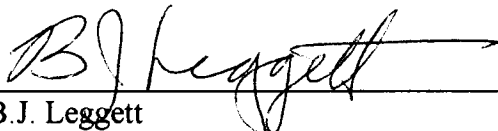


To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting here within a thesis written by William O. Maddux entitled "Savage Gulf: A Novella." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of a Master of Arts, with a major in English.


Allen Wier, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:


B.J. Leggett


Arthur Smith

Accepted for the Council:


Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of the Graduate School

SAVAGE GULF:
A NOVELLA

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

William O. Maddux
May 1998

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Lastly, I would like to thank my parents, Owen and Bonnie Maddux. Without their trust and belief I would have never reached this moment.

ABSTRACT

This novella is a study of two things: a person and a place.

The Person: Frank Cordell, through whose consciousness the events are narrated, is an aristocratic and sheltered young man who grew up in Atlanta, Georgia and went to high school outside Boston, Massachusetts. Though he is twenty-eight-years-old he has yet to actually grow up. The novella picks up shortly after he loses a teaching job in Atlanta and begins immediately after he meets Shelby Alexander, a young girl who has come to Grundy County from Bloomington, Indiana. It is because of the mystery of Shelby's character and the mystery that surrounds her disappearance that Frank discovers who he is, who his family is, and what his connection is to this place.

The Place: Grundy County, Tennessee, perhaps the most isolated and stubbornly beautiful locals in the state. Set high on the Cumberland Plateau, the landscape is a mix of small towns, pine forests, isolated hamlets and deep fractures in the plateau called Gulfs, the largest of which, Savage Gulf, is enclosed within South Cumberland State Park. Reflecting the landscape, the local residents are secretive, holding on to such things as family feuds and past events. Because of the environment in which they live, they are timebound – that is to say, their circumstances dictate that they spend the majority of their lives hewing a living out of this rocky and windswept place.

PREFACE

It is with great pleasure that I present this thesis entitled "Savage Gulf: A Novella" in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts Degree with a major in English and an emphasis in Creative Writing.

As a fiction writer I have always been primarily interested in two things: people and places, and "Savage Gulf" is in essence a study of these. The person is a young man named Frank Cordell, and the novella attempts to show how Frank portrays himself to the world. In literary terminology this is called narrative reliability, and what I hope to have created with Frank is a narrator whom the reader does not initially find reliable but with whom the reader comes to a sort of understanding with as the plot unfolds. The place is Grundy County, Tennessee, and the communities of Altamont and Beersheeba Springs. The county is a backwater in every sense of the word, but it is also one of the most stubbornly beautiful places in the South, and I hope that I have been able to convey that beauty -- the flat, windswept mountaintop, the dangerous grandeur of Savage Gulf.

My preoccupation with people and place, combined with the fact that my settings are almost always Southern and my characters almost always Southerners, places me squarely within the camp of the Southern Writers. Yet it is a label I have resisted since it was first applied back when I was taking undergraduate writing courses. At that time I thought that to be called a "Southern Writer" meant that I would have to concern myself with questions of race and morality, of class conflict and regional obsessions. In other words, I thought that to be called a "Southern Writer" one had to write like William Faulkner. That is to say, in complicated prose and splintered narratives.

I was wrong, of course. One of the first courses I had here at the University of Tennessee showed me the error of my thinking -- that Southern writing is as universal as it is regional. That course also introduced me to a writer by the name of Peter Taylor, a Tennessean by birth and by vocation who wrote stories that were stylistically nothing like Faulkner's but every bit as Southern. Another writer we read was Lee Smith, a contemporary novelist whose novels I had always read as explorations of points of view

and not inherently Southern. I began to reconsider the label.

Before I continue I think I must first define the label. What is a “Southern Writer”? There is, of course, no easy answer to this question – literary critics and writers have argued this point for several decades but always seem to return to the initial observations of C. Hugh Holman, who, in his “Introduction” to Three Modes of Southern Fiction: Ellen Glasgow, William Faulkner, and Thomas Wolfe (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1966, p 8), wrote:

In other places I have argued that there exists a group of literary characteristics, some sizeable accumulation of which constitutes a “Southern Literary Tradition”; and I have been insistent, too, that Ellen Glasgow and Thomas Wolfe belong to that tradition as clearly as William Faulkner does. Among these characteristics are a sense of evil, a pessimism about man’s potential, a tragic sense of life, a deep-rooted sense of the interplay of past and present, a peculiar sensitivity to time as a complex element in narrative art, a sense of place as a dramatic dimension, and a thoroughgoing belief in the intrinsic value of art as an end in itself, with the attendant Aristotelian concerns with forms and techniques. In varying degrees, each of these three novelists [Ellen Glasgow, William Faulkner, and Thomas Wolfe] represent a significantly large combination of these traits; yet none of them would have been happy to be thus lumped together, and all of them would probably endorse Flannery O’Conner’s irritated assertion that “The woods are full of regional writers, and it is the great horror of every serious Southern writer that he will become one of them.”

Holman’s collection of characteristics may be as close as literary critics will ever come to a thumbnail definition of the genre, for Southern Literature was not created for a generation but rather evolved over time (and, indeed, is continuing to evolve). Holman’s definition also brings up an important point: when defining a literary genre, it is necessary to build a certain amount of elasticity into the definition. For example, T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams wrote very different poetry, but they all three belong to the Modernist school of poetry. And just as the genre definition of Modernism must take into consideration those three very different poets, the definition of Southern Literature must, by the very nature of what it attempts to define, be elastic, able to encompass an incredibly diverse assortment of writers. Southern Literature rose in the late-Romantic era novels of George Washington Cable and Charles W. Chestnutt,

continued to develop in the late-Naturalist/early-Modern novels Kate Chopin and Ellen Glasgow, reached its height in the High Modern narratives of William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Thomas Wolfe and the Southern Renaissance of Robert Penn Warren and Peter Taylor, yet remains today a viable and vibrant genre with the contemporary novelists Kaye Gibbons, Lee Smith, and Earnest Gains. Faulkner, in fact, might be the only writer who can fulfill every element of Holman's definition; for myself, I cannot claim more than half of Holman's definition.

Yet that fact does not make this thesis any less a part of the genre than Lee Smith's Oral History or Peter Taylor's A Summons to Memphis; quite the opposite, in fact, for those are the two Southern writers, more than any others, within whose shadows I am working.

Peter Taylor was born in Trenton, Tennessee, in 1917, and – except for a brief stay in St. Louis – was raised in Memphis. Taylor attended Kenyon College in Ohio and maintained a nomadic existence for the rest of his life, yet he continually set his stories in the Middle and West Tennessee towns and cities where he grew up. The people he wrote about were almost exclusively members of the old aristocratic order who had, at the height of the Great Depression, moved to the cities of Nashville and Memphis. Generally speaking, Taylor's characters are either the "widows" left behind in the small Tennessee towns or the businessmen, their wives, children, and servants. Both are forced to reconcile the almost feudal society in which they were raised with the mercantile society in which they now lived. This was a society resistant to change; the old order held sway over the new lifestyles, and societal conflict – especially generational – arose. In his stories Taylor chronicled these conflicts, but his narratives are complicated by the dual facts that they are almost always told retrospectively (i.e. as memories) and that his narrators almost always carry a degree of unreliability. Time is a complex element of Taylor's narrative art because the events being recounted are overshadowed by the knowledge, in the narrator's mind, of how those events came to a close.

Like Taylor, Lee Smith was also born in a small Southern town – Grundy, Virginia – but to a later generation. In effect, she is the daughter of the people who inhabited

Taylor's world. And like Taylor, Smith sets her stories in the area she grew up: the hardscrabble mountain towns and hamlets of southwestern Virginia. But Smith's characters are not the last of the Southern aristocracy; rather, she focuses the coal miners and subsistence farmers who might have traveled beyond the next mountain, and through these characters Smith explores the insular nature of the community, the mistrust of outsiders, and the ultimate effects of this stagnation upon the characters. Unlike Taylor, what complicates Smith's narratives is not the fact that they are told from a single point of view but rather from a number of points of view. At the same time, she does not focus on a specific year or three of a narrator's life, but rather encompasses an entire lifetime of a community. Events that occurred twenty, fifty, even a hundred years in the past still influence the lives of the characters in the present. The very nature of Smith's use multiple narratives demand that the individual narrator's maintain absolute reliability, that they tell the truth of events as they saw it. But that is what complicates the narrative, for each character has his or her own version of events – a version of events that will be contradicted by the next narrator.

"Savage Gulf: A Novella" does not employ multiple narrators, nor does it concentrate on generational conflict or the shift from an agrarian society to one that is mercantile. So it cannot be said that this thesis is purely an outgrowth of my reading of Lee Smith or Peter Taylor. Rather, the novella is a combination of the two. From the influence of Taylor I have taken the single, retrospective narrator who's reliability must be questioned from the outset. It is also from Taylor that I have taken the narrator's background – by birth Frank Cordell is a member of the Atlanta aristocracy. But it is from the influence of Lee Smith that I have learned the description of the place and the people who inhabit that place. Altamont and Beersheba Springs are insular places where the people are more concerned with day-to-day living than they are with broader, philosophical questions of life. And it is also from the model of Lee Smith's Oral History from which I have taken the key to this novella: a young girl named Shelby Alexander. Like Dory Cantrell, Shelby is something of an outsider in the place (though by birth rather than temperament), welcomed as a member of the society but always on her own terms. It

is around her disappearance that the novella hinges.

What is more, "Savage Gulf: A Novella" can be placed within the tradition of Southern Literature as a whole. For Frank Cordell, the past does not just influence the present, it inhabits the present. The place in which the novella is set is not some nameless modern city or countryside, but a very peculiar place, with its own characteristics that shape the character's lives. And the shape of the text, with each of the three sections being both physically longer and narratively more complex than the former seems to dovetail with the literary ideals of the past masters.

I hope you will not only read but enjoy my thesis, "Savage Gulf: A Novella." I started with a place, a person, and, before it was all over, a story exploded onto the page.

*Will Maddux
Knoxville, Tennessee
April 27, 1998*

SAVAGE GULF: A NOVELLA

Part I

1.

TWO MILES OR SO NORTH OF TRACY CITY I SAW HER, walking along the shoulder of the highway with her head down and her hands shoved deep in her pockets, so I stopped, offered her a ride. Maybe it was because the morning edition of the *Journal-Constitution* was predicting a light snow for the area later in the afternoon, or because the backpack she carried looked heavy, or because she was wearing nothing more than jeans and a thin windbreaker, or maybe it was that I didn't think a young girl should be out walking by herself. The truth however, is that I stopped because I wanted somebody to talk to. Since leaving Atlanta at eleven the only other person I'd said a word to was the clerk at the Golden Gallon in Chattanooga, where I'd topped the tank, gotten a Coke – and said "Thanks."

Deciding and braking were simultaneous. Didn't bother to check the rearview – I drive with one eye on the mirrors at all times, hadn't seen another car in ten minutes.

She stopped walking, startled, and stared as I dropped the transmission into reverse. Like a deer, she watched, wary, ready to light out for the woods at the slightest hint of danger. There was a measure of relief, I think for both of us, when I lowered the window and asked, "Need a ride?"

Dark hair spilled out from under her hood as she bent down to the window. "Where you headed?" she asked in a voice that was deep and musical.

I gestured at the road. "Same direction you are."

She glanced at the sky, the road ahead, and shrugged. "Okay," she said, opening the door and slinging her backpack into the floorboards. It landed with a thump and a rattle.

In the rearview, a rusty red pick-up appeared over a rise. The driver slowed as he passed, then hit the gas. For some reason I waved – probably because I was in the country and that was what my parents taught me to do when I was in the country.

“You know him?” the girl she asked, slamming the door.

“Nope,” I said, pulling the car back onto the road.

“Didn’t think you did.”

“Why?”

“Cause you got Georgia plates.”

Her blue eyes met mine, and I looked away, feeling – dirty, like I was doing something wrong. The way she held her body did that to me – proud yet vulnerable, powerful yet powerless. I felt like I was looking at a woman in a bar, appraising her attractiveness, thinking about hitting on her, and then realizing she was my sister. To cover my embarrassment, I asked, “Where you from?”

“Not here.” A pause. “Where you going, anyway?”

“Beersheba Springs,” I said.

The girl – for that, I could now see, was all she was, a girl roughly around the age of seventeen – laughed. “Beersheba Springs,” she said, pronouncing it *Birsh-I-ba*, “not Beer-sheba. You say Beer-sheba and no one will know where the hell you’re talking about.” She glanced out the window; I checked the review, then looked back at her. Her coat, I realized, was but one of those space age, ultra thin backpacker’s parkas. On her left breast a few white threads still hung where *The North Face*’s logo had been. “But that’s okay,” she said with a shrug. “There’s a Mom and Pop convenience store just south of town where you can let me out.”

Her laughter put me at ease, and I glanced at the map in the floorboards, folded to show this place called Grundy County. “You were going to walk the whole way?” I asked, disbelieving.

The girl looked me over. Her blue eyes were cold, calculating, and conveyed an intelligence that I didn’t expect, not from a girl I picked up on the roadside here in on a Tennessee mountaintop. Then she looked back out the window, at the pines. “Nope. Knew someone’d give me a ride sooner or later.”

“So,” I said, “you do this often.”

“What? I do what often?”

“Hitchhike.”

For thirty, forty seconds she didn’t answer. Instead she picked my cigarettes up out of the console. “You mind?”

Yes, I started to say. But something – perhaps the knowledge that it wasn’t *my* job to enforce the rules anymore – held me back. I shook my head.

She pulled one out of the pack, held it between long fingers, manicured but unpainted nails. “Lighter?”

I flipped down the ashtray, punched the electric lighter.

“That’ll work,” she said, laughing lightly. “And no, I don’t hitch. Not very often, at least. Every now and then, when father needs the car. Like today – he’s out of town. After school I caught a ride to Tracy City with a friend. Only been walking ‘bout an hour when you stopped.”

“What does he do? Your father, I mean?”

“He’s a teacher,” she said, holding her hand over the electric lighter. When it popped, she grabbed it. Gave a slight cough with the first drag. So was I, I thought.

“Not a smoker, are you?” I asked, cracking both the electric windows.

“I smoke every now and then,” she said, scratching her throat. “The first one always hits me hard.”

“You ought to quit,” I muttered. “Now, when you’re young and it’s easy.”

“You sound like my father,” she said, sounding disappointed, a little insulted.

For the next five minutes the girl riffled through my CDs in the floorboards. Finally she help one up. “I haven’t heard this one in a while. You mind?”

I looked. Mediski, Martin, and Wood – their first album. “Sure,” I said, surprised that she actually knew of the acid-jazz trio. She pushed the disk into the stereo, thumbed the beat. Drums, bass, and an organ played as the highway rose and fell. In the hollows were oaks and poplars, on the windswept rises they gave way to overgrown fields of scrub pines. No hay fields, just open pastures, more weeds than grass. On the left was a homemade wooden sign. Welcome to Coalmont, Population 1,200.

Coalmont wasn’t much different from Tracy City – both are what my father would

call 'a wide place in the road.' Which is not quite accurate – both towns are somewhat more than that. A small supermarket with a mostly empty parking lot, a café, a video store, a hundred or so houses in various stages of repair, immaculate baseball fields, and an ultra-modern, brightly lit, gloomily cheerful, convenience store.

There was only one stoplight in Coalmont – Tracy City had two – but of course we caught it. Sitting there, waiting for no one, I took another glance at the girl and noticed a change – before, her attitude had been that of a smart-ass teenager. Waiting, held in arrest by the stoplight, she was crouched down in the seat, sullen, almost angry – or, possibly, scared, like she was hiding. Her clawed hand held her cigarette, her body language screamed, Don't talk, just go. The light changed, and I floored it.

The further we got from town the more she relaxed, and soon she was the same as before. "What's your name?" she asked as we passed the burned-out remains of what was probably had been a roadside tavern.

"Frank," I said, "Frank Cordell. What's yours?"

"Shelby," she said. "Why you moving to The Springs?"

My heart skipped a beat. "Huh? How'd you know that?"

"Educated guess," she said, and thumbed at the backseat. "Most people just pack suitcases to go on vacation, don't travel with the entire wardrobe on hangers in the backseat." She breathed a laugh. "The grocery sacks in the floorboards are a good clue as well."

"Oh." I'd hadn't thought about that. Half my wardrobe – everything except for my suits – was piled in the backseat. The night before I'd bought enough food to last two weeks. "I'm going to stay at my uncle's place for a while," I said.

"Who's your uncle?"

"Earl Cordell."

"Can't say I know him – Wait," Shelby stopped, scrunched her face, "isn't he dead?"

"Yeah – passed away late last October. His cabin's been empty since then. I don't have anything to do for a while, thought I'd move in, fix the place up."

"What do you mean? Don't you have a job?"

"No – I lost it."

"You got fired."

"No," I said. "I resigned." The difference was about five minutes, but, to me, it was important – resigning had allowed me to keep my pride.

"Oh," she said. The question on her face said she wanted to ask about it, but she hesitated. I appreciated that. "How long you planning on staying?"

"I don't know – it depends. Few weeks, maybe longer."

"Depends on what?"

"How much I like my uncle's cabin."

"No girlfriend?"

I glanced at her. "Why?"

"Just asking," she said, her tone mock-defensive.

"Well – I'm sort of seeing someone." I paused, reached for my cigarettes. "It's a weird situation," I said.

"Most are," she said, and laughed – easy, full. She was pretty when she laughed. Pretty all the time, now that I mention it, though that's not what was important about her. That was her self-possession, the sense of involved detachment she had with the world, like she was standing above us all, yet at the same time right beside me. "Do tell."

"It's a long story."

"We've got about a half hour," she said. "Might as well talk about something."

"You sure you want to hear it?"

"Yes," she said, laughing. "I'd like to know how come you're single."

"All right," I said, but I could have just easily said No. But no one had been willing to listen to my particular situation for several weeks – in fact, they were rather sick of the details of my life. 'Oh, Frank,' Jennifer – that's my sister – had said a few days ago, 'Why can't you just get over her?' Which was not any kind of advice, but a less-than-well-disguised method of making me shut up. Now, however, I had a captive audience, but more than that – I had an audience who seemed genuinely interested. "Her name's

Claire,” I said, “Claire Shillelagh. Or, at least, it was.”

Shelby’s chin dropped. “What kind of name is that?”

“Irish. Her great- grandfather came over back around the turn of the century.”

“So,” she said, stealing another of my cigarettes, “first things first – where’d you meet?” I noticed that this time she hadn’t bothered to ask, and that the omission didn’t bother me – I was amazed at how disarming she was.

“High school, sophomore year. Boarding school, outside Boston. I started my sophomore year – got in some trouble back in Atlanta the year before. Nothing, really, got arrested for public intox at a concert downtown. My Mom freaked, shipped me off to a boarding school in Mass.”

“Which is where you met Claire – say her last name again?”

“Shillelagh. But it’s not her last name anymore, hasn’t been for several years.”

“What’s she like? No – let me guess. Beautiful, with red hair and a fiery temper.”

I laughed. “Red hair, no. A temper, yes. But she’s not what you would call beautiful – long, dark hair and an occasional smile that never failed to make me dizzy. I mean, sure, her looks were what attracted me to her at first, but it wasn’t what made me want to stay with her, or what made me fight so hard to keep her. That was her intelligence, the simple fact that she was – is – smarter than me by a long shot. In a way, you remind me of her.”

The girl turned to me, stunned. “What?”

“Well, the way you’re dressed, for one thing – jeans, burgundy V-necked sweater over that white turtleneck. Except the hiking boots – Claire never would wear hiking boots. Its casual, and looks thoughtless without being thoughtless. More than that, though. From the way you talk, the words you use – I can tell you’re smart, that you have a lot of self-confidence.” What you don’t have, I didn’t say, is a touch of something that, for that first semester until I got to know Claire and her friends better, I called arrogance.

“So what happened? Why’d you break up?”

“Whoa,” I coughed, “slow down. Let me explain something first. Claire’s not just my ex-girlfriend from high school. We also dated through three years of college, and

she's the number one reason I became a teacher, why I ended up where I am today. Here in the metaphysical sense, not the physical, I mean. I did that to myself. When I met her my thoughts for college were no more than following my older brother Sam and the rest of the my cousins to Emory, where at I would have majored in Sigma Alpha Epsilon or Kappa Sig and minored in some form of business. After that I would have gone to work for my father's company, Davis Brothers Real Estate. In sheer numbers it's the second largest firm in Atlanta. Claire and I used to laugh about the coincidence, but I will say this: it gave me a certain advantage with her father."

"What coincidence?"

"Mr. Shillelagh also runs a real estate firm."

"I'll bet," Shelby said with a slight sign. "My boyfriend and my father have nothing in common."

"You said your father was a teacher?"

"Yeah – he's a professor down at Sewanee – Economics. He spends all day reading and running numbers on his computer. And Michael plays baseball, so you can imagine. But go on."

"Okay - well, Claire was the one who got me interested in the North Carolina and Virginia schools – the fact that she'd gotten early acceptance to UVA was a factor, I admit. But at the same time I was well aware that no amount of praying was going to get me into UVA. I ended up at Wake Forest, six and a half hours from Charlottesville. Eventually the distance just wore us out. For a time we remained friends – that is, right up until the Saturday before graduation when she came down to Winston-Salem for one last visit. I took her out to dinner, of course, and in my own roundabout style was telling tell her I'd gotten into Bloomington when I noticed the ring on her finger. That was how she broke the news of her engagement. The ceremony was scheduled for the month after graduation; she wanted to include me by letting me be an usher."

"Ouch."

"No kidding. At the time, I didn't know it was Claire's idea – I thought it was Tom's. That's her ex, Tom Hammonds. His family's claim to fame is that they're related

to Edgar Alan Poe. Anyway, I perceived an insult, and it was too much to bear. I wish I could say I swallowed my pride and played my part, but I can't. Instead, I was drunk on Bourbon Street with a fraternity brother who lives in the Garden District. I have no memory of that night, though he does. The way he tells it, I picked a fight with some Texans and nearly got us both killed."

She didn't laugh at my story. Normally, when I tell this story, people do – it distracts them. The fact that she wasn't distracted upset me – for some reason, I wanted to make an impression on this girl, let her know that, despite some of the things I've done, I'm after all a decent human being. "Three months later I was in Bloomington, a thousand miles from Claire and Tom. They'd moved to Baltimore--"

"Let me guess – you lost track of her."

"Not exactly," I said. "We talked, every now and then." Less than ten times, I didn't say, and she called me each time. The whole time I was in Bloomington – sixteen months, to be exact – I never once picked up the phone. I sent the occasional short, pithy letter, nothing more.

"We started talking on a more regular basis when I moved back to Atlanta," I said, neglecting to add again that during the first two years I taught American History at Buckhead Academy I actually talked to her no more than five or six times a year. Usually I would just say 'I'm sorry, but I've got papers to grade' and promise to call back in a few days. Occasionally I did, but not often.

"But we really didn't start talking again until last October. A Friday night." I was, believe it or not, grading exams, but for once I didn't use that as an excuse. A stack of a ninety or so high school exams will chew up an evening, turn the thought-process to sludge. "We talked for close to two hours, reminded each other of the old high school stories, laughing all the while at how stupid and naive we were back then. Then she dropped this on me: I want to come see you."

"Why?"

"That's what I should have asked," I said, "instead of When? like I did. She took me by surprise." Her reason was that she needed some room to think. And when she said

Please, there just wasn't any way I could say no. The silence that followed the word was just loaded. I felt as though she would start crying if I said anything but Yes.

"She was leaving him, wasn't she."

"Yes, she was." And when she came down, I got two shocks: a baby boy, named Franklin, aged nineteen months. ("Officially, after his father's favorite uncle," was all Claire would say.) The second waited until I got them into the car, but not before I'd driven out of the garage."

"So she left him, for you," Shelby said.

"I seriously doubt *that* was her intention," I said. "I mean, she brought her son."

"Where is she now?" the girl asked, obviously a little taken aback at the emotion in my voice..

"Claire? Boston. She works at a bank there."

"You don't sound very sure of that."

"I'm not – night before last, when I called her house, she wasn't there. Her mother said she'd moved in with her aunt."

"Why?"

"Claire's mother gave her two weeks to get out of the house."

Shelby turned to me, surprise – horror? – in her eyes. But even she was not as stunned as I'd been – Mrs. Shillelagh hadn't just told me Claire had moved out, but in a rather chilling tone of voice had informed me that 'Claire doesn't live here anymore.'

'Did she go back to him?' I asked her mother, disbelieving.

'No,' the woman had said, 'worse, my sister took her in.'

"Claire's mother is Old School," I said, conscious that it sounded like I was defending Mrs. Shillelagh. I wasn't – in truth, I never really cared for her. Unlike me, Claire *was* the perfect child – her mother was the reason Claire, and later her sister, were at boarding school. Having children didn't fit into Mrs. Shillelagh's lifestyle. "We used to joke that Claire and her brothers were the adopted children of her father's non-existent mistress."

It took the girl a few seconds to catch the joke. When she did, she smiled, wry.

"But seriously – where we stand right now – I have no idea."

"Don't want to get involved, do you?"

I shot her a glance. "Excuse me?"

"Get involved. With her kid."

"Oh," I said, relaxing my grip on the wheel. My mother had asked the same question. "Well, 'the kid,' as you called him, does complicate things. Franklin's funny – I like him."

She was searching for something in her backpack. "How many times have you seen him?" she asked.

"Twice. That weekend was the first. The second was right after Christmas. I went to Boston for New Years."

The girl stopped what she was doing and glanced around her. "Oh," she muttered. "Hey – what kind of car is this?"

"Sorry?"

"What kind of car is this?"

"Mazda. MX-6. Why you ask?"

"Friend of mine has one a lot like this, 'cept his is a Ford, and doesn't have leather seats. Lives right up there, as a matter of fact," she said, pointing to a tree line road off to the left. A sign on stacked stone to the right said Greeter's Falls Estates. "His uncle loaned it for him a few months ago." She shrugged. "One of those permanent kind of loans, I think. How much you pay for this one?"

"I got a deal that was too good to pass up," I said.

She smiled, like she had me caught. "Your father gave it to you, huh?"

"No, I paid for it."

"With who's money?" She asked, sharp.

"Mine," I said, a little too smug. "Trust fund my grandfather left me." I slowed the car at the base of the hill, crossing a creek.

"I figured you were rich."

"What the hell gave you that idea?"

‘Jesus, Frank, look at yourself,’ she said, pausing to light another cigarette. “Khakis, Oxford shirt – only time anyone around here except for the Sewanee and St. Andrews kids wears those is Sunday morning. Birkenstock clogs – I mean, only the college kids wear those. They call them Jesus Cruisers. CD player, CDs all over the floorboards–

“Just because I have some nice things doesn’t mean I’m rich. Hell, doesn’t even mean it’s all *paid* for–”

“And listen to yourself, will you?” she said, and she raised her voice an octave. “‘My father runs the second largest real estate firm in Atlanta.’ ‘When I got kicked out of private school in Atlanta my parents shipped me off to boarding school in Massachusetts.’ ‘I could have gone to Emory and partied for four years – mind you, I would have had a job waiting for me after graduation – but instead I went to Wake Forest. After *that* I went to graduate school in Bloomington–’ I mean, shit!”

“I didn’t get kicked out of the Academy,” I said, my voice cold. “I withdrew. Besides, you asked.”

“I asked about you and Claire. I didn’t ask for the story of your life.”

“You asked about Claire. I had to tell you all the rest so you’d understand why the situation’s so odd,” I said.

Shelby flicked the cigarette, half-smoked, out the window. “I’ll forgive you, but I’ll give you a hint. The way you dress – you’re not from here, so you can get away with that. You’re not going to fit in around here anyway. But if you want to make some friends, you better keep your mouth shut. Don’t tell them how great your life was before you got here – they’ll be jealous as hell, won’t have anything to do with you.”

“Sound’s like you know that from personal experience.”

“In a way, I do.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“I didn’t want to come here. When I arrived I thought I’d landed in the middle of nowhere – and I let everyone know it. That’s all.”

Obviously, there was more to it than that. But she didn’t volunteer anything, and I

didn't push her. For a few miles she just stared blankly at the curves in the road ahead. But not too blankly – there was a sadness in her eyes, tugging at the corners of her mouth, a sadness I could just barely see.

"This is Altamont, right?" I asked a few minutes later, fingering the map.

She had to clear her throat. "Yeah– You ever heard the term 'wide place in the road'? Well, Altamont's the true definition. A café, a family run grocery, and a courthouse." She shrugged. "Funny thing, though – it's the county seat."

"Weird," I said, looking in the rearview. We'd passed through the town during the small space of time during which she was talking – I hadn't even touched the brakes.

"Well, there's more to it than you can see from the highway," she said. "Hey – slow down. This turn's dangerous."

