

PRISONERS  
OF THE  
HEART

THE SECOND NOVEL OF A TRILOGY BY

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The Sunday edition of the *Vicksburg Daily Chronicle* sprawled across the kitchen counter, its headline proclaiming "PRESIDENT HOME FOR REUNION." Christi stared at the huge, front-page, color photo of Cameron surrounded by some of their childhood friends. She smiled to note that Kelly was not among them. As far as Christi was concerned, her friend Kelly should have gotten Cameron Coulter out of her life a lot sooner than she did.

Christi squinted to decipher the newsprint, but vowed that she would not give in to the need for reading glasses. Forty-seven was too young.

The telephone rang twice before Christi noticed it.

"Christina Boudreaux?" asked an unfamiliar voice.

"Yes," Christi answered tentatively.

"Please hold for President Coulter."

Christi frowned, wondering why Cameron would be calling her now, after everything that had happened. Maybe he was finally going to apologize.

Moments later, Cameron's early-morning, raspy voice greeted her cheerfully, as if there had never been a problem.

"Hi, Christi! How are you?" the President asked.

"Fine," she answered flatly. "You sound sick."

"Been up most of the night," he confessed with a light chuckle, "and my allergies are bothering me, but it's nothing serious."

"That's good," Christi responded automatically, then paused to let a silence grow between them.

"We all missed you last night," he offered lamely.

Again the silence.

She finally asked, emphatically, "Did you really?"

"Of course we did. Would I lie to you?"

Christi let that one ring in his ears until the silence was deafening.

Cameron cleared his throat nervously. Christi closed her eyes and pictured him tightening his jaw. Still, she didn't speak.

"Well, anyway," he began again, more hesitantly, "we did miss you last night. It was a great party."

Christi smiled to herself, listening to the publicly-smooth-talking Leader of the Free World groping for conversation as he used to do in high school whenever Kelly was around. It made her suspect that his call had something to do with her old friend. She waited, determined to make him work for it.

"Kelly was there," he said with forced brightness.

*Here it comes,* Christi thought, but didn't respond.

"She told me she finished her book."

Again, the silence.

"I'll bet it's good. She's a great writer," Cameron continued, trying to ignore Christi's lack of response. "Have you seen it?"

"No."

"Well, I was wondering," Cameron cleared his throat again, "if maybe she would let you read the manuscript before she sends it off to a publisher. I mean, you've always been such close friends."

"You've been more intimate with Kelly than anyone else has," Christi noted sarcastically.

Cameron glossed over her comment. "I'll bet she'd be happy for you to read it. I'm sure you're in it too."

Christi was beginning to get exasperated. "Let's get to the point," she suggested firmly. "If you're calling to ask me to read Kelly's manuscript and then advise her not to publish it, you're barking up the wrong tree. She's been working on that book for nearly ten years and she's not trying to hurt you with it. If Kelly had wanted to hurt you, she could have sold out during the election, and she's not the only one who had that opportunity. Ask her to let you read the book, and if you don't want it published, you tell her. From my perspective, it looks like she always does whatever you want."

"Whew!" Cameron exclaimed. He took a breath before continuing. "Listen, Christi, things are different between Kelly and me right now. I was just thinking that maybe you

could get her to back off it for a while. She's been working on it for nearly ten years, so what difference could another couple of years make to her? In the meantime, you might like to do something like be our ambassador to the Bahamas. Invite Kelly to spend time with you down there. She loves the beach and y'all could have a great time. Then we could help her get the book published later on. I'm sure it's a good book, but it might make me look bad, and I don't need that in the next two years. It's just that I could never come right out and ask her not to publish it. That book means too much to her."

"But you want me to ask her not to publish it."

The silence returned.

"No," Cameron finally replied, "I'm not asking you to do that. Forget we talked about the book, Christi. I just called to say we missed you last night. You can tell Kelly that. You can tell her I called to say we missed you last night."

"I will tell her that you said to say that," Christi replied. "I suppose I'll leave out the part about the ambassadorship. And, by the way, I'm not interested in being an ambassador - to the Bahamas, or anywhere else. You know what I want, and I hope that someday it will become politically expedient for you to deal with it. Otherwise, it's just a matter of doing the right thing, or following through on your promises, and I've learned never to expect either of those from you."

Christi heard Cameron catch his breath, but didn't give him a chance to respond. With finality in her voice, she added, "Have a nice trip back to Washington. Good-bye."

"Uh, Christi, uh, I, uh, didn't..."

"Good-bye," Christi repeated, more firmly than before. She hung up the phone, not hearing nor caring if the President had echoed her "Good-bye."

She returned her attention to the newspaper in front of her. The camaraderie of the photo looked forced now. Staged. Empty. She squinted and blinked again, trying to read the article that dominated the front page. *Maybe glasses wouldn't be such a bad idea.*

Christi remembered that Cameron had reading glasses now, although he wouldn't wear them in a picture. She recalled seeing a news clip of Cameron exiting the voting

booth on election day, wearing glasses that he quickly removed when he realized he was on camera. Christi counted back, calculating that Cameron had been forty-six the day he was elected President and was caught wearing glasses.

“At least I’m not the only vain survivor of Vicksburg’s Class of 1964,” she mumbled half-aloud.

*Survivor.* The word began to play in her mind like a bad melody that wouldn’t go away.

She didn’t pay any attention to the tears forming in her eyes, and continued to squint at the words that were now swimming together across the page. Christi blinked a few more times, trying to focus, and then gave up.

*Maybe I should call for an eye doctor appointment tomorrow,* she thought. Christi glanced at her calendar and started to make an entry, but the date itself grabbed her, and the memories came crashing back.

## PART I

### THE SUMMER OF '59

#### Chapter 1 July 25, 1959

“Christi! Christi, wake up! You’re a celebrity!”

The young girl’s muffled moan under the covers didn’t stop her excited friend from rushing to the window and pulling open the heavy drapes. Christi slowly sat up in bed, blinking and rubbing her eyes, resigned to the unwelcome intrusion of summer sunshine and Kelly’s loud exuberance.

“Look at this!” Kelly waved a newspaper. “Just look!”

Through her early-morning haze, Christi recognized the *Vicksburg Daily Chronicle* opened to the society section. Kelly held her finger on the “*Comings and Goings*” column.

“Here. Read it out loud. I want to hear how it sounds.”

Christi read the first few lines to herself, then, smiling, sat up straighter in bed, and started over in a pretentious voice, “*Clem Boudreaux (civic leader and owner/president of Boudreaux Cadillac will miss his beautiful wife and daughter this week as the popular pair of stunning brunettes travels to Savannah.*

*“Helène Boudreaux will give the bridesmaid’s luncheon for the daughter of her college roommate Christina Demarest. (Yes, that is Mrs. Claude R. Demarest III of Willow Creek Plantation, for you history and society buffs.) If you’ve been reading Southern Society (and we trust you have), you will know that young Delores Deana Demarest (“Dee-Dee” to her many friends) is marrying none other than William Lee Culpepper IV of the Georgia Culpepper’s. Need we say more?*

*“Vivacious and oh-so-popular Miss Christina Boudreaux is the namesake and godchild of Christina Demarest, so it’s all practically family. The stylish-beyond-her-years-pre-teen Miss Boudreaux has been seen shopping in all the best stores with her French-born mother, who still favors Coco Chanel. You will recall that Helène has headed Vicksburg’s “Best Dressed” list since her marriage to Clem brought her to our fair burg a discreet many years ago.*

*“Christina Boudreaux, with her own unerring good taste, reportedly chose several one-of-a-kind specialty items that have recently arrived from fashion capitol New York City. This is not to imply that Miss Boudreaux is any less of a Southern belle, but she does have that international flair that is so refreshing for our quaint river city.*

*“We can hardly wait to see the wonderful pictures of the Demarest wedding, and of our own special envoys, that will surely grace the next issue of Southern Society. Until then, Helène and Christina, ‘Bon Voyage!’”*

Christi and Kelly observed several moments of awed silence at the end of the article. The celebrity was the first to speak.

“Wow!” Christi exclaimed.

“‘Wow’ is right,” Kelly echoed, still standing in deference to her now-famous friend.

Christi looked up at Kelly and, for the first time since they met, realized the one-year difference in their ages. Twelve was definitely more sophisticated than eleven. The young blonde girl suddenly appeared awkward and tom-boyish to the “stunning brunette” with “that international flair.”

“Sit down,” Christi invited, condescendingly patting a spot on the bed, feeling magnanimous to her social inferior. Kelly obliged. The two girls leaned back against the wooden headboard and re-read the article together. By the time they had each taken a half-dozen turns reading it aloud, they not only had memorized it, but they also had returned to the social equality that they had enjoyed since Kelly “skipped” into Christi’s third-grade class. If the upcoming article in *Southern Society* didn’t do any damage, they would enter the seventh grade as perennial best friends.

The dainty white Princess phone beside Christi’s bed rang quietly.

“That will be your daddy,” Christi said, picking up the receiver and handing it to Kelly. “No one else ever calls this early on a Saturday.”

“Boudreaux residence,” Kelly answered politely. It was her father.

"May I speak with the *'vivacious and oh-so-popular Miss Christina Boudreaux?'*"

"Oh, Daddy, you'll embarrass her," Kelly admonished.

"I certainly hope so," Clayton McCain responded with a laugh, "and then I'll pick you up for breakfast."

Kelly handed the receiver to the celebrity.

"It's one of your fans," she smiled. "You better figure on sitting by the phone all day."

Christi put the receiver to her ear. She giggled and blushed at the words, "Is this *'the vivacious and oh-so-popular Miss Christina Boudreaux?'*"

"The same," she replied with the pretentious voice that she and Kelly had adopted for reading the article.

Christi motioned for Kelly to scootch over closer so she could hear too. The brunette head and the blonde cradled together, basking in the fame of the moment.

When Kelly left for breakfast with her father and his friends, Christi dressed casually, but carefully, in a cotton knit shorts outfit that she had bought for the trip to Savannah. *Might as well wear it in Vicksburg first*, she thought. *After all, I have a reputation to uphold.*

Christi bounded downstairs with a decidedly local flair. Her mother was in the kitchen, sipping coffee and reading the rest of the newspaper.

"Did you see this?" Christi grinned at her beautiful mother.

Helène nodded and smiled, "Kelly showed it to me first. She tried hard not to wake you up, but apparently she couldn't help herself."

"And I'm glad!" Christi beamed. "Where's Daddy? Did he see it?"

Helène shook her head. "He left very early, without coffee or the paper. It's the last Saturday of the month, you know."

Christi nodded, knowing the car business well enough. It seemed there was always some big promotion or contest from the factory and her daddy always wanted to win. His dealership was the largest in Mississippi, so he won more than he lost. He never admitted losing, though, because win or lose, he was still selling cars. Even when the new-car business might slow down, there was the used-car section. Clem



Boudreaux also silently owned several out of town car lots that would never merit the Boudreaux name and upstanding reputation.

"May I ride my bike downtown to show him this?" Christi asked enthusiastically.

*"Mais oui, ma chère,"* Helène replied gently, *"après le petite dejeuner."*

Obediently, Christi fixed herself a small bowl of cereal and ate a few bites. She was too excited to sit still. She gulped down a glass of orange juice, kissed her mother on each cheek in the continental style, and headed for the garage to get her bicycle.

Though it was still early, the air was hot and motionless. Christi pedaled briskly, reveling in the self-created breeze. Then, eagerly anticipating her daddy's reaction to her first big newspaper story, she pedaled faster and faster, foregoing her usual detour along the ridge overlooking the river where you could see the Mississippi lying broad and flat and brown, happy in the sun, or green and angry when the thunderclouds rolled in on it. She sped past the colored peoples' shoebox shacks and the white peoples' houses built long after The War, with their porches and railings, turrets and gingerbread trim, past the houses with names like Twin Oaks that had been built, or at least started, before The War, where the same families had lived for a hundred years, passing down the houses and furnishings, clothes and letters and diaries, silver and china, useful relics of their past lives and daily reminders of The War ~ The War that had taken almost everything there was to give, the fathers, sons, brothers, cousins, and husbands of the women of the South, leaving them shaken but stronger, alone but not lonely, cautious but unafraid, and proud of their men, of their own new strengths and of the land that was still theirs, if only a garden plot behind the house where they used to own hundreds of acres rolling down and along the Mississippi lying broad and flat and brown, happy in the sun, or green and angry when the thunderclouds rolled in on it.

Christi cruised into the huge asphalt lot of Boudreaux Cadillac and as usual swelled with pride at seeing her family name in big fancy letters on the neon sign out front, above her

daddy's parking space. Eager as she was to see him, she succumbed to her habit of touring around to the back, past the service bays and the car wash, just to see what was going on. Nothing. It was still early and the service department was only open from ten until four on Saturdays. The salesmen would come in at eight.

Completing the circuit, Christi rode once again past her daddy's "loaded" white Cadillac with custom gold trim that he parked out front as part of his advertising. Clem ordered the same car for himself every year. It was his trademark and the only one of its kind in Vicksburg. He would have the gold trim removed before selling the "demo" to one of his friends at a bargain price. The deal included their promise not to re-apply custom gold trim. It was a small vanity, but Clem was known for it. Christi didn't give it a thought as she parked her bicycle, took the precious newspaper out of the basket, and headed toward the short sidewalk that led between the main office and the service department, around to the unseen private entrance she could enter with her key.

A chameleon darted across her path, and Christi stopped to watch it. The tiny reptile paused beside a huge green leaf, then decided to scale the office's brick wall. Matted green vines leading up to the window gave plenty of cover. Christi waited for the miniature creature to change colors, but was disappointed that he seemed to be on a mission, unaware that he was not blending into his surroundings very well.

Christi thought that he deserved to be caught for his carelessness. She could take him home as a pet. She had rubbed chameleons before and there was something sweet about them. She took a stealthy step toward her new friend.

The chameleon stopped abruptly when he reached the sill. Suddenly aware of Christi's interest, he turned to face her bravely. Christi admired his audacity and decided that he would, indeed, make a nice pet. She bent closer, staring straight into his beady little eyes. The chameleon, crouched on the edge of the sill, stared back at her, unflinching.

In the stillness, Christi noticed some movement in the background behind the chameleon. Although the slats of the horizontal blinds were shut against the morning light, there

was a small slit at the bottom where the blinds didn't reach to the sill. In that small space, Christi could see clearly into her father's office. She let her eyes refocus from the chameleon into the spacious wood-paneled office beyond.

The movement she had first noticed had been her daddy's new secretary, Mrs. Jander, going in and closing the door behind her. Christi's father was sitting at his desk in his huge leather chair, talking on the telephone. Mrs. Jander started walking slowly toward him, touching the front of her red blouse. As Christi watched, transfixed, Mrs. Jander started unbuttoning it. Christi looked over at her father to see what he would do, but he didn't do anything. He just sat there and watched his new secretary coming closer, closer, closer, unbuttoning her red blouse.

Christi wanted to run away, but she couldn't move. Right under her nose, the chameleon started changing his color to match the red brick, but Christi didn't notice. She only noticed the color of that awful woman's orangey-red hair and the red bra that she was wearing under her red blouse. The woman took the red blouse and red bra off completely, and Clem Boudreaux just kept watching her and talking on the telephone.

Mrs. Jander had breasts the size of a woman nursing twins. Christi had only seen breasts like that one other time and they were full of milk. She wondered if Mrs. Jander was full of milk too. As if to answer Christi's unspoken question, Mrs. Jander reached up and grabbed her own breasts in her two hands and began squeezing and pulling on her very pink nipples, but Christi couldn't see if milk was coming out or not. Her father was watching closely and still talking on the telephone. He put down his pen. His right hand disappeared into his lap.

Rubbing and pulling on her own breasts, Mrs. Jander stood in front of the desk, rubbing and pulling, pulling and rubbing until Christi thought she was going to scream. Then Mrs. Jander walked around behind the desk and went up very close to Christi's father. He rolled his chair back. Mrs. Jander somehow slipped out of her skirt and she wasn't wearing any panties at all. Christi could only see the back of her bottom

and then it disappeared below the desk as Mrs. Jander sat astride her father's lap, facing him and putting one of her huge breasts into his mouth.

