoon)

"Connie, you're out a vodka," Jennifer called from the kitchen. When she'd told him what she wanted him to do to Howard, he'd gotten up from the kitchen table and walked out on the porch. He'd been sitting, quietly, in the swing for an hour. He needed some time alone. He couldn't think with her around. She made it so hard to think.

"There's some in the cellar," Conrad said. "I got an extra bottle down there. Cheryl Ann drinks almost as much as you do." When he heard Jennifer open the door to the cellar, he got up from the swing. He walked down the porch steps, around the back of the house, and into the woods.

When he got to the turn in the path that led down to the lake, Conrad kept going straight. He wanted to walk for a while. Just walk for a bit.

Conrad looked up at the branches overhead. Oak and Pecan trees. Plenty of Alders and Lindens. There was a Walnut tree up ahead he could get some use of later. He watched as a squirrel jumped from a branch in one tree to another. The leaves beneath his bare feet were so dry. Under the leaves was soft earth.

Conrad came to the large Cherry tree he'd used a branch from to make Jennifer's bookshelf when he was seventeen. His great uncle Jacob had helped him pick it out. They'd spent the morning looking for it. Conrad had climbed the tree with a saw tied to his arm by a shoelace. He'd sat down on the branch and wanted to start right in on the cut. 'Careful there, boy,' Jacob said, 'you'll wanna scoot ya britches on the other side a where you cuttin', less'n you wanna fall with the branch.'

After cutting down the large branch, they'd chopped it into three manageable pieces, and dragged it back to the cabin. Conrad asked his uncle if they could really get enough one-by-eight boards out of the branch to make a bookshelf. 'Don't need a mess of 'em,' his uncle said, 'just three. We'll make us some one-by-twos for the sides and back. It'll look real nice.' They spent the early afternoon sawing the chunks out of the branch. Conrad hadn't wanted to stop for lunch, but his uncle made him eat once they'd gotten all the pieces necessary. They'd sat on the back porch steps, eating ham and cheese sandwiches.

He walked past the Cherry tree. He looked at the spot where he and Jacob had taken the limb. The rest of the branch had rotted off, leaving a pockmark in the bark a foot and a half in diameter. Conrad kept walking.

Uncle Jacob had kept his table saws and wood-kiln in the garage. That was where Conrad kept them now. Hadn't parked his truck in there in the five years he'd lived here, and shivered to think of the kiln anywhere near gasoline. After getting the right size chunks from the Cherry branch, Jacob had helped him guide them along the band saw. 'We gotta get the shape close enough for we fire 'em in the kiln,' his uncle said. 'They gonna shrink when they dry up, too. That's how come a two-by-four is always a one-and-a-half-by three-and-a-half.' Jacob always made him wear plastic goggles. Conrad had never worked with Cherry before. He liked the bittersweet smell of the sawdust.

He walked past a crumbling rock half the size of his truck, covered in green, yellow and gray lichens. He noticed the grade of the decline was a little steeper. He was walking on a dry wash-bed. This was where the water all collected when there was a sizeable downpour. Uncle Jacob called those 'goose drownders.' He listened to the flaking red clay-dirt skin over the ground crunching under his feet. In the woods around him, the cicadas groaned.

It was the next day before the boards had cooled and dried. Jacob helped him plane them, and Conrad fell in love with the process. Taking rough wood and giving it a smooth, even surface. He looked down at the peelings from the Cherry wood. They

looked like brown curled construction paper. It had taken all morning, but they were able to produce enough boards for the bookshelf. They worked from the plan Conrad had drawn up. He'd surprised his uncle with how detailed it was. He'd known exactly how many screws they would need. Uncle Jacob had helped him adjust the plan a little to compensate for the one-by-twos.

When the time came to drill the holes for the screws, he didn't need any help. His uncle just sat on the steps that led from the garage into the cabin and watched Conrad busy at the worktable. 'Watch ya fingers now, boy, that bit'll go through ya hand clean and easy as it was wood,' was the only advice he'd offered. After the holes were drilled came the true test, Jacob told him.