She was right – it was banked wrong. The G-forces wanted to throw the car across the oncoming lane, into a stand of hardwoods. Oaks, maples, popular – the first real stand of trees other than pines I'd seen in twenty minutes.

Shelby was looking over her shoulder, blocking the rearview. "Every winter somebody gets killed back there."

"I thought you said you weren't from around here."

"I'm not."

"But you live here."

Shelby glanced at me. I had the distinct impression that her opinion of me had just fallen a notch. Not that it should have mattered, but it did.

"Weren't you listening?" she asked, "I live in the area, but I'm not from here. Around here, they believe that if you're grandparents weren't coal miners then you have no claim on the area whatsoever. But, yeah, I know the place pretty well – hell, I've walked almost all of it."

Driving through several turns and a switchback, I stole a glance at her feet – her hiking boots, I realized, were worn, and the backpack beside them looked like it had seen some use. Eyes back on the road, up ahead and to the right, I saw another stand of hardwoods, realized how few trees other than pines there were between Tracy City and

Altamont. We rounded one final curve.

“There’s the Market,” she said, pointing. “I appreciate the ride.”

“No problem,” I said, pulling into the parking lot. “You need a ride back south? I could meet you—”

“No,” she said, “I’ve meeting a friend.”

“Okay.”

Before the car was even stopped she opened the door, grabbed her backpack. The straps and buckles jangled as she jumped out. “Thanks again,” she said as she slammed the door. “See you ‘round.”

2.

TEN MINUTES AFTER DROPPING SHELBY AT THE MARKET I found my uncle's cabin. As I'd expected, it wasn't too difficult – my father's directions of the night before had been so simple I hadn't even bothered to write them down: Second right past Eagleton Market, through the four way, half-mile to the next-to-last cabin on the right. Getting people to the house in Atlanta is three times as difficult and usually entails a hand-drawn map mailed several days in advance, which pretty much kills any chance for a spontaneous visit. Then again, I realized as I pulled into the loose-gravel drive, being hard to find can be a good thing.

'Cabin,' of course, can mean anything. My father, for example, calls the company's beach house on Jekyll Island the 'cabin' despite the fact that it has six bedrooms, a billiards room, and a full bar. But that one is used as much for business as it is for pleasure. Uncle Earl's cabin in the mountains is just that – a cabin in the mountains. A sagging, single-story L-shaped building with a small front porch and a screened porch on the back. By all rights, it should be made of logs, but it's not. Vinyl siding that might have once been white but by now was mildew green covered what were probably clapboard walls.

I unlocked the door, stepped inside. To my right was an undersized den/library complete with a cast-iron stove in the corner; to my left a kitchen that belonged in an efficiency apartment at best. Between the den and the kitchen a short hallway opened, leading to two undersized bedrooms and the bathroom. Clearly the bedrooms were intended for nothing more than sleeping and the storage of clothing, and I would have chosen the larger of the two if not for the fact that all my uncle's clothes still hung in the closet, laundered dress shirts still in their protective sleeves. But there was a desk in the smaller bedroom where I could set up my computer, so I headed back into the den, thinking I might check out CNN.

One problem – no television. Standing in the center of the den, I stared at the spot where the glass box should have been and tried to remember if my parents had mentioned bringing one back to Atlanta. I remember them bringing a pistol and shotgun, but no

television. I collapsed into an easy chair.

From the outside the place had looked tiny, but inside it wasn't so bad. Small, certainly, but it didn't have that claustrophobia-inducing-closeness that my dorm rooms had, years ago. I think it was the furniture – spare, simple. To my right the stove was small, glass-fronted, and in the corner, so it didn't dominate the room. Opposite me, along the bedroom wall, ran a frayed couch, green burlap. The velour chair I was sitting in half-faced the stove and was complimented by a heavy end table. An antique, certainly, though devalued somewhat by dark water stains the size and shape of silver dollars. I turned on the hurricane lamp.

Three walls of the den had built-in bookshelves, the height of a chair-rail, and the neatness of the books drew me out of the chair. They were divided and sub-divided by topic and arranged alphabetically by author or state. Travelogues dominated the wall behind the couch, which didn't surprise me – when Uncle Earl used to come down for a few days each Christmas before he got sick he'd bring a new photo album and spend an evening narrating stories about the places he'd been that year. My father had said he had a talent for finding quiet, picturesque, out-of-the-way places. Fiction dominated the wall behind the chair – my uncle's tastes ran towards Conrad – along with some accounting manuals and some state and federal tax guidelines that were stored on the third.

Fingering the leftover artifacts of my uncle's life, I realized how little I'd known the man. From memory I tried to pull an image of him other than the staged photographs that hang in my father's library, but the only one that came to mind was the one I've carried for years. A Christmas afternoon, long ago – Uncle Earl is standing in the kitchen, talking to my mother, helping her with the dishes. Drying them with a towel, reaching to put the platters away on the top shelves. It was a duty I'd taken over when I was fourteen or so. I tried to call up another image, but all I could see were the photographs. Feeling sick, I stood, fingered the coats that hung on pegs beside the door and the fishing rods leaning on the wall beside them.

Despite the layer of dust and the jumble of travel magazines, photo albums, and tackle boxes, I could tell that Uncle Earl had been a rather neat man – as confirmed

bachelors go. The chronology of his life had been simple, and I knew it by heart – like my father, he'd been born and raised in Middle Tennessee and went to college in Chattanooga. After graduating he'd moved to Grundy County and badgered his way into a job with the Anderson Coal Company, a job he held until the company went belly up forty-some-odd years later. For a while, during the eighties and early nineties, he'd worked for a lady named Audrey Bledsoe part-time, helping her through the Spring and October busy seasons. Every July he traveled, most always someplace new, and he usually spent a part of December at my father's place on Jekyll. Atlanta was on his way home, so he spent Christmas with us. But in the last years the cancer that slowly ate his body had curtailed his traveling, eventually reduced him to a shell, and he'd just had to let things go.

How far? I wondered, stepping into the kitchen, yanking open the fridge. Empty and warm, it just smelled stale. I started on the cabinets. Glasses, plates, coffee mugs, pots and pans. Underneath – empty, canned goods, baking stores, empty. I breathed a silent thanks to Jennifer and my mother, one (or both) had the foresight to empty the fridge and pantry of perishables, and opened the last–

“My God,” I said. Whiskey. No, single malt. And not just Glenlivet, Glenfiddich, and Glenmorangie – though the standards were well represented – but Macallan, both Balvenies, Glen Ord, a Knockando, *three* Lagavulins. Even a Ledaig in the corner. Other names I didn't recognize, didn't know existed. Awestruck, I touched the bottles, trying to remember – had I ever seen my uncle drink? Obviously, he did, and regularly at that – every opened bottle was in that middle range between a third gone (testing for taste) and a third remaining (saving for later). But, as I stood, I couldn't think of a single time when I'd seen him with anything other than a glass of ice water in his hand. Not once.

Standing in the kitchen, I had to shade my eyes from the last glows of the afternoon sun shining through the window. When I glanced I saw the one thing that, in one fell swoop, made up for every perceived deficiency of the cabin, and that's the view. In a word, it was breathtaking.

Drawn as if by some magnetic force I left the kitchen through the side door,

stepped off the screened porch, and walked through dry winter grass and dead leaves to the bluff. The rock was sandstone, bleached gray by the sun and carved by wind and raid. A hundred feet beneath me – *beneath* me – were entire trees. I felt as if I could reach out and touch their crowns. Close to the bluff they were naked, stripped by the winter wind of their protective coats of leaves, while further down, where the sudden drop of the mountainside slowed to a gentle rush, were evergreens mixed with the occasional oaks, still clinging fast to their dry, brown leaves, and sugar maples, silver queens standing tall and graceful. A thousand feet below the slope evens out into the valley floor, a dappled patchwork of grays and browns and greens, rising and falling before running up against a distant ridge. Up against the ridge was a town; a steeple stands high.

A FEW DAYS LATER I WAS SITTING ON THE SCREENED PORCH, nursing a Macallan and watching the last brilliant slice of the sun sink behind that distant ridge when my uncle's next door neighbor came out his backdoor, walked through the grass to the bluff, and, as I watched, pulled something out of his jacket pocket, began to fiddle with it. The mystery was solved a moment later when he struck a match, and I turned my attention back to the sunset.

The promised snowstorm had never materialized. That afternoon, while I was wandering around the house, unpacking my clothes, a Gulf wind had come up out of the south, warming the air and triggering a steady drizzle. I'd puttered around, taken the time to set up the computer, but spent most of my time absently rummaging through the remnants of my uncle's life. I couldn't get used to how little I knew the man. A shelf under the travelogues held a half-century's worth of snapshots, carefully pasted into albums, but I could put names to only a handful of the people pictured. In a kitchen drawer, looking for a spoon, I found maps of Europe, with routes highlighted between cities, countries. The routes didn't make any sense, but at the same time they looked familiar – I spread them out on the table, stared at them until I couldn't see the modern highways, boundaries. It was then that I realized one followed Patton's advance from Normandy into Germany, another the invasion of the Mongol Golden Horde from

Byzantium to the gates of Vienna. A third tracked the Caesar all the way into Britain. My uncle had been a history buff as well.

Sitting, sipping my scotch, I watched the last of the clouds retreat into the stratosphere, painted pinks and purples by the setting sun. It was after seven, but the rusty thermometer my uncle had tacked on the overhanging eave still read fifty-six degrees.

"Evening," I heard, and looked off to my left. My uncle's neighbor, and, I was to find out, best friend for the past ten years, had left the bluff, was walking through the backyard. I hadn't noticed him slip through the hedge that separates my uncle's cabin from his. "You Frank Cordell?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thought so – you look like your uncle," he said, pulling himself up the steps onto the porch, opening the screened door, proudly waving off my offered hand. "Name's Alan Anderson."

"Nice to finally meet you, Mr. Anderson," I said. "My uncle used to talk about you every now and then. How you doing tonight?"

"Call me Alan. But I'm all right. Fair," he said. "Enjoying the sunset?"

"It's beautiful," I said, glancing back out over the valley. "Better than anything I've seen. Even the Smokies."

"Today's better than most – rain is why, knocked all the dust out of the air – but I wouldn't go that far. You been on Mt. LeConte at sunrise?"

"No, but I was there for a sunset –"

"Ain't half as good." He turned to look out over the valley. "You're looking in the wrong direction, out west over the foothills instead of towards the Blue Ridge"

"What's that town down there?" I asked, pointing into the valley.

Mr. Anderson climbed the steps to see where I was pointing. From the angle of the sun it was roughly north of us. "That little community down there is Tarlton. Used to be a lot bigger before they took the Interstate west of here. Behind that ridge past Tarlton is McMinnville. Before I noticed you I was thinking I needed to head that way, see a friend who's in the VA hospital." Mr. Anderson paused, almost as if he was wondering if

he'd given away more information than he planned.

I gestured back into the little valley back to the right and immediately behind us, pointing with my glass. From what I could see it was very deep, long, and incredibly thin, with five spurs that branched off like crow's feet. In the bottom, before the sun had set, I'd seen patches here and there of reflected sunlight, interrupting the line of green that I supposed followed the creeks. "What's that down there, exactly?"

"That there's Savage Gulf. Nothin' down there, but its damn beautiful. Getting there can be dangerous, especially in the winter time. Best wait for a nice day – like spring, as a matter of fact."

"I just might do that."

"Frank, you mind if I sit for a spell?"

"No, sir," I said, and pulled one of my uncle's wooden chairs out away from the wall. The smoke from his pipe had created a desire in me. "Excuse me for a moment," I said, and went inside.

"SO HOW WAS GROWING UP IN ATLANTA," Mr. Anderson asked when I got back outside.

"It was okay," I said, pausing to light a cigarette, thinking that, if we were going to be neighbors, we might as well get to know each other. "There was always something to do. Though, at the time," I laughed, "we didn't think so."

"What do you mean?"

I dropped into my chair. "What we used to say – my friends and I – was there was nothing to do. It's a relative term – what we should have said instead was 'There's nothing *new* for us to do.' Meaning we'd done it all before."

Alan pulled at his pipe. "Such as?"

"Normal stuff – concerts, the clubs, Little Five Points, Braves games. Back then, fourteen years old, all we could think about was how when we left for college we weren't ever coming back."

"But you left early. Earl told me once you went to boarding school somewhere up

north.”

I picked a dry cocklebur off my slacks. “Yeah, but I was a special case. Freshman year I got picked up by the cops downtown. Underage consumption.” I shook my head, self-conscious. “Stupid, really. We went to concert at the Fox and, well, I took a fifth of Jack Daniels. We got kinda obnoxious, management called the cops. They were waiting for us outside the door, took us home, one by one. My mother freaked, thought I was hanging out with the wrong crowd. One of my older brother’s friends had just gotten killed in a car wreck – D.U.I. – and all she could think about was getting me away from Atlanta.”

“So I heard.”

I nodded. “Don’t know how they found out about the school in Mass, but before I knew it, I’d been registered. Mom typed the application, basically held a gun to my head so I’d write the essays – she moved so fast I didn’t know what was going on, much less how to slow her down.”

“Evidently it worked,” Alan said, using a wooden match stick to re-pack his pipe.

“What do you mean?”

“Kept you out of trouble.”

“Sure, but not because they got me away from my friends. If anything, it was worse up there.” Alan pulled at his pipe, waiting on me. “When I got there I was the new kid,” I explained. “What was worse, I was from the South. All the cliques had already formed – the school was K thru twelve – and the only one that would put up with me, let me hang out – well, they didn’t have time for anything other than a little drinking on the weekends.”

“Sounds like it was more than that.”

I flicked too hard at the cigarette, knocked off the coal. “I met someone. She kept me in line.”

“What do they think of you being a teacher?”

“Who?”

“Your folks.”

"Well, my mother always liked the idea. Dad, well, I never was sure. But he'd gotten used to it."

Alan seemed confused. "But when you first told him--"

"That I was applying to graduate school for history?" I laughed, out loud. "He *flipped*. As far as he knew, I was still a business major. Dad's plan was always for me to join him and Sam at the firm. Hell, summer before graduation – I sold a few houses myself. Real, honest to God Buckhead mansions with *real* nice commissions."

"And your sister?"

"Jennifer? The understanding always was that she'd have a job at the firm as long as she wanted it. As it turns out, she's going to have my job."

Alan stared at his pipe, knocked it on the side of his chair; a shower of sparks exploded out of the bowl. "What about your father's father. Earl's brother."

"Sam remembers him, I don't" I said. "He died right after I was born. All I really know is that I'm named for him, that he worked thirty years for Combustion." Alan looked puzzled. "That was a manufacturing company in Chattanooga; he was a foreman. They closed in the eighties when the DOE quit building nuclear plants. When he retired they were making the power plants for missile submarines."

"So Sam's older than you."

"Two years."

"And Jennifer's – younger?"

"Three years."

Alan pulled out his tobacco pouch and refilled his pipe, methodically packing it down with a match stick. "What about your grandmother?"

"I hardly know anything about her," I said, pulling out a cigarette. "Other than the fact that she died when my father was a boy."

Alan waited a minute before he asked his next question. "How come?"

"How come she died or how come I know so little about her?"

"Both." His voice was gentle, grand-fatherly, yet coaxing.

"Car wreck, my grandfather was drunk. Never forgave himself. Nobody ever

talks about it – my mother didn't find out herself until the day they got married, when my grandfather said something like 'Son, I wish your mother could have been here. I'm so sorry – she would have been proud.' Mom had to ask what all that meant." I stared off into the twilight.

"May I ask another question, if you don't mind?" Mr. Anderson asked a minute or two later.

"Sure."

"How well did you know Earl?"

I'd thought this was where he was going, though I'd begun to wonder just how long it was going to take him to get around it. Unfortunately I didn't have the answer I knew he wanted. "Not very well," I said, which was nothing more than a nice way of saying Not at all. A month ago I would have said I knew him pretty well, but I knew better now. "When we were little– Well, he used to come down every Christmas." I looked into my drink for a moment, took a large swallow. The whiskey made me shiver.

"Did I mention you look like him?"

"Mom's always said I look like my grandfather. Sammy, Jennifer – they're Davises. I'm the Cordell."

"No, I'm serious. You look like Earl. Same height, same color hair, same bushy eyebrows. 'Cept yours aren't gray. He held his glass the same way you do," Mr. Anderson aimed his pipe at my drink, "cocked off to the side like that. Liked that Scotch you're drinking as well–"

"I can tell," I said. "There's ten or twelve different labels lined up in one of the cabinets, and some empty bottles in one of the closets."

"That was Earl," Mr. Anderson said. "He used to come out here every night and have a drink. Only time he ever drank. Sun, rain – only the snow kept him indoors. Scared me when I saw you out here, sitting in the same chair–" The old man's words trailed off. I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing.

3.

A WHILE LATER – ten, twenty minutes; it was dark and I'd lost my sense of time – Mr. Anderson resurfaced from his thoughts. "So, Frank," he said, "how long you planning on staying?"

"I don't know," I said. "Few weeks, a month, maybe longer." I could sense Mr. Anderson's stare.

"I'm in exile," I said, and forced a laugh, which died on my lips. "Fuck 'em," I whispered to no one and drained my glass.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Something happened, back in Atlanta. Sam, my father – they decided the best thing for all parties involved was to get me as far away as possible." I looked at the glass in my hand. "Mr. Anderson," I said, standing, "I'm–"

"Alan. I asked you once already. You're damn near thirty, so drop the Mister shit."

"All right," I said, my hand on the doorknob. "Alan. I'm empty. You want a drink?"

"Doctor won't– Well, hell. What you got?"

"Got some Amstel Light in the fridge – that and this Scotch. I've been drinking Balvenie Doublewood. It's sweet, got a hint of Sherry, but kinda strong–"

"That'll do, but drop half an ice cube in it. I can't drink it straight like you and Earl do."

Filling the glasses I realized with a shock that he was still talking about my great-uncle in the present tense. Earl had been dead for several months, yet Mr. Anderson was still talking about him like he was down the hall, out of town, on one of his trips. Carrying the glasses to the door I decided to ask what kind of person my uncle was – though not why he'd written his will such that my brother, sister, and I had inherited the cabin, that being obvious. Sam, Jennifer, myself – we were the only Cordell children left.

But Alan had his own agenda. "What do you mean you're in exile?" he asked the moment I stepped back outside.

"Here," I said, handing him the glass. I leaned on the rail, lit a Marlboro, gave it a hard pull. "Alan," I said, staring at some lights in the distance, "One Christmas, ten or so years ago, Uncle Earl and my father were talking about private schools. Earl mentioned that you sat on the Board of Trustees at Montgomery Bell Academy."

"I did. David – he's my oldest – his junior year I was elected chair of the parent's council. It's a non-voting position on the Board; I held it for ten or twelve years, until my youngest, Sarah, graduated."

"So you know how private schools work." I said, looking down at the community below. Tartown, he called it. No, Tarlton. "Saw some controversies."

"I'd say there's a good chance something's gonna happen every semester."

"Ever seen anyone forced to resign?"

"Aw, shit," Alan said. "What'd you do?"

"Nothing."

"You did something – unless you were supposed to do something and you didn't."

"That's the thing. I wasn't supposed to do anything, and I didn't do anything." I moved back to my chair. "Something happened, and somebody had to take the fall. Just so happens that somebody was me."

"That doesn't explain why you've been exiled."

"It's kinda complex," I said. "I was teaching, but I was also advisor to the Buckhead Review – that's the school's art magazine. Comes out at the end of every semester. The short version is that I was doing too many things at once, got distracted, and published something I shouldn't have. Two of them. Simple black and white photographs. Portraits, taken by a senior we all knew was headed to Savannah College of Art and Design. A little cliché, actually. Nothing more."

"Sound like it was more than that."

"Well – it was. The portraits – well, even I have to admit they're a bit racy. Or would have been, thirty years ago."

"Describe them."

"Umm – in one there's a girl, wearing jeans but naked from the waist up, sitting in

the grass with her back to the camera, her head turned just slightly to the side, her hair hanging loose down her back, a cigarette held in her fingers. The pose is natural, modest, yet somehow seductive. In the other the same girl, wearing the same jeans, is hidden in the shadows behind a lattice. There's a frost-killed rosebush in front of the lattice, balanced rather well by a hanging pot of blooming impatiens. Spring and summer flowers, which meant they were hung specifically for the portrait, about which nothing is modest. Because of the lattice and the shadows you can't see much of her other than her outline, which is as much imagined as it is seen, except that she stares out at you with a single, blazing eye."

"So what was the problem?"

I laughed, but not because it was funny. "See, the night I checked the layout the fact that there was a girl behind the lattice slipped right past me, I was so struck by the contrast between the dead rosebush and the spring flowers. I couldn't miss her in the other portrait, of course. But what I did miss was who she was – that is, the youngest member of the McConnell family."

Alan snorted. "Let me guess – Bluebloods."

"The worst kind," I said, and sipped at my whiskey. "I didn't know she was behind the lattice until Thursday when I got the proofs back from the printer. Unfortunately, it wasn't until after I'd called the printer and given final approval for the issue. I'd even dropped a copy by President Cayce's office and given the editors their copies as well.

"You see, when Cayce first asked me to run the Review I couldn't figure out why. I thought it was a job for an English or Art teacher. That is, I didn't understand until Cayce called me into his office to tell me about his plans for the reception that goes along with the Review. Cayce knew who my family was, and I'm sure he knew that I wasn't going to screw it up. See, for Cayce, the Review has nothing to do with art and everything to do with fund-raising. Every parent gets invited, and every alum gets mailed a copy of the issue. Cayce wanted it to be a bigger deal than it already was. And he was right – I ran it perfectly.

“Friday came, and, to use a cliched term, the campus was fairly buzzing with excitement. The spring before Cayce had opened the reception to include all students – though not until after nine – and somebody had managed to spike the punch. Kind of pointless, since there was more than enough champagne in the room. There’s a tradition in Atlanta that says the drinking age does not apply to champagne, so long as the parent drives.

“Anyway, Cayce yanked the pictures. Just called the printer and told him that there was no way in hell he was going to print pages twenty-seven or thirty-two. Leave the fucking pages blank if you have to, just don’t print them.”

“Damn.”

“No shit. Two years, three issues already published, a dozen lunches, and God knows how many phone calls, and the bastard still didn’t have the integrity to call me, tell me what was happening. He let me go into that reception blind.”

It was already out, of course. The existence of the pictures, not the fact that Cayce had yanked them. The student who’d come for extra help, he’d told his friends. The editors, proud of what they’d done, maybe even proud of what they’d managed to slip past me, had shown the proofs around campus. Word was out, half the students were just coming to see the show.

It was worse for Marc Edwards, Marc and his parents. He was the photographer; Doreen McConnell was his girlfriend. Marc was on scholarship at the Academy; his father was an technician at Martin-Marietta who got up at five-thirty every morning to drive his only son to school before fighting the traffic back to work. Marc hadn’t told his parents he’d won a scholarship to art school yet – he was waiting to announce it at the reception.

Those two photographs were the only pieces he had in the issue. Normally he was a painter; he’d been taking a photography class that semester because the admission counselor at SCAD had suggested it. Marc spent every dime he’d earned that summer on that class.

Cayce should have told me. I should have seen it coming. I could have told the editors, forewarned them so they would let it slide. I could have told Marc. He and his

parents could have stayed home. Because what the McConnells did was truly horrible.

"The editors," I went on, "they noticed the portraits' absence immediately, and they were furious. Their judgement of what constituted art was called into question. They smelled censorship. One of them must have had a proof in the car, must have gone and retrieved it. The proof got passed from hand to hand, person to person, student to parent, parent to student. I saw it happening, but Cayce had me trapped in the receiving line by the door.

"Somehow a copy of the proof made it into Mrs. McConnell's hands. I suppose one of her friends recognized her precious daughter and called her over. She showed it to her husband, and he went, well – ballistic. Screamed at his daughter. 'Who took this picture?' 'Marc.' 'Marc who?' 'Marc Edwards, my boyfriend who you like so much.' Then he grabbed her by the arm, dragged her across the room, over to where Marc was sitting with his parents, sipping at some champagne." I closed my eyes. At the time, watching, the thought had suddenly occurred to me – the champagne, could they taste it?

I CLOSED MY EYES, and I was there again, in the big room with chestnut paneling, full of students and parents and teachers chattering away, and Mr. McConnell, pushing his way through the people to the Edwards. "Did you take this picture?"

"Yes," Marc said.

"You little bastard."

I slipped out of the receiving line, made a bee-line for the knot that was gathering around Mr. McConnell, Doreen, Marc, and the Edwards. I couldn't get through in time.

"Who are you," Mr. Edwards stood up to say, "calling my son a bastard?"

"Your son is a bastard. Look what he did," Mr. McConnell shouted, holding the picture a half-inch away from Mr. Edwards' nose.

Mr. Edwards glanced at his son, as if to ask if Marc took the picture. I think Marc nodded, though I couldn't see very well. "It's good," Mr. Edwards said. "You ought to be proud," he said, "you have a beautiful daughter."

"God dammit, I will not have my daughter–"

That was the point at which I couldn't take any more. "Excuse me," I opened my mouth to say, but Gerald Cayce beat me to it.

"Mr. McConnell, a word with you, if you please."

"Cayce, this is your fault!"

"No, sir. I believe, when you hear me out, you will see a mistake has been made."

"A mistake? You're God *damned* right."

"George, if you please—"

"I do not please," George McConnell roared. "Tell me right now how in God's green earth this *trash*—"

Somehow, Mr. McConnell lost his breath. He went into a coughing fit. It only made him madder. Everyone seemed to be waiting on Gerald Cayce, who seemed lost for words, but I know better – Cayce had thought out this particular set of circumstances, and he had a plan. Only Mr. McConnell was being bull-headed, something Cayce hadn't anticipated. Or else Cayce had anticipated McConnell being bull-headed – Doreen was, after all, the third McConnell to attend the Academy – but he hadn't anticipated something like the proof appearing so early in the evening. I don't know, but I suspect he was in the process of altering his plan when I made a fatal error. Or maybe it wasn't fatal – maybe I'd already been sold down the river and just didn't know it yet.

"Mr. McConnell, I think I can explain—"

"Who the hell are you?"

"Frank Cordell, Mr. McConnell."

"And you are—"

Gerald Cayce looked me in the eyes for maybe half a second, and I knew. "Mr. Cordell was the faculty advisor to the Review, Mr. McConnell."

AT FIRST we thought I was going to weather the storm, that Cayce wouldn't let me take the fall alone, wouldn't sell me out so completely. We – and by we I mean my parents, Sam, Jennifer, myself – we thought it would blow over. I'd lost the advisor position, that was obvious. But I was a good teacher, I mean, at the start of the semester

parents had been *fighting* to get their kids in my class.”

My sins had been slight. I hadn't recognized a picture for what it was, nothing more, and Cayce had removed the evidence from public view. But in keeping what he'd done secret Cayce had miscalculated. The Board of Trustees, of whom McConnell had the ear, took up the matter. A special meeting was called, quorum was established when one of them cut short her vacation to Aspen.

“It didn't happen that way, of course. In less than a week, I was out of a job. Forced resignation.” But even that wasn't quite as hard to bear as the public letter of apology, addressed to the McConnells but clearly intended for everyone, that they forced me to sign. It was my future they held over my head. If I signed their letter, the letter of recommendation Cayce would put in my file would not mention this little ‘incident.’ But if I didn't sign, Cayce said, I'd never get a decent rec, ever. If I didn't sign, I was finished as a teacher. I told him I needed a day to think about it. He gave me an hour. I took the letter with me.

In effect, the letter read, I'd been preoccupied by a personal matter and made a error in judgement. Exactly what the “personal matter” was I'll never know, but that's the way the letter read. It also read that I'd caught my mistake just in time to stop the printing and call for the removal of the offending photographs. My second error, according to the letter, had been in not collecting the three proofs I'd distributed to the editors. Because of my errors in judgement, and because of a general desire I felt to resume my course of study in American History— in particular, that I felt I was better suited to teaching at the college level – I would be resigning my position, effective at the end of the school year.

I spent an hour walking the athletic fields. The entire school was taking Math exams in the gymnasium. It was cold, dreary, and raining a little, and I was alone. Poetic.

When I got back to the board room they had adjourned – evidently the Board was in complete confidence of Cayce's abilities. In reality they were giving him the freedom to get rid of me by any means necessary. When I came into the room Cayce was standing by

the window. Someone had left a fifteen cent ball point pen on the table; I picked it up.

"Frank," he said, still refusing to look at me, "I'm sorry it's come to this."

"One question, Gerald," I asked. In the fifteen years since I first met the man I'd never called him Gerald to his face; it felt good. "And answer me honestly – if you can."

"That depends."

"Do they know you were the one who yanked the pictures?"

Cayce adjusted the window sash, knocked a fleck of dirt of the pane with his fingernail. "Who's 'they'," he said.