He stopped talking, but he kept the telephone to his ear. Christi wondered who could be on the phone with him. Mrs. Jander started rocking back and forth on him, back and forth, back and forth, with her breast in his mouth. Finally, he hung up the phone and grabbed her other breast with his hand and he started rubbing and pulling on her nipple and he began to rock back and forth too, back and forth, back and forth, faster and faster until Christi thought she was going to scream. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, faster and faster, faster and faster, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, and then they made a strange, muffled noise, and then they stopped.

After a few minutes of not moving at all, Mrs. Jander stood up and grabbed a handful of tissues from the desk. She wiped herself as if she had just urinated. Then she leaned over to get her clothes. Her great huge breasts hung down in front of her as she pulled on her skirt. Still leaning over, she stuffed her great huge breasts into the skimpy red bra. Then she stood up straight and tucked her breasts in some more. Then she put on her tacky red blouse and tucked it into her skirt. Then she straightened her ugly red hair that had not moved at all the whole time she had been rocking back and forth.

Mrs. Jander stood very close to the desk and they were saying things that Christi couldn't hear, and finally Mrs. Jander walked out of the room. Suddenly Christi was afraid she might be seen. She wanted to disappear like a chameleon. Then she noticed that the chameleon was still resting immobilized on the sill. He had tried to blend in with brick. Instead, he had turned into the color of Mrs. Jander's hair.

In a flash, Christi grabbed her rolled-up newspaper and smashed the chameleon against the edge of the brick sill. She abandoned his flailing, dying body and the society pages of the *Vicksburg Daily Chronicle* in the dirt outside her father's office window.

Chapter 2  
July 29, 1959

Christi bought a half-dozen postcards as soon as she and her mother got to Savannah. She forced herself to write one to her father. She didn't really know what to say and wondered if she would ever be able to look at him again. Finally settling on sending everyone the same message, she wrote:

*"Hi! Having fun! Miss you already! Love, Christi."*

Duty done, Christi sat staring out the upstairs guest room window. Her heart was heavy and she would have given anything to talk to Kelly. She opened the fancy leather box on the dresser and rubbed her fingers across a soft white envelope with its beautifully engraved script pronouncing the return address of *Dr. and Mrs. Claude R. Demarest III, Willow Creek Plantation, Old Willow Creek Road, Savannah, Georgia.*

The heavy matching letterhead had a fancy crest at the top and repeated the engraved return address. Christi realized that she was in really high cotton. If only her spirits could be. She picked up a pen and began to write:

*Dear Kelly,*

*I wish we had more time to talk before I left. Something really terrible happened and I didn't know how to tell you. Don't worry. I don't mean something really terrible like somebody dying, but in a way it's that bad. And, it's not about you and me. I know this sounds really stupid.*

*Anyway, it's about my father. He is doing something bad and I don't know if I should tell my mother or if she would even believe me if I told her. It's not something terrible like he could get arrested or anything, but it is terrible, I think. Actually, I don't know what to think and I don't know what to do, but most of the time you and I can figure things out if we work on it together and I'm sorry I didn't tell you when I was at home. I can't wait to see you.*

*Love,  
Christi*

She put down her pen and re-read the letter. She was correct in what she had written in the first paragraph. It did sound really stupid. She tore the letter into tiny pieces and carried them into the bathroom. As she flushed the fluttering

scraps of paper down the commode, she began to cry quietly. Then she went back to the bedroom, chose another piece of the elegant stationery and began again:

*Dear Kelly,*

*I wish you could have come with us. Savannah is beautiful – big trees like Vicksburg and a blue-water river. Mama's friend lives out in the country in a house bigger than ours (plus they have two guest houses and quarters) and we're staying in an upstairs bedroom in the main house. (You can see from the stationery, they call it Willow Creek and there's a giant willow tree outside my window that's creepy at night.) There's a ton of people and lots of parties because this is a big deal! The best news is about the reason for the wedding, but it's so juicy I'm going to save it until I get back, cause you probably wouldn't even believe it unless I was there to cross my heart and swear to die. Can you guess?*

*I'm riding horses and swimming every day. There's lots of people here to fix the horses and everything. I wish you could be here. I'd like to stay forever, but we'll be back next Wednesday night, so see if you can come over. I miss you.*

*Love,*

*Christi*

Christi re-read the second attempt and decided that it would do. She also decided then and there that it would be best to forget what she had seen in her father's office and never, ever, mention it to anyone. Probably no one would believe her anyway and she would just get in trouble. She convinced herself that the incident between her father and Mrs. Jander was a once-in-a-lifetime terrible event that occurred on the 25<sup>th</sup> of July in the year 1959, and would never, ever, happen again. Feeling guilty and not knowing why, she addressed an envelope to Kelly, stuffed the revised letter in it, and quickly sealed it shut before she could change her mind.

By the evening of her arrival back home in Vicksburg, Christi had managed to relegate *the July 25<sup>th</sup> incident* to a distant place in the back of her brain. It surprised her by jumping out clearly in front of her eyes as they pulled into the driveway. She was even more surprised to be embarrassed when she saw Kelly sitting on her front porch, playing jacks, waiting excitedly to see her as if nothing had ever happened.

Kelly came running out to the car. "Christi! It's about time! Hi, Miz Boudreaux. Mama sent a casserole. She says I may stay if that's all right with you, or Christi may come spend the night with me."

"Why, thank you, Kelly. Of course, you're welcome to stay. I'll call your mother. You girls give me about an hour to get settled and reheat the casserole. Then we'll eat. Now don't go off and get lost."

On cue, the girls ran to their hideout above the garage. From there, they could keep an eye on most of the neighborhood, and in the winter, when the trees were bare, they had a good view all the way to the river. Now, all Christi could think about was *the July 25<sup>th</sup> incident*, so she immediately sought another topic to distract herself.

"It was a shotgun wedding!" she proclaimed boldly.

"I don't get it," Kelly frowned. "What's a shotgun wedding?"

"I didn't know either," Christi confessed, "but I found out." Her blue, blue eyes opened wider. "It's when you have to get married because you're pregnant!"

"But, I thought only married women could get pregnant and have babies."

"Don't feel stupid. So did I, but Michelle Demarest, she's the bride's cousin, told me all about it," Christi nodded, dark curls bobbing. "She's thirteen and she knows."

"So what happens?" Kelly wanted to know too.

For a second, Christi thought about her father and Mrs. Jander, and wondered if Mrs. Jander could be pregnant now. She blushed, and started into the story she had heard.

"Well, when a boy and girl are going steady, they do a lot of kissing and stuff."

"I know that," Kelly remarked impatiently. Christi was very flushed now, but Kelly didn't seem to notice.

The older girl took a deep breath and continued authoritatively, "Eventually, they go to the drive-in and they get in the back seat of the car under a blanket and then — you might not believe this, but Michelle swears it's true and I believe her — then the boy puts his wiener up inside the girl and she gets pregnant."

"He puts his wiener where?"

"Up inside the girl."

"I know, but where? Exactly where?"

"In the hole you pee out of."

"You're kidding."

"No. I swear."

"Yuk."

"I know."

Silence followed. Christi blushed again, thankful that Kelly seemed to be lost in her own thoughts. She pulled a splinter of wood from the floor and cleaned under her clean fingernails with it as Kelly stared out toward the unseen river.

Finally Kelly asked, "What do they call it?"

"Call what?"

"It.' What do they call it when a boy does that to a girl?"

"There's lots of words for it."

"Name some."

"Making love. Doing it. Screwing."

"Are they all the same thing?"

"I think so."

"Name some more."

"I can't think of any. There's a big one, though. It's the technical name for it. Actually it's two words, but I can't remember."

"Is it sexual intercourse?"

"Yeah! That's it. How did you know?"

"Lucky guess."

"Come on. How'd you know that?" Christi really wanted to know. She felt scared.

"Ran across it in the dictionary."

That was enough to satisfy Christi, although she never would understand her friend's habit of reading the dictionary just for fun. She wondered if there were any way that Kelly could know about *the July 25<sup>th</sup> incident*, and so she asked, "Then you know all about it, huh?"

"No more than you do," Kelly confessed. "Just what I read in the dictionary. And another word."

"What?"

"Fuck!"



"Yeah. I heard Billy DeVito say that one. I wondered what it was. He got in trouble for it," Christi recalled.

"It's a trouble word, that's for sure," Kelly agreed, and Christi wondered again.

Christi watched a squirrel dangling upside down from the tip of a limb, carelessly clinging with his back toes to the pencil thin branch, his tail looped over the neighboring twigs. With his front paws, the squirrel was grabbing tiny berries and thrusting them into his mouth. Another squirrel approached, and the first one scrambled upright, chattering. They chased each other around and around the tree, up and down, leaping onto other trees and then back again. Around and around. Scared.

Christi cleaned her clean fingernails with the splinter, waiting and hoping that Kelly would change the subject, but Kelly obviously wasn't finished with it because in a few minutes she volunteered, "Mary Margaret McCafferty told me to go fuck myself."

"Mary Margaret McCafferty said that?"

"Yeah. Sunday."

"What did you do to her?"

"Nothing."

"I can't believe it. Mary Margaret McCafferty? She's so prissy. Wonder why she said that. You sure you didn't do something to her?" Christi insisted, knowing Kelly.

"Sure. She's just weird."

"Yeah, she's weird, all right."

Finally, Kelly changed the subject with her favorite line, "I'm hungry." Christi felt enormous relief as Kelly added, "Let's go help your mom set the table."

\* \* \*

"This is a delicious dinner, Kelly. You be sure to thank your mother for it."

"Yes, sir, I will," Kelly mumbled at her plate.

Christi noticed that Kelly didn't look at her father when she replied, and then Christi noticed that she herself wasn't looking at him either.

"I'm afraid it would have been another night of sardines and crackers for me. I wouldn't expect Miz B to fix dinner after such a long, tiring trip. No, siree, I wouldn't."

Christi wondered why her father couldn't fix a better dinner for himself than sardines and crackers. *And why couldn't he have fixed a nice dinner for our homecoming? Kelly's father can cook, although he doesn't do it more than once or twice a year, except breakfast. Why doesn't my father? And how did Kelly's mother know that he didn't cook? How well does Kelly's mother know my father anyway?* For a second, she imagined Mrs. McCain in her father's office instead of Mrs. Jander.

Christi blushed and glanced around furtively to see if anyone noticed. They were all eating and talking about the trip. Everyone seemed normal. Or did they? Christi couldn't remember how it had felt before.

Nothing had changed, but everything was different. Were they all pretending? Did they all know about *the July 25<sup>th</sup> incident*, as she did?

Her beautiful mother was smiling. Christi heard herself tell a funny story about the trip and they all laughed, even her father. How could he laugh? How could they all laugh and act like nothing had happened? But of course, Kelly couldn't know and her mother couldn't know. Christi realized that she was the only one who could know, besides her father, and he was laughing. How could he keep laughing?

Christi heard herself laughing. *This is crazy, her mind raced. The world is upside down and everyone is laughing.* Kelly was laughing so hard that she started choking, but Christi just stared at her as through a fog. She wondered if Kelly would sit there and laugh and choke until she died and would never know about *the July 25<sup>th</sup> incident* because Christi was afraid to tell her. She wondered how she could be so afraid. After all, she was still laughing.

"Honey, are you okay?" Mr. Boudreaux patted Kelly on the back.

"Yes, sir, I am," Kelly mumbled at her plate. She still wasn't looking at Christi's father, and Christi wasn't looking at him either.

Christi was afraid to go to sleep too early. She was afraid that she would wake up again in the middle of the night and think about her father and Mrs. Jander, or even her father and Mrs. McCain. She was afraid that if she thought about it too much, she would accidentally say something to Kelly, so she changed the subject by talking on and on with endless details about Willow Creek Plantation, the parties, the magnificent church, the wedding itself with twelve bridesmaids and groomsmen, and the extravagant reception at Willow Creek with two bands and dancing until three in the morning.

"I don't get it," Kelly finally confessed. Christi panicked, afraid that her brilliant friend had seen through her subterfuge. Her stomach tightened. She was relieved when Kelly went on with her question.

"If they had to get married," Kelly frowned, "wouldn't they want to keep it a secret? It sounds like everybody in Georgia was invited to their wedding."

"I asked Michelle about that. She said that Mrs. Demarest always wanted a big wedding for her daughter because she didn't have one. And Dr. Demarest said, 'Why not? The bigger the lie, the more people believe it.'"

Chapter 3  
August 6, 1959

“The bigger the lie, the more people believe it.”

Helène Lepeltier Boudreaux was contemplating that very truth as she rose early to fix breakfast for her husband. She gathered her long dark hair into a clasp at the nape of her neck and took a quick look in the mirror. Definitely French, not Cajun. That part of the story was true at least. Aristocratic? A possibility. Wealthy? A laugh.

Helène Lepeltier grew up as a street urchin in Paris, never knowing her father, ashamed of her prostitute mother, and then found herself in the same occupation at the age of thirteen. But Helène had resolved to be different. She avoided the drugs. She saved seventy-five percent of her ill-gotten earnings, and traded her favors for the things she would need to escape – tutoring in English, lessons in piano and voice, elegant, tasteful clothes, and finally, along with her legitimately earned *diplôme* from the local *lycée*, a glowing letter of recommendation from the disgusting old *professeur de français*, setting forth not only her outstanding intellectual capabilities, but also the illustrious heritage and social connections of the Lepeltier family. Sophie Newcomb College in New Orleans, Louisiana, United States of America, welcomed nineteen-year-old Helène into its soft protective bosom.

The French girl felt surprisingly at home in the foreign country, surrounded by girls a year or two younger, and quickly adapted to the Southern manner. By the time of her senior year, as her money was rapidly eroding, she had no trouble securing a marriage proposal from Clement Boudreaux, assuring her future as a comfortable, if not wealthy, United States citizen. She thought she could love him and might have been relieved to know that her motives were not too different from the bevy of her classmates who flowered the South with their summer weddings.

Helène told everyone that her entire family had been killed during the occupation of Paris, so that a large wedding would be inappropriate. The chaplain at Tulane University

performed the Catholic ceremony in the presence of their friends Claude Demarest and his young wife Christina, who appeared quite pregnant for a recent bride. Christina and Claude Demarest stayed in New Orleans where he was in medical school. After a brief honeymoon in Biloxi, Helène and Clement Boudreaux drove to Vicksburg.

The Boudreaux family, as would any Americans who made their money the hard way, welcomed Helène as that most prized acquisition, an aristocratic Western European (probably related to royalty though it was too painful for her to speak of her sadly departed relatives), sophisticated, accomplished in the arts and fluent in four languages. Helène took her place in Vicksburg society and set about the business of making a home and learning to love Clement (“you-can-call-me-Clem”) Boudreaux.

After several annual trips to her trusted gynecologist in New Orleans, Helène had been convinced that it was safe to conceive and soon thereafter a daughter, Christina Lepeltier Boudreaux, began and completed their family. At twelve, Christina was everything her mother had wanted – pretty, popular, smart and healthy. She would have all the advantages that Helène had missed, from the love and attention of two parents to the material trappings necessary for moving in the right circles from which a suitable husband could be selected. It didn’t matter to Helène that her own marriage was not idyllic. She never looked at another man, and always proclaimed, verbally and physically, her love for Clement. They never argued, and, though there was a lack of passion, there was no lack of admiration from their friends who considered them to be the perfect family.

Occasionally, Clem Boudreaux, hearing more undiluted praise of his beautiful wife, felt a little uneasy, but could never find any fault with Helène. He finally concluded that he must have some terrible character flaw that made him unappreciative of his good fortune.

Clem was feeling that way again as he sat down to breakfast across from the perfect French woman. Consciously, he compared Helène to his new secretary Vayda. Mrs. Jander. There was no contest. Helène clearly excelled in every

category, from her thick, luxurious, wavy hair to her thin ankles and beautifully shaped feet.