The pieces had fit together without so much as a millimeter gap. Conrad had followed Jacob's rule strictly: Measure twice, cut once. Before they stained it, he'd told his uncle that he needed to carve her name into it. That hadn't been planned. It just felt right to do. Conrad had found the little dremmel with the quarter inch bit and, after stenciling an outline of her name on the side, had written "JENNIFER" in inch tall letters into the wood. A little later, when he'd gotten the stain all over his fingers his uncle said, 'Boy, you know you done good work, when it don't wash off right away.'

The dry wash-bed led Conrad to a creek tributary that would lead down to the lake. He waded across the creek, slipping a little on a moss lined-rock under the surface. On the other side of the creek, he found a large, gnarled root growing up from under an Oak tree where rains had eroded a little of the hillside away. He sat on the root, scraped mud off his feet with a twig, and thought about his brother.

Saturday, the 22nd

(Afternoon)

It took Jennifer a few minutes to find the extra vodka bottle in the cellar. She had to go to the back wall, where the deep freeze was. There were shelves on either side of the long freezer, and cupboards above it. Jennifer opened the freezer, just to see if he kept this cold, too. There were clear plastic packages of fresh meat, dated yesterday and marked 'hog steak,' half a box of Popsicles, a bucket of vanilla ice cream, but no bottle. She closed the freezer and looked at the shelves. He kept the vodka next to a case of olive oil. She grabbed it and headed back up the stairs.

After placing the bottle in the kitchen freezer, she went to the living room window. She saw he was no longer on the porch. She hadn't heard him come back in the cabin, so she went to the kitchen window. He wasn't out in the garden.

She paced from the kitchen into the living room and back again. She thought about her phone, turned off, at the bottom of her purse. How many calls would Howard make before he went over to her house? Not many, probably. Most times he didn't exhibit much patience.

Jennifer walked out into the backyard. The sun was high overhead. She sat on the concrete steps. She noticed the black spot she'd left from grinding out her cigarette last night. She wondered if she could find his rifle. She got up from the back steps and went back into the house.

Jennifer walked into the bedroom. She glanced at the unmade bed. Where would he keep a rifle? It was big, she remembered. She'd seen him shoot in competitions when they were in high school. She hadn't understood, then, what winning the trophy three years running had meant. She'd known that it was important to him, and that he looked very attractive when he was focused on the target. She remembered him taking the winning shot. The wind picked up his hair a little. He'd cut it short the week before so it wouldn't get in his eyes. He looked calm and removed. His nervousness around others cleared right up. Like there was no crowd at all. No competitors or judges or family. Just Conrad lying flat on the ground with his rifle. And the target at five hundred yards. She'd only known the distance from hearing the judge announce the next event. She couldn't even see it, really, a white dot in front of a green mound. All she knew, watching him, was that he was the first boy she'd ever thought was beautiful.

She looked under the bed and found nothing. She scanned the walls, in case she'd missed a gun rack that she'd kick herself later for not seeing. Just watercolor pictures of flowers his great aunt had done in the last years of her life. A family photograph of Cheryl Ann, Bobby, and the girls. Another picture of his great uncle. They were in wooden frames. She wondered if he'd made them.

She checked in the closet. He didn't own a lot of clothing that needed to be hung up. The rifle was leaning in the back corner. She went to pick it up by the barrel and was astonished at its weight. The rifle slipped from her grip and fell. The stock bounced on the floor and the muzzle put a dent in the paint on the back wall of the closet. Jennifer flinched, expecting it to fire. When it didn't, she winced and moved in to pick it up again, this time with the shoulder strap.

She laid the rifle on the bed lengthwise, muzzle facing the headboard, and stared at it. Where were the bullets? She hadn't seen any in the closet. She pulled out the dresser drawers and looked in each. Conrad's boxers. Socks. Jeans. T-shirts. Winter shirts. Summer shorts. No bullets in the dresser. She went across the hall into his workroom. One armoire in the middle standing on a battered gray drop cloth. There was a small table in the corner with a few brushes for staining lying on top. About ten different cans of varnish underneath the table, and a plastic jug of thinner. The closet in the workroom was bare. Jennifer went back into the bedroom.

She remembered there were a few boxes on the shelf above the clothes rack. One by one she pulled them down. The first contained several pairs of antlers. In the bottom was an animal's skull; she had no idea what species. The second box contained about twenty pornographic magazines. She picked one of them up. She laughed a little. So you're not a monk, she thought. She examined the cover. It showed what was probably a twenty-year-old girl, long black hair, on the skinny side (except for her tits, of course), beckoning to come hither with her index finger. Jennifer put the magazine back and pulled the third box.