"I don't have to," I said, and signed the letter. Only before I did I crossed out the words 'school year,' and above them I wrote 'semester.'

"I SIGNED MY RESIGNATION WITH A FIFTEEN CENT BALL POINT PEN," I said. "But even that wasn't as bad as what happened next. No one – certainly not Cayce and I doubt even McConnell – expected. It started when my father was asked to resign his position on the parent's council committee at the Academy – a position he was still holding despite the fact that all three of us had long since graduated.. When he asked why they said it was because it was time for a change – and continued through the New Year's holiday when the owner of an old warehouse by Little Five Points that my father was going to turn into office suites killed the deal. When my father tracked him down and asked him point blank, he said it was because a 'friend' had pointed out that the Cordell family he was about to go into business with was the same Cordell as Frank Cordell, the history teacher at his daughter's school. Furthermore, he said, he was a religious man and just couldn't see going into business with a family like *that*."

"There were some other rumblings, though none quite so ridiculous, or so expensive. But Dad and Sam did have to spend quite a bit of time soothing ruffled feathers. In the end, right when I got back from Boston, a family conference was called, and, despite my mother's objections, they decided the best thing for all parties involved was to get me out of town, quickly. They figured if I was gone, folks would be apt to forgive and forget – or at least forget – a little sooner, and everyone could get on with

their lives. Mom didn't think they would ever forget; to be honest, I just didn't care.

"It was Jennifer, of all people, who came up with the idea of Uncle's Earl's cabin in Tennessee. Earl had died in October, Sam and I'd had both begged out of going to Tennessee for the funeral – Sam because he had two small children at home, me because I had 'papers to grade.' The way Jennifer described it, the cabin could be the perfect mountain getaway for the family. It just needed some fixing up was all."

"So that's why you're here," Alan said.

"I suppose."

"To fix up the cabin."

"On one level."

"And to keep from killing the family business."

"On another level."

"Jesus," Alan said, shaking his head, "and I thought Nashville was nuts."

"Yep," I said, and shifted in my chair, poured another glass of whiskey. My third – fourth? – of the evening.

"So what are you going to do?"

"About what?"

"The cabin."

"Oh," I said. "I don't know. Clean, paint, make some repairs."

"It needs a new roof. Leaks a little, when it rains real hard."

"I've noticed the water stains in the ceiling."

"I could put you on to somebody."

"Who?"

The old man stood up, wrapped his jacket close. The temperature had fallen several degrees in the last hour. "Harry Jakson. He's good."

"Okay."

"The boxwoods need to be trimmed. Earl got so it was all he could do to keep the roses pruned. And if you don't cut that tree out front – well, we have an ice storm this winter and you're not gonna be able to get out of the drive."

"Harry do that too?"

"Nope. Better get that mildew off the siding, unless you want to replace all of it. The gazebo out by the bluff burned years ago. Kids, probably. Earl never got around to replacing it. Talked about it, though. All the time. Foundation's still good."

"Wondered what that was."

"Well, best be getting to bed." He shuffled towards the door, stopped, and turned to me. "Get some sleep," he said.

"I'll try. Don't sleep too well these days," I said.

"Didn't think so. Saw your light on last night at three." He opened the screened door, descended the steps, one by one, hand clutching the rail. Remembering his pride, I resisted the urge to help. "Hey, Frank," he said.

"Yeah?"

"What you doing for breakfast tomorrow?"

"I don't know. Been eating cold cereal the last few days."

In the dark, Mr. Anderson frowned in distaste. "I usually go to the café in Altamont 'round nine," he said. "You interested?"

"I might be."

"If you are, I'll pick you up around fifteen till, introduce you 'round."

Part II

4.

SEVERAL WEEKS HAD PASSED. Three, maybe four, I can't remember. My life didn't run according to the calendar anymore, so it was hard to tell.

The days settled into a routine. After so many years of going to school and, later, teaching, it was just plain impossible to sleep past eight so five days a week I would get up, start a pot of coffee, jump in the shower. Nine minutes later the hot water would run out, so I'd scan the radio for the weather reports. Beersheba Springs is about halfway between Nashville and Chattanooga and high enough to get radio signals from both. After a few minutes I'd hear Alan honk the horn on his truck, grab my coat, flick off the coffee pot, and head to the café for a hot breakfast.

Alan would drop me off in front of Danny's Family Grocery. I'd buy a newspaper, cigarettes if I was running low. Don't ask me who Danny was, I never knew. Phil, who owns the place, he works the only register until ten when Janie comes in. Phil sits on a stool and does his orders and has a shouted conversation with Jack Junior, the butcher/stock boy/janitor who hides in the back of the store. Jack Junior is about twenty years older than Phil, used to work at a saw mill until he lost two fingers and developed an uncontrollable fear of the blade; he works the register on Phil's days off (Wednesdays and Sundays) and will tell his life story to anyone willing to listen.

By the time I got back to the café Sally, the waitress – she's Alan's youngest niece, by the way, about my age – Sally would have coffee waiting for me on the table and my breakfast would be sizzling on the griddle. Reading the sports page and drinking my coffee, I'd work my way through four silver dollar buttermilk pancakes, three strips of bacon, two eggs fried to the consistency of rubber, and hash browns, heavy on the onions. It's a taste I picked up in Bloomington. Alan and the others wanted to know where I put it all.

The conversation didn't change much from day to day. Nobody worried about what was going on in Washington, despite the fact that the President was coming up for re-election in the fall. These men didn't seem to care about that – as a rule they voted

Democrat and left running the country to the people who were supposed to know about that. Instead, they talked about the extra rooms Tom Campbell was adding to his house out on Carlson Road (Mr. Campbell grew tobacco and had put in an especially large crop the previous summer), and about Marion Boothe, who was dying from the Black Lung (unfortunately, a common enough occurrence in the area). They talked about William Shipley's twin boys (he had two of them, big farm boys already headed to Carson-Newman in Johnson City on football scholarship – they were linemen), about Dexter Johnson's wife Ellie (she'd just had her third stroke), and about Hal Norton's son Henry, who was up for parole but probably wasn't going to get it.

The group, incidentally, hadn't been too keen on my inclusion at first – that was, until the fifth or sixth day when Alan let it drop who's nephew I was, whereupon they all gave me a long, hard stare before taking me in like a long lost cousin. That same day they altered the structure of their stories to include who was related to who and how. Some of these stories went back four, five generations. Evidently I was filling a chair that, for the last few months, had been empty.

Anyway, I'd get back to the cabin around ten-thirty and spend the next several hours rummaging through the cabin. I was still in the process of cleaning and organizing – just taking inventory, really, trying to decide what to keep and to throw out, not yet willing to make any real kind of decision. On the days I stayed inside Alan avoided me, at least until I finished. I think the sight of Earl's stuff made him feel his friend's absence even more than usual. The occasional clear, sunny day I'd mess around in the yard. On these days – unless he was out somewhere with Robert Harris – Alan would come over, stand, watch, smoke his pipe, and resist the urge to give advice while I cut underbrush out by the bluff and pruned the rosebushes (on one of the shelves I'd found a guide – that's what it said to do).

But most of what I did was think about what I was going to do with the place. Sam and Jennifer were split as to whether we should keep or sell it – Sam, who had inherited Grandfather Davis's dreams and vision, had stepped outside his own character to pronounce the place a money pit. Jennifer, who was the complete opposite of Sam and

usually practical to a fault, was completely against selling. I had the swing vote and was of two minds. Either way, the place needed a lot of work. Yet, I dawdled, for the moment unwilling to make any changes.

Towards the end of February the weather turned warm for a spell. According to the weatherman we were having an early spring, and on a Wednesday, while hunting in the gear closet for a rake, I found a set of hedge trimmers. Great, big, evil looking things with a double handle and eighteen inch blades. I snapped the blades together; they made a metallic clack that sent an electric current through me. Alan was right, I decided in an instant, the hedge needed trimming.

I headed for the boxwoods that separated my uncle's cabin from Alan's. Halfway there I decided I needed a little practice, so I went to where the hedge met the bluff at a sixty degree angle.

Not ten minutes and Alan was beside me, smoking his pipe. For some reason he was having more trouble than usual keeping quiet; he fidgeted like an eight year old at a school play. "Hey Alan," I asked, wiping my brow, "how come you always come outside to smoke?" *Chop.*

"Eleanor never would let me smoke indoors." *Chop.* "Old habit, I guess."

"Oh." *Chop.* From the conversations at the café I'd picked up that Eleanor was Alan's wife. She'd died about the same time Alan retired, which was about the same time he moved to The Springs. "What was she—"

"Dammit, Frank, give me those things," he said, and basically ripped them out of my hands. "Like this, see? Swing from the chest, with your elbows out." *Chop.* "Not in." *Chop.* "Arms in and you'll be blown in an hour." *Chop. Chop. ChopChopChop—*

Suddenly he stopped, held the blades upright. "Christ," he said, and waggled the handles. "C'mon, will you?"

"Where we going?" I asked, almost running to keep up. Fastest I'd seen him move yet.

"Gear closet. You seen any oil in there?"

"Thought I saw a can of motor oil—"

“That’ll work. Hinge’s rusted. Christ, you don’t know nothing.”

AN HOUR LATER I WAS A HUNDRED FEET AWAY FROM THE BLUFF and meditating upon lunch. Alan had disappeared not long after showing me how to strip the rust off the trimmers, but that wasn’t the problem. Problem was Earl’s side of the hedge hadn’t been trimmed in four or five years and every forth or fifth stroke I hit a branch too big for the trimmers, and had to stop, pick up a pruning saw. That movement was always proceeded by a jarring, painful arrest of the motion of the clippers. I found myself wishing for the electric version, understood why it had been invented.

About half past twelve a dual-cab Dodge pickup I didn’t recognize pulled into Alan’s driveway, and a man who I recognized from the café (but not his name) got out. Alan must have been waiting on him. The two of them talked for five or ten minutes – the wind was running parallel to the bluff, I couldn’t hear them – before walking over to me. I stopped, let the clippers drop blade first into the ground, and wiped my face with my shirttail.

“Frank,” Alan said, “this is Harry Jakson, man I told you about.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Jakson,” I said. “Seen you in the café a few times.”

“Seen you too,” Harry Jakson said, examining my handiwork. After a bad start – the first twenty feet – I’d figured out how to maintain a straight line. Not a level plane, but a straight line. “Alan here tells me you might be in need of some yard work.”

I shot a glance at Alan, but he’d picked the trimmers out of the ground, was examining his own handiwork. “I might be,” I said, “but I thought you were in construction.”

“During the winter,” Harry Jakson said, forcing a laugh, “I’m into everything. Got some guys between jobs at the moment.”

“Oh,” I said, making a mental check of my checkbook balance. I still had a couple of hundred, hadn’t dipped into savings yet. “You take down trees?” I pointed at the dead popular between the driveway and the power lines. Almost a hundred feet tall; after every good rain I had to pick branches out of the drive.

Harry Jakson took a step towards the tree, nodded. "We can. Take some doing, though. Power lines 're in the way. Have to get hold of a bucket truck."

I nodded, as if I knew what he was talking about. "How 'bout that pine in the back yard?" I said, pointing at a thirty foot spruce in the dead center of the backyard.

Harry glanced at it. "Sure, but— Why? Ain't dead—"

"Obstructs the view."

"Keeps the sun off in the summer."

I blinked. "Good point," I said, deciding to keep the pine around for another year, despite the fact that I hate pines. "Your guys wouldn't be insulted if I asked them to clean up the rest of the underbrush, maybe plant a few shrubs, would they?"

"They'd be working."

"I just thought— I mean, a construction crew—"

"They got families to feed."

"How much?"

"For the dead poplar? Take half my crew, so— Five hundred. Like I said, I'd have to rent a bucket truck to top it out." Harry Jakson said, looking up over my shoulder, up high. Course, it wasn't hard for him to look over my shoulder — he was at least six inches taller than me.

But I had a feeling I knew what he was looking at, and that it leaked. I took a guess. "Four hundred."

Harry didn't flinch. "Sounds fair."

Bingo. "And the yard?"

"Depends on what you want done. I'm not in the landscaping business, so I don't know what the going rates are. Say — two hundred fifty for a crew of three and a half guys—"

I almost laughed. "Half?"

"High school kid who works for me after school."

"Oh." Didn't seem so funny after all. "How soon can you get the tree down?" I asked. "I'd like to get it down before the weather turns."

"Depends on how quick I can get a bucket truck. Maybe tomorrow, maybe Monday."

"Okay," I said, and we shook hands. No contract, no insurance waiver to sign. We shook hands and the deal was done.

FRIDAY MORNING, as Alan and I were leaving for the café, we passed a green and white utility truck headed down our street. "You been having problems with the electricity?" I asked Alan, mystified.

"That's your bucket truck," Alan said, and pulled the truck into a houseless driveway, turned around.

"Oh." So that's what a bucket truck was. "Wait, we don't need to go back—"

Alan shot me a glance. "Frank," he said, "for someone smart as you are, you can be awful stupid sometimes."

"Huh?"

"What you think's gonna happen when they get that tree down?"

"They'll cut it up, and I won't have to buy any firewood." The stack behind the cabin was starting to shrink.

Alan laughed. "*Buy* firewood? Boy, round here, *nobody* buys firewood. You taken a good look around? Been down in any of the gulfs yet? More trees n' you can spit at. But before that."

I shrugged.

"Son, didn't you take physics in high school? You got to move your car, Earl's truck. Tree that size, its gonna *bounce* when it hits."

I understood, and was afraid. "The tree's awful close to the house—"

Alan shrugged. "Ain't nothing you can do 'bout *that*. But I wouldn't worry, Harry's got insurance."

It wasn't comforting.

HARRY WAS RIGHT – taking down a tree that size is an all day process. When Alan

and I got back from breakfast they's just gotten the bucket truck in place. Evidentially the crew – ten men, between the ages of twenty and forty – in fact, the largest gathering of young men I'd yet seen in Grundy County – they must have taken the hour to have a conference on the best way to get the thing down. I guess, but I'd bet it's a good one, because once they started they moved like clockwork. I watched it all from Alan's front porch.

They started by stripping off their jackets, tightening their boots, and putting on gloves. Two carried chainsaws, one of them an axe; the rest uncoiled four-foot lengths of heavy rope that had loops braided into both ends. One man wearing a hard hat climbed in the bucket. He had a miniature chainsaw and another of those ropes. The last man climbed into the operator's consol, clamped a whistle between his teeth, and put his hands on the controls. He took them off exactly three times – once for a cigarette, once for lunch, and once when Harry came, I think specifically to spell him.

This man was *In Charge*; but I don't think he was the crew leader – that seemed to be the one with job I deemed the most dangerous: running all over the yard with a blazing chainsaw, cutting the fallen limbs into dragable lengths.

The language was simple. One blast meant the man in the bucket was about to cut a limb off, let it drop. Everybody stopped, backed away when he did that. Two blasts meant all clear, and would come anywhere from immediately to five minutes after the limb hit the ground. Then the leader with the chainsaw would come over, cut it in half, three pieces, whereupon the men with ropes would come over, hook up the pieces, and drag them behind the cabin, to the woodpile, where the branch would be reduced to cordwood in a matter of seconds.

Watching, I came to understand that the leader's job was not the most dangerous, but the man in the bucket, who had to strike a delicate balance between gravity and gravity. By that I mean he had to know instinctively, by feel and resistance, when to back the chainsaw out of the limb and let it fall. Too late and the saw would bind, maybe explode back into his face. Too soon and the limb wouldn't fall, but dangle. The man seemed to prefer the latter over the former – every now and then, not more than six or

seven times – he would back the saw out, and the limb would shudder. This precise movement was what the man at the controls was watching for, the very reason for his existence – immediately he would yank back on a lever, swing the man in the bucket out of danger. The man at the controls was good, but the man in the bucket was an artist. In Atlanta he could have been making fifty thousand a year, working for Asplundh. I know – later I asked my father.

Incidentally, the power lines didn't give them much trouble at all. Any limb hanging over the lines was first trimmed to within six inches of the lines. Then the man in the bucket attached one loop of the rope to the branch, usually using a fork, and the other to a spot where he'd already sawed off a limb. Then he made a quick cut, and the limb fell, stopped, and crashed against the trunk.

The next step absolutely floored me, and it's why those professionals in Atlanta make fifty K a year. He took one hand off the chainsaw and placed it on the base of the limb, right beside the rope, so the limb wouldn't twist. Then, with a single hand, he made a quick cut, and the limb shivered a full second before diving straight into the ground, like a javelin. But that wasn't what spooked me – it was what happened to the remaining piece of limb that did. Released of so much weight, it jumped three feet into the air, right through the spot the where bucket man's head had just been. He was, of course, inside the bucket by then. Then gravity regained control, the log shuddered, turned, and dropped out of the loop.

And the process would start all over again.

TWO-THIRTY IN THE AFTERNOON, and all that remained was twenty feet of trunk pointed at the sky. The bucket man was back on the ground, lounging in the cab of the truck, I think drinking a cold one. (I know I would have been.) Harry and the rest of the crew were gathered around the trunk, planning the next step when a black sports car pulled up, parked on the street. A kid got out, and I decided that school must have been over for the last member of crew. Bored, and with no danger, I stood, made my way over to the gathering, arriving about the same time as the kid.

The first thing that struck me about him was that he was tall – I mean, he could look Harry in the eyes. But, what was interesting was that, for some reason, the men all seemed to react to the kid in the same general way they did to Harry – with deference, getting out of his way, smiling when he shook their offered hands, giving honest answers to his questions as to the health of their wives, children, and girlfriends, all of whose names he seemed to know. The reason Harry got that kind of respect was because he owed the company and was their boss; I couldn't figure out how the boy fit into the scheme of things. He wasn't Harry's son, though Harry was old enough. Other than being the same height, they just looked completely different – Harry had a dark complexion and scowled a lot, the boy was fair and light on his feet.

Harry, who'd been contemplating the direction the trunk needed to fall, seemed to suddenly realized the boy was present. "What you doing here so early?" he asked, his tone bordering on accusatory.

"School get out early," the kid said. I thought he looked defensive. "Send-off pep rally for the basketball team. They made the playoffs."

"And you skipped it."

The boy shrugged and, without a word, picked up a rake.

"SO – WHAT DO YOU THINK OF MICHAEL?"

"Who?"

"Michael," Alan said, pointing. He'd come outside for a pipe. "The kid who works for Harry."

"I don't know," I said. "Just met him. Nice enough, I guess."

Alan smiled. "Harry thinks the world of him."

"I can see that."

"Tough on him, too."

"I can see that, too." The trunk was down. After all the buildup, it was disappointing. But I would have thought Michael would be stacking firewood or something. Instead, he was pushing a wheelbarrow, picking up sticks, bark, and twigs.

"Must be hard on him." Alan said.

"What? Hard on who?"

"Hard on Michael. Having two fathers the way he does."

I turned, looked at Alan. "Huh?"

"Harry and Michael's father, they go way back, and they're as thick as thieves. Elementary school, maybe earlier – I don't know. Michael's the only son either one of them's got, and they sort of share him."

"Wait, that's not Michael—"

"Bledsoe? Yeah, that's him."

"Oh." I'd heard of Michael Bledsoe, just hadn't met him yet. In fact, it was hard not to have heard of him – any conversation involving the children of northern Grundy County always seems to somehow circle back to him. Michael is the only son of Jack Bledsoe. Jack's a graduate of UT and Vanderbilt Law, and, to put it bluntly, Harry Jakson and Jack Bledsoe have their collective thumb on the pulse of this area in a way my father could only dream of. Nothing happens without their approval, and the rest of the county knows this. General opinion is divided on Harry and Jack – people either like them or they don't. That's about all there is to it.

But Michael – well, it's hard to say exactly what Altamont thinks of Michael. To put it the best way I know how, he's their prize possession, and they know they're about to lose him to the world, which, because it's bittersweet, makes him all the better.

See, not only is Michael smart and genuinely friendly, he's also an incredible baseball player. More than once I've heard him compared to that pitcher out in Seattle, Randy Meyers. Wild Thing, I think they call him. Or maybe it's The Big Hurt, I can't remember. I'm not much of a fan – besides, all of this is second hand. From the way people talk, it's Michael's height and strength that give him a lively fastball. Early on – VFW summer league – he developed a killer curve, and rumor has it Harry helped him develop a slider that he was going to unveil once the season starts. In effect, they say, he's a power pitcher, and uses the curveball to set up the heater. But he's also got control – he can put that fastball anywhere he wants to.

I think I've mentioned how the cleanest and most immaculately kept things in Grundy County are the baseball fields. Every town, from Tracy City to Coalmont to Altamont, has one – even tiny little Beersheba Springs. This is an area that doesn't have a lot going on, so the local high school football, basketball, and wrestling team's are important. But here, baseball is life. No, it's more important than that.

"SO THAT'S MICHAEL BLEDSOE, THE STAR PITCHER."

"Yep."

"Never thought I'd see a child prodigy raking twigs," I said.

"You don't know Jack Bledsoe."

"No, guess not – but from what I've heard, he sounds familiar."

Alan stopped, mid-puff. "Huh?"

"Way people round here talk about him – well, sounds like the way some people in Atlanta talk about my father."

"Some like him, some don't, but everyone has to respect him, that what you mean?"

"Yeah. Something like that."

Alan pointed. "You ever have a job like that one?"

"You mean something that I might have thought beneath me?" I asked, watching carefully for a reaction. Nothing, not even a flinch. "Yeah, couple of 'em. Washed and waxed cars at a auto body shop for a while. Spent a Christmas vacation installing fiberglass insulation – stuff makes you want to crawl out of your skin. The worst was the summer before college – buffed floors in an office building my father's company owns, up in Marietta. Started on the twelfth floor, 'bout five, and worked my way down. Took till midnight – hell on my back, hell on my social life." I chuckled, "One thing, though, I was always ready to go back to school when break ended."

"Michael doesn't have that luxury. Every afternoon, 'cept during baseball season, he's cleaning up after one of Harry's crews. Summers he gets up at six, spends an hour throwing by himself before meeting up with Harry. Works all day, then goes to practice in

the evening. You might have heard, Michael doesn't play with kids his age, but with a bunch of men twice his age. Those same men he's working with right now, matter of fact. Harry's hardware store sponsors the team—"

"Wait, Harry Jakson owns the hardware store?"

"Yeah, but don't mention it, especially at the café. Carl Jenkins still hasn't forgiven his brother for selling his stake to Harry 'stead of him, moving to Nashville the way he did."

"But the sign out front says Jenkins's Brothers."

Alan knocked his pipe against the rail, emptying it. "That would be Carl Jenkins' father and uncle, not Carl and his brother. Carl's uncle died ages ago, for a while the store just belonged to Carl's father. When the old man died he left the store to Carl and his brother, equal partners."

"So Harry Jakson and Carl Jenkins are partners."

"No. See, three or four years ago Carl's wife kicked him out of the house. Carl decided that since he wasn't living in the house anymore he didn't have to make the payments. Wife took him to court – not Jack Bledsoe, by the way. That woman's a Saunders, and just as crazy as the rest; Jack wouldn't touch her with a ten foot pole. Anyway, Harry bailed him out – for an additional twenty percent."

"Ouch."

"Yep. Man's tough, and has no compunction about using every advantage he can. Course, twenty years ago—" Alan suddenly stopped.

"What about twenty years ago?"

Alan sat down in the swing beside me. "You breathe a word of this to anyone and I'll forget I ever met you, you understand me? I might have lived forty years in Nashville, been a hot-shot architect, but you remember where I grew up. I don't care whose nephew you are."

I didn't say a word while Alan looked me up and down, as if meeting me for the first time all over again.

"All right," he said, and pulled out his pipe. By then I'd figured out he used it as a

prop when telling his stories. And, to be honest, that's all I ever thought this was going to amount to – another story of the tangles family relationships of small towns.

“Harry Jakson and Jack Bledsoe, those two have known each other pretty much all their lives. Met in elementary school, hit it off from the first day. Played ball together, even dated the same girl for a while.

“Like most folks around here, both of ‘em come from old Grundy County families. The Bledsoe's used to live south of Altamont, the Jaksons in Greutli-Laager. Not much left of either family, though – after the coal mines went bust, they just sort of drifted away, like most people did.

“Jack Bledsoe's father didn't leave, though. Bought some land out on the Mennonite Road and tried his hand at farming. Did well enough at it to send Jack to school in Knoxville. From there Jack went on to Vanderbilt, then surprised everyone by coming home. Brought that pretty wife from West Tennessee and a baby boy.

“Harry was a different story. His old man was a deputy sheriff – that is, when he wasn't too drunk to do his job. Most of the time he'd just park his cruiser somewhere, nurse a flask 'till it was time to go home. But folks liked him, and they understood his reasons, which is why he got to keep his job.

“Anyway, after high school Harry volunteered for the army. Vietnam was going up in flames, nobody could figure out why Harry volunteered, except that Harry probably figured he was going to get drafted anyway. Harry couldn't afford college, didn't have any kind of draft deferment, not even a farmer's, which is what most people round here had. My guess is Harry decided that since he was headed there anyway it was gonna be on his own terms. So he enlisted, landed in the Combat Engineers.

“Day Harry volunteered for the Army Jack cussed him out, said he was just throwing his life away. They didn't hardly talk at all for ten years after that.

“Something happened over there, nobody really knows what. All we really know for sure is that when Harry left he was a decent enough kid, but, few years later, when he came back – well, wasn't nobody who could stand to be 'round him. Place had changed him. Personally, I think it was just being there. But nobody liked him, not even Jack

Bledsoe. But there was bad blood between them anyway, so it didn't matter much.

"But, like I was saying, Harry got back, got himself a job managing the Grocery for Danny, who was still alive then, but starting to decline. Black Lung, though he didn't know it at the time. Took him ten years to die. Anyway, Danny was sick a lot, needed someone to work in the evenings. Nights, after work, Harry spent most of his time drinking, raising hell, racing cars. Got picked up more times than anybody cares to count. Most times he didn't make it to the jail, on account of who his old man was. The last time was in McMinnville. Down there they couldn't give a cold shit who his old man was.

"For whatever reason, Harry, he called Jack. Guess he knew he needed a lawyer. Jack paid his bail, then made him plead guilty."

"And they've been friends ever since," I interrupted.

"Not quite," Alan said, glancing off to see where Harry was. "They didn't get along too well for a while yet. Put up with each other, more'n anything."

"So what happened?"

"Michael."

"Huh?" I asked, glancing to see where the boy was – loading equipment into Harry's pick-up. "What'd he do?"

"Nothin', really. Audrey signed him up for VFW summer league. Harry was dating Christine – you know Christine Haas, waitress at the café–"

"That awful woman?"

Alan smiled. "She is, ain't she? Sally hates her, of course." Sally is Alan's niece; she also waits tables at the café. She's the one who starts my breakfast when she sees me headed into Danny's. "Anyway, Christine's got a kid, same age as Michael. From the way the boy looks we think the father's a Meigson, though we ain't too sure. Don't matter – Christine asked Harry to coach – he and Jack Bledsoe played back in their high school days – and the two boys ended up on the same team.

"Harry saw somethin' in Michael, even at that age. Started asking him to come an hour before practice. Harry and Jack started talking about teachin' Michael how to pitch."

“So that’s where things –”

“Slow down, you’re getting ahead of yourself. Jack, he was starting to get out of the divorce racket, make something of himself, and people were starting to trust Audrey enough to do their taxes. ‘Course, when Audrey hired your uncle, made things lot easier for ‘em.

“Harry saw it, started thinking. Figured if Jack could make something out of this town, he could too. Only thing he knew was construction, so that’s what he started – odd jobs here and there. Word of mouth. Danny, of all people, gave him his first real job – put a video arcade in the basement of the grocery for the kids – which didn’t last too long, but gave Harry his start. Harry’s got his office there now – even pays rent to Phil. Makes him remember where he came from, I guess.”

“‘Course, it had to be Jack Bledsoe who gave Danny the idea for the arcade. Danny never would have thought of it on his own, and Jack needed to see Harry’s work up close. Sort of a test run to see what kind of a job Harry could do, ‘cause Jack and Audrey, they had ideas of their own.”

I smiled; I’d felt something like that coming. “What plans?” I asked, settling into the story.

“That office of their’s, cross from the courthouse. Before the coal mines went bust, it was the Anderson Coal Company. That was where you’re uncle worked, right up until the bitter end, when Earl *was* the bookkeeping department. Building’d been empty for five or so years, Jack and Audrey, they saw something in it that nobody else could. And they saw something in Harry, too – a desire, I guess you’d call it.”

“So Harry and his crew–”

“Nope. Harry started off by himself, hired some help, when he needed it. High school boys – baseball players. Most of ‘em are still on his crew – and most of ‘em still play ball. ‘Cept Michael’s the pitcher and Harry’s the coach.