Vayda had over-permed reddish hair with dark roots, a few extra pounds around her middle from drinking too much beer, and thick ankles above her square feet. Clem wasn't even sure what color her eyes were. She was smart enough, for a secretary, but lacked the refinement that everyone prized in Helène. Even as he wondered what he saw in Vayda, his heart did a little skip and he knew he was too anxious to get to the office.

Christina and her friend Kelly McCain slipped into the kitchen and sat down at the table just as Clem was leaving for work. He looked with pride at his daughter – and his wife. Yes, he was doing damn well for himself. Best not to mess it up with fooling around.

He felt Kelly's cool presence in the room and turned to say "good morning." She had always been so friendly to him, but now this strange aloofness. He imagined that she knew his secret, but ridiculed himself for the thought. She was only a child. How could she even think of such a thing?

"Morning, girls! You're up early. Got big plans for the day?"

"Yes, Daddy."

Once again, Clem felt the strange aloofness from his own daughter. He responded in the only way he knew how.

"Need any money?" he asked hopefully.

"No, sir, thank you," Christi answered politely, but looking away. "I still have some from the trip."

"How 'bout you, Kelly? Need a coupla dollars for a special treat?"

"No, sir, but thank you anyway," Kelly mumbled at her plate.

It seemed to Clem that Kelly hadn't looked directly at him since Christi returned from Savannah last night. He felt rebuked, and the cloud of Kelly's unspoken disapproval followed him all day. *Must be my guilty conscience*, he thought. *I'd better do something about it. Maybe I'll just get another secretary. Hell, they're all the same.*

This resolution was no better than the previous ones he had made and not much different from the ones that would come later. The only thing to change would be his conscience. Eventually, it would wear down.

Christi and Kelly sped off on their bicycles immediately after breakfast. By eleven o'clock, they were hungry again and near enough to Kelly's house to drop in for lunch. However, both girls were specifically hungry for a Dairy Queen hamburger and a strawberry shake.

"Let's go," Christi started off.

"Can't."

"Why?"

"Don't have any money," Kelly confessed sheepishly.

"But you told Daddy you did."

"I lied."

"Why?" Christi asked, blushing. *Why would Kelly lie? Does she think I'm lying by not saying anything about the July 25<sup>th</sup> incident?*

"I don't know," Kelly lied again, blushing and hoping Christi wouldn't notice.

"Stop here," the older girl ordered. "Let's see if I have enough for both of us."

Christi counted. "Nope. Sorry. Why don't we go by your house to get some?"

"We might get stuck there, especially if Nellie Mae has something good started for lunch. And she'll want to hear all about your trip. Then my parents will want to hear it."

The girls sighed together. All they could think of now was a big juicy hamburger with lots of mustard and onion. And a cool thick strawberry shake. There had to be a way.

"Christi, I got it! Follow me."

Minutes later the two girls were talking to Kelly's neighbor Old Man Everett through his screen door. Christi remembered that the Everetts had been in Florida while she was in Savannah, but the Everett's news had rated only a small paragraph in the "Comings and Goings" section of the *Vicksburg Daily Chronicle*.

"Yes, sir," Christi heard her friend say, "I kept those kids from riding through your yard the whole time you were gone."

And, in case you didn't notice, I cleaned out your garbage can real good so it wouldn't draw rats and I watered your garden some, while I was at it."

"Martha, come here. Did you hear what all this nice child did while we were gone?"

"What? Oh, it's Kelly McCain. Good morning, Kelly, how are you?"

"Fine."

"And who's your little friend here?"

"You remember Christina Boudreaux, don't you?"

"Yes, of course. Good morning, Christina."

"Good morning, ma'am."

"Now what's all this you did? Won't you come in and have some barbecue? You know we've always got plenty of barbecue!"

"And it's great barbecue, too, but no, thank you, ma'am. We were just on our way over to the Dairy Queen for a hamburger and strawberry shake."

"Some other time then, but now, Kelly, you tell Mrs. Everett what all you did while we were gone."

"Oh, it wasn't really all that much."

"Wasn't much? Why, this child kept those other kids from riding all over our yard ... "

"Do tell."

"... and she watered the garden ..."

"No!"

"... and even scrubbed out that filthy garbage can just so's the rats wouldn't come."

"Well, glory be."

Kelly shrugged her shoulders. "It wasn't really all that much. I just wanted to stop by and see if you had a good trip and..."

"We sure did, honey, but it's awful nice to come home, especially when we have such nice neighbors. Herman, don't we have a little something from Florida for Kelly and her friend?"

Old Man Everett shuffled to the kitchen and returned with a box of salt-water taffy.



"We were going to bring this to you anyway, but seeing's how you kept an eye on things for us, here's a little something extra," he added, reaching into his pocket and coming up with a one-dollar bill and two fifty-cent pieces.

"Now don't eat all that candy before lunch. I don't want Nellie Mae getting on me."

"Yes, sir. Thank you. That's real generous of you. I didn't do much. Really."

Kelly and Christi sped off again on their bikes, this time for the Dairy Queen.

Christi waited until they were halfway through their feast before saying, "You've done some dumb things in your life, Kelly McCain, but cleaning out the Everett's garbage can has got to be the dumbest."

"Not so dumb," Kelly grinned, "we're eating hamburgers, aren't we?"

"Sure," Christi acknowledged, "but there must be more to the story than that."

Kelly nodded, "There is, but it's kind of a secret. You tell me a secret, and I'll tell you this one."

Christi glanced away, then lowered her eyes. "I can't think of any secrets right now."

"You're lying," Kelly challenged boldly.

Christi blushed, and stammered, "Whuh, whuh, why do you think I'm lying?"

"Because I know you. I know what you think," Kelly announced loudly. Then she leaned forward and lowered her voice to a whisper, "I never told you this before," she confided, her pale green eyes piercing Christi to the soul, "but I can read your mind."

Christi's face paled. She stared wide-eyed at her friend. She tried to think of something other than *the July 25<sup>th</sup> incident*. There was nothing else in the world. She felt her face and neck prickling with heat. She saw her father and Mrs. Jander rocking back and forth, back and forth, back and forth until she thought she would scream.

"NO!" she screamed at the top of her voice. "NO!"

Kelly stared in disbelief as Christi yelled right in her face. Everyone in the Dairy Queen turned around to stare at them.

Christi dropped her hamburger and jumped up from the table, knocking her purse to the floor.

"NO!" she screamed again and burst into tears as she ran to the girls' bathroom.

Kelly sat in stunned silence. She didn't even care that everyone was looking at her. She waited for a few minutes that seemed like an eternity, but Christi didn't reappear. Kelly had never heard Christi raise her voice. No one in the entire Boudreaux family, cousins and all, ever raised their voices.

She tried to remember exactly what she had said that made Christi so upset. The words "I can read your mind" echoed in the silence of her heart. She never should have told such a lie to her friend, but of course, Christi couldn't have believed it. Maybe that was it. Christi was upset because Kelly had lied to her about being able to read her mind.

Feeling guilty and suddenly concerned that people were still looking at her, Kelly bent down slowly to gather Christi's little purse and its contents. Everything was spilled out. Lipstick, mints, pens, stamps, change, junk.

Kelly stuffed it all back in the purse, straightened up, and walked blindly through the Dairy Queen to the girls' bathroom. She wanted to cry. *What's wrong with me? Am I crazy? What did I do?* Feelings she couldn't define welled up in her and she wanted to be sick. When she opened the bathroom door, she could smell that Christi already was sick.

"Christi? Christi, are you in there?"

"Yeah," came a weak voice from the last cubicle.

"I've got your purse."

"Thanks."

Kelly went to the sink, ran water on a paper towel, folded it and held it under the door.

"Here's a wet paper towel," she offered.

"Thanks," Christi replied feebly, reaching for it.

Kelly heard the commode flush. She waited, and waited.

"Are you going to come out?"

"Unless I can figure some way to flush myself down the sewer."

"Aw, Christi, come on. It's not that bad, is it?"

"Yes."

"Listen. I'm really sorry."

"You didn't do anything."

"I made you scream and cry and throw up a perfectly good hamburger," Kelly replied.

Christi couldn't help chuckling about the reference to the hamburger. That was so like Kelly.

"It's not anything you did, Kelly."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. It's Nothing with a capital N."

"Okay, but come out of there and listen to me."

Christi slid the latch over and the door creaked open.

"Look at yourself in the mirror."

"I don't need to look."

"I said 'Look!'"

Christi's blood-shot eyes stared back at her.

"Now, you can either go around looking like that and making yourself miserable over 'Nothing with a capital N,' or you can tell me what's wrong and we can figure it out."

Christi managed a weak smile.

"So you really can't read my mind?"

Kelly shrugged, returned the weak smile, and found a way out of her predicament.

"Of course not, Dummy! And why would I want to? There's nothing like a Webster's Dictionary in there. Reading your mind would probably just bore me."

"Yeah," Christi agreed gratefully, nodding and beaming at her friend. "Yeah, it would probably just bore you."

Chapter 4  
August 8, 1959

"It's not fair!" Christi complained to her mother as they stood at the sink drying the dinner dishes. "Kelly's a whole year younger than I am and she already has a boyfriend. She doesn't even want to be over here. I can't believe it's Saturday night and she's sitting at home by herself just in case Cameron might decide to call her. Where does that leave me? It's not fair. Kelly always gets everything."

Helène looked around their large, beautiful kitchen and sighed, "Some people might think that you have everything, *ma chère*. Besides, she just met him today. She's excited, but it won't last forever. You're her best friend. That lasts forever. Try to be happy for Kelly and be patient. Someday you'll have a boyfriend, too, and you might need Kelly's patience."

"I'll never have a boyfriend," Christi whispered loudly. "Never."

"Of course you will," her mother assured her. "Of course you will."

"No," Christi insisted. "I won't. I don't want one. Boys are nasty."

"Look at me, *ma chère*," the elegant Frenchwoman cooed, cradling her daughter's face in her hands and looking straight into her eyes. "You don't mean that."

"I do mean it!" Christi glared at her mother, thinking about *the July 25<sup>th</sup> incident*. "You just don't know how nasty they can be."

For a moment, Helène thought back to her life on the streets of Paris. *Boys can be nasty, indeed, but Christi is too young to know that*. Helène felt her own shame, and looked away.

"Some boys are nasty, *ma chère*, but I'm sure that young Mister Cameron Coulter is not. You said that he's nice and smart and tall and funny and handsome. I'm sure that someday you'll have a boyfriend like that too."

"Like Daddy?" Christi asked defiantly.

Helène glanced away momentarily before assuring her daughter, "Your Daddy is a very nice man. Everyone in Vicksburg likes him. We're fortunate that he takes such good

care of us. Don't you forget that. You'll find a nice man who will take care of you, too, but there's no rush. Now, why don't you go call Kelly and be sweet to her?"

"She doesn't want me to call. She doesn't want the line to be busy in case Cameron calls her. It's just not fair. Kelly gets everything!"

Christi finished her part of the dish drying without another word, wondering why her father couldn't be like Kelly's. Mr. McCain would never do anything nasty with that nasty Mrs. Jander. Clayton McCain was the most nearly perfect man in Vicksburg, maybe in all of Mississippi. Why did he have to be Kelly's father and not hers?

Christi decided that if she ever got a boyfriend, he would have to be like Clayton McCain — tall and handsome and smart and nice to everybody and always interested in what she had to say. She smiled to herself, thinking about his call to "*the vivacious and oh-so-popular Miss Christina Boudreaux.*" Clayton McCain would never, ever let her down as her own father had already done.

With that thought, Christi walked disconsolately through the den, past her disappointing father dozing in his big leather recliner. She slowly dragged her feet up the grand staircase to her exquisitely decorated bedroom. She didn't turn on the lamps, but got ready for bed in the dark, then lay there alone, staring at the ceiling, thinking about *the July 25<sup>th</sup> incident*.

It had been exactly two weeks, and the images of it still tormented her night and day. The nighttime was worse. She tried to stay awake to avoid dreaming about it, but a fitful sleep came, bringing the torment that she had come to fear and hate. When the phone beside her bed rang early the next morning, Christi felt as if she had just fallen asleep.

"Christi, wake up," Kelly whispered loudly into the phone. "I have to tell you something very serious and important. Are you awake?"

"Mmm-hmm, I'm awake," Christi mumbled. "Did Cameron call you?"

"This is not about Cameron," Kelly continued solemnly. "But no, he didn't call."

There was a long pause on the line.

"Then what is it?" Christi asked, sitting up straight in her bed, disturbed by the tone of Kelly's voice.

There was another long silence.

"When I got home from church this morning, my Daddy wasn't at home."

"No!" Christi exclaimed, thinking instantly of Mrs. Jander.

Kelly was silent again.

"Is he home yet?" Christi asked, hating Mrs. Jander and her red hair and her tacky clothes.

Kelly sighed, "No."

"Do you know where he is?" Christi questioned, with a sick knot forming in her stomach. "Do you want me to help you look for him?" she offered, recalling Mrs. Jander's address.

"I know where he is," Kelly whispered.

Christi felt guilty. On top of everything else, Kelly was a better friend than Christi could ever be. Kelly was going to tell her a secret about Clayton McCain and Mrs. Jander. Christi felt her hand getting sweaty on the phone. She didn't want to hear it, but she waited for the words she was dreading. The silence was deafening and interminable.

"My daddy," Kelly paused, and a chill went over Christi, "went to the hospital early this morning. Old Man Everett took him."

"Oh, no," Christi gasped, but there was some relief in her voice. "What happened?"

"He had a heart attack," Kelly said softly. "I don't know if a heart attack hurts or not. Do you think it hurts, Christi? I mean, we can't usually feel our hearts, you know."

"I don't know anything about heart attacks," Christi murmured, realizing that she was lying. She knew that you could die from a heart attack and that they did hurt, but she didn't want to worry her friend. She tried to sound cheerful as she said, "I'm sure he'll be okay, though."

There was another great long silence. Fear clutched Christi's throat. She tried to swallow and nearly choked.

"He will be okay, Kelly," she tried to assure her friend and herself at the same time. "He has to be okay."

"He's not going to be okay, Christi. He'll never be okay. He'll never come home again."

"What are you saying, Kelly? Tell me straight out how bad it is."

Again, the silence. A longer silence.

"He's dead," Kelly whispered, as though her heart would break.

"NO!" Christi shrieked into the phone. "NO! He can't be dead!"

"My daddy is dead, Christi," Kelly responded quietly. "Maybe you could come over before everyone else gets here."

"Oh, Kelly, I'm so sorry! Oh, my God! What are you going to do?"

"Maybe you could get your mother to come over and talk to my mother," Kelly asked plaintively. She paused a long time before adding, "I think there is something wrong with my mother. After the doctor called to tell her that Daddy was dead, she told me not to tell anybody."

"Then, maybe it isn't true," Christi said hopefully. "Maybe your mother was upset and she got confused about what the doctor told her."

"He's dead, Christi. I called the hospital. Then I called the funeral home. They're going to pick up..." Kelly paused a moment, "... his body."

"We'll be there in a few minutes," Christi promised. "We'll all be right there."

"Thanks," Kelly sighed. "I knew I could count on you."

Christi hung up the phone, slid back down in bed, and collapsed on her pillow. She felt hot tears forming, and was crying softly by the time her mother came into the room.

"I heard you scream again, *ma chère*. Are you all right?" Helène asked gently.

"Nuh, nuh, no, I'm not," Christi sobbed as her mother sat beside her on the bed. "Kelly called. Her fah, fah, father had a heart attack. He's dead."

"*Mon Dieu!*"

Helène embraced her daughter and felt her own tears coming.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she cried, rocking her child back and forth. "*Mon Dieu!*"

\* \* \*

Christi sat on the sofa in the McCain's front parlor and listened to the awkward whisperings of the classmates and neighborhood kids who had come to call on Kelly. Kelly herself was spending more time with the adults because her mother wouldn't come out of the bedroom to talk to anyone.