There were oil-stained rags, a thin, collapsed, steel rod, and a flat, black plastic box. Next to the plastic box sat a carton of bullets. She grabbed the carton and looked for bullet sizes. She didn't know how to read the information. There were numbers, but several different sets of them. Conrad had called it a 'thirty-aught-six'. Was that the same as the '.30-06' on the carton? Probably it was, she thought. And she didn't think he owned any other guns. So he wouldn't need any other kind of bullets, then. It had to be the right kind. Her hands were shaking, and that made the bullets in the carton rattle.

She looked over at the clock. Twelve-fifteen. She realized she had no idea how to load the rifle. Her hands would stop shaking sooner or later. They had to.

"Fuck," she said and sat on the bed next to the rifle. "Running out on me again, motherfucker," Jennifer yelled at the floor. She put her hands to her head, made fists around her hair and pulled a little. "I can't do this," she said, "I can't fucking do it by myself." Jennifer dropped her hands in her lap, made fists again and beat on her thighs. "Shit-shit-shit-shit-shit you goddamn prick!" she shouted through clenched teeth.

She relaxed her fists and jaw. Closed her eyes and took several deep breaths. She got up from the bed and walked into the kitchen. She got a cloudy glass from the cupboard to the left of the sink and filled it with ice from the freezer. Opened the not-quite-chilled-vodka bottle and poured it over the ice. She took a long draw on the drink, topped it off again, and headed to the bathroom.

She started the water running in the tub. She sat squeezed between it and the toilet, with her back to the wall. She rested her arm on the lip of the bathtub and held her fingers under the water. Last night Conrad had said it would take a while to warm up.

Saturday, the 22nd

(Afternoon)

Johnny liked playing basketball, he remembered. He'd been tall. Six-one, maybe. Lanky, too, like Conrad. He'd been good on the court, too. Good enough for Fayetteville, anyhow. Real competition for the other local schools. He had gone to all of Johnny's games with Mom and Dad and little Cheryl Ann. She'd just been about three,

then, but they brought her whenever she'd behave. Johnny ran up and down the court, sweating. He never stopped moving for the whole game, it seemed. He could steal the ball away from anybody. He'd sneak up on your side and, whoosh, he was headed back up the opposite direction with the ball. He scored more points that way, just stealing it right from under their noses. Johnny knew when to pass the ball, too. He wasn't the best shot from far away, and if he couldn't get in close right away, he's shoot it to somebody who knew to wait for him.

Conrad sat on the gnarled oak root protruding from the hillside. He stared up at the foliage. There were slender Ash trees with their light gray fingerprint-bark, Maple trees shaped almost like an Indian arrowhead, and stout, wide Pecan trees with black and green fruit ready to drop. Much of his life came from the trees. He took from them what he needed to fashion his existence. He listened to a Jay calling from a good way off.

"I know why you came up here, Johnny."

"Why's that, Bro?"

"Cause a Uncle Jake. He made it our home here."

"Yeah. I 'member when we'd crawl up them hills like we was in the Army. Shootin' at each other from 'hind trees with them clothes-pin rubber band guns he made for us."

"We couldn't never relax like that back in Fayetteville. Mom'n Dad always screamin' at each other like that."

Johnny had been his best friend when Conrad was ten. There was a kicking bag in the basement of their house that Johnny had gotten during his one year in Karate. Sometimes he'd show Conrad how to hit the bag, how to kick it. He'd hold the bag while Conrad tried to mimic Johnny's kicks. When Conrad tried to hold the bag for Johnny, his older brother would go easy on him. Conrad would stand back when Johnny told him to and just watch his brother grunt and sweat and shake from the punches he gave. Sometimes Johnny got into fights. That was why he'd gotten kicked out of Karate class. His basketball coach had threatened to throw him off the team if he didn't cut it out. Johnny just laughed it off.

"You was a little crazy. That come with the talent, I guess."

"Little brother, I's never half as crazy as you. 'Stead a tryin' out for basketball, you join the shootin' club. Sounds real normal."

"What was that girls name? The one you brought over to the house all those times? I'd a killed to have your confidence. It was so easy for you."