“But as for the building – Harry did most all the work himself. Took him over a year, and until he hung the sign, nobody knew who he was working for. Nobody could figure out where he was getting the money for the supplies – lumber, electrical wires,

sheet-rock, paint, fixtures. Harry gutted that building, then put it back together. Few years ago Jack and Audrey got it put on the National Register.”

Alan stopped for a minute, caught his breath. I glanced over the hedge – the crew was breaking up, getting ready to go home. “Something else about him – looking at his father, no one ‘round here could figure out where he got his drive. Comin’ back from the army, bein’ a drunk – they expected that. Not spending a whole year working on that one building, six, seven days a week. Nobody saw that coming. ‘Cept one.”

“Who’s that?” I asked, not really paying attention. A blue (green?) Honda Accord, engine rattling, had pulled into my drive way. I stood up to get a better view.

“Your uncle.”

My head snapped back around so fast my neck popped. “What?”

Alan was looking at his hands, his face expressionless.

“Michael!” one of the crew called, drawing my attention. “Your momma’s here!” Two or three of them laughed.

“Tell her to go home,” a young voice called from behind my uncle’s cabin, from the general vicinity of the woodpile. “Tell her to start dinner without me.”

“What’d Uncle Earl know about Harry?” I asked, stepping to the rail.

“Something the rest of us didn’t.”

I looked back at Alan. Whatever it was he knew, he seemed to be enjoying himself.

“Well?”

“Harry’s mother – the lady he called mother – she wasn’t his mother.”

A girl’s voice came over the hedge. “Michael Bledsoe, get out here!” More laughter.

The voice was familiar. “Who was his mother?” I asked.

“Harry’s mother–”

“See ya, Harry, gotta go!”

Michael Bledsoe ran around the corner of my uncle’s cabin. “Don’t forget practice tomorrow!” Harry’s voice called.

“I won’t!”

By now I had my hands on the rail of Alan's porch, and was leaning on it, craning my neck. It was her. I drew a breath, getting ready to shout.

"I think – I'm not sure about this, but I think it was that Harry's mother was a Cordell."

I gagged, the rail cracked, and I fell.

I FELL IN SLOW MOTION. I saw trees, then sky, then the roof, then nothing. At some point I tried to catch my balance, but something got in the way, which only made me fall faster. Then I hit.

My head bounced, and everything went out of focus. I tried to sit up, couldn't, then made it. Sitting with my arms and legs going in all directions I heard a yell, then saw three people run turning, and three more behind them. My brain was working in bursts – something like a semi-automatic rifle –and I couldn't quite put it all together.

"What happened?" someone asked.

"Young fool was trying to look over the hedge," someone said. He sounded nervous. "The rail gave out on him."

"Where is she?" My voice came from far away.

"Told you, Harry."

"Where's who?" the other man asked.

"Claire– No, wait–" My tongue felt thick. I tasted salt.

"Who's Claire?" Alan asked. I looked at him; he was white.

"His ex," a girl, close by, answered. "She's in Boston."

"How do you know that?"

Shelby climbed the steps onto the porch, touched my shoulder. "Frank," she said, trembling, "Claire's not here."

I pushed forward. "Not Claire–" My hand touched the back of my head. "Shit!"

"Lay back," the man in front of me said. "Shelby – you looking for Shelby?"

"That's the girl that was–" I blinked. "That's the girl that was in the drive–"

"I'm right here."

"You two know each other?" Harry asked.

"He gave me a ride, month or so ago," she said. "I've seen him two or three times since, at the café."

I shook my head, slow. It was just starting to ache. "Christ, what happened?"

Harry smiled. Something about his expression felt familiar. "Best we can tell, you were trying to play Peeping Tom when the rail broke. We think you hit the chair on your way down."

"I wasn't--"

I blinked again, and then I remembered. "Alan," I asked, "does he--" I pointed with the back of my palm.

"No."

I shut my eyes, then opened them and looked around. Two of Harry Jackson's crew were standing in the grass, between them was Michael. One looked worried; the other was trying not to laugh. Alan was standing in front of me, as was Harry--

"How long was I out?"

"I don't think you ever were, not completely," Harry said, leaning closer. "Jimmy over there saw you fall, hollered for the rest of us." A frown. A familiar purse of the lips. "You sure you're okay? Don't need to go to the hospital or anything?"

I shook my head No, and blisters of white hot pain spider-webbed around my head. "I'll be okay," I said through a grimace. I opened my eyes. "Nearest hospital's what -- half-hour away?" I asked, forcing a smile.

"Forty minutes, thirty-two seconds," Harry said, forcing the same smile. "I timed it when John Junior broke his leg."

"Mr. Anderson," Shelby said, "Get him a cold glass of water, will you?"

Alan nodded, scuttled inside.

Harry stood, looked at the others, then off to my left.. "Been telling Alan for a year now. That rail's rotten." I followed his glance. It was cracked in the middle and V-shaped. "But what I can't figure out is why you didn't catch yourself."

"When it cracked," I said, "I threw myself backwards, ran into something."

"Oh," Shelby said, laying her hand on the chair. "This."

"Yeah."

"What were you trying to do?"

"Say Hi," I said, cursing at my own stupidity. The movement sent another wave

of pain bouncing around inside my skull. "I gave Shelby a ride, few weeks ago," I said to Harry. "Hadn't talked to her since." I was embarrassed.

Harry shook his head, slowly, side to side, as if to say, You people. Alan came back outside, handed Shelby the water. "Here," she said, handing me the glass. "No – rinse a few times first. Don't stand up, either. Go ahead, spit on the porch. I'll ask Jimmy to hose it off." She glanced at Harry, who shot a look one of the crew. Jimmy – if that was his name – immediately disappeared around the corner of the house. I spit pink. A detached voice in my head told me I'd bitten my tongue

"What should we do?" Alan asked Harry, which was curious.

Harry glanced at his watch, shrugged. "He took a good knock on the head. I don't think he ever lost consciousness, though. Which is a good sign." He smiled at me, "Got a hard head, don't you?"

I spit again. Less pink, more water. I grunted.

"So?"

"Tell you what. We'll take him to Earl's, put him on the couch. Just keep an eye on him. I'll call you later, from Sally's, check on things." He gave Shelby a nudge, turned to the others. "Well, go on," he said.

"WHO'S CLAIRE?"

"Girl I was sort of seeing," I said, trying to get the words past my tongue, not wanting to explain any more than that. I'd bitten it pretty badly – it had swollen up to about twice it's normal size in the past two hours. With a finger I adjusted the damp towel he'd forced over my eyes.

Alan was hovering over me, a nurse, attendant to my every need. Right after Harry and Michael left, he'd wanted to call my parents. Took me several minutes to explain exactly how bad of an idea *that* was. Mom would have been here in three hours, I explained, and turn the place upside down. Normally she's pretty quiet, relaxed. The sight of blood, the very thought of pain – it galvanizes her into action.

"When you came to, you said her name—"

"Shelby, I meant to say Shelby."

"But you said—"

"Shelby reminds me of Claire."

"How?"

"I'm not sure," I said, nervous. Something from my past had kicked in, the old taboo against finding anything outside the Platonic in my students. "What about Harry? You said his grandmother was a Cordell."

"Yeah. You sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," I said, a little sharper. I was getting tired of the question. There was a minute's silence, broken only by the two of us breathing. Then Alan's knee popped as he stood, crossed the main room of the cabin. A few precious minutes of near silence, during which I might have heard him talking to himself. A minute later he came back.

"Frank."

"Hmm?"

"Look at this, will you?"

I lifted the towel; the lights in the room were very bright. He was holding up an framed black and white portrait. It looked professional, in an antique and amateurish sort of way. Brown water stains lined the edges. A young woman stared out at me, fearless. "Where'd you get that?"

"Off the wall, in the kitchen."

"So, who's the girl?" I asked, dropping the towel back over my eyes.

"I was hoping you could tell me," he said.

I lifted the towel. "Here," I said, sitting up. My head still hurt, but not quite as bad anymore. He handed me the picture.

She looked familiar. Young, with dark, brooding eyes, and a full head of curly hair. But I couldn't place her. Something at the bottom – a swirling indentation – caught my attention. Words. A ball point pen. I looked at Alan, sitting in his chair. He was tense, a child on Christmas morning. "This was Earl's?"

He nodded.

"You know there's writing on this?"

Alan nodded again.

"You know who this is."

He shook his head. "No, I don't. I never got around to asking."

On the back of the frame six little metal diamonds held the paperboard in place. I lifted one with a fingernail, another. The third one broke, and I paused. Three more, and the paperboard dropped out.

The words were written in an old fashioned, ornate but precise cursive. It was a style I immediately recognized from birthday checks of old. *Millicent Jakson*, he'd written in black ink, now faded to brown. *Born April 27, 1916, Died September 14, 1944.*

I took the picture out of the frame and handed it to Alan. He took it, read the words, then flipped the picture back over and gazed into the girl's face. "So who is she?" I asked.

"Harry's mother," Alan almost whispered. "The one he never knew." He seemed shaken, looked almost ill. "Earl never told me. I mean – I always suspected, in the back of my mind – but –" He closed his eyes.

"But what?"

"That date—" Suddenly Alan jumped out of his chair, fairly ran across to the kitchen. Half a minute later he was back, carrying three pictures he'd pulled off the walls. He handed one of them to me. The first I recognized with a glance. A staged picture from my parent's wedding, on the steps of the church. My father and my mother in the center, the man I'm told is my grandfather, Frank Cordell, standing beside my father and Uncle Earl beside my mother. Two groomsmen – army buddies of my father – stand beside my grandfather, and two more – college friends – beside my mother.

"That's your grandfather, right? Beside your father?"

"Yeah."

He handed me another. This one was older, by about twenty years. A black and white studio portrait of two men and two boys. I'd seen this one before as well. "That's

Earl and my grandfather. That's my father," I said, pointing to a boy of about eight or nine, "And that's Jay." I handed the portrait back to Alan, answered his unspoken question. "Jay was my father's brother, older by about ten years. He got killed in Korea, when the Chinese counterattacked."

"I'm sorry," Alan said, automatic.

"It's all right. I mean, he was several years older than my father. Dad hardly ever mentions him."

"Oh," Alan muttered. He held the last picture up for me to see. Not only was it water stained, but the entire right edge was burned away. In it, two men, a woman, two boys, and a girl stood beside a rock outcropping. I leaned forward. I'd seen it every day for the last month, but never stared into the faces the way I did now. "Who's that?" I asked.

Alan handed me the picture as well as the one of Millicent. "I think the boys are Earl and your grandfather," he said. "And I think that's Millicent."

"Looks like her," I said, comparing the two. It was hard to tell – while the portrait of Millicent was remarkably clear, the other was slightly out of focus. "And who are these other two men?"

"I don't know," Alan said, but I think I know someone who does—" At that moment the phone started ringing. "Stay there," Alan ordered, standing. "I'll get it."

"Who?" I asked, "Who knows?"

"Robert," Alan said, his back turned as he walked to the kitchen.

I looked at the two pictures in my hands. She could be the same, but then I really couldn't tell. The one of the family – if it was, in fact, a family and not just some friends out together – was too out of focus. It had been scorched badly as well, turning the gray-scale brown.

"Hello? No, wait, you don't have the wrong—"

I smiled to myself, and focused on the clearer portrait of Millicent. She could have been a Cordell, there was a certain amount of family resemblance in the dark, bushy eyebrows, low forehead and heavy nose, but then those are traits common to about half

the county.

"No, he's fine. Resting on the couch as a matter of fact. Took a bump on the head this afternoon. No, no – he's going to be fine. You want to talk to him? Okay, sure, let me see if the cord'll reach. Hold on--"

"Who is it?" I called across the cabin. "My mother? I can get up--."

Alan handed me the receiver and took both photos. The cord didn't quite reach – he had to set the phone on the floor, and the receiver wanted to jump out of my hand.

"It's Claire," he almost whispered.

I almost choked. "Claire? How'd– Where are you– How'd you get my number?"

Laughter filled my ear. It sounded delicious. "Well, hello to you too," she said.

"Hi. Wait, where are you?"

"Boston. My aunt's. What's this I hear about a bump on the head?"

"I– Hold on." Alan was trying to flag my attention. I dropped the receiver to my chin

"I'm going to run home for a minute," he said, sidestepping towards the door.

"Sure," I said, nodding wildly. The sudden motion sent some pain spiraling around my head, made me see stars. I gritted my teeth to keep from groaning. Alan had his back turned by then. I shifted on the couch. "I was leaning on a rail," I said into the phone, focusing to clear the pain. "It broke."

"Silly boy."

"Yeah, yeah. I assume you called my mother, got the number from her."

"I did. She's a little upset with you, by the way – says you haven't called home in a week."

"Well, I haven't."

"And why not?"

"Cause every time I do they want to know what I've decided to do with the place. Whether or not I think we should keep Uncle Earl's cabin."

"What are you thinking?"

"I don't know," I said, noticing that, the more I talked, the less my tongue hurt. "On one hand I agree with Sam – the place is a potential money pit. But on the other hand, Jennifer's also right – it *would* be a nice to keep in the family. Sort of a retreat. Like the beach house at Jekyll, only quieter. You've gotta see the view – it's gorgeous."

"Think I just might do that," she said.

I hesitated. "Do what?"

"Come see the view."

"Wait– You're coming to Tennessee?"

"If you'll let me."

The room suddenly felt small, constricting. "What about Franklin?"

"I'll bring him along, of course."

"It's a long drive. Can he handle it?"

"Well, if you don't want me to come down, just say so."

"No, no—" I stopped. "Claire, I'd like to see you again, but—"

"But what? What's the problem?"

In terror, I looked around the room. Four dirty-white walls and a bunch of books, but no escape routes. "I don't want to be a rebound relationship," I said finally.

"God, Frank, you haven't changed a bit, have you?" she asked in a rush. "You still think every woman who talks to you is hitting on you. No, I'm not looking for a rebound. I'm not even looking for a relationship – Jesus Christ, the papers just went through yesterday morning. Do you actually *believe* I would want to get involved with someone the same week I finally got away from Tom? Do you?"

"Well, no, but –"

"But what?"

Thirty seconds passed, thirty seconds that felt like an eternity. Then something inside me cracked, and the wave of self-pity I'd been holding back finally broke, washed over me. "I don't know what to think anymore," I said finally, in a voice that was almost a whine. "My life's not my own anymore. Everything was going so well – I had a job I loved, friends to go out with. My father and I were getting along better than we have in

ten years. I lost all that – lost my job, got kicked out of Atlanta, my father’s so busy cleaning up after me that he doesn’t even want to hear my voice–”

“Frank.”

“What?”

“Shut up. You sound like Angela Bennet.”

As quick as it had come, the self-pity was gone. Stunned, feeling a tinge of self-hatred, I shouted, “I do not!”

“The hell you don’t. Remember how she used to get, every single night crying into the telephone.” Claire changed the inflection of her voice; it was nasal and high-pitched “I wanna come home, Mother, I really do. It’s so awful here – they all hate me.”

I chuckled. “We hated her ‘cause she was full of shit.”

Claire’s tone changed, she was dead serious. “No, we hated her because she was the richest girl at school.” A pause. “So, you want me to come down or not?”

Hell, why not. “Sure. When?”

“I’m not sure – the bank’s not working out. I’m putting my notice in for the end of the month; Franklin’s too young to stay with a sitter nine, ten hours a day, and he’s starting to wear thin on Aunt Kaye. I’m going to work for my father – I told you he offered me that job.”

“Yeah – what was it? The old Intern position?” Mr. Shillelagh used to employ Boston University business majors every summer; when I was in undergrad he’d had a guy who was especially bad and hadn’t hired one since.

“That’s it. Help the bookkeeper at the end of the month, keep the appointment book, and help show the office suites. Basically a pretty face to carry his bag, but yeah, that’s the job. I could build my work schedule around my son.”

“Claire, may I ask a question?”

“Sure.”

“Why didn’t you take his offer the first time?”

There was a noticeable pause. “Because it would have been too much like charity.”

I drew a breath. "That's kind of insulting," I said, "considering the present situation."

"Thing's change, don't they?"

"Yeah," I muttered. Neither of us seemed to know what to say, and there was an uncomfortable moment.

"Anyway," she began in a rush, "I'll probably leave a week from Thursday, in the morning, hole up in a hotel somewhere in Virginia, and be there late Friday night, one or two. That sound good?"

"You've looked at the maps, haven't you?" My question was rhetorical. "So that gives me – a little over two weeks to get the place ready."

Claire laughed. "You've been there over a month – I thought you'd have that place sparkling by now."

"I've been sulking," I said. It came out natural, without any prior thought, but when I said it, I understood it was the truth. For a moment I hated myself.

"So I figured." My pride started to object, but she was talking again. "I'll call you when I get things worked out."

"Sure."

"Kay, bye," I said, and walked around the couch to hang up the phone. Within seconds it started ringing again. I thought about letting it ring, then groaned, reached for it. "What'd you forget?"

"Frank?"

"Oh, sorry. Hi, mother."

"How are you?"

"Been better. Got a headache. And you?"

"Fine. Claire's looking for you. She called--"

"Too late. Just got off the phone with her. What did you do, put the phone on auto-redial?"

"Yeah, I did. What'd she want?"

"She's gonna come down, visit."

"When? And for how long?"

"Early March. I don't know how long— forgot to ask. Why?"

"No reason, just asking. What do you mean, 'been better'? You're not sick, are you?"

"No," I said, "just a little headache is all."

"What'd you do?"

"Nothing," I said. There was no way I was going to tell her — as I think I've mentioned, she would have left Atlanta in thirty seconds, probably with my sister in tow.

"Barometer's falling."

"Davis family curse."

I groaned. "You need something?"

"Just to hear from you. You never call."

"I've been busy. Jennifer there?"

"She was — I'll check." A scratch as she covered the receiver, followed by a muffle yell. A long pause.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Jennifer."

"Make it quick; Thomas is outside."

"How is the old curmudgeon?" Thomas is my sister's fiance. We have an odd relationship — sometimes I like him, sometimes I don't. It depends on whether I remember the fact that he sleeps beside my baby sister.

"Fine. What you need?"

"Money."

"Shit, Frank, shouldn't you be talking to Dad?"

"For supplies, Jennifer. Paint, some rugs, a vacuum cleaner—"

"Hold on," she interrupted, and set the receiver down. I twiddled my thumbs and glanced around the cabin for two or three minutes before she was back. "Okay— You were saying?"

"Where'd you go?"

“Get Thomas out of the car.”

“Tell him I said Hi.”

“My brother says Hi.” A distant grunt. Like I said, love hate. “Okay, so what’s going on?”

WE SPENT CLOSE TO AN HOUR ON THE PHONE, during which, at some point, Thomas must have allowed his hunger to overcome his patience, because I heard my mother ask if she should throw more chicken on. This sparked a moment between the three of them, during which I was temporarily forgotten. In Thomas’s defense, he wasn’t being rude – he’s a large, active man and it takes quite a bit of food to keep his body fueled. His job doesn’t help – it gets him up before six. He runs a start-up remodeling business that specializes in restoring houses in Buckhead. Often, in fact, the same ones my sister sells.

Incestuous and parasitic, sure. But that’s business.

Business being business, and Thomas being a professional builder, he was drawn into the conversation almost from the word go. Jennifer consulted his opinion on everything from the color I wanted to paint the two main rooms – Navaho white, which got his bored approval – to the best way to kill mildew – some stuff called Canned Heat. But Thomas also being a professional, he wouldn’t give his approval to anything without a detailed description of the place, and I kept having to correct Jennifer’s memory. It was when we were arguing the merits of carpets versus throw rugs that my mother must have gotten tired of the dual conversations, because the next thing I knew she’d given Thomas the portable.

“And who’s going to install it?” I wanted to know, feeling smug.

“I will – That is, if you’re sure you want carpet. What’s wrong with the flooring?”

“It’s plywood,” I said, “not flooring. But what are you taking about??

“I’ll lay the carpet. This Friday.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Sure. I’m due a break. Got the tools in the truck, as a matter of fact.”

"Doesn't sound like much of a vacation," I said.

Thomas laughed, deep and full. I was jealous, but the jealousy was tempered with pride. "Oh, don't worry, I'll bill you."

"Ha!"

"He's serious," Jennifer said, deadpan.

I swallowed. "Well – how much are we talking?"

"Materials, food, cold beer, a place to sleep."

"Well, then – you've got a deal. Wait – one problem."

"What?"

"Roof leaks."

"How bad?" Thomas asked. His tone of voice was neutral.

"Not bad. Just a couple of water stains on the ceiling."

"They grown?"

"Since when?" I asked.

"Since you got–" he caught himself. "Since you moved in."

"No," I said, ignoring his slip. "But I'm talking to a guy here in the county about putting a new roof on this spring."

"His idea or yours? To wait till spring, I mean."

"Mine, why?"

"How's the weather up there? Dry?"

"Dry, yeah. But cold."

"When would you rather have a new roof installed?" Thomas asked, his voice patient. "Winter, when its cold and dry, or spring, when its warm and wet?"

"Oh." I did another mental check of my bank accounts. "Jennifer," I said. "I–"

"I'll go see Sam tomorrow," she said, "and call you Sunday. But don't sign anything until I talk to you."

"I won't."

"See you this Thursday," Thomas said.

"Later."

“Frank?”

“Yeah, Jennifer?”

“Bass. None of that watered down Amstel crap you drink.”

I laughed. “Bass. Got it.”

A WEEK PASSED. A week that just might have been, physically, the most active of my life. And after the previous two months of inactivity, of nurturing the wound to my pride, it felt good.

Alan Anderson, for one, was worried. "You sure that bump on the head didn't knock something loose?" he asked Tuesday morning.

"Like what?" I asked, wiping sweat from my forehead. Evidentially we'd inherited our characteristic thinness from the Davises – all of my uncle's clothes were two sizes too large, and I was loading most of Uncle Earl's everyday clothes into the truck for a second trip to local Goodwill. In between phone calls I'd spent the weekend going through my uncle's things with a fine tooth comb, deciding what to keep, what to donate, and what to throw out. It was funny what I'd decided to keep – out-of-the-ordinary objects that had more sentimental than practical value. All his photo albums and fishing rods – including a broken bamboo fly rod that I hung on nails in the hallway – and some souvenirs, including a hideous carved ivory tusk that I found in the bottom of the hall closet and now sat in regal splendor on top of a bookshelf, beside my stereo boom-box. Simple, generic utilitarian objects I'd taken to Goodwill – a laminated chest-of-drawers, a card table, a cabinet Hi-Fi stereo from the late seventies. Some of those were worth money, but on Monday's trip to the dump, when I saw a family riffling through the obsolete tax guidelines, back issues of *National Geographic Traveler*, broken coffee mugs, chipped and cracked pots and pans, and other assorted broken odds and ends that I'd left Sunday, I'd decided to just donate them.

"Like your sanity."

"My sanity's fine," I said, jumping into the bed of the truck. "Now." I kicked a box of socks to wedge it in beside a box full of shoes.

Alan leaned on the truck. "Now?" he asked.

"Yeah, now. As in this week. You just didn't know me before is all."

"Before what?"

I jumped out of the truck. "Before I got fired," I said, headed inside for another

box.

WEDNESDAY MORNING HARRY JAKSON AND HIS CREW of converted yard-men showed up. The topic had come up when Harry and I were discussing the possibilities of getting the roof on before spring – as Thomas had implied he would be, Harry was quite taken with my sudden change of mind. I'd brought up the yard work in passing, really – in all truth I was perfectly willing to do the work myself. In fact, I was planning on it.

"One seventy-five."

"I thought you said two-fifty."

"I did, but my boys need work. I pay them fifty a day – the seventy-five is my cut. Keeps the chainsaws sharp."

"Oh," I said, wondering how a man could keep his family fed on two-fifty a week.

"We'll just skip the middle man is all."

"Who gets the twenty-five – oh, Michael. Fine. But what about tools?"

"I'll charge 'em rent. Five bucks per day per person. Hell, the tools are just sitting anyway. They'll have to use your truck, though."

"Why?"

"Insurance."

"Oh, yeah. I was just gonna burn the brush anyway."

"Can't – got an ordinance against that. Leaves, but no brush." Harry shrugged. "The y got it so people don't have bonfire parties. For their own protection. Anyway, let Michael drive. I trust him well enough – drives my Corvette around sometimes."

"Okay." I figured that was the closest I was going to get to a vote of complete confidence from Harry Jakson. "So," I asked, "if I were to give you the job, how soon could you start?"

"Week, probably. Depends on how fast we get Tom Campbell's addition enclosed. His old lady's getting on the boys' nerves – might calm her down some if nobody shows up for a week." He grimaced. "'Course, I'll get one hell of a phone call." He grunted, "Don't *ever* piss off a Campbell," he said. I laughed with him.

"SO WHAT'S THE PLAN, MR. CORDELL?"

I looked at the man in front of me. Two others were behind him, helping Harry unload saws, shovels, axes, tarps, two water hoses, an electric hedge trimmer, and something that looked like a cross between a pick-ax and a hoe into a pile beside the driveway. "Jimmy, right?"

He nodded.

"Call me Frank. You're the same age as me."

Jimmy shook his head, then had to brush some shaggy bangs out of his eyes. "No, sir, Mr. Cordell, not till after five. After five, we'll call you whatever you want. Shithead, even." He smiled, a silver tooth caught the sunlight. The smile disappeared. "One of Harry's rules, seeing as how we've known most everyone in the county since we or they were babies anyway."

I nodded. "Good rule. Okay, then – first things first, we gotta rake up all the old leaves, trim out most of the underbrush – let's take a walk, I'll explain what I have in mind."

"All right," Jimmy said, and followed me around the yard. He seemed to be the one in charge, despite the fact that I was paying all three the same. The other two – Darrel and Al were their names – took their orders from him.

Jimmy had a quick mind and was able to grasp what I was doing immediately. In reality, very simple: by leaving a good twenty feet of the underbrush – a thick interlace of saplings, mountain laurel, and the ever present scrub pines – by the road I hoped to hide the cabin. From there back, however, I wanted the rest of it cleared, except the laurel. I thought that would open the yard up, make the cabin seem larger. I also wanted to abandon the grass farther than thirty feet from the front porch to focus on what was close in. The back yard, on the other hand, I wanted completely cleared, so nothing other than that spruce could obstruct the view. I also had my eye on some wrought iron lawn furniture I'd seen at the McMinnville Co-op on Sunday.

Friday morning, I explained, a truck from the Co-op was bringing a load of pine bark, which we were going to use to mulch the rose beds and the old bushes by the house.

Jimmy thought that hilarious – I hated pines but wanted pine bark. Then he had a realization. “But that stuff’ll get all over the yard in two weeks!”

“You forgot about Thursday,” I said.

“What’s Thursday?” He sounded a little nervous.

“Well, Thursday morning you an I are each gonna drive down to the Collins River by Tarlton, get a load of river rocks.” I put two fists together. “Rocks ‘bout that big” – I put six inches of air between my fists – “to that big.”

His eyes narrowed. “What’re we gonna do with a bunch of rocks?”

“Line the beds. Make borders.”

His chin dropped. “Oh.” City folks, his tone said. Then– “Wait, I don’t got a truck.”

“That’s okay. Harry said you could drive his.” I gestured.

Jimmy looked at the truck, then at Harry. “He said I could drive the Dodge?”

“Said you had before.”

Jimmy was still looking at Harry. “Yeah, but just on site. He ain’t never let me take it on the road.” He looked at me, I noticed a glint in his eyes. Greed, maybe. And why not – this might have been Harry’s way of telling Jimmy he was moving up in the crew. Harry had said Jimmy was about to go full-time, which meant salary instead of piece-work.

“Where do you think we ought to start?” I asked, not wanting to burst his bubble. “Back yard or front?”

“Back,” Jimmy said, looking back at Harry. “It’s bigger, but easier.”

“Sounds good,” I said, “let’s hit it.”

JIMMY AND I PICKED A BARE SPOT IN THE BACKYARD for a leaf burning pile and hooked up the water hose for safety. Very quickly a pattern emerged – two of us raked, a third hauled leaves in a tarp, and the other fed the fire while keeping the hose in hand. When the hauler got tired he became the fireman, and so forth. The wind was the reason for the hose, and it made things tricky at first – the burning leaves kept wanting to blow

towards the house. That is, until Jimmy and Al decided to move the pile to a safer spot immediately behind the spruce and into the lee of the wind. Things went quickly from there, by one, when we broke for lunch, we had the whole yard –front and back – raked. I was disappointed to find most of the grass wasn't just brown, but dead. "I don't think it's been raked in two years," Darrell said. I shrugged, decided to wait a few weeks before worrying about it.

Around ten or eleven Alan showed up, took a look around. I explained to him what my plans were, he shrugged, left. I hadn't seen much of him since Friday night, when he disappeared. Being so busy at the moment, I'd given up my hot breakfasts. Most afternoons he was gone, I assume with Robert Harris.