Christi felt helpless, despondent, and alone. She didn't know what she should be doing, so she just sat and cried intermittently, while she listened to the subdued buzz of conversations and the droning of the air conditioner.

It was nearly one-thirty. The dining room table was crowded with platters of food that people had brought already. It looked as if half of Vicksburg had decided to bring their Sunday lunch instead of eating it at home. Someone handed Christi a brownie on a napkin.

She stared at it and remembered how much Mr. McCain had liked brownies. *I had always planned to make some brownies for him, but I never did. I never did. No, I never did, and now it's too late.* Hot tears came to her eyes and brimmed over, spilling down her cheeks. She let them fall onto the brownie.

The room became stifling hot. The air conditioner was running constantly, but it was over a hundred degrees outside and there were too many people in the house, or coming and going and letting the front door stand open. Christi wanted to get up and shut it again, but she didn't have the energy. She felt too empty inside.

She glanced into the dining room and saw her father standing beside Kelly, talking quietly with some of Mr. McCain's friends. She supposed that her mother was still in the kitchen with the women and Nellie Mae. She wondered if Mrs. McCain would ever come out of the bedroom. Maybe she should go knock on the bedroom door and talk to her, but what would she say? Regina McCain was always nice to Christi, but they had never actually talked about anything. Maybe this was not a good time to start.

The group standing in the open doorway stepped back for another visitor, and Christi saw the new priest up close for the first time. There was a momentary lull in the conversations as



the houseful of Baptists and Methodists and Presbyterians paused to scrutinize the Catholic cleric.

He was young, mid-to-late twenties, tall and athletic, with dark wavy hair. He looked around the room for a moment and then walked toward Kelly, who apparently had sensed his arrival and disengaged herself from the group in the dining room.

"I'm Father O'Connell," Christi heard him say gently, with a soft Irish accent. He took Kelly's hand in both of his. "Sean O'Connell. I came as soon as I could."

Christi watched as Kelly led the priest through the crowd, upstairs toward the master bedroom. She felt compelled to follow them, though she didn't know why. She waited a few minutes, put down the brownie that she had made soggy with her tears, and started up the stairway, hoping that no one would notice. Feeling guilty, she stood outside the master bedroom door and tried to hear the conversation.

It seemed that only the priest was talking. Christi was mesmerized by the sound of his voice, soft and lilting, gentle and reassuring. She sensed, as much as heard, what he was saying – words about eternal life and rest in God. She tried to picture Clayton McCain in Heaven. She smiled, remembering his stories about picking cotton when he was a kid and wrestling alligators in Panama and fighting with bayonets in the Marine Corps. She could almost hear him singing the Marine Corps Hymn in his deep off-key voice:...

*"If the Army or the Na-a-vy  
ever gaze on Heaven's scenes,  
They will find the streets are guarded by  
The United States Marines."*

\* \* \*

Christi heard herself mournfully humming the Marine Corps Hymn like a dirge as she dressed for the funeral on Tuesday afternoon. It was the hottest day of the year, without a breath of air stirring or a cloud in the sky – not a good day to wear black. Christi stood in front of her mirror and wished

it were cold and rainy outside, to match her mood. She had cried so much she was exhausted. Suddenly it occurred to her that she hadn't seen Kelly cry at all.

Kelly had asked her to sit with the family during the service. It was the highest honor a friend could bestow, but Christi was too sad to feel at all proud as she took her place in the small room off to the side where the family could see but not be seen.

Christi sat beside the family niggers Nellie Mae and her daughter Prudence in the row behind Mrs. McCain and Kelly and Kelly's younger sister Mandy. Funerals and weddings were the only times that white people and colored people ever sat together, and so it was the first time that Christi ever sat beside Prudence. She realized that they were the same age and that Prudence seemed to be as upset as she was that Mr. McCain was dead. She vowed to go out back and talk to Prudence the next time she was at Kelly's house.

\* \* \*

The procession to the cemetery was interminable. A couple of older cars overheated along the way, and others stopped to pick up the stranded mourners. It was after three o'clock by the time everyone got situated at the graveside. The sun was unmerciful, even under the tents and the shade trees.

Christi felt sweat mingling with the tears running down her cheeks. She looked over at her best friend, sitting straight and silent in the white folding chair on the fake green grass carpet. Kelly didn't seem to be crying or sweating. She was just sitting there, staring at the open grave and the shiny casket suspended over it on belts.

The Baptist preacher prayed on and on. Then Father Sean O'Connell prayed on and on. The sun beat down, and Christi thought she was going to faint. She wondered how Father O'Connell could stand there in all those robes and not die from the heat. She thought about Clayton McCain being up in Heaven, watching all of them sweating around a box that held only his body while his soul was safe from the weather and from everything.

Then Christi began to wonder what would happen if her own father died. Would he go to Heaven? She panicked at the thought of her father and Mrs. Jander being together and dying and going straight to Hell.

She became aware of a lingering "Amen," followed by some uncomfortable shifting and coughing among the crowd. Then, in eerie silence, the casket was lowered slowly into the ground until it disappeared from her sight. She watched the funeral home attendant ceremonially scoop a shovel full of dirt and walk over to Mrs. McCain with it. He held the shovel out toward her and stood respectfully still. She looked up at him, with her big brown eyes so scared, and she shook her head from side to side. Other than that, she did not move.

There was another uncomfortable shifting of the crowd and a few more muffled coughs. Kelly stood up and took the weighty shovel from the man. Slowly, resolutely, steadily, she carried it across the carpet of fake green grass to the very edge of the open grave. She held the shovel over the gaping hole for the longest time. There was no shuffling of the crowd. No coughing. No breathing. There was nothing but the silence of stifling, still, summer air.

Finally, Kelly turned the shovel over. Dry dirt and rocks thundered onto the shiny new casket, and the rumbling echo of death was the only sound heard in Mississippi for the rest of that long, hot, August afternoon.

## PART II

### THE SOPHOMORE YEAR (*sophos* - wise / *moros* - foolish)

#### Chapter 5 Thanksgiving 1962

"...for which let us give thanks as our families gather together and bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies, from Thy bounty, through Christ, Our Lord. Amen."

*That blessing is just like me, Christi thought as she made the Sign of the Cross during the silence following the unanimous "Amen." Part Boudreaux. Part Lepeltier. Part father. Part mother. Part old. Part new. What am I anyway? Fifteen years old and what am I? A sophomore. Sophos - wise. Moros - foolish. So what am I? Well, whatever I am, I'm better off than that turkey.*

All eyes were on the perfectly browned bird in front of Clem Boudreaux. He stood to carve, and conversations resumed.

"Now, hurry up, Clem. You know all those babies cain't be good for long," Billy Boudreaux interjected as Christi's father poured his second glass of wine.

"Help yourselves to the vegetables and start passing things around," suggested Helène Boudreaux, the perennially gracious hostess.

Always the same admonitions. Every year more babies. Only now it would be Nellie Mae and Prudence trying to keep all the babies quiet during the Thanksgiving dinner. One o'clock. Nap time for most of them anyway. Christi was cousin to twelve girls now, all but the eldest living in Vicksburg.

Besides the teen-age Christi Boudreaux and her California cousin Maggie Stevenson, the other girls were under five years old, all offspring of Clem's younger brothers, of whom Billy was the most vocal at dinner conversation, as usual.

"Well, I don't care. I don't see why a nigger would want to go to Ole Miss anyway!"

Christi closed her eyes and let the voices blend together. It was almost impossible to tell one Boudreaux brother from the next without looking at them. Christi didn't want to look.

"I think it's those damn Yankees puttin' ideas in their heads, that's all. No self-respecting Mississippi nigger would want to go to a school where he's not wanted."

"I think you're right about that. They've done fine going to their own schools, and damn lucky to have schools if you ask me."

"That nigger Meredith won't live to graduate, you mark my words."

"Well, at least Governor Barnett did what he could, sending the state police to keep him out. Who would'a thought Kennedy would butt in with federal marshals?"

"Anybody with a brain might'a figured he'd do it. Lookit the damn laws he's pushed down everybody's throat."

"Yep. Lettin' niggers ride in any seat they want on interstate buses, lettin' 'em sit in airports and train stations right next to white folks."

"Cain't say I was too surprised to see the President back up them marshals with fifteen thousand armed troops."

"Well, I'm just surprised only two people got killed."

"That's the truth."

"Don't forget them two hundred wounded. I hate to think how many I'da taken out if they'da started throwing tear gas in my fraternity house."

"It's them damn Yankees. All they wanted to do for the last hunnert years is come down here and tell us how to take care of our niggers. It's enough to start another war."

Silence.

"Sure is good dressing, Helène," Billy complimented, remembering his manners. "A body might think you were born and bred right here in Vicksburg, Mississippi, 'stead of Paris, France."

"Thank you, Billy. Have some more giblet gravy on it."

"B'lieve I will."

"The next thing you know, little Christi here'd be going to high school with niggers. Now, you just try to imagine that."

"I wouldn't mind if Prudence went to school with me," Christi interposed in the lull.

Everyone stopped for a few seconds to stare at her.

"Have you been running around with that nigger again?" her father asked. "I should've left those two at the McCain's instead of trying to help out bringing them over here. I've told you a hundred times that nice white girls don't run around with niggers - not even in their own back yard!"

Christi's face flushed at being called down in front of the whole family. She bit her tongue to keep from asking him who he was running around with. She didn't say anything. The Boudreaux brothers resumed their usual conversation, oblivious as always to the comings and goings of Nellie Mae as she refilled the serving bowls and tended to their unspoken needs.

"I swear, there's no telling what this place is coming to. My own niece running around talking to a nigger gal and willing to go to school with her. Clem, boy, you better take charge of your daughter."

"She doesn't understand that it wouldn't be just Prudence. Once you let one nigger in, you're gonna have 'm all."

"Yep, you mark my words. If that nigger James Meredith lives to graduate from Ole Miss, God forbid, there won't be no end to it."

"That's the truth. Why, twenty years from now, you could have a nigger football team at Ole Miss, and Grambling out trying to recruit white boys."

Another silence fell as all considered the enormity of that prediction.

"Niggers in the dorms, a nigger roommate, for God's sake."

"White kids would have to go outa state to college."

"Imagine a nigger homecoming queen at Ole Miss!"

"I'm afraid that's the day I'd become a card-carrying member of the Klan!"

"We don't carry cards."

"I know that. It's just a figure of speech."

"Well, the Klan better git busy, 'cause things are goin' down hill fast."

"Next thing you know, niggers'll be wanting to eat inside at Tolbert's Ice Cream Parlor."

"Naw. Tolberts don't serve chitlins and skins."

"Yep. And they don't serve niggers."

"Not yet, but you just look what's goin' on all over. So-called 'civil rights workers' down here stirrin' up trouble, signing up niggers to vote. Hell, most of 'em cain't read."

"Cain't none of 'em think."

"So you know this ain't their doin'. It's damn Yankees tryin' to do their thinkin' for 'em. Gitt'n 'em all stirred up. Making promises they cain't keep."

"It's the same old thing it's always been. Hard 'nough for a white man with good sense to scratch out a decent living, and now they wanta give hand-outs to the niggers."

"Can you imagine how much of our hard-earned tax money it took to send them federal marshals and fifteen thousand troops to Oxford just so's one coon could register at Ole Miss? Now how many more are they gonna have to send down there to tutor that boy?"

"At that rate, this country can't afford too many more niggers in white colleges."

Christi interjected, "But that federal court ordered the University to register James Meredith."

"With all due respect to you, Miss Christina Boudreaux, I don't believe we need nigger-lovers or federal courts or any other kind of courts to run our schools."

Christi closed her eyes again and listened to them going on and on.

"So there, you see, even if, and I'm saying 'if,' even if it was just a question of rights, there's nobody in the South wantin' those rights started down here by a bunch of left-wing Commie Yankees coming from New York and Dee-troit City and Washington, DC, tryin' to tell us how to run our schools and our bus service and our lunch counters and our public facilities."

"How'd you like to go to a picture show and find out they let the niggers come down out of the balcony and sit beside you?"

"Yep. White folks have got rights too and we don't want to have to drink at a water fountain where any nigger can come up and spit in it, or go sit on any public john where some nigger just sat. For Christ's sake, I don't know what this country's coming to. Niggers are gonna be the ruin of it..."

\* \* \*

"Gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you again, as we leave to go our separate ways, for the opportunity to gather here together as a family on this Thanksgiving Day, in peace and love, to enjoy the fruits of Thy Harvest, this food for the nourishment of our bodies, from Thy bounty, through Christ, Our Lord, Amen."

"Amen."

Clem Boudreaux opened another bottle of wine. Chairs scuffed across the hardwood floor, china and crystal clinked to the kitchen, and televised football droned through the house, occasionally punctuated by lazy conversation and a few snores. Christi surreptitiously picked up the black hall phone.

"Kelly, can I come over?"

"Sure. Y'all finished eating?"

"Ate at one. Everybody's still here, but I don't care."

"What's wrong?" Kelly asked.

"I don't know. Maybe nothing. Maybe it's just me. I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"Okay," Kelly agreed, and immediately went to get her bike out of the garage. She wiped the cobwebs off and dusted the seat with a handful of fallen oak leaves, then rode slowly up and down the driveway waiting for Christi. She tried to see how slowly she could go and still maintain her balance. It helped that the wide tires were nearly flat.

Christi had found her tires flat too, so she got her father to air them up, figuring the gas station would be closed.

"Thanks, Daddy. See you later."

"Now don't be out on the bike after dark."

"I know. We won't."

"Call if you're gonna spend the night there."

"Daddy, I always do."

"I know. It's just my job to remind you."

"Okay."

"How about taking the pump? You haven't ridden that bike in a while. There may be a leak."

"I can make it to Kelly's. She has a pump if I need it. Please stop worrying about me. I'm fifteen years old!"



Under his breath, Clem Boudreaux admitted, "That's why I'm worrying."

"Bye."

"Now don't forget to call."

"Okay. Bye."

"And, honey, be careful."

At the corner, Christi turned left away from the direction of the McCain's, taking a detour to be able to report on the whereabouts of Cameron Coulter if she could ascertain as much from riding past his house. Their porch light was on, the garage appeared to be locked, and the big Buick was gone.

Christi headed to Kelly's at full speed.

"What took you so long?"

"I had to put air in the tires."

"Me, too."

"And then I rode by Cam's to see if he was at home..."

"Oh, Christi, no! Tell me you didn't! On your bike? I could die!" Kelly moaned.

"What? I thought you'd be happy."

"Happy? Are you kidding? If he saw you ride by he'll know you were spying on him for me. Oh, no! And on your bicycle, like a little kid! Jesus, God, I could die!"

"Kelly! How could you talk like that? Taking the Lord's name in vain! What's getting into you? And what's so bad about being on a bicycle?"

"Little kids ride bikes. I could die! He'll think I'm a little kid and he'll never call me again! Oh, how could you?"

"Calm down. It wasn't you riding by, it was me, and I'm not a little kid."

"But he knows you're my best friend. It's all the same thing. He'll know you were spying for me."

"Kelly..."

"What?"

"He wasn't home."

"Oh, no! Where could he be?"

"It looked like everyone was gone."

"How could you tell?"

"Porch light on in broad daylight, garage locked, car gone, no sign of life."

"Oh, my God! No sign of life? Maybe they've all been killed and the murderer stole their car!"

Silence.

"Jesus, God! What do you think?"

Silence.

"Christi! Maybe we should go over there! What do you think?"

Christi looked at her friend for a full ten seconds and then said quite seriously, "I think you're crazy."

"But Cameron and his whole family could be dead!"

"Or, they could have driven down to Bogalusa to have Thanksgiving dinner with his grandparents."

Kelly sighed with relief. "I'll bet you're right. They probably drove down to Bogalusa to have Thanksgiving dinner with his grandparents. I'm so glad you thought of that."

"Know what else I think?"