"Yeah, well, I learned the hard way on that one. Easy come easy go."

He remembered watching Johnny wrestle around with Joann, on their living room floor. He peeked through the spindles of the staircase after they thought he'd gone to bed. Joann laughed and giggled and begged him to stop tickling her. Johnny stuck his tongue in her ear and made her shriek. Joann was on the cheerleading squad. Conrad had seen her in uniform at the games. Johnny had told him, one night, while they were

working on the bag, that he was going to marry her as soon as high school was over. They were going to be happy, he'd see.

"I never had your confidence. I think that hurt me with women. With Jennifer."

"No, buddy boy, if you'd a been me, she'd never a come near you."

"How do you figure?"

"That'n there's a different breed. From what I seen, she got plans for you, and it's cause you got that weakness, that need to be molded, that's why she chose you. Swingin' dick like me, she got no use for."

Johnny got into a fight on the court one night. In the middle of the district semi-finals. A tall player from the other team, taller even than Johnny, knocked his chin with a well-placed elbow. Johnny had tried to steal the ball when the other player was getting ready to shoot a basket. Conrad watched his brother knocked flat on the polished wood. He watched Johnny kick the other player's legs out from under him. Then he saw Johnny climb on top of the player and begin choking him.

That was it. Johnny was off the team. Next day, Joann called to say that they weren't going together anymore. Johnny worked on the bag that night until Conrad went to sleep. Conrad remembered dreaming, that night, that he was the bag. He was inside a clear plastic sack that hung from the ceiling and Johnny was working him over like he would the kicking bag. Conrad had tried to scream in his dream.

"I got the same temper you had."

"You got the same powder-keg, buddy-boy. Difference is long fuse and short fuse."

When Conrad had gotten up in the morning, his parents had already gone to work. Dad left early to be on the construction site by six, and Mom's shift at the diner started at seven. Johnny always dropped him off at school, and Mom took Cheryl Ann to daycare. He figured he'd have to ride his bike when he was finished with breakfast and still hadn't seen his brother. He didn't wait. It was getting a little colder out, and there'd been rain. He didn't want to ride his bike if he didn't have to.

"I was happy, you know. For a while. We were happy, Jen and I. Like you wanted to be with Joann. Lasted almost a year 'for it fell all to shit. I thought we had it."

"Wish I could a seen it."

Conrad watched a large garter snake wind across the wash-bed. He looked at the spot in the low thorn bushes it disappeared into.

Johnny'd been hanging by his neck on the beam where the kicking bag usually was. Conrad walked down the stairs and headed to Johnny's room. He glanced to the side, where his brother worked out. Johnny's toes were one foot above the concrete floor. He'd stood and looked at the back of his brother's head for a long time.

Conrad heard the Jay calling again.

Saturday, the 22nd

(Afternoon)

Jennifer opened her eyes when the door to the bathroom opened. She pulled back the shower curtain a little bit. She reached for her drink on the lip of the tub and knocked it off. She saw the shape on the other side of the curtain move in close, bend down and pick up the glass. She heard the glass clink on the sink porcelain. Then there was the sound of the toilet lid being lowered. The shape on the other side of the clouded curtain sat very near where she was.

"Have a nice walk?" Jennifer asked.

"Very nice," Conrad said. "Would ya like another drink?"

Jennifer scooted up in the tub a bit. She'd fallen asleep and her eyelids were heavy and sore. Her head was beginning to ache.

"Please," she said. He got up and took the glass with him. He closed the door behind him. Jennifer supposed he would see her wet footprints in the hallway. After she'd gotten in the bath, she decided she needed to read something. She couldn't do crossword puzzles this near drunk. She'd gotten out of the tub, nearly slipped twice, and walked, freezing in her towel, into the bedroom where his bookshelf was. She steadied herself on it when she leaned forward to read the spines. Several books on woodworking. Some books on history. Some Louis L'amour paperbacks she didn't give a shit about. There were a few more fiction books with the library barcodes still on them. A dictionary. A farmer's almanac. A guide to home appliance repair. A guide to gun

repair. Jennifer had sighed and grabbed a magazine out of the box she'd pulled down from the closet.

She let some of the lukewarm water out while he was gone making her a drink, then turned on the hot tap. She scooted back down and closed her eyes again, allowing the warmth to creep up her body. She thought about the first time she'd fucked Conrad.