After lunch we shifted to the front and started on the brush. We were still working our way through the tangle when Michael Bledsoe showed up. After a five minute explanation from Jimmy he tucked in his shirt, pulled on some gloves, and waded into the tangle.

FIVE O'CLOCK, AND WE WERE ABOUT FINISHED. Michael was taking care of Harry's tools, putting them under a tarp behind the cabin. Jimmy and I were still cutting. At some point someone – I think Michael – had the idea to shove some of the cut brush into that first twenty feet beside the road, creating a wind block to catch the leaves, keep them from blowing into the front yard. I agreed; as dusk was coming on, Al and Darrell were putting the finishing touches on the tangle when a car pulled into the drive. Probably it was just Alan, I thought, and I attacked another three foot pine.

"How's the bump?"

"Huh?" I turned around – Shelby. I'd kind of been half-expecting her, but not what she was wearing. White, long sleeve oxford shirt, a plaid blue skirt (obviously uniform), white socks, and black and white saddle shoes. Her hair was pulled back into a single ponytail. The effect was altogether childish, and I almost fell onto the ground, I laughed so hard.

Her face developed a pout. "What?"

"You look twelve," I said, choking back another spasm of laughter.

"Fuck you," she said. But she smiled when she said it. "How'd you like to have to wear this to school every day?"

"I did – well, the girls did. I wore a tie."

She grunted, turned on her heel. But I noticed she pulled the rubber band out of her hair, threw it across the yard. I turned, took a swing at the pine. When it fell I'd decided enough damage had been done for the day, dragged it to Earl's truck, threw it on top of a pile of trimmings. The plan was to find a place to dump them on our way to the river in the morning. "All right," I called to Darrell and Al, "that's enough."

Shelby reappeared around the corner of the cabin. She had Michael in tow.

"Where you two headed?" I asked.

"His place."

"Mom's cooking dinner," he said. "Shelby's staying with us while her old man's out of town."

"Where'd he go?"

"D.C. Conference of some sort – I'm not sure what."

"Hey, Michael!" Jimmy yelled from the front yard. I looked; Jimmy was bent over, crouched on the ground. "C'mere a minute."

"What for?" Michael answered.

"You okay?" I yelled.

Jimmy gave me a backhand wave. "I'll go see what he wants," Michael said. I noticed he gave Shelby's hand a squeeze before running over to Jimmy's side.

"What's that about?"

Shelby shrugged. "I dunno. Probably found a shrew, or a mouse nest. Jimmy's all the time finding things like that, and he shows Michael."

"Why?"

"Michael's talking about majoring in biology when he goes to college."

"Oh," I muttered. "You two are juniors, right?"

Shelby shook her head. "Michael is. I'm a senior."

“But—”

“Michael’s older than me?” Shelby laughed. “Yeah, he is. Two months – Dad started me a year early.”

I turned and took a step back towards the front porch. “What’s he do, anyway?” I asked. “Your father, I mean. You said once before he taught economics—”

“That’s part of it,” Shelby said, following me towards the porch. “But he does more than that. He serves on some sort of government commission, has to do with the SEC Oversight, I think.”

“Damn.”

Shelby shook her head. “It’s really not as big of a deal as it sounds. Couple of times a year they fly him to Washington or Chicago, where he spends a week listening to other economists give presentations and then explains what was just said to congressmen who were sleeping through the presentation anyway.”

“That’s a big deal,” I said, “especially for someone from Sewanee.” It was a barbed question, for several reasons – for one thing, to see if she’d ever paid enough attention to her father to understand exactly what it was he did or if she was just deflecting my attention. I was also well aware Sewanee’s academic reputation. But mostly I just wanted to keep her talking.

“Actually,” she said, “he got the job here because of the commission.”

“How?” I asked, sitting on the front step.

“Sewanee wanted a Name. My father’s a Name. So they offered him too much money to pass up, and we moved here.”

“How long ago was that?” I asked, mildly disappointed. She’d managed to deflect my questions after all. Shelby wasn’t reminding me of Claire anymore, but of someone else. Me.

“Year before last.”

“Where from?”

“Seymour.”

“Indiana? You mean to tell me—”

"That my father taught at IU-Bloomington?" Shelby laughed. "Small world, isn't it?"

"No shit. Why didn't you tell me before?"

She shrugged, turned to glance at Michael. "Didn't feel the need, I guess. Kind of tired of it, actually."

"Tired of what?" I asked. But at that moment Michael and Jimmy stood, started walking towards us. Something that looked like dark rope dangled, twisted in Michael's hand. "What's that?"

"I think – shit!" She turned, jumped up the four steps, over me. "Snake," she whispered.

She was right. Snake. Michael and Jimmy walked towards us, slow, Jimmy grinning from ear to ear, Michael looking a little more worried, but self confident. The snake didn't seem too happy – it continued twirling in the air, then started to wrap itself around Michael's arm.

"Bledsoe," Shelby hollered, "You touch me with that fucking thing—"

"Calm down," he said, "I'm not gonna doing anything of the sort, not with this one."

"Why not?"

"Cause this one's poisonous," he said, and I heard it. Something between a grind, a whirr, a buzz that I can't really describe. But I can tell you it made me get up, move, join Shelby beside the door. It was the most evil thing I've ever heard. Then I realized where they'd found it.

My yard.

"Christ."

Michael laughed. "Damn, Frank, you're white as a sheet. Ain't you ever seen a rattler before?"

I nodded. Behind white fangs and under a scaled horn a golden eye stared at me. I saw blind rage. "Yeah, but they were behind glass. Not," I said, "up close and personal."

"Stop right there," Shelby said, her voice dull.

"Don't worry," Michael said over the whirr. "I'm not coming up there. Just gonna take it over to the bluff, let it go."

"No!"

Three heads snapped around to look at me.

"Kill it," I said. As if sensing the danger, the snake stopped its noise for a second, then started again, louder, somehow.

"Why?"

"Cause I live here, that's why," I snapped. "I don't want—"

"Frank," Michael said, absently flicking the tip of the snake's tail, "Let me explain something. The rattlers, they congregate around the bluffs. That's where they live, in the nooks and crannies of the rocks. They come out and sun themselves in the early mornings. There's probably six more where this one came from — I'm surprised you haven't seen any yet, warm as its been. Besides, you want them around."

I looked at the creature in his hand. Black diamonds along its back, a pinkish-white underbelly. Michael held his thumb on the back of the creature's dark head, just close enough to keep its pink-white mouth and white-hot fangs from writhing around with the rest of its body. "Why?"

"Cause they keep the rodents down, that's why. C'mon, Jimmy. I need your help." And he walked around the corner of the cabin. I noticed Jimmy kept a safe distance, and stopped to pick up a hoe.

"You're not big on animals, are you?" Shelby asked a moment later.

I shook my head. "I like animals fine. Dogs, cats. But snakes—"

"Shit!" someone yelled. "Goddamn it, get that fucking thing away from me!"

"Oh, hell—"

Shelby laughed. "Relax," she said, and Al came tearing around the corner of the cabin. He was as white as I'm sure I'd been just a minute before. When he saw us he stopped, stood on shaky legs.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Fine," Al sputtered. "Fucking kid. Knows I hate the goddamned things." He smacked dirt off his pants leg, bent down to cinch the knot on his boot. Shelby covered her mouth with the back of her hand.

I whispered to Shelby. "That wasn't too nice—"

"Oh, Al, he'll get over it. You watch."

"Why, 'cause Michael's the star baseball pitcher?"

She turned, looked at me, then started off the porch. "No," she said, "because Michael's his cousin."

THAT NIGHT, SORE AND EXHAUSTED, I fell asleep on the couch, dreamed of snakes. Rattlers pouring out of the rocks, encircling the cabin, coiling on the front steps, hanging off the back porch, coming in through the windows. Big ones, little ones. Everywhere I stepped, everywhere I looked – more snakes, whirring, whirring, whirring—

I woke up when I hit the floor. In an instant I was standing up right, terrified in the half-light. I was awake, but the ringing wouldn't stop—

I staggered across the cabin, still shivering at the memory, found the phone in the darkness. "Hello?"

"Hey, you are awake." Claire's voice.

"Sorta," I said, my body releasing a last shudder. "I fell ta' sleep, readin'. How you been?"

"How you been? You fell ta' sleep?" She laughed, dropped her voice an octave. "I be doin' jus' fine, thanks ver' much."

"Wha— Fuck you."

"In your dreams."

The reminder of my dream caused another involuntary shudder. I flicked on the kitchen light. "How's Franklin?"

"Sick, actually. Came down with a touch of a cold this morning. Found out when I got back from lunch – Aunt Kay'd left a message. All she wanted to know was if he has allergies. I kinda freaked, and the manager told me if I went home to not bother coming

back." Claire snorted. "So I walked."

"Damn."

"Yeah, well, they were happy to see me go. I never was cut out to be a teller."

"But you were supposed to move up," I said, opening the cabinet and pulling out a bottle.

"They kept postponing my promotion," she said. "Anyway, think this means I'll come down sooner than I thought."

"When?"

"Leave Sunday, get there sometime Monday."

"Okay," I said. "But what about Franklin?"

"He'll be fine in a few days. Shit, he just woke up. Gotta go. Call you in a day or two."

"Later," I mumbled, and dropped the receiver in its cradle, poured a glass. Glen Ord – thick, smoky. I needed it.

THURSDAY, WHEN JIMMY KNOCKED ON THE DOOR AT EIGHT, I was still asleep in the back bedroom. I'd spent half the night sipping whiskey and staring off into space, thinking about Claire, about Earl, about whether or not I wanted to keep the cabin, turn it into a summer retreat. Some time after two a.m. Earl's photographs caught my attention. Friday night, after Alan disappeared and Claire called and my mother called I'd hung the photos back on the wall, forgotten about them.

Well, not exactly forgotten. The dates on the back of Millicent Jakson's portrait kept returning to me – *Born April 27, 1916, Died September 14, 1944* – and I pulled the portrait out of the frame to look. One of those dates caused a twitch in my memory, I couldn't figure out which one. I wanted an atlas, a textbook to look of the chronology of the two World Wars. Maybe a battle began on that day, maybe some important general was killed, maybe some important political event occurred. I couldn't remember. At Bloomington any serious study of the World Wars – especially the first – was considered to be territory of the Europeanists, not the Americanists. And when I taught I de-emphasized the dates in favor of the sequence of events – if my students could remember what happened December 9, 1941 and June 4, 1944, respectively, I was happy. In the end, before I finally crashed a little after two, I added the word "textbook" to my list of things I wanted Jennifer to get from my apartment. My television headed the list, just above my cordless phone.

Anyway, I got dressed, brewed some coffee. Then Earl's truck didn't want to start. Dead battery, we lost another fifteen minutes tracking down jumper cables, getting Harry's Dodge backed into place, and getting the older Chevy started before heading off the mountain and down to the Collins River. Jimmy led with Darrell, Al rode with me. Harry had told Jimmy of a place where we could get the trucks into the river bed. .

Loading the trucks was the hardest part of the day. Rocks all over the place – the bed of the Collins was a hundred feet wide here – but most of the ones close in were boulder-sized. For some reason the best rocks were all in the actual river, which was of course on the far side of the river bed. Jimmy'd had the foresight to bring a pair of

camouflaged hip waders, and he spend most of the morning wading through the calf-deep but bitterly cold water, bending over every two minutes for another, then tossing the rock underhanded to the bank. The three of us must have walked ten miles apiece before we had a half-load each pick-up, and each of us was bruised from at least two falls. Darrell had taken the worst of it – his foot got caught when a boulder he'd stepped on had shifted, and his kneecap had fallen directly onto another. I made him spend a half hour evening out the two loads, then he was back at it. "Workin'," was all he said.

We stopped for a late lunch at the Hardee's in Tarlton – I would have paid if they'd let me – and headed back up the mountain. Harry's new Dodge didn't have the least bit of trouble with the grind up Highway 41, but Earl's '88 Chevrolet did – some trucker blew past me at Mach 1 when we finally reached the top. Al and I both flipped him off.

Back at the cabin, I had Jimmy dig some trenches while Darrell tossed rocks to Al and me. By far and away the easiest part of the day, though I must say this – after the rattlesnake, I was more than a little leery of heading into the underbrush. Every rustle in the leaves made me jump, every bit of movement made me stop, look. Jimmy caught on after a while, made things worse by tossing sticks every twenty minutes or so. By the time Michael and Shelby showed up my stomach was in knots, and I was chain smoking.

Actually, Michael showed up first – he took one look at what we were doing and joined in without so much as a hello. Jimmy, Darrell, and Al stopped long enough to glance at each other. I have a feeling they knew what was coming, but the phone inside started ringing before I could ask.

I raced inside, not stopping to knock the dirt off my boots. "Hello?"

"Good, you're home." Jennifer. "We're about to leave for Builder's Supply. You had any more ideas since the last time we talked?"

I did, but with what we already had planned for the weekend – painting and laying carpet – I didn't see the need. Besides, most of them were just furniture – lamps, tables, that sort of thing. "No," I said, "but I do have a favor to ask."

"What's that?"

"Stop by my apartment, pick up a few things."

"I'll try – depends on how much room we have," Jennifer said.

"Okay." I read her the list. She didn't question my request for the textbook, but the television and cordless phone seemed to catch her by surprise.

"The little TV in the bedroom – not the big one."

"Oh, okay. But – why?"

"I miss the news."

"All right." In my mind's eye I could see her shrug. "See you late tonight."

On my way out the door I grabbed a six-pack of cokes, still in their plastic ring. It wasn't hot, not by a long shot, but I figured the drink would be nice. Stopped on the porch to light another cigarette, coughed. I'd been doing so well for the past few weeks since I'd decided not to smoke in the cabin, four or five a day at the most. But then, rattlesnakes didn't live indoors. I walked over, started handing out the cokes when Shelby pulled into the drive.

She was dressed completely different. Today it was frayed jeans, old tennis shoes, a gray Rhodes College sweatshirt – and wore her hair pulled underneath a frayed University of the South baseball hat. More like the first time I'd met her. But that wasn't the first thing I noticed about her. That was that she was not happy. Downright mad, as a matter of fact. And when she ignored my greeting I could tell immediately who it was she wasn't happy with. Michael.

I guessed immediately they were having a fight, and I was right. But it wasn't one of those overly-emotional screaming matches – whatever the disagreement was, it had long since passed that stage, settled into that white anger where even monosyllable words are hard to come by. As we watched she stalked over, grabbed Michael by the arm. He pulled it away, picked up another rock. "Not now," he said.

"What the fuck do you mean, not now?"

"I'm working."

"Do you think I give a shit?"

He set the rock in place. I had the abstract thought that this was the last bed to be

encircled, that in less than half an hour we'd be done. "No," he said, standing up to his full height, "why would you? You never did before."

She took a step back. I thought she was going to slap him, but she didn't. "That's a load of shit."

"Why don't you go home," Michael said, staring straight at her. "We'll talk about this later."

"I can't, remember? My father's out of town, remember? And besides, I don't want to talk about this later."

Michael seemed to stare at the sky, the trees, the last of the rocks in the trucks. Anything but her. "Fine, then, Goddamn it," he said, and grabbed her by the arm, led her around behind the cabin.

"Watch out for snakes," Jimmy said under his breath, and Darrell and Al burst into a semi-controlled laughter. I stared at them. From somewhere I had the thought that I hadn't seen a wedding ring on any of them, though all of them complained about their 'old ladies.' I turned on my heel.

"Whoa, fella, where you think you're going?"

I turned, looked at Al. Pointed in the direction the two had taken.

"No, you don't. You stay right here. They'll get things worked out soon enough."

As I watched, Al took a finger, raked the inside of his lower lip, knocked dirt-brown snuff to the ground, then rinsed his mouth with the Coke I'd given him. "She's been seein' that Meigson boy the past month or two," he said after he spit. "Michael, I think he's had enough of that."

I blinked. "What do you mean 'seeing'?"

"Dating, I guess you call it."

I took an involuntary step back. "But she's dating—"

"Michael? Nah, they've been broke up for two months now," Jimmy said. "She tell you that?"

"Yes—" Wait, I thought. She'd mentioned his name, but had only implied that she

was dating him. "Not exactly, but they're together so much— I assumed—"

"Don't assume nothin' with that girl," Al said. "Sure, they dated, but that was last summer. She been seeing that Meigson shithead for a while now."

"And what's wrong with that?" I wanted to know.

"Cordell, you damn well ought to know what's wrong with that," Al said in a low grumble. "Or'd your precious uncle forget to tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"Aw, Christ," Jimmy said, cutting Al off. "Can't you just let it be?"

"Let what be?" I asked.

Jimmy turned to me. "Shut up," he said, and turned back to Darrell and Al. Darrell had his back turned, but Al was staring straight at Jimmy, a look on his face that I will never forget. Pure hatred. But not of Jimmy.

"If his folks chose not to tell him, then I don't think we should."

"And why the hell not?" Al retorted. "It's his name, his family."

"What about my family?"

"God damn," Darrell said, and threw his work gloves on the ground. "Just fucking tell him, Jimmy."

At that moment Shelby went running by, jumped in her Accord, started the motor, and floored it in reverse. I'd barely seen her face, but this I am sure of — she was not crying.

The sudden movement caught all four of us by surprise, threw Darrell and Al into action. Darrell went running down the driveway; Al tore around the corner of the cabin. Jimmy and I stared at each other. Just as quickly as he'd disappeared, Al reappeared, dragging Michael behind him, holding a set of keys. Without a word they jumped into Michael's black Probe, followed Shelby out of the drive. Al drove; before he left he stopped long enough to say something to Darrell, I don't know what — I was too far away to hear.

After all that the sight of Darrell limping up the driveway seemed out of place.

"You okay?" Jimmy asked Darrell, and Darrell nodded. "What'd he say to you?"

"Tell him."

"No. What'd he say?"

"That's what he said," Darrell grunted. "'Tell him.'"

"I don't think we should—"

"I do."

All three of us turned, looked. Alan Anderson was standing by the hedge, arms folded across his chest.

"HOW LONG YOU BEEN THERE, OLD MAN?"

"Long enough," Alan said, picking his way through the opening. "Long enough to figure out what you fools were arguing about. Al's right. Tell him."

"I ain't gonna," Jimmy said, and picked up the rock Michael had dropped, threw it into place. Darrell looked from Jimmy to Alan and back, picked up a rock, put it back, picked up another.

"All right then," Alan said, "I will. Frank, go get that picture of Millicent."

With the mention of the name Jimmy looked like he'd been shot. Darrell did too.

"What you figure out, old man?" he asked.

Alan ignored the question, pulled me towards the cabin. Darrell followed.

"Dammit, Anderson," he said, "who you been talking to?"

On the front porch Alan stopped. "Go get it," he said.

It took me less than thirty seconds to fetch the picture – it was still on the kitchen table. When I got back outside I handed it to him. "The other one," he said, "get that one too."

"Which one?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

I did, and went to get it as well. The picture of the people standing beside the rock outcropping. When I got back outside I handed it to Alan he was sitting on the top step. Darrell was standing beside him, holding the portrait of Millicent. "Go ahead," Alan was saying, "take it out."

Darrell did, but he didn't seem surprised by what he saw. In fact, he seemed to already know. Then he handed the picture to me; I took it, carefully, by the edges.

"September 14, 1944 – that date's familiar, isn't it?" Alan asked.

I didn't answer; I thought Alan was talking to Darrell.

"Frank?"

"Huh? Oh, well, yeah. A little – I was thinking about it the other night. Something happened in Europe, I think – I can't remember what, exactly. Jennifer's bringing up one of my old textbooks so I can look it up."

Darrell snorted. Alan held up a hand, stopping whatever he was about to say. "Frank, you're not going to find it in a textbook. Or, if you do, it won't be what you're looking for." He reached, took the portrait from me, began to put back in the frame. Across the yard Jimmy was working at a furious pace, practically throwing the rocks into place.

Alan turned. "You ever heard the name Meigson?"

I jumped, like I'd been shot, looked down at Alan. "Here and there," I whispered. "Why?"

"When was the first time you heard the name?"

"When I started going to the café with you."

"Figured," Alan said, shaking his head. "They're tied up in this, of course. Tied up in most everything that happens around here, as a matter of fact. Darrell, how would you describe them?"

"White Trash," the younger man said. The hatred in his voice was more than apparent.

"They were," Alan said.

"Still are. Bunch of shits – haven't worked an honest job in twenty years—"

"Then what do they do?" I asked.

"Three things," Darrell said, holding up three fingers. "Cash welfare checks, cause trouble, and grow weed."

"These days," Alan said, "these days it's marijuana. Back before the war, they ran

‘shine.’

I almost laughed, but the stare from Darrell told me not to.

“‘Course, the Cordells did too.”

I turned, stared. “What?”

“Jack Cordell – he and Daniel Bledsoe – they both did.”

“Who?”

“You’re great- grandfather. Michael Bledsoe’s grandfather.”

“You’re kidding,” I said. Across the yard Jimmy gave up, pulled out a pack of cigarettes, started towards us. I pulled out my own. “How come I never heard anything about this?”

“Think about it,” Alan said. “What does you’re father do these days? Sells real estate to rich folks down in Atlanta. You think he wants anyone to know how he grew up? You think he wants anyone to know he didn’t darken the door of the schoolhouse until he was nine, that he and his brother spent their afternoons turning corn mash into whiskey, that before he was fourteen he was spending his nights driving trunk loads of whiskey into Chattanooga?” Alan almost laughed. “Hell, you think your grandfather would have let his daughter marry a bootlegger if he knew?”

I remembered the old man, my grandfather. How he always had time for us, how he used to pick me up from elementary school, take me downtown. Then I remembered the one time I’d seen him lose all control of his temper – a tenant who was defaulting on his lease. The tenant had gotten into trouble with the government, old man looked like he could have killed him. “No,” I said.

“Course, ‘round here just about everybody ran whiskey, one time or another. My family didn’t, but then we were in the coal business. I grew up in that building your uncle worked in for forty years. But the rest of the county did. Jimmy there, his father is one of the few who still does—”

“Alan.”

I looked, Jimmy was standing in front of us. “You didn’t have to say that,” he said.

"Sorry, Jimmy. I forgot myself." Alan waited a minute. "Anyway, Jack Cordell and Daniel Bledsoe, they were partners--"

"Wait," I said. "Who'd you find all this out from?"

"Some of it is common knowledge, some of it is not. I talked to Robby. Took me three days to finally get it all out of him -- just put it all together this morning, as a matter of fact. Now, you gonna let me tell my story or not?"

I nodded. From his pocket Alan pulled his pipe.

"ALL THIS HAPPENED YEARS AGO, goes back to the twenties and thirties, before that, even. Prohibition didn't start the whiskey trade, just made it profitable, and folks 'round here weren't any different than anyone else. They knew how to make whiskey -- been doing it for years. The only thing Prohibition did was turn it into a business.

"With all the hollows and gulfs around here, Grundy County was the perfect place to set up shop. An agreement of sorts was reached between the different families -- we'll leave you alone if you leave us alone. Nobody risked breaking the code of silence, and everybody kept their families fed.

"When Prohibition ended, the commercial distilleries started back up -- well, the demand dried up, and with it the trade. This would have been at about the time the coal companies really got big, and everybody went to work in the mines.

"Then the war came, and the commercial distilleries started shipping a lot of their stuff to the troops overseas. Not exactly legal, but then not exactly illegal either. But that didn't leave enough for the folks in the cities stateside. Law of supply and demand -- and there was a demand. Especially in Chattanooga, where people were making a killing working for Volunteer Munitions.

"Only this time it was different from before. This time it wasn't just for money for food, but for profit, and that made things different. Most people stayed in the mines -- the companies were paying well. But a couple of families took advantage of the demand. Here in Altamont it was the Campbells, the Bledsoes, and the Cordells. Over in Palmer it was the Meigsons.

"At first it wasn't too bad – these folks got along the same way they had ten years before. I mean, it was the same individuals running the show, though a new generation had been born in the meantime.

"Nobody knows for sure how the trouble started. Well, the Meigsons might, but they ain't talking. Jack Bledsoe probably knows, but I know he ain't talkin'. And, come to think of it, your father probably knows as well.

"Anyway, things went from bad to worse real quick. Folks started competing with each other, and the Bledsoes and the Cordells were getting the worst of it. See, the Campbells, they've been here forever, and they were a large family, even then. The Meigsons – well, that's most of Palmer. So Jack Cordell and Daniel Bledsoe, they put their two families together to stay competitive.

"Year or two passed. I got sent to the Med myself, helped design airfields, so I wasn't here when things got really bad. But from what I can tell, the Meigsons got into it with your great-grandfather.

"I don't know if you've noticed or not, but the old road to Chattanooga goes through Palmer. That was everybody's favorite route – down into the Sequatchie Valley, then into Chattanooga either through Powell's Crossroads and over Jasper Mountain or up the backside of Walden's Ridge and down the front side of Signal – which is the same mountain. Anyway, one of the Meigsons got the idea that since the road went through Palmer, they had some sort of exclusive claim to it, let people here in Altamont know that if they wanted to use the road they's have to pay a toll. Twenty percent.

"That didn't sit to well with Jack Cordell and Daniel Bledsoe. Not too well with anyone, as a matter of fact – but a family that large? What you gonna do? The Campbells switched their route to Highway 41, which is the long way to Chattanooga. Not Jack and Daniel – they started waiting later and later, picking odd nights like Wednesday or Sunday, laying up in the city for a day or two.

"This went on about six or seven months before the Meigsons caught on. Seems they were making an extra run in the middle of the week or something. Anyway, they told Jack and Daniel the toll'd just gone up to thirty percent – Daniel Bledsoe told them to go

fuck themselves. Two weeks later was the car wreck.”

“WHAT CAR WRECK?”

“The wreck that killed Daniel Bledsoe. The same wreck that killed your grandfather’s sister, Millicent Jakson. The same wreck that killed your grandmother.”

“That’s not how it happened,” I said, almost automatic. “D.U.I. – my grandfather was drunk.”

“That’s what your father told you,” Alan said. “Real story goes more like this: Harry had just been born. Millicent or your grandmother one wanted to go to Chattanooga, the other decided to go as well, Daniel Bledsoe let them tag along. Something happened on the side of the mountain – the car they were in fell off the mountain—”

“That’s bullshit,” Darrell said, standing up. “Everybody knows what happened. Some Meigsons rear-ended the car they was driving, pushed it off the mountain.”

“That’s the rumor,” Alan said.

“Truth.”

“Now, you don’t know that for sure.”

“No,” Darrell said, “but I do know that Ford truck the Meigsons used to haul whiskey got crashed that night as well. Arlo Jenkins saw them pulling it back up the mountain that morning.”

“Arlo was sixteen,” Jimmy said, “out cutting cordwood for the winter. Arlo said just last week he don’t know what he saw.”

Alan looked at me. “People round here don’t believe in coincidences,” he said, “especially when there’s a Meigson involved. Or, for that matter, a Cordell. When Earl moved to the mountain – folks talked a bit, but Earl wouldn’t say nothing. After a while, they just got used to it. Then he dies, and a few months later you show up. Nobody moves here just because they like the place – basically, one coincidence too many.”

“You’re sure this Cordell is the same Cordell as my great-grandfather,” I said, not yet willing to believe.

“Positive.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Why do you think Earl Cordell came to Grundy County, especially when he did?”

Alan asked. “Late forties people were moving *away* from the county, not to it.” He stood. “But more than that – I knew your grandfather, before he up and moved what was left of the family to Chattanooga. And you know something? You don’t look like Earl, though you do have some of his habits. You look like your grandfather.”

Part III

8.

THAT EVENING I CALLED MY FATHER. He was at a meeting, of course. It wasn't until after seven that he finally returned my call. "How come you never told me?" I asked, getting straight to the point.

"Told you what?"

"The truth," I said. "The truth about the Cordells. About Earl. About you. About your father. About your mother."

Despite the distance I heard his expelled breath, and I could see him – top button undone, tie pulled a little loose, the heavily starched shirt a little wrinkled. He was twirling his reading glasses in a circle, and one foot was kicked up on the corner of his mahogany desk. "So they told you, huh? Sometimes I forget how long their memories are."

"Dad," I said, "if what they're telling me is the truth, then it's murder."

"Sheriff said it was an accident," he said.

"They also say the Sheriff was on the Meigson's payroll." Darrell did, actually, and according to him the Sheriff was still on their payroll. 'That's how come their fields never get found,' Darrell had said. 'When there's a bust here it's always some poor guy just tryin' to raise a little extra cash.'

"Well, he probably was. They had the whole county in their back pocket."

"So you admit that you were born here."

"Frank," my father said, "I never said that I wasn't--"

"No, you didn't," I said, breaking my rule and lighting a cigarette indoors. "But you always let me believe you were born in Chattanooga."