"What?"

"I think you're crazy."

"Thanks a lot. What a nice thing to say."

"Just listen to yourself. Worrying about Cameron seeing me on a bicycle, worrying about Cameron never calling you again, worrying that Cameron's been murdered just because the family is gone for awhile — this is not your usual way of thinking."

"Maybe it is. Maybe I just don't tell you everything I'm thinking. Maybe I think about some really weird things you couldn't even imagine," Kelly retorted.

"Well, if you get any weirder than thinking Cameron's been murdered, don't bother to tell me about it or I'll be visiting you in your padded cell."

Kelly shoved off down the driveway into the street. Christi followed.

"Has he called you lately?" Christi asked sarcastically from twenty feet back.

"Not exactly."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, you always know every time I talk to him, and you know I'd have told you if he called again, so you're just asking to be mean. I talked to him last week at the Dairy Queen."

"I know. But that was accidental."

"That was Fate."

"Don't be dramatic."

"I'm not. It was Fate. Just like when we met."

"That wasn't Fate either. Cameron was on the golf course with his brother and you were on the golf course with me and Mandy. We all played golf a lot. How can you call that Fate?"

"It was Fate that he moved to Vicksburg."

"And I suppose it was Fate that caused you to be here in Vicksburg waiting for him? That Fate got your parents together so you could be born here in Vicksburg and be waiting for him?" Christi taunted.

"Why not? You're just jealous because I wanted to talk to Cameron instead of you at the Dairy Queen."

"Here you go, talking crazy again. Where did I put that straight jacket?"

"You just don't understand," Kelly complained as she picked up speed.

Christi kept pace. "I think I do. You met a guy three years ago, fell madly in love, but he only calls you once in a blue moon, and so your little brain flipped out. Simple."

"That's really mean," Kelly replied over her shoulder, still pedaling fast.

Christi's voice softened, "You've gotta face it, Kelly. He's just not interested."

They pedaled along in silence for a few minutes, in and out of the dappled shade on Cherry Street.

"Maybe he's shy."

Christi laughed. "Cameron Coulter, shy? Ha! Now I know you're crazy."

"I think he is. He's too shy to call. He's afraid I'm not interested in him, so he doesn't call unless he can come up with a good excuse. Why don't you give him a hint?"

"Sure, like, 'Cam, why don't you call Kelly more often? She'd love to talk to you, but she's too shy to let you know.'"

"Yeah, something like that."

"You're serious?"

"I'm serious."

"Well, okay, I'll do it."

“No, don’t! I’d just die of embarrassment. If he’s going to call, Fate will take care of it.”

“Then, I’ll go back to my original statement. I think you’re crazy.”

“Just wait. Just you wait, Miss Christina Boudreaux, until you feel like this about somebody and he doesn’t call you for a long time. You’ll think about him, and you’ll talk about him, and you’ll wait forever if you really care about him.”

“No, I won’t. I’ll figure he isn’t interested, and I’ll go look for somebody else.”

“You think you will. You just wait.”

Chapter 6  
Monday after Thanksgiving, 1962

Miss Fennstemmacher walked briskly into the noisy classroom, carrying desolation and silence in her satchel.

“Good morning, Class. I apologize for keeping you waiting,” she glanced at her watch, “but I was detained in the principal’s office. I’m sure that you industrious students made valuable use of the past five minutes in order to prepare for a little pop test this morning.”

Gasps. Groans. Grumblings.

“I trust you all had a pleasant Thanksgiving holiday. Now let’s stand for the Pledge of Allegiance. Whose turn is it to read our Scripture passage? Thank you, Lucinda.”

*“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands...”*

Christi’s mind wandered as the familiar words came out of her mouth of their own volition and fell to the linoleum floor. The room was too hot. She glanced over at Johnny Chambers. He was wearing his ninth-grade letterman’s football jacket, heavy wool with leather trim. Beads of perspiration formed on his forehead and his upper lip, clinging to the light brown hairs he was hoping to shave soon.

Johnny was big for his age, and a good-looking boy, but that was the problem with him. He was immature, a boy, nothing at all like Grover Jones. Christi smiled, thinking that the new guy in the high school might be just what she wanted.

Back in September, Grover had caused quite a stir in the halls as the head football coach and three assistants had shown him around the school. Rumor had it that Grover was an eighteen-year-old-junior who was transferring in from the county just to play football for Vicksburg High. He was six-four and huge and really cute, in a rugged sort of way. As a sophomore, Christi hadn’t managed to get introduced to him yet, but occasionally she would see him in the hall and she would give him “a look.” She smiled again, in practice for the next time she might see him.

Johnny Chambers sensed someone’s eyes fixed intently on him and he looked around, surprised to find that it was Christi

Boudreaux. She always acted so snobby to him. Maybe she saw him make those great tackles against Natchez last week. Something had happened. She was smiling. Staring right at him and smiling. He smiled back. She blinked and stopped smiling. Girls. Always coy. He resolved to talk to her between classes. This was the most encouragement Christi had ever given him and he wouldn't waste the opportunity to make a move.

"Before our little test this morning, we have one item of homeroom business. It's time to decorate the classroom doors for Christmas and as usual there will be prizes awarded for the best designs in two categories—religious and novelty theme. It is a matter of great personal concern to me that my homeroom should win one of these prizes this year. Your assignment this week from my homeroom, in addition to your regular English homework and the outline for your term paper, will be to submit a design for our homeroom door.

"You may sketch your idea on regular notebook paper. Do not worry about the quality of your artwork. I'm sure we have plenty of competent artists in here who will be able to bring the design to life. What I want to see is the idea. The religious category is self-explanatory. The novelty category should relate Christmas to the fact that this is an English classroom. You may submit a design in each category if you wish. In fact, you may submit as many ideas as you have. As I said, it is a matter of great personal concern to me that my homeroom should win a prize this year. If you fail to submit an idea, you will receive a zero in English this week.

"If you have any questions about this, please see me after class. Now take out a sheet of paper and put your name in the upper right hand corner with the date ..."

*What a witch, Christi thought to herself. 'Matter of great personal concern to me.' Who in the world cares? Miss Fennstammacher cares, that's for sure. Christi wondered why. Could she be in trouble? She was 'detained in the principal's office' this morning. How could the door prize help? Funny. 'Door prize.' Play on words. Hmmm.*

Johnny Chambers made a point of walking next to Christi as they left the classroom. "Did you see the Natchez game?"

"Yeah."

"Did you see me make those tackles in the last quarter?"

"Yeah."

"What did you think?"

Christi looked around and saw at least half a dozen girls eyeing her enviously just because she was walking with Johnny Chambers. She did another quick appraisal of him. Definitely handsome, in a young sophomore sort of way. Nothing like Grover Jones, though. Johnny was only the star of the sophomore team. Kelly probably wouldn't be impressed.

Still, Johnny was considered a real catch by everybody else. She could do worse for the time being. After all, she was the only cute tenth-grade girl who didn't have some kind of boyfriend to talk about at slumber parties or at the Dairy Queen or Tolbert's Ice Cream Parlor.

"Well, what did you think?" he repeated.

"About what?"

"The tackles. My tackles in the last quarter."

Christi took another look and saw more eyes on her and Johnny.

"To tell you the truth, Johnny, I thought they were extremely aggressive and excellently executed."

She smiled. Everyone was watching.

"No kidding? You mean it?"

"Certainly. In fact, it occurs to me that you might be the best football player to come out of Warren County since Glynn Griffing."

"No kidding? You mean it?"

"Of course, I mean it. By the time you're a senior, every college in the conference will be after you. That is, if you keep on trying as hard as you did against Natchez."

"Aw, I can do better than that. I know I can."

"You can if you think you can, Johnny. I'll be watching."

"Would you like to eat lunch with me in the cafeteria today?"

"I thought you always sat at the jock table."

"I can sit wherever I want."

"Like a six-hundred pound gorilla."

"Huh?"

"You know. The old joke about 'where does a six-hundred pound gorilla sit?' ... Anywhere it wants to."

"Oh, yeah," Johnny chuckled, "well, how about it?"

"Sure. I'll meet you in there. Better go to class. See you later."

"See y'at noon."

Christi ran into Kelly on the way to the cafeteria.

"I heard you're meeting Johnny Chambers for lunch."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"It doesn't matter, I heard it so many times. When did all this happen?"

"Nothing happened. We just talked after English, and we're going to eat lunch together. It's no big deal."

"Maybe not to you."

By Thursday afternoon, Christi was wearing Johnny's jacket ("only as a token of our friendship, Johnny, 'cause I don't want to go steady") and cheering him on at the "B-team" game. His coach wondered about the spectacular improvement in an already outstanding player. Too bad the season was over. Johnny Chambers almost single-handedly shut down the entire Greenville offense. The celebration at Tolbert's Ice Cream Parlor was loud, but ended quickly. It was a school night.

Christi got home after ten o'clock wearing the hero's jacket, and was finishing her homework when she remembered the 'door prize' contest. She hadn't thought of anything and now her brain was tired from unscrambling 'sentence fragments' and 'run-on sentences,' differentiating subordinate from independent clauses. Suddenly, she brightened. *Thank you, Jesus!* She found a piece of red construction paper, some old Christmas cards, scissors and glue.

\* \* \*

"You may work quietly on your term papers while I look through these designs," Miss Fennstammacher announced through lips more tightly checked than usual. "If you find it necessary to speak to your neighbor, please be considerate of those who are working independently."



Johnny immediately turned to Christi to hear more about her impressions of the game. She frowned and shook her head. Disappointed, he talked to a fellow jock. Christi opened Huckleberry Finn and pretended to read. She was watching Miss Fennstemmacher.

There were only three designs turned in on construction paper, one blue, one green and Christi's red one. These had been shuffled to the bottom of the stack, Christi's last. Slowly, Miss Fennstemmacher made her way through the pieces of notebook paper, frowning. She sorted the efforts into two stacks, one receiving frowns, the other getting frowns plus pursed lips and an occasional glare over her glasses at the artist who had failed so miserably.

As the original pile diminished into two smaller ones, the glares increased in frequency and duration. Miss Fennstemmacher's acorn eyes got smaller and darker. At last she came to Christi's. She picked it up in her left hand and held it at arm's length. She stared at it. Her tight mouth quivered slightly at the corners. Her nostrils flared almost imperceptibly.

The shoulders of her brown dress began to move in jerky rhythm with the air coming from her nostrils in short, audible puffs. Her bullfrog throat swelled up with each puff, the puffs coming louder and faster like a locomotive leaving the depot.

Finally, a squeak came with each bit of air and her lips separated. Christi noticed her teeth for the first time. Miss Fennstemmacher opened her mouth wide and leaned back in her chair. The squeaks became guttural bellows and her whole body moved with them. Miss Fennstemmacher was laughing. Ugly, old Miss Fennstemmacher was actually laughing.

\* \* \*

At the Christmas open house, Principal Bullock himself guided the distinguished guest around the school, stopping at the end of the tour in front of Miss Fennstemmacher's door where Christi's winning design was displayed: a large Santa Claus and his mate sitting in front of a glowing hearth, around them a half-dozen baby Santa's, and above it all the greeting

*'Merry Christmas from Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus and all the Subordinate Clauses.'*

"We're quite proud of your daughter, Justice Fennstemmacher. She has provided us with a very creative class project. She's a real inspiration as a teacher."

"I had hoped that she might become a lawyer," the justice replied quietly, glancing back and forth from the principal to the daughter who had never quite measured up to his expectations. "I always thought she was bright enough."

"No doubt. No doubt, Your Honor, but there are other considerations. An inspirational teacher can provide the turning point in a young person's life. A lawyer is seldom able to match that kind of accomplishment. It's fortunate that your daughter has chosen this profession and fortunate, indeed, for Vicksburg that she accepted a position here. We're mighty proud. Mighty proud."

Justice Fennstemmacher gazed at the ceiling and remembered old Mrs. Jensen, Lord rest her soul, who had taught his tenth-grade English class and encouraged him to participate in the debate club that she sponsored. Her influence had, indeed, started him on the long satisfying road to the Mississippi Supreme Court. He looked directly at his daughter for the first time in years, and jovially asked, "Is there an ice cream parlor around here, Alexandra, my dear? I believe this calls for a celebration."

\* \* \*

Miss Fennstemmacher walked briskly into the noisy classroom. Smiling.

She sat down at her desk and looked at her thirty-two students. Smiling.

"Wonder what got into her," Johnny whispered across the aisle to Christi. "Get it? 'What got into her?'"

Christi gave him her drop-dead stare and pretended not to understand his vulgar implication. She thought about *the July 25<sup>th</sup> incident*, and pictured Johnny Chambers with Mrs. Jander.

"Good morning, class. As you well know, we won the prize for the best Christmas door in the novelty division, thanks to

Christi's idea and the artistic contributions of most of the class. I think we owe ourselves a round of applause." Smiling.

Enthusiastic applause.

"For our prize, in addition to the blue ribbon that you see hanging on the bulletin board this morning, Mr. Bullock will give our class a little party in the teachers' lounge when we come back from Christmas vacation." Smiling.

Whoops, hollers, and more applause.

"In addition, I am very pleased to report that your parents scored perfect attendance for our homeroom at the open house last night. As their reward, I am going to give you an additional week for the completion of your term paper, so that you might recover fully from your vacations before you have to begin the final draft. This should give you plenty of time to do the work yourselves without asking for parental assistance." Still smiling.

More applause, whoops and whistles.

"And because it is the last day before Christmas vacation and I am so genuinely pleased with this class, we will have our own little celebration today."

On cue, one of the cafeteria workers rolled in a cart with two large bundt cakes and three dozen cartons of milk.

"I baked two cinnamon swirl cakes last night so that we could have a party today instead of the 'pop test' that the more cynical of you might have anticipated." Smiling.

Whoops and hollers and whistles and applause, during which Johnny leaned over toward Christi and warned, "She probably put arsenic in them!" and Christi curtly replied, "Shut up! Can't you see she's trying to be nice?"

"Now, if you will all please stand for the Pledge of Allegiance..." Smiling.

That afternoon Christi tried to avoid Johnny by ducking into the girls' bathroom instead of going straight to her locker. *That guy is getting to be a regular pain in the something-or-other. He is so juvenile with his dumb jokes. This whole thing was a totally stupid idea. If I want Grover Jones, I should go after Grover Jones. There must be some way to get to know him. I should give Johnny his jacket back. I could do it right now. The jerk is probably still hanging around my locker, waiting.*

Kelly came running into the bathroom. "Thank God I found you! You'll never guess who's been standing out by the side door for the past five minutes!"

"Grover Jones?"

"Yes! The one and only Grover Jones!"

"Oh, my God! How do I look?"

"You look great, but that won't matter if he's already gone!"

"Do you think he's waiting to see me?" Christi asked breathlessly.

"Of course. Who else? I saw the way he looked at you in the hall last week. Johnny Chambers is going to wet his britches when he has to sit on the bench behind Grover Jones next year. Come on! Hurry!"

The girls ran frantically down the hall, past Christi's locker, turned the corner and dashed for the side exit, inadvertently picking up Johnny Chambers on the way.

"Christi! Where are you going in such a rush? Wait! Christi!" Johnny called, running behind them.

At the end of the long hallway, Christi and Kelly slammed into the push bar on the big door together. It swung wide into the vestibule and crashed into the wall. Then they casually opened the outer door, and stepped slowly and demurely into the December afternoon sunshine.

Bigger than life, Grover Jones was walking toward them. He smiled in recognition. Christi's heart stopped. She tried to say his name, but the sound wouldn't come. Suddenly his face turned to stone, and he walked brusquely past them into the building.

"Christi, why were you running away from me?" Johnny whined.

Christi whirled around to face him.

"Because you make me sick!"

"What? But you're wearing my jacket."

"Not anymore!"

Christi dropped her books on the pavement and tore off the jacket.

"There!" she flung it at him. "Take your damn jacket! I hope it keeps you warm!"