She'd loved the house her family had moved into in Fayetteville. A hundred times more than the trailer in St. Louis. Her dad accepted a promotion to floor manager at the new plant in Fayetteville. The two-story house was the result of his raise. Most of all, Jennifer loved her room. Her very own that she didn't have to share with her little brother. She decorated the walls with posters of movies and rock stars. "Young Guns" and Madonna were her favorites.

Her parents had been at a church retreat. Her brother was at a soccer game in West Fork. She skipped practice that afternoon so she could bring Conrad up to her room, where she was most comfortable, and not have to worry about interruptions.

She hadn't told him what her plans were. He blushed nearly purple when she said what she wanted. They'd done just about everything else that either could think of in the back of his old pickup. She'd never had to buy condoms before. She would have had him pick them up, but she wanted it to be a surprise.

"You know how to put one on?" she asked him.

"Sure I do," he said. "Well, I can figure it out, anyhow."

Jennifer hadn't known if it was impolite to watch. She wanted to, and he didn't object. Conrad struggled with it at first.

"Shit," he said, tearing the first one with clumsy fingers. Jennifer laughed. She tried to stop herself, but couldn't.

"I'm sorry," she said, putting a hand over her mouth. "I don't mean it."

Conrad looked up at her, still blushing, sweating from embarrassment. He grinned. "It is kinda funny," he said. "Like water-balloon wars when I was a kid. You had to fit the balloon over the spigot to fill it up and sometimes it'd tear."

They laughed a little, and he had gone back to the task at hand. Jennifer lay down and looked up at him.

"You worried?" she asked.

"Bout what?" he asked, not looking up.

"I don't know," she said. "I heard it's supposed to hurt some."

It had.

Then, after a bit, it got a lot better.

Jennifer sat up again as Conrad opened the bathroom door. She leaned forward and turned off the faucet. She settled back against the tile on the wall. He sat on the toilet lid again. She heard the ice move in the drink he'd brought her as he took a sip.

"You gonna give me that drink?" she asked.

"In a minute," he said. "Nice reading material you have there."

She'd let the magazine she'd been reading drop onto the bathmat by the tub.

"I needed something to take my mind off it. You know? If you had a television, that wouldn't a been a problem. And fuck Louis L'amour," Jennifer said.

"Still readin' them mysteries?" he asked.

"Not readin' much at all, lately, except for portfolios and ad proposals and budget projections and small business tax bullshit."

"Find anything good in there?" Conrad asked, joking.

"Oh, sure. Lots a good articles. High quality short fiction," she said, running with the joke. "In fact, there was one story about a girl who loses her cherry to a United States postal worker. Stays home from school and seduces the mailman."

"And does he deliver?" he asked. They both chuckled.

They were both quiet for a moment. Jennifer heard him take another sip from her drink. She pulled back the shower curtain just enough to make eye contact.

"You gonna hand that over or what?" she asked.

"I told you already. In a minute."

Jennifer scooted back down in the tub and looked up at the ceiling. She left the curtain open a little. "That shitty little story got me thinkin' bout our first time. Remember?"

"Sure."

"And you were so careful. So gentle. You felt bad that it hurt at the start. Remember how you got scared when you saw the blood after?" she asked.

"Yeah. I didn't know how much of it there'd be. I thought I'd done something wrong. I thought I'd damaged you somehow," he said, "couldn't figure it."

"You didn't worry so much after that," she said.

"Per your request. You didn't want a worrier," he said. He stood up, pulled back the shower curtain, and looked down at her.

"Somethin' you want?" Jennifer asked, looking up at him. He opened his hand and she saw her cell phone resting on his palm. He knelt down and handed it to her.

She sat up and took the phone from him.

"Turn on your phone. See if he's left you a message. Call him back if he has," Conrad said. Jennifer looked at her small phone, silver and flat, in her wet fingers.

"This mean you're gonna…" she hesitated. "You're gonna do it?" Jennifer felt the heat slowly leaving the bathwater.

"Check it. Call him if he's left you a message. Then you can have your drink," he said. She leaned toward him and stopped when their foreheads were an inch apart. She swallowed hard. Her eyes were watering. She closed them. Shivered a little.

"Connie, I," she started, but couldn't think of anything to say.

"Don't worry," he said.