"Well, I'm sorry. But I couldn't exactly have you and Jennifer running around telling your friends what I really did when I was growing up, now could I?"

"That's not an excuse – wait a minute." Something about the way he said 'Jennifer and you' felt odd – normally he would say 'the three of you.' "Does Sam know?"

My father paused. "Yes," he said. "He's known for several years now."

"Since when?"

"You were in Boston – I can't remember, exactly. No, I do – Sam's senior year at the Academy. Earl was trying to get me to invest in some real estate deal. Greeter's Estates, I think he called it – a friend of his was building it. It's out by Savage Gulf, if I remember correctly. But Sam and I went up for the weekend."

"How come he never told me?" I asked, thinking that it certainly explained my brother's wish to sell the cabin.

"Cause I asked him not to. Don't tell Jennifer, either," he added without a pause.

"Why not?"

"Cause, Frank, some things are just better left in the dark."

I held my breath for thirty seconds before I asked my next question. "Does Mom know?"

"A little – enough. Nobody knows everything that happened, of course. And that includes me." A pause, during which I heard some distant scratching, and I knew he was growing out his beard again..

"Why shouldn't I tell Jennifer?" I asked, searching for a way to communicate my outrage. For twenty-eight years I'd been lied to.

"Because I'm your father, that's why."

"I need a better reason than that."

"No, you don't," he said, and I knew that while he wasn't right, it was completely useless to argue.

I dropped the cigarette butt in a coke can. It fizzed. "Someday," I said.

"Just not this weekend, okay?"

"Sure," I said, hating myself. Headlights flashed through the window, onto the wall. "So how do I tell between what's true and what's not?"

"Trust your instincts."

"That's not much help," I said.

"Sorry. Listen, I gotta go. There's a reception downtown I gotta get to, and I'm

already late to pick up your mother.”

“Tell her I love her.” A knock on the door.

“Will do. See you.” He hung up before I could say ‘bye.’ Trying to make sense of it all I went to the door, opened it—

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Shelby Alexander smiled a wan smile at me. Her face was dirty, as were her jeans.

“Hiding,” she said. “Can I come in?”

I stepped aside, let her pass by me. “From who?” I asked, closing the door.

“Michael, Jack, Harry – all of ‘em.” She looked over at Alan’s house. “Al was waiting for me at home,” she said.

“You lied to me,” I said. Her face fell; I wished immediately I could take it back – I was taking my anger out on the wrong person. I pulled her inside, shut the door.

“How?”

“You let me believe you and Michael were dating—”

She picked my cigarettes off the table, sat down. “We were.”

“Last summer,” I said, holding the lighter for her. Maybe I was apologizing – I don’t know.

“Most of the fall as well—”

“What were you two fighting about, anyway?” I asked, trying to change the subject.

She shook her head. “College, of all things. I thought I’d decided to stay at Sewanee. Michael thinks I ought to get the hell out of here.”

“Why?” I asked, sitting down across from her. With everything I’d been told that afternoon I didn’t quite believe her.

“It’s complicated,” she said, and I almost laughed. Complicated didn’t begin to describe it. “What?”

“I suppose you’ve heard the story about how Michael’s grandfather got killed.”

She shook her head, rolled her eyes. “These people,” she said, turning to look out the window, “their memories are just too fucking long.”

"That's what my father said."

"What?"

"Well, evidentially it was the same wreck killed my grandmother."

Shelby stared at me, her blue eyes wide. "You're kidding," she said.

"Nope. Story is my grandfather's father, man named Jack Cordell, and Daniel Bledsoe ran whiskey together, back during World War Two. My father just confirmed that much. What I don't know is if the Meigsons had a hand in the wreck or not."

"Oh, I'd say it's common knowledge that they did," Shelby said.

"There's no proof—"

"Who needs proof? Besides, that's not what's important, not anymore. What important now is that everybody in Altamont—and when I say Altamont I include the Springs, cause everybody else does too—everybody in Altamont *believes* they did. And they hate the Meigsons for it. That's all Michael, Harry, and the rest of 'em see—Jason's last name. Meigson."

"Wait, you lost me. Who's Jason?"

"Friend of mine."

"Guy you're seeing."

"I'm not dating him," Shelby said, her voice rising. "Can't anybody understand that? We're just friends, that's all. Christ, he doesn't even live in Palmer. Harry Jakson sold his family their fucking house—"

"Shelby—"

"I suppose this means you're with *them*," she said, and my jaw dropped.

"With who?"

"*Them*. Michael, Harry, Al. Alan, too—they all hate the Meigsons, cause of some shit that happened fifty years ago."

She was looking for an ashtray, I handed her the coke can. "Not quite," I said. "I'm not like the rest of them—I didn't know anything about this until today."

"You're serious."

I almost laughed. Almost. "Yeah. My old man always said his mother—my

grandmother – got killed in a car wreck–”

“She did.”

“– except they always said it was D.U.I. That my grandfather was drunk. I never heard anything until today about moonshine or the Meigsons.” I picked up the coke can, shook it until I heard a fizz. “So I don’t hate Jason Meigson.”

“I do.”

“What?”

She picked another cigarette out of my pack. “I hate – well, not really. I’m not sure what to think, not anymore. You ever been to Palmer?”

“No.”

This time she did laugh, a little chuckle. “You ought to go,” she said, “see these people they all hate so much. They live in rusty old trailers up on cinder blocks. Eat frozen pizza two or three times a week. Sure, they all grow pot, but what else are they gonna do? I mean, the land out there sucks, can’t farm it–”

“Doesn’t excuse the fact that it’s still illegal,” I said, remembering all the friends, students I’d seen get into the drug. One case in particular – Donna, one of Claire’s (and later, my) best friends. The transformation was stunning – a gradual slide from a clean, introspective girl with a sparkling future to a motivationless pothead who wandered through life. I could name ten, twenty others – and every case was its own individual tragedy. Sometimes they made it back, but more often than not they ended up working marginal jobs, with marginal lives.

“No,” Shelby said, “but it puts food on the table.” She leaned forward. “You wanna know a secret? Jimmy, that guy who works for Harry, every year he plants a half acre below the bluff on the backside of his father’s farm. Thirty or so plants – I bet he makes thirty or forty thousand dollars a year that way.”

“How’d you find that out?”

She smiled. “Michael, Jimmy, and I were talking one afternoon and Jimmy told me there were some Indian rock carvings back there. I didn’t have anything to do one day last summer, so I went to check them out–”

“But how do you know he does this every year? And what does he do with the money?”

“I asked Mr. Bledsoe about it. He told me not to tell anybody, including Michael – that if I did Harry would fire him in an instant. But the money? He spends it, I guess – he goes to a lot of the stock car races every summer. Daytona, Talladega, Charlotte – he’s even talking about driving to Texas for the new one this summer.”

“He ought to invest it,” I said, shocking myself, “buy a house or something.”

“Can’t – everybody knows he works for Harry, makes fifty bucks a day. If he went and bought a house, Harry and the rest of ‘em would start asking questions, and they’d find out, treat him the same way they treat the Meigsons–”

With the mention of the name her face fell, the sparkle that had developed in her eyes from sharing secrets disappeared, and she shrank back into her chair. Three or four minutes passed; I stood up, walked over to the stereo boom-box and dropped in an old Jerry Garcia solo album. “So what are you gonna do?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “I can’t go home – Al or somebody is watching the house. Besides, that’s where they’d be looking for me anyway. I know one thing, though.”

“What’s that?”

“I can’t go back to the Bledsoes’.”

“Why not?”

“What Michael said – him or me. That I had to pick one of them.”

“And you don’t want to.”

“No. I want to be friends with both of them. But–”

“But, around here, that’s just not possible,” I said.

“No.” She stood, stole two last cigarettes out of my pack, tucked one behind her ear. “I gotta go,” she said, and started towards the door.

“Wait– Where you going?”

She paused, as if debating with herself. Then she looked at me. “Into the Gulf,” she said. “I’ve got my backpack and a sleeping bag out in the car. There’s a overhung

cliff I know about, couple of miles from the Door. It's safe enough."

I hesitated. I knew, in a general sort of way, where she was talking about. The Great Stone Door was one of the two main entrances to the Gulf, a place where a chunk of the cliff about the size of a large building had broken away. Erosion, rain water had filled the gap in enough to where a natural staircase to the bottom had formed. Killing some time one afternoon I'd gone there, and after jogging a mile through the woods I'd sat on a wooden observation deck and watched a pair of songbirds drive off a crow. Then it started raining again.

"You could stay here," I said.

Instantly the expression on her face changed, became bright. She walked over to where I was standing, wrapped me in a bear hug. For a moment I was scared she was going to kiss me. The question suddenly occurred to me – if she did, would I kiss her back? Or push her away? "Shelby—"

She let go, backed a foot or two away. Strangely, I now wished the hug hadn't been so short.

"Thanks," she said, "but I really couldn't do that to you. Besides, my car's outside – Mr. Anderson would know."

She was right, of course.

"Hold on a minute," I said, and went into the kitchen. She followed me.

"Here," I said, handing her my pager, completely unsure of what I was doing. "I haven't worn this since I left Atlanta. The coverage is nationwide – they use satellites – and it should reach into the Gulf."

For a moment I thought she was going to hand it back to me, but she didn't. Instead, she clipped it to her belt. "Thanks," she said, "but the only phone's by the ranger station."

I thought for a second. "123 means everything's okay, but lay low. 911 means emergency, come out right now." I frowned. "And 555 means I'm at the ranger station, meet me at the bottom of the Door in thirty minutes."

"Two hours," she said, correcting me. "It'll take me that long to walk down."

Still full of self-doubt, I turned away. "I can't thank you enough," she said.

"Go, before I change my mind, call Mr. Bledsoe."

She touched my elbow. "Frank," she said, "before I go, tell me, what was your grandmother's name?"

"I don't know," I whispered, staring at the ceiling, listening to her breathing. A minute or two later she dropped her hand and I heard the door open, then close, and I turned, stepped to the window, watched this girl, all of seventeen, walk to her car. She was braver than any of us – she was getting away from all of us, carving out a space in which to clear her mind, make up her mind, and in the process show this arrogant boy how wrong he was, her only lifeline an expensive electronic box, the signals for which I wasn't even sure would reach her.

"Frank, you gotta be crazy," I said, my breath condensing on the pane.

But I knew why I was helping her.

"HIM OR ME."

"Frank, god dammit, don't *do* this."

"Him or me. Pick one."

"Frank, please."

This was Claire's last visit. The real one. The one I never told anyone about.

"You're gonna pick him, aren't you?"

"I don't want to pick either of you—"

"You can't have your cake and eat it too," I said. "So who's it gonna be?"

She flashed the ring on her hand in my face, then took it off, pressed it into my palm. It was cold, heavier than I'd expected. "Go ahead, throw it. That's what you want, isn't it? For me to throw it away?"

I closed my palm, loosely, and shook it. The diamond bounced around inside my hand. It tingled where it touched.

"Go ahead."

I couldn't. I shifted the ring to my thumb and forefinger, tried to hand it to her.

She wouldn't take it; I dropped it into her shirt pocket. She didn't look, but stared me straight into the eye.

"Go home," I said. "Go to him. He'll give you a better life than I can, which is what you deserve. I don't deserve you."

She stared at me, the questions on the tip of her tongue. Or maybe there was nothing there. Just betrayal.

I shut the door to my apartment in her face. She stayed there for twenty minutes, then went to her car, but she didn't leave, not for an hour or two. I turned on the television, but didn't see what I was watching. The two of us, separated by thirty feet and thirty thousand miles. Me, watching television. Claire, listening to a mix tape I'd made her.

When I finally worked up the nerve to go outside, apologize, she was gone. A week later I graduated, moved to Atlanta. Then I was in New Orleans. Then Bloomington. Somehow, the distance made it easier to bear. But I couldn't forget the memory. And I couldn't escape the guilt.

IN THE DARKENED CABIN I DIALED HER NUMBER. "Hey, Miss Kaye, is Claire in?"

"Frank? That you?"

"Yeah, Miss Kaye, it is. How'd you know?"

"You got that accent. Besides, nobody else in this world calls me 'Miss Kaye.' But no, Claire's not in. She went to meet her father for a late dinner. You want me to have her call you?"

"No, that's all right," I said as another set of headlights illuminated the den. Jennifer and Thomas, several hours behind schedule. "I'll give her a try later."

"Okay. Peace." And she hung up the phone.

Peace. Jesus, I thought, walking outside.

"YOU'RE AWFULLY QUIET THIS MORNING."

"Yeah, I know," I said, pouring myself another cup of coffee – my second. "I'm thinking."

"What about?" Jennifer asked, dropping some scrambled eggs from a skillet and into a plate. From the moment she and Thomas had arrived at ten last night it was obvious she'd adopted the attitude that this was going to be a Fun weekend, that she and her fiancé were on a vacation.

"Where's Thomas?" I asked, sidestepping the question.

"Outside, looking at the roof. Said he wanted to make sure it wasn't so bad we had to reschedule."

"It's not."

She stopped, looked at me. "How do you know that?"

"First month I was here, it did nothing but rain. Roof held up fine—" The door opened and Thomas walked in. I'd forgotten how *big* he was. "What's the prognosis?" I asked.

"It'll hold," he said. "But that Jackson guy's right. You need a new one before the next winter." As he talked he'd crossed from the door to the kitchen in three steps, now he was hugging my sister. "What's to eat?" he asked her. "I'm starving."

"You always are," Jennifer said, laughing. I felt a little sick.

"Frank," he said, still holding onto my sister, "you were right about one thing. That view's spectacular. Ya'll could sell this place for a pretty penny."

"I don't think I want to," I said.

The two of them exchanged a meaningful glance; Jennifer sat at the table across from me, took my hand. "You're sure of this?"

I nodded.

"What caused you to change your mind?"

If you only knew, I thought. If I could only tell you. "I don't know," I said,

"place feels like home, I guess."

Thomas covered his laugh with a grunt. "Home? Frank, my man, this place ain't *nothing* like Atlanta."

For an instant I hated him, then, just as quickly, the feeling disappeared. I nodded. "That's my point," I said. "It's not Atlanta."

He shrugged. "Okay, whatever." He emptied the skillet of its eggs, plucked some toast from the oven, using his bare hands. I noticed the heat didn't bother him a bit.

"What time you got?" I asked.

"Fifteen till nine."

I grunted.

"What?" Jennifer asked.

"Jimmy, Darrell, Al – they ought to be here by now."

"Who're they?"

"Guys I told you about," I said, shoveling eggs into my mouth. "They've been helping me get the yard into shape the past two days."

"Looks good, by the way," Thomas paused long enough to say.

I didn't answer, but finished my breakfast in a hurry. Filled my coffee and headed outside. The guy at the McMinnville Co-op had said the truck would arrive around nine; I had to figure out where to tell him to drop the chips.

"What's with your brother?" I heard as I was stepping outside.

"Leave him be," I heard Jennifer say as I closed the door.

I DON'T KNOW IF HE TIMED IT THIS WAY OR NOT, but Harry Jakson arrived at the same time as the dump truck. After he pointed out to the driver where he wanted him to drop the chips he pulled me on the shoulder, took me aside. "Jimmy, Darrell, they're not coming today," he said.

"Why not?"

"That Alexander girl didn't come back to Jack's last night. Nobody knows where the hell she is."

Controlling the flinch was a problem. "Oh?"

"Hell, no. I *told* Michael to let her be, but he wouldn't hear none of it. Said there was no way in hell his girlfriend was gonna be seen with a Meigson."

"But they weren't actually dating," I pointed out.

"Yeah," Harry said, "whatever. Call it whatever you like. They were seeing each other." He looked down at me, his head tilted just a bit. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about this, would you?"

I leaned over, picked up a stray stick. "Why would I?"

Harry shook his head from side to side. "You're right, you wouldn't. I gotta go – Jack Bledsoe's about to go crazy. He's called every cop from here to Nashville, got 'em all out looking for her. Seems to think she went for a drive."

"Oh."

"Well, yeah. Like I said, Jimmy and Darrell won't be here today. Put a tarp over them chips – keep 'em dry."

"Huh?"

"Warm spell's over. It's snowing out in Memphis, headed this way. Looks like we're gonna get it."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Turn on your radio," Harry said, heading towards his truck.

"Hey!" I hollered. When he turned I asked, "What about Al?"

"Al? Ain't nobody seen him either. Had Michael drop him off at his place out Mennonite Road around eight last night. Nobody seen him since," Harry said, and climbed into his truck. I watched him back out of the drive.

"Who was that?"

I turned; Jennifer had come outside. "Harry," I said.

"Oh, the contractor. What'd he want?"

"Came to tell me the crew wasn't showing up today." I shrugged. "Well, come on. We better get started."

"Right," she said, following me inside. Thomas was still at the table, though just

drinking coffee by now. I noticed he kept his heavily diluted with cream – somehow, it made me feel better. While Jennifer went into the bedroom to change I stepped over to the refrigerator, clicked the Weather Band radio on. Every house in Altamont has one of these little black cubes stashed in it somewhere, I was beginning to understand why.

“ . . . rain converting to sleet at nightfall, changing to snow after midnight,” the voice droned. “Light accumulation is expected in low elevations, but accumulations in the higher elevations are expected to be heavy–”

“What’s up?” Thomas asked.

“Nothing,” I said, “I just hadn’t heard the weather in a week or two. I noticed it was getting colder, but I didn’t think it would be cold enough to sick, warm as it’s been.”

Thomas held up the paper he’d been reading. Yesterday’s *USA Today* – the southeast was painted in bands of yellows and reds, the rest of the country in greens, purples, and blues. Mostly blues. “You see all this?” he asked, pointing at the smaller map below it, the one that depicted warm and cold fronts, “This things headed right for us.”

“Shit.”

“Aw,” he said, “shouldn’t be too awful bad. Besides, you got a truck. Four wheel drive. Anyway, we’ll be working inside, so what’s there to worry about?”

“Nothing,” I said. He dropped the paper, stood up, and walked into the den.

“You wanna keep all these shelves, right?” he called.

“Yeah.”

“The stove’s gonna be a problem,” he continued, “neither one of you bothered to tell me about it.”

Jennifer came out of the bedroom. “Why?” she asked.

“Can’t lay carpet underneath it, that’s why. It’ll burn. If you’d a told me, I would of brought some tile as well. As it is, we’ll have to leave it on that pad.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Hey, who you calling?”

“Friend,” I said, “but he’s not in.” Before I hung up the phone I paused, then hit

three buttons and looked at my watch. Nine-thirty; I hoped it would work.

“Who?”

“Alan Anderson – next door neighbor,” I said. “Let’s get on this.”

THOMAS DECIDED that the best thing to do was to paint first, so we spent close to an hour piling furniture into the center of the den and lining the bookshelves with masking tape. Around ten-thirty I slipped outside for a cigarette, which got a nasty look for my sister, and to cover the chip pile with one of Harry’s tarps, then spent another half hour painting and trying to figure out how to slip out of the cabin as painlessly as possible. Finally I decided to just say I was running to the store, and when I did it got no comment from either of them. How I would explain why it took me so long I had no idea.

When I stepped outside the drop in the temperature hit me square in the face, and I went back inside to get my coat. Not knowing if she had one herself – with the warm spell of the last two weeks we’d all stopped carrying our coats – I grabbed a second, one of Earl’s, an old Army fatigue jacket. At the Eagleton Market I stopped, got two packs of smokes and some candy bars. Unfortunately I’d been insulted by the price of bread at the market and therefore had doing all my grocery shopping at Danny’s. Had I bought a bunch of groceries, like I wanted to, it would have been noticed.

The drive from Beersheba Springs to the Great Stone Door takes about fifteen minutes, normally. I made it in ten. When I flashed by the café in Altamont I noticed there was more cars there than I’d ever seen before – sedans, Trans Ams, Cameros, pickups, but four wheel drives dominated by far – which meant if I would have stopped at Danny’s someone’d be sure to notice me and that I left in a direction other than the one back to Beersheba. I didn’t think about it until I’d pulled into the park entrance, but it looked like they were getting a search party together.

At the Door I pulled into the wrong parking lot by mistake and noticed Shelby’s father’s green Accord under a tree. It was behind some trees, and I wouldn’t have seen it if I hadn’t made the wrong turn, but as it was it was hard to miss – it was the only car in the lot. So I pulled out of that lot and went to the next one, which was paved and

contained about ten vehicles, most of them with tags with out of state tags. I parked beside a green ranger's truck and headed down the trail.

Getting to the Door involves a three quarter mile trot along a meandering path between white pines and stunted oaks that's paved for the first quarter mile, then this crushed, hard-packed gravel stuff the rest of the way. The last thousand yards or so parallels the bluff, but it's not until you're actually standing on top of the Door that you can really see the whole thing.

If the view from Earl's cabin is grand, then this one is confining. It's like looking into a giant cracked soup bowl. The cliff – not a bluff here, but a cliff – the cliff drops a solid two hundred feet. And at the bottom the drop doesn't slow to a gentle roll, but is a lung-collapsing rush to the bottom, where Savage Creek and Deep Creek and the Collins River all converge. Then, as quickly as it fell, the bottom of the canyon jumps back up to the base of the opposite cliff. It's only about a half mile to the opposite side, as the crow flies, but I wouldn't want to walk it.

The most amazing thing about the Gulf is not the size, which is at once grand and confining, but the sound. There should be blasts of wind rushing around, throwing my hair back, but there's not. Instead, it's silent, a barely perceptible breeze. I'm told that sometimes, when the wind is pointed in the right direction – and by that I mean straight down the barrel of the Gulf – that at those times it blows seventy miles an hour and the whistle can be heard as far away as Altamont. But most of the time – days like today, when the sunlight is dull and some gray thunder heads hang in the southwest – it's quiet, so quiet I can hear the tumbling creeks below. A rush of water that comes from the Collins River, from Savage Creek and Big Creek, and from the thousands of feeder streams that throw themselves off the rim. The sound echoes, magnifies, and there's never enough green to absorb it all.

I STOOD AT THE TOP OF THE STONE DOOR FOR ANOTHER FIVE MINUTES, debating with myself, folding and unfolding the fatigue coat. Part of me wanted to just grab her, pull her out of there, take her home. I mean, after all, she was only seventeen, a senior in

high school. But doing so, taking the role of her uncle, of a parental, dragging her out of the Gulf, returning her to Harry and Jack Bledsoe – it would destroy any possibility of a friendship with her. Shrugging, I climbed down the staircase, down a two-hundred foot path between moss coated rock walls, stepping from rock to rock. At the bottom she found me. “Frank.”

“Shelby?” I stopped, looked around. Nothing but trees. “Where are you?”

“Here,” she said, stepping out from behind a laurel thicket. Down in the Gulf the trees were bigger, mostly hardwoods, and, under the canopy, thick stands of mountain laurel stood between carpets of dark green ivy. The effect was a permanent twilight, even at noon. “Anyone follow you?”

“Nah,” I said.

“What’s that for?” She pointed at the fatigue jacket in my hand.

“Weatherman says there’s a storm coming.”

She chuckled, and I understood that my gestures were pointless. She knew exactly what she was doing. “Thanks,” she said, taking the coat from me, “but I’m fine, really. What’s that – God, you brought me food.” With that she broke into full fledged laughter. “I’ve got plenty really – hey, Snickers bars! How’d you know?”

“Know what?”

“They’re my favorite.”

“I didn’t – I bought them ‘cause they’re filling,” I said, staring into the bag, at the half dozen candy bars and plastic wrapped ham and cheese sandwich. “How long you planning on staying down here, anyway?”

“C’mon,” she said, “let’s get some distance.” And she turned started up the trail. It took me thirty seconds to realize I was suppose to follow her. I had to chase after her a hundred yards before I’d caught up.

“How long you staying down here?” I repeated.

“Couple of days,” she said, not bothering to turn around, not even slowing down. “Till things up there calm down.” She turned off on a side trail, much thinner, with trees cleared only to a height of four or five feet – a game trail, really, one made by the animals

rather than human hands. At least it slowed her down. "What's going on up there, anyway?"

"I don't know," I said. "Harry stopped by this morning, said Jimmy and Darrell weren't going to show up for work today."

This bit of information made her stop, turn around. "Did he say why?"

"No," I said, conscious that I was lying to her.

She frowned, then turned and continued up the path. It followed the curvature of the bluff, maintaining the same elevation with variations of only a foot or two. "How far away is the storm?"

"The radio said it was snowing in Memphis."

"How about Birmingham? Did they say if it was snowing in Birmingham?"

"No. Why?"

"The stuff in Memphis goes to Nashville. We get what hits Birmingham. Has something to do with the Gulf of Mexico." She stopped, turned halfway. "Your friend Claire's coming down soon, right?"

"Monday. Did I tell you that?"

"You might have, last night. Or maybe Michael heard it from Alan, I don't remember." She shook her head. "People been talking about you a lot lately."

"Why?" I asked. I didn't like the idea.

"Mr. Anderson's been asking a lot of questions, stuff Michael's father thinks would be better left alone. Jack and Audrey were talking about it after dinner night before last – I was staying at their house, you know."

"He's got the cops looking for you," I said, suddenly remembering what Harry had said. "Seems to think you took off, went back to Indiana."

"Really?" She laughed, "Figures."

"Why?"

"I told you once before about how I acted when I first got here. I wanted to go back, told everybody how horrible this place was. Truth is, I like it here."

"You do?"

She stopped, brushed some leaves off a fallen chunk of cliff, sat down. I realized that this was what she had been looking for. Wherever her secret cave was, I wasn't going to be allowed to see it. "Yeah," she said, "it's nice. A little backwards, but nice. First place I've ever been that feels like home."

"You said that last night," I said, scraping leaves off another spot on the rock, sitting down.

"I did, didn't I? Well, it's the truth – not that I can explain it. Place just feels right. Course, I don't have the same reasons you do."

"Like what?" I asked, fishing out a cigarette.

"May I?" I handed her the pack, the lighter. "My father wasn't born here," she said through a cloud.

"I didn't know that until last night," I said.

"Family secrets are a kicker, aren't they?"

I nodded. That was exactly how I'd felt, like I'd been kicked in the guts and still hadn't caught my breath. "You wanna know mine?" she asked.

"Sure."

"My father's not my father. Never knew my real father – supposedly his name's Bobby. My mom's a hippie, Dad and her got married when he was in graduate school, out in California. They met at a show in Berkeley. I came along as part of the deal. When Dad got the job at Bloomington – well, my mom just wasn't going to leave California, not for anything. I was three, don't remember any of it. He adopted me a few months later – Mom signed the papers." She fell silent, took a puff at her cigarette.

"You still talk to her?"

"Who?"

"Your mother."

"Every now and then. We used to fly out to California for two weeks at the beginning of every summer."

"Used to?"

Shelby picked up a stick, threw it into the laurel. "Last time we went – summer

before we moved here, actually – Mom just wasn't interested. Most of the week it was just Dad and me. He took me to meet some of his old professors – nice people, but old. The next summer we went to New York instead. The Catskills. Last summer we went to Seattle.” She shrugged. “So that’s my sob story,” she said, examining the coal of her cigarette. “You ever notice how, if you listen long enough, everybody’s got one?”

“No,” I said, my voice quiet, “not until now.” Down below us, through the trees, I could see the glint of water. I felt her looking at me, turned my head. Her blue eyes stared, piercing. “What?” I asked.

“Just thinking.”

“About what?”

“Nothing,” she said, and stood. “You best get back, before they start wondering where you are.”

“Yeah,” I said, not wanting to leave.

“Keep me posted,” she said, tapping my pager with her thumb, “but don’t come down here again. I bet they’re watching you.” The plastic grocery bag crinkled when she picked it up.

“What makes you say that?”

“I saw Mr. Anderson last night, when I was leaving your cabin. He was on his front porch, smoking that pipe of his.”

I stood. “You don’t trust him, do you?”

She shook her head.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because he’s in too tight with Harry, that’s why. You know that subdivision of Harry’s, Greeter’s Estates, where Jason lives?”

“Yeah.”

“When your father turned Harry down Mr. Anderson went into business with Harry. He and Jack Bledsoe put up the money so Harry could build his subdivision.”

“How’d you know my father turned Harry down?”

She stepped a few paces on up the bluff. “Michael’s father let it slip the other

night," she said. "Seems the reason your father didn't want in was because Jack was already in. He doesn't like you, by the way – which explains why he hasn't been out to see you."

"I never invited him."

"You don't have to invite Jack," she said, "Jack invites himself." She looked at her watch – she had to pull back the sleeve on her coat to do so, and I noticed her arm was layered with about three different kinds of synthetic fabric. She was going to be all right – the question was, would I?

"You better call Claire," she said, "when you get back. Tell her to hold off her visit for a few days."

"Sure."

"I'll see you in a few days."

"Sure," I repeated, and watched her walk up the trail until she disappeared behind some laurel.