She pulled open the huge outer door, paused a moment in the vestibule, then ran to the girls' bathroom, choking back the tears until she was safely locked in the last stall.

Kelly bent down slowly to pick up Christi's books and everything that had spilled out of her purse. Johnny stood by helplessly, watching her gather the lipstick, pens, change, junk.

"Why do you suppose she did that, Kelly?"

"I don't know. Maybe she's playing hard-to-get."

"Yeah, maybe," Johnny shrugged his shoulders and put on his jacket. "Girls are funny that way."

Grover Jones had run blindly down the hall to the opposite exit. He wanted to cry, but decided on anger instead. *Typical dumb girl, walking around in some jock's jacket that doesn't fit, smiling, all full of herself with her stupid boyfriend tagging along behind. I could smash his skull!* Grover looked around for a victim.

*What's wrong with me? Am I crazy? I saw this girl a week ago and haven't had a three-minute conversation with her yet, so I want to smash some guy's skull because she's wearing his jacket. I should never have come here. I should have stayed out in the county with the rest of the hicks where I belong. I could never have a girl like Christi Boudreaux.*

*My daddy's right. I'll never amount to anything. No, I'll never amount to anything. I never should have come to Vicksburg. These coaches are just filling my head with crazy, uppity notions. Feelings he couldn't define welled up in him and he wanted to be sick.*

\* \* \*

"Christi? Christi, are you in there?"

"Yeah," came a weak voice from the last cubicle.

"I've got your books and your purse."

"Thanks."

Kelly went to the sink, ran water on a paper towel, folded it and held it under the door.

"Here's a wet paper towel," she offered.

"Thanks," Christi replied feebly, reaching for it.

Kelly heard the commode flush. She waited and waited.

"Are you going to come out?"

"Unless I can figure some way to flush myself down the sewer."

"Aw, Christi, come on. It's not that bad, is it?"

"Yes."

"Listen. I'm really sorry."

"You didn't do anything."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

"Okay," Kelly replied, with compassion in her voice.

"Okay," echoed Christi's voice behind the closed door. "It's just that I'll never get a chance to see Grover and talk to him and find out who he is and let him find out who I am and if we might like each other and I don't understand why I feel like this about him when the honest truth is that I haven't even had a three-minute conversation with him, but it seems like I've known him forever, yet I don't know what he's thinking of or if he likes me at all, but when he looks at me I could just die-and-go-to-heaven and something tells me that he feels the same way, but how will I ever know? I mean, why would he smile like that, you did see him smile, didn't you?, and then just walk past me without stopping to talk or even say hello?"

"Maybe it was because Johnny was there," Kelly suggested.

"Don't be ridiculous! I wasn't paying any attention to Johnny. I didn't even realize he was there until he started whining about my running away, and that was after Grover went inside."

"Well, you were wearing Johnny's jacket."

"Kelly! He wouldn't have even noticed that, he walked by so fast. Besides, I don't care anything about that dumb old jacket."

"Grover couldn't know that."

"Sure he could."

"How?"

"He could ask me."

"Okay, here we go into the Twilight Zone. Christi, come out of there and listen to me."

Christi slid the latch over and the door creaked open.

"Look at yourself in the mirror."

"I don't need to look!"

"I said 'Look!'"

Christi's blood-shot eyes gazed back at her.

"Now, you can either go around looking like that and making yourself miserable or you can put all this Grover Jones nonsense in perspective. You're a pretty girl when your face isn't all twisted up from crying. Let him see how pretty and nice and smart you are when you can, but don't go crazy trying to make it happen. Why don't you just relax and let our friend Fate take care of this?"

"You know I don't believe in Fate!" Christi whimpered, sounding as if she would start crying all over again.

Kelly shook her head, and patted Christi on the cheek. "Who else but Fate would have started a silly thing like this?"

\* \* \*

Indefinable nightmares tormented the young minds and, restless in the morning, their fated souls instinctively sought solace in nature. Alone, Christi Boudreaux and Grover Jones walked their individual aimless paths to the ridge above the Mississippi, sometimes less than a block apart, blinded by the heavy December fog that obliterated the landscape.

Dense gray-brown mountains of clouds rushed into each other, then backed away slowly in apology, only to meld again like herds of amorphous elephants, drunk on loco weed, confused, twisting, turning in slow motion, sinking and rising with the fog that separated them from the roily renegade river. The sun appeared only occasionally, as a full moon will sometimes trespass feebly into the late morning, a timid child in the corner waiting futilely to be noticed.

### PART III

#### THE CLASS OF '64

##### Chapter 7

October 7, 1963

Grover Jones found his precious Christi talking with Kelly McCain and senior class president Cameron Coulter on the Confederate Street side of the school. His heart skipped a beat as he noticed a tall, red-headed stranger with them. *The guy better not be making a move on Christi.* Grover approached the group in a rush.

"Christi, I've been waiting at your locker."

"Sorry, Grover. We got to talking."

"That's all right. Hey, did you see that Corvette parked in front of my truck?"

"Yeah. That's what we were talking about. It belongs to Larry Llewellyn here. Larry, this is my boyfriend Grover Jones."

Grover felt relieved to be called "boyfriend" by Christi. It was still hard for him to believe his good fortune. *It looks like Cameron Coulter might be in for some trouble, though. The red-head guy with the fancy car seems to be totally smitten with Kelly, and she's being a little too flirtatious. Probably doing it to make Cameron jealous. Not a good idea.*

"Related to the George Llewellyn who just bought out all the Dalton Department Stores in Mississippi?" Grover asked.

"Guilty," Larry confessed. "That's my dad. Anyway, I'm pleased to meet you, Grover," the newcomer said sincerely. Looking up at Grover's wide face, Larry asked, "Am I correct in assuming you're the largest high school football player in Mississippi?"

"Biggest white one," Grover shrugged. "Don't know about the niggers."

"Grover made All-State as a junior," Christi beamed. "He actually lives out in the county and is supposed to go to Jett, but he's such a great player, we got him to come to town."

"You play ball, Larry?" Grover asked.



"I did in New Orleans, at a small prep school. I'd be afraid to try it in Mississippi, though. You all take your football too seriously for me."

"It can get you off the farm, Larry. That's serious," Grover confessed. "Yep. That is serious."

"Hmmm," Larry acknowledged with a nod. "Well, I'd better get moving. I need to get a locker assignment before class. It was nice to meet all of you. I'll see you after school, Kelly."

The newest Vicksburg High School senior walked quickly through the double doors, followed more slowly by Grover and Christi. They left Cameron Coulter standing on the sidewalk, staring wordlessly at Kelly McCain.

"Christi, you ought to tell Kelly not to keep trying to make Cameron jealous," Grover suggested quietly. He glanced back over his shoulder as if he could still see the pair on the sidewalk. "It's not going to help the situation any," he added wisely.

Christi shrugged and shook her head. "Have you ever tried to tell Kelly anything?"

\* \* \*

Grover Jones watched from a second floor window of the high school as the sleek, black Corvette eased into the parking space in front of his forty-nine Chevy pick-up. He was surprised to see Cameron Coulter get out of the passenger side, laughing and talking with the new red-head kid. Grover was not the only student to notice and to conclude that the transferee with the fancy car must be all right since he was a friend of Cameron.

Grover grinned and stepped aside to his easel when a kid yelled, "Hey, Big Guy! Move over! You're blocking the light!" At nearly six-feet-six, two hundred seventy-five pounds, Grover did block a lot of light, but he never intentionally threw his weight around, except on the football field. He nodded at the runt who hadn't even said 'please.'

Lunch period was not quite over and Grover already had his materials assembled for class. The fifty minutes in art seemed to go by so fast that he would arrive early, even though it cut

into his time with Christi. His dark heavy brows knitted together above cow-brown eyes as his huge hands sorted the tiny brushes. Then his wide face relaxed into a gentle smile as he looked at the promising beginnings of a still life on the easel. If it turned out as well as his art teacher predicted, he would give it to Christi for Christmas, matted and framed if he could come up with the money. Even her parents might like it.

Clem and Helène Boudreaux had not been enthusiastic about Christi's choice of boyfriends, and Grover didn't feel welcome at their house. After having dinner there twice, Grover had told Christi not to push it anymore. He wouldn't come in the house after that, but would always call to be sure Christi was ready to go, so that his visits with her father at the front door never lasted more than a minute.

Then on the third Saturday in September, two weeks ago, when he went to pick her up, thinking she was ready, he stood on the front porch waiting through four rings of the door chimes. His big heart was pounding with worry that Christi's father had decided she couldn't date him anymore. Mentally, he prepared for a verbal confrontation with Clem Boudreaux, but Christi herself opened the door, wearing a filmy yellow silk gown.

"Christi!" Grover had gasped. "You shouldn't go to the door in something like that! Where are your folks?" Grover's eyes darted everywhere but at Christi.

"They're in Jackson for a Chamber of Commerce dinner. With speeches!" Christi laughed as she took Grover's damp hands and led him into the house. "Til midnight!"

"Oh, God!"

"Don't you remember what day this is?"

"Well, sure. Nine months from the day we officially met. I even brought you a present."

Grover took the small box from his pocket and handed it to Christi. He lowered his eyes.

"It's not much, but I thought they might be pretty on you."

Christi opened the package and found two matching mother-of-pearl barrettes.

"Oh, Grover! They're lovely!"

"Do you really like them? Tell me the truth."

"Don't be silly! They're beautiful! I love them!" Christi swept part of her long dark hair up on one side and clasped it with a barrette. As she reached up to the other side, her arm brushed across her breast and a dark nipple stood erect against the pale yellow silk.

"There," she said, the barrettes in place, "how do you like them?"

"The bar-rettes? Or the bar-reasts?"

Christi giggled and crossed her arms over her chest.

"The barrettes," she teased. "I believe we discussed the breasts previously."

"The barrettes really do look pretty in your hair, Christi. Go look in the mirror."

"I have a big mirror in my room. Come on upstairs with me."

"Do you think we should?"

"Look in my mirror? Sure. No one's here and I have an anniversary gift for you."

"Where is it?"

"Come on upstairs. I'll show you."

Christi took his hand and led him up the spiral staircase and across the landing to her large, exquisitely decorated bedroom. Late afternoon sun filtering through white lace curtains cast a golden glow on her wallpaper's yellow roses. White lace and yellow roses were everywhere – at the windows, on the bed, at the dressing table.

"This is a beautiful room, Christi," Grover whispered. "Prettier than I ever dreamed."

"I'm glad you like it. Now stand here at the mirror with me and look at my new barrettes. Aren't they lovely?"

Grover stood beside Christi in front of the mirror and laughed, "When we live together, Christi, we'll have to hang the mirrors higher. My head's cut off!"

"I guess we'd better get wider ones too. No, on second thought, I might look better with half my rear cut off."

"I love your little rear! Don't change it a bit." He grabbed her ample bottom and turned her toward him. "Don't ever change anything!"

"Thank you for the barrettes. And for always making me feel so special."

"You are special, Christi. Everybody knows that. I'm just lucky you want to be with me."

"Well, then, we're both lucky. Now, give me a kiss and you'll get your present."

Grover lifted her off the floor as they kissed, then set her down gently.

"I can't take too much more of that without getting carried away. Better get the present now."

Christi twirled around lightly, the gown billowing in a yellow cloud around her.

"I'm it! Your present! If you still want me."

"You? Here? Now?"

"Why not? Remember, last week it almost happened in the truck. Wouldn't it be better here?" Christi walked over to the bed and pulled back the yellow, lace-trimmed coverlet. She twirled again and smiled at Grover, "Now? In a place we will always remember?"

Grover stared at the yellow roses forming on the easel, and remembered. He knew he would always remember.

Chapter 8  
October 22, 1963

Hurricane Nora came to life as a small tropical depression sometime after dawn on Tuesday, the twenty-second of October. One of many storms that season to be spawned near the Tropic of Cancer, Nora was first charted at approximately twenty-four degrees north latitude, ninety degrees west longitude, halfway between Key West and the thinly-populated northern coast of Mexico, over three hundred miles due south of New Orleans.

For twenty-four hours, she churned an erratic path through the Gulf, picking up speed and velocity as she struggled to focus on a victim coast. Inhabitants of all the port cities from Ft. Myers, Florida, to Corpus Christi, Texas, went about their business as usual, paying casual attention to the United States Weather Service reports that were being broadcast with the hourly news.

On Wednesday, as Nora headed northerly at about twenty miles an hour, a heady mix of excitement and apprehension quickened the pace of the typically languorous coastal population. Housewives from New Orleans to Biloxi to Panama City added bottled water and extra batteries to their grocery lists, while their husbands made sure they had enough wide masking tape to cover their storefront windows and enough gas in the cars for an emergency evacuation.

At the Grand Cayman Yacht Club, the bartender plotted Nora's course with toothpicks stuck through his new gulf chart into the pockmarked corkboard wall. This method of tracking hurricanes and diverting them from his home island had worked for twenty-two years and Stringer wasn't about to change his ritual now.

"One more?" he asked the tall, weathered American who was pondering Stringer's wooden line advancing upon the southern United States.

"No, thanks, Stringer. Better get going."

"Pulling out, are you?"

"Not yet. Waiting to see what Miss Nora will do," he replied, putting an American ten-dollar bill down on the bar.

"I don't have to be in New Orleans until the first. Plenty of time to move after landfall."

"Right you are, Cap'n. Plenty of time."

Stringer nodded, picked up the money, and wiped the spotless bar with a clean cloth.

"I hear you got a new owner," the bartender added, as an apparent afterthought.

Rundy Pryor stopped and turned back to Stringer.

"New owner?"

"Yeh," Stringer replied absently, wiping the bar again.

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Around."

"Thanks," the captain acknowledged, putting an American hundred-dollar bill on the bar. "Maybe you'll hear something more by tomorrow."

"Maybe," Stringer winked. "Walls talk around here," he grinned, jerking his head toward the chart.

Pryor put on his sunglasses and pulled down the brim of his cap, shielding his light blue eyes from the late morning glare off aquamarine seas as he strolled to the end of Pier Three where *La Muestra* lay waiting.

The impressive, steel-hulled *Chris Craft*, the flagship of an anonymous fleet, had been in his sole care since Arnie had bought and registered her in the Caymans only two years ago, right after the hurricane season of nineteen-sixty-one.

Occasionally her owner had been aboard or had made her available to some of his clients, but usually Pryor was alone at sea with only his illicit cargo and a girl he might pick up along the way — preferably a black-skinned Bahamian or a nubile Jamaican — grateful to be freed from her island prison.

The captain's pace quickened as he remembered the young beauty who would be lazing in the master stateroom's wall-to-wall bed. He had met her in Cartagena last week on his usual Colombian layover. She had said her name was Tawanya, that she was a nineteen-year-old American model, and that her boyfriend had put her off his sailboat at Aruba after a fight.

The girl's story was plausible enough, which made the captain less likely to believe it. But what did it matter? She

was probably at least fifteen, if not twenty-five, and she knew her way around a boat. He could almost imagine keeping this one. Arnie would never have to know.

But now Arnie might not be the owner. Pryor frowned and wondered what kind of trouble had precipitated the change, but in his fifty-one years, he had learned to take what comes and not ask too many questions. For his part, he had always done a good job, skimmed off a lot less than most men in his position would have done, and had been very discreet. None of the girls he had traveled with along the way were ever seen with him in port.

Pryor's eyes caressed the large yet sleek white ship as he automatically checked the blue water line running her length. *At least the homebound stash is lighter than all those damn guns going south, but no matter. The storm will have passed.*

He padded silently across the teak deck, dropping his cap and glasses on the pilot's seat as he went below, the sound of his movements muffled by the generator's quiet hum. The deep blues and greens of the salon and galley soothed his eyes as he fixed himself a gin and tonic.

A shadow emerged from the stateroom door.

"Rundy?"

Tawanya stood framed in the doorway, tall, supple, her hair, eyes and skin all the same shade of warm, soft, milk chocolate. She was wearing nothing but the white coral necklace he had left out on the dressing table. He smiled at her. She parted her lips to let her tongue trace their contour.

Pryor finished his drink and put the glass on the counter. This girl could arouse him with a look. There was something different about her. Maybe he would keep her awhile. He reached down and touched the front of his white cotton ducks. Tawanya placed her soft hand over his.

"Let me," she whispered, pressing with one hand as her gentle fingers found the drawstring. "You're a magnificent man, Rundy Pryor," she caressed with her eyes and fingers, moistening her lips as she slowly knelt before him.

He stood transfixed, lost in the rhythm of her movements, more soothing at first than the gentle rocking of a sailboat at anchor, then undulating as a great yacht crests the swells in a

heavy sea, finally as powerful and insistent as the pounding of the ocean's surf against a rocky cliff, until at last he exploded, and the sea was calm once more.

Spent and limp, Pryor leaned back against the counter and stared at the white coral necklace.

\* \* \*

In New Orleans, a seventeen-year-old mulatto boy slipped the *Charleston Lady's* bowline off its deck cleat and dropped to the dock below. The big Pacemaker glided from its mooring laterally, its twin screws counter-rotating to move the yacht crab-style away from the pilings before reversing to ease out into the marina.

*Picky, picky, picky*, Jody French thought, as the *Lady's* owner himself guided her toward the harbor and finally upriver. The Crescent City Yachting Club and Marina would be almost empty by Wednesday afternoon, most of its members opting to move their expensive boats farther inland under the threat of Hurricane Nora.

Jody's eyes followed the progress of the beautiful white Pacemaker until it disappeared around the bend, leaving barely a trace of wake in the turgid brown water. Then he looked around for something else to do. It was frustrating to the young mulatto that he always wanted more work, but no one would trust him with anything important.

The sky darkened and Jody's heart beat faster. *If the hurricane hits full force, I'll be a hero*, he thought to himself, trying to imagine what he might do. He caught a Styrofoam cup that was being kicked along by the wind and dropped it into the trash barrel beside the diesel pump as a dark blue sedan drove into the guest parking area. Jody trotted over to open the driver's door.

"Thanks, Boy," the man said flatly.

"May I help you? My name's Jody."

"Okay, who's in charge here?"

"Mr. Watson, sir, but he's ferrying a boat upriver right now. Is there something I can do?"



"Maybe you can. I'm thinking about moving my big fishing boat up here from Destin, Florida. Just wondering about security around your marina."

"This one's as secure as any in N'Orleans. We lock those gates at night and only members have a key."

"How about getting in by water?"

"Can't lock up the whole harbor, sir. That's the only way to get in at night. By boat. 'Course, we have a night watchman too. He'd hear a boat coming in."

"Well, good."

"What d'ya fish, sir?"

"Huh?"

"What d'ya fish?"

"What do you mean?"

"What kind of fish are you after? Marlin? Tuna?"

"Yeah. Tuna."

Jody decided to ask a stupid question to see if he could figure out what this guy was trying to do.

"Would you be wanting an open slip, sir, or a covered one, or a private boathouse?"

"Oh, a regular slip would be fine. One like that'd be nice," the older man said, pointing to the pier of low, covered slips where a few day cruisers bobbed. "Well, thanks, Boy, you've been very helpful. Tell Mr. Watson I may be back later because of you."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. And may I tell him your name?"

"Burns. Bill Burns."

The wind picked up as he slammed the car door.

Jody watched Mr. "Bill Burns" drive away and then mused aloud. "'My big fishing boat,' the guy brags. In a day-cruiser berth?" He shook his head. "*Fishing for tuna without a tower? Does he think I'm an idiot?*" Jody chuckled to himself, wondering what the real story was, knowing that if he kept his eyes open, he would probably figure it out, eventually.

\* \* \*

*Hope I'm not making a big mistake here, Alexandra Fennstammacher thought as she watched the ancient Chevy*

pick-up truck back into her driveway to within a few feet of the old quarters' front door. The huge boy she had met just yesterday got out from behind the wheel. Young Cameron Coulter stepped from the other side. In a few minutes they had unloaded a double-bed frame, mattress and box springs, a small dresser, a rickety desk and chair, and a dozen odd liquor boxes of stuff.

*Better not be alcohol in there*, she stiffened at the thought, peering harder at her overgrown new tenant, who supposedly would pay for his "keep" by doing odd jobs around the place and tending to some long-neglected maintenance. In all her years of teaching, not a single coach had ever even dared ask her to mark up a grade for one of the dumb jocks. Now, here, she had one, a big one at that, needing a roof over his head. Miss Fennstammacher was still surprised she had agreed to the arrangement for one Grover Jones. *That Cameron Coulter is a persuasive young man.*

The old spinster sniffed the air through the musty screen and frowned. *Here it is Thursday already. Wish that hurricane would get on with it. Unstable air isn't good for anybody.* She closed the window with a thwack.

\* \* \*

At Tolbert's Ice Cream Parlor, Kelly McCain fretted about the weather over her sundae. She had never been on a yacht before, and Larry Llewellyn's invitation to fly to New Orleans with his family and cruise up the Mississippi to Vicksburg on their new boat was almost more than she could stand. At first, Kelly was amazed that her mother agreed to let her go, since she had only been out with the tall, red-headed Larry a couple of times. She suspected that her mother was reacting more to the Llewellyn family money than to Larry himself. Kelly decided not to think about that. If nothing else, she could have a good time with Larry, and maybe even make Cameron jealous at the same time.

"But Larry, what if the weather's too bad and your boat doesn't get to New Orleans by the first?"

"You worry too much, Kelly. The boat's especially fast, and there's plenty of time left. I didn't realize you were looking forward to the trip that much."

Kelly glanced down at her ice cream. She realized she wasn't being very coy about this trip. She didn't want Larry to get the wrong impression.

"I guess I'm much more concerned about the Homecoming Queen election that day. I want to be here to vote for Christi," Kelly said.

"We'll be here for that," Larry assured her. "Now, finish up your sundae and let's get going. I promised Grover that we'd stop by to help him get settled. It's certainly nice of old Miss Fennstammacher to let him move into her quarters."

"Wait till you see the place before you decide how nice she is. The house is a mansion, but run-down. You wouldn't put your dog in the quarters."

"Still, it's a place to live, so he doesn't have to drive that dilapidated truck so far every day. I think it's nice of her."

"Fine," Kelly agreed flatly, "but it's probably the only nice thing the witch ever did."

\* \* \*

Hurricane Nora, at her best, spiraled winds of a hundred-eighty miles per hour around her calm eye, with torrential rains extending hundreds of miles beyond. Moving sporadically through the Gulf for three days, she efficiently completed her job of drawing excess heat from the water into the cool upper atmosphere, venting her fury without a direct assault on the coastal cities.

Nora sent her heavy, moisture-laden clouds up the Mississippi River valley past Memphis, drenching Vicksburg with a furious Friday-afternoon thunderstorm that continued through the night, turning the football field into a muddy battleground, wrenching the last leaves from red-oak trees and plastering them together in sodden puddles upon the gummy black soil, quenching the Indian Summer's thirst and more as the storm faded into a gray drizzle that spread across the South and lasted the dismal weekend, while four-day-old

Nora herself was spinning harmlessly toward an uncharted ocean grave.

\* \* \*

Rundy Pryor was Stringer's only customer at ten-thirty on Sunday morning.

"You know we don't open till eleven, Cap'n."

"Then this'll have to be on the house. Gin and tonic."

"Bad night, Cap'n?"

"A good night. Bad morning."

"Pulling out today?"

"No rush. I'll be right here until sometime tomorrow."

"Storm's no problem now," Stringer volunteered, inclining his head toward the toothpick spiral that was Nora's path.

"We all hear the same weather reports."

Stringer shrugged his shoulders and continued polishing wine glasses, sliding them into the overhead wooden rack.

Pryor stared out the window at *La Muestra*. When he set his empty glass on the polished mahogany bar, Stringer replaced it with a fresh one.

"No more after this," Pryor mumbled, putting a ten on the bar. Stringer shrugged again and began filling the nut dishes.

"Hear anything new?"

Stringer nodded.

"Well?"

"You're in trouble, Cap'n, if you show up in New Orleans with a mulatto girl you picked up in Columbia."

Pryor stood and reached into his front pocket. He pulled out an American hundred-dollar bill and put it on the ten.

"Thanks," he nodded, turning to leave.

"Cap'n?"

"Yeah, Stringer?"

"Real trouble."

The rugged seaman looked straight through the bartender, fishing another hundred-dollar bill from the same pocket and putting it on the bar.

"Don't mention it, Stringer. And, don't worry about it," Pryor scoffed as he made his way to the door.

“Me? I don’t worry ‘bout nothin,’ Cap’n Pryor,” Stringer shrugged, popping a salted peanut into his mouth. “No, sir. I don’t worry ‘bout nothin.”

Business at the Grand Cayman Yacht Club picked up by eleven-thirty and it was almost one o’clock before Stringer noticed that *La Muestra* had slipped quietly from her berth, headed for the open sea.

Chapter 9  
October 29, 1963

George Llewellyn bore no resemblance to his son at the moment. Both of the Llewellyn men typically appeared relaxed and quietly in control, their brown eyes never giving a hint of emotion. This afternoon, the man known as "PapaLew" to family, friends, and foes, was clearly furious. He clenched his teeth, took shallow breaths, and clutched the telephone mouthpiece closer to his pale lips. Beads of perspiration glistened on his balding head. His slight frame hunched forward, as if he were ready to pounce on his prey.

"God damn it! I know she got on in Columbia! I want to know where she is now! Exactly where she is! Don't give me that patronizing 'now-now-PapaLew' shit! I'm sick to death of your fucking excuses! This won't happen again, you sonofabitch! God damn it, this won't happen again!"

\* \* \*

"Why don't you take the afternoon off, Jody? Looks like we'll be busy this weekend when the boats start coming back in, so take a break now."

"Thanks, Mr. Watson, but I'm okay. Maybe I could help ferry some this afternoon."

"I said, beat it, Jody. Go take in a movie. Come back in the morning."

"But tomorrow's Wednesday, my regular day off."

"Then I'll see you Thursday," he added absently, glancing at the wall clock above the water cooler. "Get moving."

The brown-skinned teen-ager picked up his duffel bag of extra clothes and headed for his bike. He was a quarter mile from the yacht club when he remembered the tennis shoes he had left drying on the workshop radiator. Making a U-turn, he sped back toward the marina, gliding through its gates unnoticed, leaning his bike against the chain link fence while he ran in to get his only other pair of decent shoes.

A dark blue sedan drove into the guest parking area and Jody noticed that Mr. Watson waved the curious visitor — the

purported “Bill Burns” – around to the space beside his own car on the far side of the clubhouse. Jody frowned and took a closer look before moving his bike. No one saw him leave that second time.

\* \* \*

“You’re the best, Tawanya. I don’t know what it is about you, but you’re the best.”

The young girl lounging on a towel across the bow cushions stretched and rolled luxuriously onto her back, exposing the front of her rich full body to the afternoon sunlight. She smiled and her teeth glistened like the white coral necklace she wore.

“No. You’re the best, Rundy Pryor,” she purred. “This has been the best two weeks of my life.”

“Hasn’t been two weeks yet.”

“What day is this?”

“Tuesday, on this side of the globe. Come here. You’re too far away from me.”

\* \* \*

“God damn it! Get someone to chart a ship’s course from the Caymans to N’Orleans. Send a plane out over the Gulf on that heading. Get a reading on that fucking boat! Call the Senator. Send a Coast Guard cutter to board her.”

PapaLew wiped the perspiration from his brow as he listened intently.

“Fuck! I don’t give a rat’s ass if she’s loaded!”

He sighed heavily into the phone.

“God damn it! That much? Shit! You’ve goddamn tied my fucking hands!”

With his left hand, PapaLew rubbed his eyes as he went on quietly, “All right, all right then, forget the plane. Fuck the Senator. Fuck the Coast Guard. But if anything happens to that girl,…”

\* \* \*

Christi sat on Kelly's bed, watching her pull clothes from her closet.

"Maybe you're right," Kelly nodded. "I'm probably making this whole thing into too big a deal. It's just that I've never been on a yacht before. I don't want to look stupid."

"You could never look stupid, Kelly, but wear the navy blue pants suit," Christi insisted. "Navy blue is nautical and it won't show dirt."

"It's nice that you're always so sure about what to wear," Kelly sighed. "Thanks."

"Now you promise you're going to be there to vote for me in the run-off, right?"

"Of course. Don't you think I'd do just about anything to keep Carol Jean Tolbert from being Homecoming Queen? She's always trying to get her claws into Cameron. She makes me sick," Kelly spit out the words.

"I really want to win," Christi whispered. "Wouldn't it be perfect? Grover just got elected captain of the football team, so he'd be my escort even if we weren't going steady."

Hearing Christi recount the Homecoming protocol, Kelly realized with sudden clarity that the runner-up, the "loser," the Senior Maid, would have to be escorted by the Senior Class President. Cameron Coulter. She felt ill.

"You'll win, Christi," her young friend reassured her. "Now, relax. It will be all over by three o'clock on Friday. I only wish I could be there to hear the announcement."

Christi laughed, "Sure, you'd rather be at school than on a yacht. Don't start lying to me now!"

\* \* \*

"Tawanya! Good, you're awake. Come watch the sunrise with me. It promises to be almost as lovely as you are.... Wait. Where's your coral necklace?... Sure, go get it, and take time to put on your robe....

"There now. That's much better. Come on up here with me.... Watch your step. Don't trip on the robe.... No, silly girl. Don't take it off. Wrap it around you. It's chilly up here.



The end of October, you know. You could catch your death....”

Tawanya shivered momentarily in the early morning sea breeze and leaned her back against the captain’s chest for warmth. He encircled her from behind, his powerful arms pulling her body closer to him.

The yacht cruised effortlessly through the rolling swells as the couple swayed together gently on the bridge. They watched silently, mesmerized as the pinkness of a perfect dawn broke through the heavy cumulous clouds above the horizon, casting an iridescent glow on the ship’s bow. Moments later, the quiet pearlized pink of the sky deepened to a more and more brilliant rose as the sun ascended above the clouds and recklessly flung its most brilliant color before them - an astonishing red that irradiated the dazzling sea with a billion sparkles of effervescent light.

“The promise of a new day,” Tawanya whispered, letting her head fall back to rest on his shoulder.

Rundy Pryor felt himself becoming aroused. He let his hands drift down from Tawanya’s stomach to the opening in her robe.

*Now, touch me,* he thought, and in that instant he realized that Tawanya’s hand was already there. Her fingers explored him with curiosity and excitement, as if she had never felt a man before.

*She seems so innocent,* he frowned. *If I hadn’t had her myself, I’d swear she was a virgin.*

As her other hand joined in the caress, it became stronger, more insistent. He thrust himself harder into her hands against the top of her buttocks and she responded with an equal force, pushing her shoulders back into his chest and arching her body upwards.

His left hand massaged her in rhythm with his own pleasure, and he let his right hand trace a moist path up her soft brown body, pressing and releasing, pressing and releasing, finally stopping only when he felt her flood with satisfaction. She sighed and rested her head easily against his shoulder while her hands behind her continued their insistent stroking of him.

"Bend over," he whispered, lifting the back of her robe.

Pryor entered her from behind, immediately came to a raging climax inside her, then jerked her upright and crushed her body back against him.

Encircling her so tightly with his left arm that she couldn't move, he reached over to the boat's console and grabbed his fish knife. With one, swift, practiced stroke, he sliced the girl's neck from left to right, severing artery and windpipe in a fraction of a second. There was no sound but a gush of air and a gurgle of blood as she slumped lifeless in front of him.

The terrycloth robe absorbed most of the mess. He bent down, unfastened the white coral necklace, and dropped it into last night's glass of gin to prevent the blood from drying on it. Then he tied the red-tinged robe tightly around Tawanya's limp body and picked her up. Being careful to support her bobbing head as he crossed the deck, Pryor dropped his ruined cargo off the stern.