WHEN I GOT BACK TO THE CABIN Jennifer was waiting for me on the front porch. I stepped out of the car, lit a cigarette, and walked towards her. "I thought you quit," she said.

"I gave it a shot," I said, looking at her. Her expression said she had all kinds of questions to ask. "I suppose you want to know where I've been," I said.

But instead she asked, "Who's Shelby Alexander?"

"Girl I know. What did you hear about her?"

"Frank, she's *seventeen*."

I almost laughed. "Not like that," I said. "She's a friend. Strictly Platonic, I swear."

"You swear." Her tone was that of a statement, but it was tinged with a measure of doubt.

"I swear— Did I tell you Claire's coming down on Monday?"

"No — I had to find that out when she called, about thirty minutes ago."

"What did she want?" I asked, stepping up onto the porch.

"To know what the weather was doing. If you thought she should leave today instead of tomorrow."

"And you told her —"

"Her decision. But that's not the only person that called — Harry Jackson, somebody named Jack, and a guy named Al. And your neighbor, Alan Anderson, he's been over here twice."

I nodded. So she was right — Alan had seen her the night before.

"Frank," my sister asked, "what the hell's going on?"

"Nothing."

Her eyes flashed. "Don't feed me that bullshit," she said, her voice a whisper. Anyone else would have yelled, but Jennifer's a Cordell *and* a Davis. Arguments in both families are slow, quiet waltzes rather than rock n' roll shows. Part of what makes us so

good at business and so bad at living. "Who is she?"

"She's a friend," I said, and paused a moment. Jennifer stood stock still, waiting. "I've only actually talked to the girl five or six times, but we get along. She reminds me of someone."

"Who? Claire?" Jennifer fairly sneered.

"No," I said. "Somebody else. You might know him, actually, young punk from Atlanta who couldn't get along with his parents, drank himself into a ticket to boarding school, almost flunked out of a respected North Carolina university his freshman year, lied to his father until his senior year about what he was majoring in—"

"This wouldn't be the same shithead who published pictures he knew were going to make him lose his job, would he?"

"I was just trying to shake things up," I said.

"Christ, you picked a hell of a time to do it. What with your father about to get himself elected to the board of trustees. They took his name off the ballot, you know — they're making him wait another two years. Or did he forget to tell you? Shit, Frank, he fought for you, got you that teaching job—"

"It was Cayce that put me in charge of the Review. Our father didn't have a damn thing to do with that."

"Why'd you do it, anyway?"

"I don't like being used," I said. From behind I heard a door open, then close; I turned, Alan Anderson was standing on his front porch, looking at me.

"How were you being used?"

"The reception."

She stared at me. "You threw all that away because Cayce was *using* you? Shit, Frank, what did you expect? Of *course* he was using you—"

"Jennifer, go inside."

She jumped. "Frank Cordell, I'm your sister, not one of your students. You can't tell me what to do—"

"I'm not telling you, I'm asking. Please, go inside."

"Why should I?"

When I thumbed over my shoulder she saw him, making his way through the hedge. Her expression changed from anger to one of distaste, and she nodded, went inside. Almost immediately her shadow appeared in the window. I turned. "Afternoon, Alan."

"Afternoon, Frank. Got some visitors?"

"My sister and her fiance," I said. "They're helping me with the painting."

"I'd say they're doing most of the work themselves," he said, stepping up onto the porch, waving off my offered hand.

"Yeah," I said, "I had to run some errands."

He looked at me, his head cocked a little off to the side. "Like what?" he asked.

"Look at some furniture down in Sewanee," I said, the lie – completely unthought and unplanned – rolling off my lips.

"What, the stuff Earl had not good enough for you?"

"It's all right," I said. "But the dining room table only has two chairs. I didn't notice until this morning, when the three of us tried to sit down for breakfast." I noticed another shadow, this one much larger, had appeared in the window. If Alan saw them he gave no sign.

"Most people would have taken a truck," Alan said. "The stores 'round here don't deliver like they do in Atlanta."

"I was just pricing," I said. "Window shopping. They didn't have what I was looking for after all." His line of questioning was a little too sharp for my own taste.

"What you been up to this morning?" I asked.

He sat down in the only chair on the porch, made himself at home. "Not much. Went to breakfast at the café."

"How is everybody?"

"Fine," he said. "Not much changes around here." Through the door I heard the phone ringing.

"Excuse me," I said, opening the door.

"Sure," Alan said, digging in his coat for his pipe.

I shut the door behind me. Jennifer grabbed me by the shoulder. "What the fuck is going on?" she whispered in my ear. Thomas just stared at the two of us.

"I'll explain when he leaves," I said, pointing. "Let me get this – Hello?"

"Frank?" Claire said.

"Yeah, it's me. Where are you?"

"Boston. We're leaving in ten minutes." She giggled, a little self consciously. It was obvious she was in a good mood, that she was looking forward to this. "I lost your pager number – hate the damn things you know, refuse to use 'em."

"I—" I couldn't think of a good lie. But then I didn't want to lie, not to her. "I don't have it with me," I said finally.

"Well, stay by the phone, just in case."

"Claire, I don't think this is a good idea – not this weekend."

"Aw, shit, Frank, you're not getting cold feet are you?"

"No, it's not that," I said. "There's something going on here."

"What?"

Jennifer and Thomas looked at me. Claire's question was etched on their faces. "I can't explain right now," I said. "There's a man on my front porch who thinks I know more than I'm letting on—"

"Well, do you?"

I closed my eyes, trying to forget their stares. "Yes," I said. My eyes opened. "It's real complex right now. I promise I'll explain – I'll even introduce you to her. You'd like her, she's a lot like you."

"That's what you said about the girl you met in Bloomington," she said, her voice even, emotionless. "The one you were so sure about."

"It's not like that. Nothing at all like that, in fact. She's seventeen – just a friend."

"You want me to come down there or not?"

"Yes, I do."

"You're sure about this."

"Never been so sure in my life," I said. It was the truth – I wanted her at the cabin *now*, not tomorrow. Her control and her sense of right and wrong were what I needed. But more than that. Her physical presence, like when we were in college. Like the afternoon she stood beside me when I called my father, told him I was a history major. That the closest thing I had to a business major was a minor in economics. That I was applying to graduate schools for a Masters. Like the time we were out to eat in downtown Charlottesville and the waitress started to cuss her out for throwing the curve – I wanted to leave, Claire tipped her double. Like the night of the fraternity party where some guy crashed into her and called her Bitch and I wanted to kill him, started an argument, and she pulled me away. Like the morning in Charlottesville after Wake beat UVA in basketball when I woke up to discover a UVA student taking a baseball bat to all six windows of my old Toyota because of the *Wake Forest* sticker and I wanted to kill him too but she made me call the police instead.

"All right," she said, and I realized I'd been holding my breath, hoping. "See you tomorrow night. 'Bye.'"

"Bye," I said, slowly handing up the phone, turning to face my sister.

"It's this girl, Shelby, isn't it?" Jennifer whispered. I nodded. "Where is she?"

"It's a secret," I whispered, conscious of the oddity of the scene. "But she's in the Gulf."

"Where?"

"Savage Gulf – somewhere around the Stone Door."

"What's she doing there?"

"Hiding," I said, stepping towards the door.

"From who?"

"Everybody," I whispered, throwing my arms around the room.

"Including him?" She was pointing at the front door, behind which, I was sure, Alan still sat. I nodded. "Get rid of him – he gives me the creeps."

"That's what I'm gonna try to do," I said, and stepped outside, pulling the door to behind me.

But he wasn't out there. In fact, he wasn't even in the yard, but out in his own driveway, talking to Harry Jakson and some guy I'd never been introduced to but had seen enough times to know who he was. Jack Bledsoe. They saw me, started towards me. I realized I didn't want them on my porch, met them at the hedge.

"Afternoon," I said. Harry nodded. "We haven't been introduced," I continued, holding out my hand to Jack.

He took it, and I knew immediately where Michael got his strength – the muscles on his palm alone cried out to crush me, this offending party who knew more than he was saying. Like his son, he was light-skinned, though quite a bit heavier, with a slight gut developed during years of riding a desk. He was not as tall as Michael, but he was still several inches taller than me – like Harry, I had to look up at him, which automatically put me on the defensive. "Jack Bledsoe," he said, dropping my hand and rubbing his own against his pants leg, like the touch of my skin left a residue of something nasty. "Knew your uncle – good man. Met your father, once – can't say the same about him."

I nodded, as if I was agreeing with him. "He has his moments."

"I'll get straight to the point," he said. "Where is she?"

"Who?"

"You know God damn well who—"

"Jack—"

"Quiet, Harry. I'll handle this." Jack hadn't even taken his eyes off me. "Shelby Alexander, where is she?"

"I don't know." Which was true enough – I didn't know *exactly* where she was.

He crossed his arms. "She came here last night, didn't she?"

Without turning away from Jack Bledsoe I glanced at Alan – he met my eyes for a split second, then, just as quickly, looked away. "Yes."

"She say where she was going?"

"Not to me."

"Any idea?"

"Nope."

“What was she wearing,” Harry interrupted to ask.

“Wearing?” I asked, a little surprised by this question. “I don’t know – jeans, a sweatshirt. Why?”

“Did she have her boots on?” Jack asked.

Oh. “No,” I said, remembering something someone – I think Saunders – had said one day when Harry and Jack came into the café together. ‘They tag-team you with questions.’ “I think she was still wearing her sneakers,” I heard myself say.

“How long did she stay?”

“Ten, twenty minutes. I can’t remember, exactly.”

“You got any idea why she stopped to see you.”

“Not really,” I said, and I understood that here was a moment to throw them off the trail. “Kept talking about some friend of hers named Jason Meigson, how everyone thought they were going out, but that they weren’t. You try him? He might know something.”

“He ain’t seen her in two days,” Jack said.

“Oh,” I said. I had to try again. “Come to think of it, she was acting a little strange, though. I mean, I don’t know her all that well – only talked to her a couple of times – but –” My mind was racing. “She wanted to know how far it was to Atlanta, said she’d never been there. How much a hotel room cost, where to eat, that sort of thing. I just thought she was gonna take a trip there with her father – said he had a conference coming up at Emory.” I paused, tried to add a little drama to my lie. “You don’t think she actually went, do you?”

Harry stared at me, brown eyes blazing. I don’t think he bought it – well, I’ve never been much of an actor. “We don’t–” Suddenly the cell phone at his belt started ringing. He snapped it out of its clip. “This better be good,” he grunted. I watched as he turned to Jack, nodded. Up in the treetops a crow squawked. “Thanks,” he said, still looking at Jack.

“Jimmy found her car.”

“Where?” I asked, thinking that asking the question would cover the fact that I

already knew.

“Stone Door.”

Jack finally turned away from me, looked at Harry. Something unspoken passed between the two of them, Harry nodded and turned towards his truck. Jack turned back to me. “One more question,” he asked, “How much would it take for you to sell me Earl’s cabin?”

“More money n’ you got,” I said, and turned on my heel. Walking back to my front porch I could feel three separate sets of eyes boring into my backside. Fifty years ago, they might have shot me.

INSIDE THE CABIN ALL WORK HAD COME TO A STANDSTILL. Even the pretext of having the paint brushes out had been dropped – Thomas was over by the sink, running water over them. Jennifer was sitting on Earl’s couch, a worried look on her face. “What exactly have you gotten yourself into?” she asked when I shut the door.

“Is there still coffee?” I asked.

“Thomas?”

“No, I drank the last of it an hour ago. I can brew a new pot, though–”

“No,” I said. “Ya’ll haven’t eaten yet, have you?”

“We were waiting on you.”

“Get your coats.”

“Why? Where we going?”

“The café, in Altamont. I need to know what’s happening there,” I said in explanation.

Jennifer stood. Thomas stood by the sink, the last of the three brushes still in his hand. “C’mon, Thomas,” she said.

He looked at the two of us. “You two go ahead,” he said. “This is family stuff. I’ll fix a sandwich, do what I came to do.”

“You’re family,” I said.

“I appreciate that,” he said, leaning on the sink, “but I have a feeling I’d rather stay

out of this one.”

“Suit yourself,” I said, and started back outside.

Jennifer took me aside. “Give me a moment,” she said, then tried to push me out the door.

I looked at Thomas, who was still looking at the two of us, a blank expression on his face. Well, not entirely blank – a slight pressure of his lips, a barely perceptible lowering of the eyebrows. What he felt I have no idea. “Sure,” I said. I didn’t know if I was upset with him or not, though I certainly understood his desire to stay out of it. At that particular moment *I* didn’t want to be caught up in what I was caught up in. But I was, and there was no way out, nothing to do but carry on, moving forward, regardless of if it was right or wrong. “Tell him you love him,” I whispered. “Make sure he knows. I’ll meet you outside.”

I went to the car, started it, turned the heat on max. Thought about switching to the truck but decided against it. Changed the CD – Jennifer hates the Black Crowes. Jennifer came out of the cabin, shivered in the chill, walked towards the car.

“Thomas okay?” I asked when she opened the door, sat down.

“Confused, but yeah, he’s okay.”

I dropped the car into reverse, backed out of the driveway. Turning back around, I noticed Alan Anderson on his front porch, a cordless telephone in his hand. Halfway on purpose I let the clutch go too fast, stomped on the gas. My tires squealed.

“What was that for?”

“Sending a message.”

She looked around; evidently her eyes landed on Alan. “He always been like that?”

“No,” I said. “When I first got here, before this thing blew up – he was nice. Used to take me to breakfast every morning at the café.” I shook my head. “What he was doing, though – I didn’t realize this till now – he was making sure I met the right people.”

Jennifer brushed a stray curl out of her eye. “The right people?”

“Yeah. Harry, Jack Bledsoe – that crowd. Not the Meigsons.”

"Who're they?" she asked, and I summarized for everything that had happened since getting to the county, starting with the moment I picked up Shelby. What I didn't tell her, though, was that we were from here too. I followed my father's wish. Someday, I promised myself, someday soon I would tell her. But that day was not today, and this was not the time.

THE EYES THAT MET US AS WE WALKED INTO THE CAFÉ WERE NOT FRIENDLY. Nor were they welcoming. There was no shout from Don, the cook, no murmured chorus of hellos from the few men and women gathered inside. In fact, they almost completely ignored us.

I'd seen it before, this silent gaze that strangers received, but never expected to receive this treatment myself. In fact, I'd done it myself – dropping the volume of my voice, reducing my conversation to a series of statements. "Cold day we're having." "Uh-huh." "Think it'll snow tonight?" "That's what the weather man says." "Uh-huh."

I nodded at Carl Jenkins, on his lunch break, but he barely acknowledged my existence. A slight tilt of the head, a centimeter or so, and then he was talking to Arlo again. "They found her car," I heard him say. I wondered if he meant for me to hear him.

"It always like this?" my sister asked after we found an empty booth.

"Not exactly," I said, "we're being ignored."

Sally Anderson appeared beside the table, dropped two cups of coffee in front of us. Some of it spilled, she mopped it up with a paper napkin. "Afternoon, Frank," she said.

"Afternoon," I said. "Kind of quiet in here."

She glanced around the café, from Carl Jenkins to Don. When she did I noticed Darrell in the corner, his back turned sideways, wolfing a sandwich, fries smothered in catsup. "Well, things are a little out of sorts here today. What'll you have?"

No shit, I thought. "Club sandwich, some fries, and a glass of water. Jennifer?"

"Same."

Sally nodded, walked in her graceful style back behind the counter. She was the

complete opposite of Christine, the other waitress at the café, a gossip-monger who was rude to a point and listened to every conversation at once. "Club wearin' fries times two," she called to Don.

"Club wearin' fries time two," was his immediate response.

I glanced back over my shoulder, at Darrell, who had his wallet on the table. "Excuse me for a moment," I said to Jennifer. She nodded, though it was obvious she wasn't too happy about being left alone in a strange restaurant, surrounded by people she didn't know and were obviously more that a little upset with me. Well, I thought, it couldn't be helped.

"Afternoon, Darrell."

The man looked at me. I'm pretty sure he didn't want to talk to me, but I had him trapped. I slid into the booth, maybe to make him feel a little more comfortable.

"Afternoon."

"How're thing's going?" I asked. What I wanted to ask was Why it was you and Jimmy couldn't show up today? but I figured the roundabout approach would work just as well.

"They're okay."

"What you been up to?"

"Harry's got us running errands," he said, waving at Sally with a ten dollar bill.

"What—" Over Darrell's shoulder the door opened and Al walked in. It was evident that he'd come for Darrell, because he marched directly towards Darrell until he saw me. Then he stopped, his mask melted for just a moment, though I couldn't name the emotion I saw with anything other than a mixed and unpleasant surprise. Then the mask re-formed, and he completed the five steps to us.

"Darrell, you finished?"

"Yeah, just waitin' on Sally."

Al looked for her and found her behind the bar, polishing a glass. "Hey, Sal—"

"Yeah?"

He thumbed at Darrell's plate. "Goes on Harry's tab."

"Harry tell you that?" she asked.

It looked as if Al wanted to jump across the counter, but he restrained himself. Sally, I ought to mention, had a reputation for not getting along with everyone in town. Well, not everyone – only the folks around her and my age. There's a story there, I was just never privileged to hear it. Though, at the moment, I rather enjoyed it. "As a matter of fact he did," Al said, almost spitting out the words.

"All right, then," she said, and then Al almost dragged Darrell out the door. I stood, returned to my sister.

"What was that all about?"

"Just part of this whole mess," I said, picking up my coffee. "I'm trying to figure out what's— What do you need, Sally?"

But instead of answering she sat down, forcing me over, up against the window. She carried with her the scents of eggs, coffee, frying bacon, hamburger, and sweat. "Tell me where she is," she said.

I almost dropped my coffee, in the process forget that I didn't know. "What?"

"Shelby Alexander, where is she?"

"You know her?" Jennifer asked. I wanted to kick her, but I didn't – I was just as surprised by the question as she was.

"Course I do," Sally said. "She comes in here three, four times a week, 'bout mid-afternoon, does her homework while Michael cleans up after Harry's crew."

Jennifer drummed her fingers on the table. It was a habit she'd picked up ages ago from my mother, one that used to annoy the hell out of the three of us. "Doesn't mean you know her," she said. I could have kissed her.

"No, except that she's usually the only one in here besides me and Christine. We talk."

"What about?" I asked, wanting to know how Sally fit into the scheme of things. This was something I – and, I'll bet, nobody else – knew.

"Stuff." She paused. "You know, school, her father, my old man, Michael, Jason – everything."

It wasn't enough. "Any idea why she disappeared?" I asked.

"I have a couple," she said. "Most of them have to do with that Bledsoe boy. But that's not what I asked. Shelby – where is she?"

I felt more than saw Saunders and Arlo behind me, turned halfway. Caught, they scuttled out the door. Aside from Don at the far end of the stove and the two women on the far side of the café, we were the only ones there.

"All right," Sally said, "Let's try an easy question. Is she safe?"

"What–"

"She's safe," Jennifer said.

Sally shot her a glance. "Who're– No, let me guess. You're a Cordell."

"Sally," I said, cutting Jennifer off, "this is my sister, Jennifer. Jennifer, this is Sally Anderson, Alan's niece." I emphasized the last two words.

"Just cause I'm the old man's niece don't mean I agree with everything he does," she said, her tone sharp. "Unlike the rest of 'em, I *do* have my own mind."

You're still his niece, I wanted to say, but sipped at my coffee.

"You're not gonna tell me–"

"Nope."

"But you know."

"I know enough."

"Christ, Cordell, you don't know shit," Sally whispered, thumping the table.

"Why you protecting her?"

"I don't know," I said. "It just seems like the right thing to do."

"She's *seventeen*."

"I know that. But– Trust me, she's okay." Through the glass I saw Harry's red Dodge fly past, followed by Michael's black Probe. The odd thing was that Michael was riding with Harry, and that they were coming from the wrong direction, not from the Gulf but from the south. I craned my neck to follow them. "Where the hell are they going?"

"I couldn't say," Sally said. "But I'll tell you this – right after the three of them ate lunch, Michael went to Palmer."

Involuntarily my head snapped around. Sally almost laughed. "Didn't know that, did you?"

"No – Why'd he do that? From what I've heard, they hate him there."

"Not until you tell me where Shelby is."

I hesitated, looked to Jennifer. She drummed her fingers, once – in family parlance it meant Your call.

"The Gulf."

"I know *that*," Sally whispered, sounding almost disgusted with me. "They found her car this morning."

"That's all I know," I said. "She's down there." Which was close enough to the truth. "So why'd Michael go to Palmer?"

"Lookin' for Jason," she said.

"I thought he lived here in Altamont."

"He does, but last night, after Al, his momma sent him to his grandpa's."

"What Al do?"

"What Al always does," Sally said. "Went off half cocked, knockin' on doors, lookin' for Shelby." She shook her head. "Thank God Jason's daddy wasn't home – we'd a had a killing. As it was, Al scared Jason's momma so bad she sent him – he's her only – to his grandpa's farm in Palmer."

"Which is why Michael went to Palmer. Looking for Jason."

"Yep. Young fool nearly got himself killed too – only reason he didn't is Reed – he owns the grocery in Palmer, only Meigson any of 'em gets along with – Reed called Harry on his cell phone and told Harry to come get Michael before somebody took serious offense to the little shit asking questions."

"He was just asking questions," Jennifer interrupted to say.

"It's not so much the questions as who was asking them," Sally explained. "See, Jack Bledsoe's put half of them in jail, one time or another. Prowls around out there until he finds a field, then calls the D.E.A. and they have themselves a bonfire. Goes back to the Meigsons killing Jack's grandfather– "

“Jesus,” Jennifer said.

“Old history,” Sally said. “Course—”

Quick as lightening I’d jabbed her side. “What?” she asked, blue eyes flaming. I pointed at the cook, who was leaning on the counter, two club sandwiches with french fries in front of him, glaring at Sally. I’d noticed him about thirty seconds before, but waited because of a feeling.

“Sorry,” she mumbled. “I forgot myself.”

“Frank,” Jennifer leaned forward to whisper. In the brief interval Sally was gone, “this place is nuts.”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

“So anyway,” Sally said, dropping the two plates in front of us, “‘bout half an hour ago Harry and Jack Bledsoe was in here eating lunch when Harry’s cell phone rang. I happened to be standing right beside ‘em when it did, so I heard Harry tell Jack where Michael was.” She paused, as if weighing her words, then looked directly at me. “Shelby better come out of there pretty quick. She don’t, they’re gonna call out the National Guard, go in after her. She don’t, somebody’s liable to end up dead.” Her voice sweetened. “You two enjoy your meal, and be sure to let me know if I can get you anything.”

THAT AFTERNOON JENNIFER AND I FAIRLY THREW OURSELVES into helping Thomas with the painting, and by nightfall it was just the two of us – he and I – working on the two bedrooms. We were saving the kitchen for after dinner. Thomas seemed relieved that we’d gotten everything worked out between the two of us - what he didn’t know was that, on the way back, we’d agreed to omit any references to what was going on outside the cabin. I didn’t like the idea of keeping Thomas in the dark, but it was Jennifer’s idea, not mine – I think she needed some time to absorb and process everything she’s been told, what she’d seen.

Not that the outside world didn’t intrude – every hour or so the phone would ring and I would jump to it. Sally didn’t seem to believe that I knew less than I’d told her,

though I swore all I knew what that Shelby was somewhere in the Gulf. She also seemed to believe that because I'd known where she was before any of the others that I must have had some sort of means of communication that the others didn't. In this she was correct, but I didn't let on. "She'll have to make her own decision," I said once. Two calls later it was "Sally, she'll come out when she's good and ready." The last call it was "Sally, it's out of my hands. Either they'll find her or she'll come out on her own."

"You better hope they don't find her," Sally said.

The upshot of Sally's pestering was that I knew exactly what was happening, both in Altamont and at the Stone Door. Jack Bledsoe and Harry Jakson had divided the job of looking for her – Jack was working Altamont and Sewanee on the off chance that she'd left her car at the Door as some sort of subterfuge and was headed to Atlanta or even Florida with Jason Meigson. (The Meigson's weren't being helpful in the least – they considered Shelby a Bledsoe problem and wouldn't even say if they knew where Jason was or not.) Harry, on the other hand, was working the Gulf. He had his entire construction crew out there, full-timers and part-timers both – about twenty-five men in all – walking the trails in pairs, looking for her. I knew they weren't going to find her – she'd hear them coming a half-mile away. But on one point Sally had been correct – if she didn't show up in the morning, it had been decided, they were calling out the local Tennessee National Guard unit from McMinnville under the assumption that she'd fallen somewhere inside the Gulf, last night in the dark, and was lying under some bush, drifting in and out of consciousness.

That idea scared me. A bunch of rednecks who didn't know her – they'd be rough, maybe even smack her around a little bit. They didn't understand why it was she was doing this. Nor did I, for that matter, but I had a much more personal stake – it was my job to protect her, keep that from happening, but it was also my job to keep this thing that she'd started from blowing up in her (and my) face. Before going to bed I asked Jennifer to wake me up at seven, that I had a phone call to make. Though if it would be the 123 'all clear' or the 911 'come home', I didn't have a clue.

A LITTLE AFTER MIDNIGHT Claire called. We'd finished the kitchen only twenty minutes before and had collapsed onto the couch (Thomas and my sister) and the easy chair (me). On account of the cold and the snow the beer was forgotten. All three of us were drinking Scotch and water and talking about what was going on back in Atlanta. (Stephen Cartwright, the youngest son of Linda Cartwright, one of my mother's friends, and one of my former students had recently been arrested downtown – possession of a controlled substance. Nobody knew exactly what the controlled substance was.) Claire was outside Charlottesville, Virginia – actually she'd stopped to see a friend of hers who'd returned for the MBA. Becky something-or-other was her name, though I should have been able to remember it – I mean, she and Claire were roommates, freshman year. But that was before I'd gotten the Toyota, and therefore before I started traveling to Charlottesville every other weekend. All I really remember of Becky is her Chicago accent, high and nasal.

Anyway, Claire had gotten a good look at the Weather Channel and decided she was altering her plans – after a four hour nap at Becky's she was getting on the road, which meant, according to my calculations, that she would arrive sometime in the late afternoon or early evening tomorrow – if all went well and the storm front had passed over the mountain. The idea of Claire driving in the snow didn't faze me a bit, but the idea of her driving in the snow up an unfamiliar mountain did, and before she hung up I extracted two promises from her – one, that she would call me when she reached Knoxville (Claire was cutting through Roanoke), and two, that she would turn around if the weather got the slightest bit nasty.

Jennifer, by the way, has about the same kind of relationship with Claire that I have with Thomas – they get along, but always on a somewhat forced basis. Of course, there's more of a history between the two of them – Claire and my sister met when Jennifer was an eighth grader at Buckhead Academy. Mother bribed me to come home for the January long weekend by sending an extra plane ticket, 'for a friend.' Claire and I weren't dating

yet – this was long before the thought had even crossed our minds – and, to be honest, Mom probably expected me to bring someone else, at the very least someone male.

So if Jennifer was being a little cool to the idea of Claire's expected arrival it was forgivable. Thomas, on the other hand, surprised us both. "So I finally get to meet someone you actually went out with," he said.

"Yep," I said, then thought about it. "What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing. Just that all your friends are women."

"Well, as a matter of fact, they are."

"So tell me about this Claire. What's she like?"

"She's rich," Jennifer said.

Thomas didn't flinch, but I did. "Her family's well off," I said, my eyes on Jennifer. Thomas had upset her more than I thought, probably more than he knew. "Doesn't mean *she* is."

"I don't care about that," Thomas said. "I know she's recently separated from her husband, that she's got a kid, that she works in a bank. I also know you two met when you two were in high school, that ya'll somehow managed to keep things going up until your junior year – your sister here told me all that on the drive up. I wanna know what you think of her. What's she like? Does she go out every night or does she want to stay home? Does she insist on having a life that's almost completely separate from yours like this one here" – he thumbed at Jennifer – "or is she like glue?"

"I do not–"

"I know that, Jen – I'm just trying to make a point."

"He's talking about the way you were before you two got serious," I said, trying to back Thomas up. Jennifer didn't exactly look happy, but she didn't say anything.

"Claire's hard to talk about," I said. "You're asking me to describe my best friend – the one person who knows me better than anyone else. The one person who trusts me completely, who I trust completely. The one person who, despite everything I've done, everything I've said, still cares about me."

"What do you mean, everything you've done?"

“Well,” I said, wondering why I was about to say what I was about to say, “for example, she asked me to be an usher at her wedding. I refused – in fact, I made a point of being in New Orleans that weekend.”

“She know where you were?”

I nodded. “Yeah – I called the church, that morning. Hangover and all.”

“And she still puts up with you?”

“Yep.”

Thomas looked into his whiskey, then down at Jennifer. “Frank,” he said, looking back up at me. “You know you don’t find that everyday.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“No, I don’t think you do—”

I held up a hand, stopping him. The last thing I wanted was another lecture. “Thomas, I agree, I didn’t, not for a long time. But lately—” I frowned, this wasn’t coming out quite right. “But lately I’ve been seeing things differently. Not much, mind you, but I’ve changed.”

“Losing your job tends to do that to you.”

“I didn’t lose it,” I said, “I got fired.”

Thomas blinked, but his reaction was nothing compared to Jennifer’s. She sat up, wide-eyed, opened her mouth to talk, but nothing came out. “What?” I asked.

“You’ve never said that before.”

“Not to you, I haven’t. Only admitted it to myself the other day, along with a bunch of other shit. Like the fact that the real reason I came up here was to pity myself, not to fix up the cabin. Well, fuck that. I’m over it.”

The two of them looked at me, Thomas blank, Jennifer with one eyebrow raised. I had to admit the truth. “Well, I’m getting over it.”

The conversation then turned to other things. Thomas wanted to know what we were doing with the cabin – Jennifer and I argued, took into account Sam, and decided to wait a while longer before we made any decision. Bored, Thomas got up, collected the glasses, and went to the kitchen.

"Hey," he said when he got back, "it's snowing."

"Let's go see," Jennifer said.

He looked down at her, his expression saying *Why?* "Ya'll go ahead," he said, and Jennifer bolted out the door.

I followed my sister outside. But rather than chase her into the falling snow – great, big clumps of wet stuff that I knew would coat the ground by morning – I stayed on the porch, lit a cigarette. Jennifer came back after a few minutes, clumps of melting snow on her shoulders, in her curls, her eyebrows, her lashes.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

I didn't answer.

"She's out there, isn't she."

I nodded.

"You're worried, aren't you?"

I nodded, blew a cloud of smoke. For a moment it hung there, a cloud lit up by the light from the cabin, then a gust of wind came along and blew it all away.

THAT NIGHT I SLEPT LIKE SHIT. Every half-hour or so I'd wake up, lie there for four or five minutes before drifting off again. My dreams were – well, they weren't bad, but they weren't good, either. Moments of impending doom – I was standing on the Great Stone Door, looking across at her, and the wind was making me lose my balance. I was walking across thin ice, trying to reach her. She was being chased through the woods, the Guardsmen closing, nearer and nearer, jumping out from behind trees, from under rocks. At four-thirty I woke up for the last time. Shelby had just been eaten by a giant rattlesnake. Swallowed her in one bite. Then the snake had looked at me with that golden eye and licked his lips.

I got up, got dressed, and went into the kitchen. On the counter, piled neatly, were Earl's pictures – I'd taken them down before Jennifer and Thomas had arrived, figured they would have asked questions I didn't know how to answer. From the stack I pulled the one of Millicent, the one of the family out by the rock outcropping. When the

coffee finished brewing I went, poured myself a cup. Walking back to the table, my eyes fell on the picture, and I looked at it again. Then I realized I'd been there before. That day, in fact.

The picture was burned, that was why I hadn't seen it before. I pulled it out of the frame, looked at it closer. The family wasn't beside a rock outcropping, they were *between* two outcroppings. In fact, the outcroppings weren't outcroppings at all, but the Great Stone Door.

The phone rang. Quick as lightning, I reached over, picked it up. "Hello."

"Frank? What are you doing awake?"

"Who is this?"

"Shelby."

I sipped coffee. "Shelby? Where are you?"

"The ranger station."

"At the Door? Shelby, that's where Harry is—"

"The other ranger station. Savage Falls."

I searched my memory. "The Falls? Christ, Shelby, that's on the other side of the park!"

"Yeah, tell me about it."

"You walked?"

"It's only about twelve miles," she said, her tone implying that it wasn't any big deal to hike twelve miles in the dark, through a snow storm. "What are you doing right now?"

"Drinking coffee – I couldn't sleep."

"Come get me," she said.

"Shelby, it's snowing—" I stopped myself. Of course she knew it was snowing. Then I realized that this was exactly what I wanted – a chance to get her out of the Gulf before the National Guard went in. "That's all right, I'll drive Earl's truck. It's got four wheel drive. How do I get there?"

"Back through Altamont, through Greutli-Laager. At the split go left – go right

and you'll end up in Palmer. The turn's three, five miles after that – drive slow, or you'll miss the sign."

"Right," I said, repeating the directions as I scribbled them in pencil on the only piece of paper available – the back of the photograph. "Ought to take me – what, an hour?"

"Forty-five minutes."

"Right," I said. "Oh, hey–"

"What?"

"Stay hidden. They're calling out the Guard to look for you today."

"You're kidding."

"I'm not. You've caused a lot of people a lot of trouble."

"I didn't mean to –" she paused. "See you in an hour," she said, and hung up the phone.

Hanging up the phone, I wondered if they really would. Get over it, I mean.

IT HAD BEEN YEARS SINCE I'D BEEN UP AND OUT OF THE HOUSE THAT EARLY. The whole drive – forty miles, which took me the long way around the Gulf, what would have been a straight-line distance of only fifteen – I kept noticing the reflection of the snow in my headlights, the way all that white made the pines and firs and occasional silver maples stand out so much more. Nothing moved, and it was so quiet it was almost scary.

At first I was able to follow tire tracks, all the way to the Palmer split Shelby had mentioned. After that, however, the tracks disappeared, and I slowed the truck to a steady five-mile-an-hour crawl, kept it in the center of the road. Didn't want to run any risks of falling off the road or anything stupid like that.

The temperature seemed to have risen, or I was just better prepared for it, both because I was expecting it to be cold and because I was better dressed – underneath my jeans and tube-necked sweater I had thermals on, and in the closet I'd found an old wool stocking cap of Earl's..

Like she'd said it would be, the turn into the Savage Falls ranger station wasn't

clearly marked. What she hadn't said was that the 'road' was only wide enough for one car, that even though it climbed up a rise it was sunk between banks higher than the truck, or that it was gravel – potholed gravel at that. I appreciated both the fact that Shelby had told me to bring the truck and the fact that I'd had enough foresight to put it in four-wheel drive before leaving.

Coming down the backside of the rise a snowfield opened up before me. A sign said "Overflow Campground," and off in the distance a couple of RV trailers were parked beside a small ranger's cabin, inside which a single light glowed. I was looking for the phone when two snowballs in rapid succession exploded against the driver's window. I jumped, slammed on the brakes, skidded a foot or two.

Something was knocking against the window. Then I realized it was a hand, encased in a black nylon glove. I cranked down the window – old and cold, it didn't want to move. "Shelby?"

"Yeah, it's me." As I watched she scampered around the front of the truck; I reached over and unlocked the passenger door. She climbed in, bringing snow and the scent of wood smoke with her. "How're you?" she asked.

Somehow, she had gained another inch or three of girth. But as she flopped both gloves and her stocking cap on the dash, unzipped her yellow and black coat, the legs of her black canvas pants, the green polar fleece sweater and the red one underneath that, the girl I knew reappeared. "Pull forward and turn around," she said, pulling her hair out from under her coat and letting it fall down her back, spill into her hood, "the ranger woke up about twenty minutes ago – I didn't know they had a cot in there. Scared the hell out of me when he turned the light on – I was sitting on the porch."

"Well, you scared the hell out of me," I said, putting the truck in motion, "throwing those fucking snowballs."

She chuckled. "I had to get your attention somehow, before you got to the cabin. Shit – hurry up, he's looking this way." She ducked into the floorboards.

I glanced back towards the cabin. "Who? The ranger? How can you – oh, there he is. Standing in the window." I let off the brakes, we eased up the hill and back down

the other side. When the cabin disappeared from the rearview I said, "He's gone."

"Thanks," she said, climbing back into the seat. A sudden lurch threw her into me. "Watch it!"

"I'm trying, dammit," I grunted. "Put on your seat belt."

She did, though she kept her hand on the latch-release. "What's this about the National Guard?"

"They're coming up tomorrow, to look for you."

"Hell," she said, her voice suddenly muted. "I didn't want anything like that to happen. I just wanted to get their attention, that's all."

"Whose attention?" I asked, stopping the truck at the turn-off.

"All of 'em," she said. "But mostly Michael. I wanted to show him what it would be like if I really did choose Jason over him." She glanced out the window. "That's all I wanted – I never meant for it to get this big, this out of hand."

"Well, it did," I said. My voice sounded too gruff, too curt, too much like a schoolteacher. I softened it. "What do you want to do now?"

She put her hand to her face. "I don't know."

"Well, how 'bout this, then," I asked, "Where do you want to go?"

For a full minute she said nothing. Then she turned to. "How good are you at off-road driving?"

"Not very—" I said, my voice trailing off.

"Turn right."

"Back to Altamont?"

"Not exactly," she said. "I want to show you something."

TWENTY MINUTES LATER SHE TOLD ME TO STOP. I WAS GLAD SHE DID – despite the snow, I could tell the paved road ended there (instead of being flat, the road was raised in the middle). I'd driven no more than three miles – one mile back towards town, then another up some tarmac drive I'd never even seen before; during the last few minutes she'd been zipping up all the coats and putting on her hat, her gloves. I was nervous that

she was about to bolt, and I was keeping a hand free to catch her if that was the case. But instead she leaned over, looked in the direction of my feet, asking "What are you wearing? Hiking boots – good."

"Why's that good?"

"Cause we walk from here."

"How far?"

"C'mon, Frank, live a little," she said, opening the door and climbing out of the truck and starting off into the twilight, headed straight up the dirt road. In the half-light I had to hurry to catch up, she was waiting for me.

"This way," she said, and turned to the right, into the woods, still headed uphill. Only it wasn't like we were bushwhacking – she was following an old trail, overgrown but still a trail. Mountain laurel grabbed my coat, and a dogwood scratched my cheek.

"Shelby," I said, but she didn't seem to hear me. Frustrated, I crashed through the laurel, slipping on an ice patch, tripping on roots I hadn't seen. She was much more nimble than I was, and used to walking trails like this.

Then, at the crest, she stopped, waited on me. When I caught up she took my hand, pointed down the other side. I followed her arm—

"What is this place?" I asked. A thousand feet below, Savage Creek, just a little branch and not yet in the Gulf, bubbled between snow covered banks. Beyond that, but still below us, more woods. But that wasn't what held my attention. What grabbed me was the brown-green hedge, fifty feet down the crest, box shaped. In the center a passageway, about three or four feet wide, closed by a weathered-gray wooden gate. My first thought was that this place was some old homestead from days gone past – but there wasn't a chimney, not even a fallen pile of stacked stone to mark where a cabin might once have been. Also, the hedge was too well maintained, with level sides and a flat top. Drawn by the magic of it all, I started down the hill.

Then I realized Shelby wasn't following. When I turned she was squatted down in the snow; both her gloves lay beside her, and she was lighting a cigarette. I walked back towards her. "You coming?" I asked.

She smiled a little, shook her head No, and sat in the snow, then leaned back up against a tree. "I'm just gonna watch the sunrise," she said.

I stared at her a minute or two, then turned. In the distance, beyond the hedge-box, the clouds were painted in purples and oranges and reds.

I walked to the gate, put my gloved hands on it, and understood what this place was.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up; a tremor ran through me, then was still.

"Shelby," I called without turning around. "Shelby, what is this place?"

"It's called Cordell Mountain," she answered. "Careful where you step," she added a minute later.

I stepped through the gate. Scattered around, but neat, geometrically, were little raised rectangles of snow, their surfaces flattened. I stepped to the nearest one, leaned over, and brushed the snow with my fingers. Even through the thin gloves I could feel them, letters carved in stone. I pulled off a glove, brushed back the snow.

Rebecca Cordell, it said, Born 1915, Died 1944. Beloved Wife and Mother.

I dropped to my knees, stared at the letters until they went blurry. After a while I heard footsteps behind me.

"Family?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, my voice choked, "It's my grandmother."

JENNIFER MET ME AT THE DOOR, a crazed mixture of worry and fear and relief written across her face. "Morning," I said after a minute, "you're up early."

"Where the hell have you been?"

"Out," I said. "Everything okay?"

In answer she handed me a scrap of paper. A rush of fear ran through me, and I thought *Claire*. But the note said Dean Alexander, Room 465, followed by a telephone number. "He's called twice – first time was at six. Scared me to death when you didn't answer the phone. You know him?"

"No," I said, "but I think I know someone who does." I turned to face the truck, parked behind Thomas' Ford, the roll of plastic-wrapped carpet still jutting out of the back end. Past the truck was Alan's house – still dark, thank God. I flashed a thumbs up, and the door of Earl's truck opened.

"Oh, my God," Jennifer whispered.

She was walking too slow for my liking, I hurried her up with a rapid motion of my hand. Suddenly I crumpled the note, thinking *One step at a time*.

"Is that who I think it is?" Jennifer whispered, and Thomas materialized behind her. Halfway onto the porch, Shelby stopped, and I grabbed her arm, shoved her into the cabin. Stepped inside myself, shut the door.

The girl stood, wide-eyed and trapped between the three of us. "It's all right," I said in a rush. "This is my sister. Jennifer, this is Shelby Alexander. And this is Thomas, my sister's fiance."

The three of them eyed each other, Shelby on one side, Jennifer and Thomas on the other. Everyone, everything was still. Then Thomas nodded, raised a hand. "Pleased to meet you," he said, enveloping her tiny hand into his bear paw.

Shelby relaxed. "God," she said, "I thought you were Al there for a minute."

"Who's Al?"

"Michael's cousin," I said.

“Oh, you mean the kid who—”

Jennifer stopped him with a hand on his chest. “Let me get your coat,” she said, and then to Thomas, “Hon, why don’t you make some coffee?”

“There’s still a cup or two left—”

“Now,” she said, and flashed him a look, one that I’d seen my mother use on my father on more than one occasion. He headed towards the kitchen, and I heard the splash of a coffee pot being emptied. “I told him everything,” she said to me, her voice low, and then to Shelby, “Let me get your coat.” When the girl hesitated my sister ordered, “Please.”

One by one, Shelby took off all three of the coats she was wearing – the high-tech backpacker’s parka and both polarfleece sweaters. The red one, I discovered, was a vest. The act reduced the tension in the room by half – first my sister chuckled, then laughed outright. For an instant Thomas’s head appeared around the corner, then there was the sound of running water. Jennifer handed the coats to me. “Put them in the back room,” she ordered.

“Why?” I wanted to know.

“Harry called,” Jennifer whispered, “I told him you were asleep.” She turned to Shelby, who was unzipping the black nylon pants. “Anybody – and I mean anybody – pulls into the driveway and I want you in the back bedroom like that,” she said, snapping her fingers. “But don’t shut the door – leave it half-open. It’ll look suspicious if it’s shut.” Then she pointed at Shelby’s boots. “Those, too,” she ordered.

Shelby handed me the pants and I carried them all into the back bedroom. Dumping the pile in a corner, I heard Shelby say, “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Jennifer said. “I haven’t made my mind up about you or what all you’ve done yet.” A meaningful pause, during with I imagined Shelby was receiving a glare. “But for the moment I’m backing up my brother. He’s not always right in what he does – more often n’ not he’s wrong – but I trust his judgement of people well enough. He’s says you’re okay, then you’re okay.”

I wasn’t sure what to make of that, but it was the least of my worries. The

crumpled note, now burning in my pocket, headed the list. I headed out of the bedroom, but Jennifer met me in the hallway with Shelby's boots. I returned, dropped them beside the pile. Then thought better of it, grabbed the blanket off the bed, and threw it on top of the pile, thinking *It'll dry*.

Jennifer had installed Shelby at the table and was standing by the fridge. "When was the last time you ate?"

"Nine o'clock last night."

Jennifer shook her head. That was my sister's order of attacking a problem – start with the little things, then work her way into the larger questions. Thomas seemed to be expecting this as well – in fact, he had the skillet out and was fiddling with the stove.

I grabbed the cordless off the counter, slipped into the back bedroom, pulled the note out of my pocket, and dialed. "Alexandria Hilton," a male voice said.

I glanced down the hallway. Shelby had her back to me, so she hadn't seen what I was doing. Besides, I had full confidence that between Thomas and Jennifer, they could keep her where she was. "Room four six five."

"Just a minute, please." Waiting, the electronic Muzak in my ear, I tried to think of what I would say. Nothing came.

"Dean Alexander," a man's voice, very much awake, said.

"Dr. Alexander, my name is Frank Cordell—"

"How is she?" he asked, his voice trembling. "How's my daughter?"

"She's fine, Dr. Alexander—"

"Where is she?"

"Right here, Dr. Alexander. I can assure you, she's okay—"

"Let me talk to her."

I looked at the pile in the corner. "In a minute, Dr. Alexander—"

"Stop calling me 'Doctor.' A simple 'Dean' will suffice – you swear she's okay."

"I swear. She's fine. I'll give her to you in a minute, but I need you to do something."

"What?"

"I need you to call a man named Harry Jackson. I need you to tell him you've talked to your daughter. I need you to tell him to call off the search." I paused, no answer. "I need you to tell him to send the National Guard home," I said.

"They called out the Guard?"

"Yes, sir."

"They didn't tell me that."

"Who?"

"Jack, Jack Bledsoe. He called yesterday afternoon – the son of a bitch waited twenty-four hours to call me, then just left a message with the desk clerk. With the desk clerk! 'Daughter missing, will call. Jack.' Asshole didn't even leave a number. And he's not listed in the phone books either. I had to call the fucking cops."

I'm not surprised, I didn't say. People like Jack Bledsoe, they think they can run everything, by themselves. And that, I realized, was the difference between Jack and my father. "Dr. Alexander, one other thing – she's kind of shook up, if you know what I mean, so don't start by yelling—"

"Frank, you got any kids?"

"No, sir."

"Then you don't understand. All that comes later. Much later. Right now I just want to talk to my daughter. Put my daughter on the phone."

"Yes, sir," I said, and dropped the receiver to my shoulder. "Shelby," I called, "Shelby, come here—" and before I'd even gotten the second 'Shelby' out she was standing in front of me, hand outstretched. I handed her the phone.

"Daddy?" she asked, her face a frown. Then she smiled, and I shoved myself off the wall, walked down the hall. "Daddy, I'm so sorry."

In the kitchen, standing beside the stove, Jennifer and Thomas were, trying to ignore the sound of Shelby's voice. Thomas had his arms around her in a bear hug. She was shaking, watching scrambled eggs slowly burn.

"Girl's a mess," Thomas said, his voice quiet.

"I know," I said, reaching for a coffee mug, filling it. With one hand I pushed the

skillet off the eye.

Jennifer opened her mouth to speak, her voice a croak. "God, Frank, she's just a *baby*."

"Yeah," I muttered, and sipped some coffee. "You okay?"

"No."

A minute passed, during which the three of us stared at each other. "How'd you know to go get her?" Thomas asked.

"She called me, little before five."

"I heard the phone ring," Jennifer said. "But I thought it was just Claire, went back to sleep. God, if I'd only *known*—" Her voice broke, and she was trembling again. Thomas squeezed.

A minute later I stepped to the window, looked out over the valley below. Here and there, through holes in the veil, the sun shone through, making the snow bright. I stepped to the other window, looked at Alan's house. Still dark, but I knew he didn't get up until after eight-thirty.

"Frank?"

"Yeah?" I said, turning around. Shelby, wiping her face with her sleeves. "Dad wants to talk to you."

I took the phone from her, she sat back down at the table. My sister released herself from Thomas, steadied herself. "You drink coffee, Shelby?"

She smiled. "Yeah."

I stepped back into the hallway. "Hello?"

"Frank," Dean said, "first of all, thanks for being awake—"

"I couldn't sleep, that's all." I didn't say why.

"Any idea why she did all this?" His voice was more controlled now, less emotional.

"I have a few," I said.

"We'll talk about it later," he said. "I've got a nine-fifteen flight to Atlanta, connection from there to Chattanooga. There's a Theater professor — friend of mine —

who lives on the north side of the city, he's meeting me at the airport."

"Yes, sir."

"This is what I want you to do – keep her there, at your place. Don't let her out of your sight. More importantly, don't let anyone inside. That includes Michael. I'm gonna call Jack Bledsoe, just as soon as we finish here, tell him to send the Guard home. But I'm not gonna tell him where she is, and I don't want you calling anybody, telling them where she is." A short pause. "You understand why I'm asking this?"

"I think so," I said. In truth, I more than understood, and I was thankful. "We'll sit tight until you get here."

"Good. I gotta get to the airport. Call you from Sewanee. Oh, and Frank?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Thanks."

"I'll see you when you get here," I said, thinking *You won't thank me when you hear the whole story. In fact, you might want to kill me.*

I returned to the kitchen, hung up the phone. The faces turned to me. I looked from Shelby to Thomas to Jennifer and back to Shelby. "Orders are to stay put till Dr. Alexander gets here," I said, but I could tell they'd heard everything I'd said. I picked my coffee up off the table.

"You got any eggs left? I'm starving."

EXACTLY TWENTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER Jack Bledsoe and Harry Jakson pulled into my driveway. Jack was on the cell phone; Harry knelt to look at my tire tracks in the snow. Shelby saw this and scampered into the back bedroom. Not wanting them to even make it to the porch, I started to get my coat, then thought better of it. Better if things looked normal, like we weren't expecting them. I snapped my fingers to get Jennifer's attention, pointed at the four plates on the table. Jennifer dropped one in the sink just as Harry knocked on the door.

As I opened it Thomas walked by me, sat on the couch, acting like nothing was going on. Never would have thought of it myself; for a moment I loved him. "Morning,"

I said, faking a stretch, rubbing my eyes.

"Where is she?"

"Who?"

"God dammit, Cordell, where is she?"

"Who?" I repeated.

"Shelby," Jack almost screamed.

"How should I know?"

"Because twenty minutes ago I got a phone call from Dean Alexander, telling me he's talked to his daughter, that I'm to send the Guard home *and* call off the search." He glared at me. "That means one of two things – either he's just as fucking crazy as she is – which I doubt – or else you know where she is."

"How do you figure that?" I asked, looking from Jack to Harry, who was looking over my shoulder, trying to see through walls.

"Cause I told him about how she came to see you, what *you* said about her wanting to know how far it was to Atlanta, that's why."

I shrugged. "Hell," I said, "I don't know where she is. Haven't seen her since that night – where's Michael, by the way?"

Jack was as surprised as I was by my question. "At home, with his mother," he said, looked at me with angry eyes.

The two of us glared at each other for thirty seconds. Then Harry nudged Jack. "C'mon," he said, "there's other ways to skin this cat."

Jack didn't want to leave, but he let Harry pull him off my front porch. I shut the door, watched them through the window. Harry got on his cell phone, within minutes a black Chevy Blazer was positioned at the base of my driveway. Harry pulled his truck out, they stopped at the Blazer, and the driver's window lowered. Al was behind the wheel.

He stayed there for the next six and a half hours, only stepping out of the car once. And that was when Claire finally arrived.

AL'S SILENT PRESENCE HAD AN UNSETTLING EFFECT ON ALL OF US, but it got to Jennifer worst of all. She couldn't stand the idea that she was being watched and retreated to the back bedroom, where she and Shelby struck up a conversation. Couldn't tell you what they talked about – they had the door shut and Jennifer has never talked about it. Thomas was more pissed that he couldn't call the police more than anything that had happened since he'd gotten to the county – as I explained while we were dragging the carpet roll around to the screen porch, Al's presence was probably not only known by the police, it probably had their blessing.

Shelby, who hadn't slept since God-knows-when and had spent half the night walking twelve miles across the Gulf fell asleep. How she did it I don't know, but Jennifer came out while Thomas and I were fixing some sandwiches for lunch and informed us that the girl had been asleep for "about an hour," that she'd just been watching her. Then she quickly made two sandwiches, grabbed two cokes and a bag of chips, and returned to the bedroom.

I was jumpy, but relieved that things were working themselves out. The only variable left – at least in the immediate future – was Claire. With everything going on, I hadn't had the time to worry about what I would say when she arrived, which she did, right on schedule.

She forgot to call from Knoxville, of course, just came barreling up the mountain like it was a Sunday drive. But the worst of the storm was well into North Carolina – it had never really developed after all, just that one night's worth of snow. She finally called from the Sewanee exit, as Thomas and I were watching basketball on the TV, and I gave her the directions to the cabin.

Epilogue

IT'S BEEN A YEAR, NOW, SINCE ALL THAT HAPPENED. Quite a bit's changed. Quite a bit's stayed the same.

Dean Alexander arrived shortly after Claire to collect his daughter. He and I had a short conversation on the front porch, then he went into the back bedroom to wake her up. I didn't get to see the scene.

Mr. Alexander still lives and teaches at Sewanee. Took him a while, but he's forgiven me for letting his daughter go down into the Gulf the way I did. Says that there was no real way I could have stopped her anyway, short of handcuffing her.

Michael Bledsoe's a senior at St. Andrews, about to start another baseball season. He's already being recruited by UC-Davis and Pepperdine, but folks in the county say he's probably headed to Tennessee or Florida. From what I hear he's not getting along too well with his parents, spends most of his time with Harry.

Claire's back at UVA, working on her Masters of Business Administration and chasing after Franklin. We did give it another try, starting that week in Grundy County, but the relationship has mellowed since then. Distance – that thing we were able to keep at bay through three years of college – isn't so easy to handle now the we both have real commitments. I think it's pretty obvious we'll never advance past the friendship stage again, but then again.

Jennifer and Thomas finally set the date for this coming May. Last Christmas Thomas bought a house on the outskirts of Buckhead, a real fixer-upper, and they moved in about a month ago. My parents aren't too happy about the situation, but they're dealing with it.

We decided to keep the cabin, by the way. Sam changed his mind – or had it changed for him. He and his wife came up in late May to help me pack, move back to Atlanta. Michelle took one look at the view and that was all it took. Harry put the roof on, by the way, but I didn't negotiate the deal. Sam did that. Thomas inspected the work, says it's got enough nails in it to hold another forty years, and I don't doubt it.

That was the weekend before my father took all of us up Cordell Mountain Road, told us the story of his childhood. Jennifer was, of course, floored by it all, as was Michelle. Thomas didn't really react, just shrugged his shoulders. For the rest of us it was a matter of filling in the details, getting the dates right. It was nice, however, to finally hear him tell it.

Since then I've been working for my father and going to school at night. Taking business classes since I ignored them as an undergrad. In a few months I'm headed to either Emory, Carolina, or Virginia, depending on which school decides to accept me. I'm not sure why, but I want to stay in Atlanta.

Since I only sold three houses my first four months Sam and my father transferred me over to the office management. Found my niche. Current plans are to start a subsidiary company, Davis Bros. Management Consulting, which will help property owners improve profits by improving the property, and I'll run the day-to-day operations. That's where the real money is nowadays anyway, consulting. But the whole thing's contingent on whether or not I get into Emory.

For the first time I can remember, the course of my life is in someone else's hands. I'm not sure I like the feeling.

AND SHELBY? Shelby ended up at, of all places, Emory. She's a freshman there now, making a go of it. Taking a variety of classes, testing the waters, seeing what she likes. She's leaning away from corporate business classes like finance and accounting, but at the same time she doesn't want to take the academic path either. Psychology, that or Sociology. Which is fine, I tell her, just don't go into social work. She rushed a couple of sororities but decided they just weren't for her, and she's right. She's too damned independent. Got another boyfriend, but I don't think this one's gonna last too long. Well, as Jennifer says, that's his loss.

She comes over, every now and then, and I take her out to dinner. Sometimes her father comes along, and we talk about things like school, work. Occasionally we talk about what's going on back in the county – that's how I found out about Michael not

getting along with his parents. More often, though, I'll pick her up in front of her dorm after class and sneak her into one of the bars in Buckhead, where we talk about different things, including that weekend in early March when she thought she'd make a statement and nearly sent a county to war with itself. Then we move on to other subjects. Shelby likes it when I tell the old stories about the people the buildings at Emory are named after.

Jennifer sees more of her than I do, actually. Partly that's because I'm so busy – between school and work I don't much time to breath, much less a few hours to kill in the mountains of Northwest Georgia, where they go hiking up in the National Forest. Sometimes, when he's not working, they'll take Thomas with them. The three of them just hit it off. Jennifer relays information back to me – that's how I found out about her boyfriend – but I get the feeling I don't know the whole story.

Anyway, as Jennifer says, she'll be okay.

VITA

VITA

William O. Maddux was born in Knoxville, Tennessee on November 12, 1973. Shortly thereafter he moved to Signal Mountain, Tennessee, where he attended elementary school in the public school system of Hamilton County before transferring at the start of seventh grade to The Baylor School in Chattanooga, Tennessee from which he graduated in June, 1992. He then entered Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana during August of 1992 where in May, 1996 he received the Bachelor of Arts in English with minors in History and Art. Three months later he entered the Masters program in English at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, receiving the Master's degree in May, 1998.

Starting in June, 1998 he will be a student in the Master of Accounting program at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, where he continues to write fiction and poetry.