The few splotches of blood on the deck wiped off easily with a damp cloth. Pryor straightened from his task and noticed the sunlight sparkling on the glass of gin and coral. He sighed, picked up the glass with the necklace in it, and carried it to the fantail. As the boat cruised indifferently on autopilot, Pryor stood staring at the rosy froth in its wake.

"It's a shame to treat you like all the rest of them, Tawanya," he said aloud, tossing the beautiful strand of white coral into her uncharted ocean grave.

"You really were the best."

Pryor descended through the salon to the galley sink and washed the smell of her juice from his left hand and the stain of her blood from his right. Then he poured himself a bowl of corn flakes and sat down to breakfast.

\* \* \*

"God damn it! This is Thursday afternoon! It's been five fucking days!"

George Llewellyn took a breath and tried to calm down in response to the placating voice of his man in New Orleans, but

there was no real point in trying to be civil. Instead, he tightened his grip on the telephone and continued his tirade.

"It better be in and she better be on it, or there'll be hell to pay.... No, leave it alone. I'll be down there myself tomorrow.... Damn right, I'll be there by noon.... No. We'll use Arnie's old captain for now. Let him run us up to Vicksburg - get to know him. I doubt if he's loyal to anyone but himself. You know the type.... No, God damn it! Stay away from there. The captain has orders to stay on the boat overnight and that'll have to be good enough. We don't want to draw any attention to it... "

\* \* \*

"Afternoon, Cap'n! Welcome to N'Orleans!... Jody, catch that line! Give the Cap'n a hand there!... Good trip, Cap'n? Ole Nora gave us all a little extra work here, but no matter. Put the big ones upriver. Where'd you lay over?"

The weathered man glared at his interrogator from the fantail, then vaulted nimbly over the rail to the gas dock below.

"You sure are running your mouth a lot today, Watson. Something wrong, or did you just miss me?" the captain asked, without a hint of playfulness in his cool blue eyes.

"Just trying to make conversation, Rundy. Sorry," the fat man mumbled.

"Have your boy fuel her up and bring me some oil for that port engine."

"Jody, you heard the Cap'n. Fuel her up and check the port engine."

"I said 'bring me some oil!'" Pryor growled. "I didn't say check it. Nobody goes below, Watson. You got that? D'ya hear that, Boy? Nobody steps foot inside this boat."

"Yessir, Cap'n," Jody nodded, meeting the man's stare.

Watson jerked his head toward the office indicating the captain should follow him. When they were out of earshot of the mulatto boy, Watson turned to face Pryor and whispered, "Arnie lost the boat. You got a new owner."

"You're always boring me with old news, Watson. Tell me something I don't know."

"Arnie's plenty sore about it."

"Think I wouldn't know that?"

"Well, Arnie don't take shit like that sittin' down."

"Never has before."

"Damn it, Pryor, I'm trying to tell you something."

"So, tell me, Mouth, what's he gonna do about it?"

"Shit, Rundy, I don't know. Just cover your stern. These boys play for keeps."

"So do I, Watson. Don't lose any sleep over it."

"Say, that reminds me. Some guy called. Said he works for your new boss. He wants you to take the night off. Stay at the Royal Orleans on his tab. Sort of a 'welcome aboard,' he said."

"Hmmm ... "

"Yeah, the Governor's Suite is reserved in the name of Fred Perkins. Already paid. Got that? Fred Perkins."

Pryor glanced back at the boat.

"He doesn't want me to stay on board?"

"Call him yourself, if you don't believe me."

"I don't suppose he left a number?"

Watson laughed.

"Nope, but he did mention that your favorite kind of girl would be waiting in the suite."

"I like his style."

"Yeah. Sounds real classy. Anyway, you're not supposed to thank him or nothin' when he shows up in the morning because his wife will be along and she don't cotton to that kinda shenanigans."

"Why would he bring his wife down here?"

"You got me, Cap'n. Wait. Is that my phone ringing? Damn Gloria took off to the dentist. 'Scuse me a minute."

Watson huffed up to his small office and grabbed the telephone.

"Yacht club. Watson.... Damn it, Shimwell, are you crazy calling here?... It better be a pay phone. Why the hell aren't you at the store? You've just been on the job two months. Think, man, how it's gonna look. You're a fucking bean

counter for the Llewellyn Department Stores. Those kinds of guys are always on the job.... No. Not here, you fool. You think I want 'em to blow up my place?... I told your girl it was all set for Friday at two-forty-five. Didn't you get the message?... Yeah, Llewellyn should be here by noon and he's always on time, but we added two hours in case of delay and then forty-five minutes for them to get outa here and upriver past the town.... It'll look like an engine caught fire and set off the explosions.... Nah. 'The Torch.' Same guy that did the warehouse. Always on time. Always does good work. Ex-military.... Can't. Shit, man, don't you think he'll check to see the stuff's there? It's his money that paid for it. We can't take it off without blowing the whole deal.... Heh, heh, yeah, that was funny, blowing the whole deal. So I'm a comedian. Now get your ass back to the store and stay there. We need to keep you inside. Don't call me back. I've got it handled.... Yeah, wife and kid too, but that's not our fault.... Hell, no! Everybody knows the rule. The captain goes down with the ship. I never did like the son of a bitch anyway. There's something weird about that guy.... Yeah, he'll be all right. Ole Arnie's tougher than they thought. He'll be keeping a low profile for a while, which is exactly what you better do. Now get back to the store...."

Watson hung up the phone and turned to the window. Jody was still pumping fuel into *La Muestra*. Apparently, the captain had gone below to check and oil the engines. Watson sighed and looked at his watch. Four-thirty. It would all be over at two-forty-five on Friday, less than twenty-four hours. He picked up the phone and called his night watchman.

"Schrader? Watson. Listen, I don't need you to come in tonight.... No. The wife and I had a little disagreement and I'll be sleeping on the couch in my office, so there's no use both of us being here. 'Course, I'm such a nice guy, I'll pay you for it anyway, but you keep this to yourself. I don't want my dirty laundry flapping in the breeze.... Heh, heh, you old reprobate. Go ahead. What you do on your night off is none of my business.... Now, why would I ever want to tell her anything? Your wife don't work here. You do.... Yeah, we

guys got to stick together. These goddamn women are trying to run the world. Heh, heh..."

Watson's smile faded as he hung up the phone and looked down at the fuel dock. Damn nice boat. Damn nice.

Jody replaced the nozzle in the pump and looked up at the captain.

"Anything else, sir?"

"That'll do it, Boy."

Pryor turned the left ignition key, listened a moment, then turned the right. Twin spurts of water spewed across the river's surface, small jets forced into being by the boat's exhaust. Jody listened with admiration as the big Chris Craft settled into its deep muffled "bloo-bloo-bloo-bloo-bloo-bloo-bloo-bloo" and glided away from the gas dock to its reserved berth four slips down.

Fading afternoon sunlight glowed across the massive white stern with its arc of bold red lettering identifying 'La Muestra.' Jody frowned. The "U" appeared to be a "Y." He squinted and read again from the increasing distance. 'La Myestra.' He trotted down to her berth and waited to secure the lines. Then he stood still on the wooden walk, listening, while the captain went below to pack a bag and secure the boat for the night, finally locking the cabin door behind him and pushing the keys far down in his pocket.

"Anything else, sir?"

"That'll do it, Boy."

"Get in any fishing this trip, sir?"

"Too busy. Storm," Pryor added as he passed the young mulatto without a glance. He stopped halfway up the ramp and turned back.

"Boy."

"Yes, sir?"

Pryor reached into his pocket and pulled out a one-dollar bill as Jody approached.

"Here. Buy yourself some Halloween candy and a soda."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Then the captain repeated his motion.

"Here. Buy some for your girlfriend, too."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. Have a nice evening."

"Thanks, Boy. I plan on it."

Jody thrust his hands in his pockets and casually ambled off toward the supply shed, then cut back quickly to the main office when he saw the captain go inside. Out of sight under Watson's window, he could hear the two men talking.

"Go ahead and take my car. My night watchman just called in sick, so I'll be stuck here anyway."

"Okay. Where's the key?"

"Here. Now, remember, Royal Orleans' Governor's Suite, in the name of Fred Perkins."

"There you go boring me again, Watson. Ease up."

"Sorry."

"Just be sure no one gets near that boat, or it's your ass."

"Sure, sure, I understand."

"I hope you do."

"See you in the morning, Cap'n. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Guys like you would do anything you could get away with, Watson. You're just too chicken-shit to try it."

The fat man laughed, then froze under the captain's stare.

"You don't need to call me chicken-shit, Rundy," Watson dared to mutter.

"You're right, Watson. I don't need to call you chicken-shit," the captain replied, tossing up the car keys and catching them in mid-air. "It's written all over your face."

As Pryor disappeared down the street in Mr. Watson's car, Jody gathered some cleaning supplies and headed back down to *La Muestra*. The agile boy climbed aboard without a sound and padded across the aft deck. He leaned over the rail to get a closer look at the lettering.

A thick red glob of something had hit the "U" and trickled down the stern several inches, changing the letter into a "Y." He stretched over to get a better look.

*Blood. It could be blood. But the captain said he was too busy to fish. Hmmm.... Still, it looks like blood to me. Maybe even human blood.... Maybe I've been reading too many murder mysteries.*

"Boy!"

Jody's heart skipped a beat.

"Yes, sir?" he straightened up with a jerk.

"What're you doin' on that boat, Boy?"

"Looks like a gull dropped a big purple one on the railing. It dripped down the stern. You know how the captain likes to keep her clean, sir."

"Yeah, but he don't want nobody on that boat, neither."

"So, I'll get down and let you scrape it off, if you'd rather."

The fat man heaved a sigh.

"Go ahead and get it yourself, since you're up there, but don't go bothering nothing else. Then you can take off early."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Jody pulled a pack of chewing gum from his pocket, unwrapped one piece and folded it into his mouth. He held onto the foil wrapper very carefully as he reached down over the stern to scoop up the offending red globule.

*Blood*, Jody concluded, looking at the congealed residue on the gum wrapper. *Hmmm. Murder mysteries or not. This is definitely blood.*



Chapter 10  
November 1, 1963  
Morning

Christi smiled, walking down the hallway. Her blue, blue eyes sparkled up at Grover. He whispered something in her ear and she giggled. Grover turned toward his classroom alone, giving a wave to Kelly and Larry as they approached.

"I'm so glad y'all are here!" Christi stage-whispered.

"Why wouldn't we be?" Larry asked.

Flustered for a moment, Christi looked at Kelly and stammered, "Uh, because Kelly has a doctor's appointment in Jackson today. Don't you, Kelly?"

Christi was confused that Larry didn't seem to know the excuse. Surely he wasn't planning to leave school without a valid reason.

"Oh, sorry," Larry grinned. "I don't know what I was thinking. Of course, I knew she had a doctor's appointment in Jackson. By coincidence, I have one in N'Orleans. Dad and I are flying down. He's waiting for me, and chomping at the bit, I'm sure."

Carol Jean Tolbert passed by with a group of admirers.

"Good luck, Christi!"

"Same to you, Carol Jean!" Christi beamed.

"This is disgusting," Larry whispered to Christi with a grin. "You girls are so two-faced."

"The guys are just as two-faced," Christi laughed. "Wait until our class elections. The school population doubles."

"As far as I know, that's about par for all elections in Mississippi, and in Louisiana. Even dead people have the right to vote," Larry quipped.

"Dead white people, that is," Christi corrected him.

"Of course," Larry agreed. "Dead white people."

"Attention. Attention all students," the crackly voice of the vice-principal interrupted them. "The mimeograph machine should be fixed shortly and all the ballots should be ready in an hour or so. You will have until one o'clock to complete your voting in the Homecoming court run-off, so please be orderly. Thank you."

Christi's heart sank at the announcement. How could she ask Kelly and Larry to stay to vote for her?

"I'm staying," Kelly announced firmly, almost defiantly.

"That settles it," Larry nodded at Christi. "I'm staying."

Christi smiled in gratitude.

"I'll call my dad and tell him I'll be there as soon as I can. He'll just have to wait."

"Won't he be upset?" Kelly asked. "I thought that he was in a huge hurry to leave."

Larry shrugged, "It's no big deal. I'll go call him."

Larry left without another word, heading down the hall, leaving Kelly and Christi alone.

"He's awfully nice, Kelly. I really think you should take him more seriously."

"He's not Cameron. If you think he's so nice, you can have him, with my blessing."

"Now, Kelly, don't get testy. It's just that he's obviously crazy about you, and surely you realize by now that Cameron is only interested in Cameron."

"Shhh!" Kelly warned. "He's coming down the hall."

"Who?"

"Cameron."

"I don't see him."

"I don't either. I can just tell," Kelly whispered.

A moment later, Cameron rounded the corner.

"Good luck, Christi!" he smiled at her. Then he faced Kelly without a word.

Christi quickly excused herself to go to class.

"I hope you're all right," Cameron began.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Kelly asked.

"I heard you were going to the doctor in Jackson. Is it something serious?"

Kelly shook her head. "It's nothing. Really. Nothing."

Cameron nodded and tightened his jaw.

"Good. That's good. I..." he paused. "I..."

"What, Cameron? You what?"

"I hope you would tell me if you needed anything," he replied quietly.

"Of course," Kelly lied. "And you'd do the same?"

"Sure," he reciprocated her lie. "Sure, I would."

\* \* \*

"God damn it, son! I told you we have to be there by noon! Fuck the run-off!"

"God damn it yourself, Dad! This is her best friend we're talking about. Aren't you the one always preaching about fucking loyalty to your friends? Kelly isn't just another piece of ass. I'm not even fucking her, for God's sake, but of course, I couldn't expect you to understand that. Shit, your brain's in the head of your dick."

"God damn it, boy, don't you talk to your father like that!"

"I'm fucking eighteen years old and I'll talk to you any goddamn way I want to. If you don't like it, you can get on the fucking plane and go without me. Kelly is one classy girl, and I'm going to treat her right. Maybe I'd be smart to keep her away from you and Mom anyway."

"God damn it! Don't remind me about your mother! I'm the one that'll have to tell her there's a fucking delay after I dragged her out of bed early. Shit, boy, you owe me for this!"

"Then you'll wait?"

"God damn right, I'll wait. She's probably worth it."

\* \* \*

Christi and Grover were among the first to cast their ballots. Moments later, Carol Jean Tolbert was in the voting line with Larry Llewellyn right behind her. He had imagined for weeks that she wanted to "lose" the Homecoming Queen election so she would be "only" the Senior Maid, and thus would be escorted by the Senior Class President Cameron Coulter. Larry peeked over her shoulder and grinned at being right when he saw Carol Jean Tolbert boldly mark her vote for Christi Boudreaux. He would not have been so pleased to know that Kelly was about to cast her precious Homecoming Queen vote for the hated rival Carol Jean Tolbert.

\* \* \*

"Would it be okay if I take off early today, Mr. Watson?" Jody French asked his boss. "I think it's going to be a quiet afternoon for a Friday."

Watson looked at his watch and at the clock on the wall before turning back to him. *Two-fifteen.* Watson frowned.

"You sick, Boy? You don't look so good. Got bags under your eyes. Been up all night?"

"Maybe I'm coming down with something," Jody lied, hoping his face wouldn't betray what he had seen and done the night before.

"You got everything done that needed doin'?"

"Yes, sir." *And more, he thought, not that you'd ever notice.*

The wall clock clicked another minute.

*Two-sixteen,* Watson noticed. *Twenty-nine minutes to go and the fucking Llewellyns haven't even called.*

"Is *La Muestra* out yet?" Watson asked casually, as if his eyes hadn't been back and forth from the entrance gate to the dock a thousand times in the last three hours. *Could PapaLew have heard something?*

"Hmmm? No, sir, I don't believe she is," Jody imitated his boss's nonchalant attitude.

"Well, maybe you oughta wait awhile. I don't know who all's coming and how much gear they might have. You better stay. Help them load up and shove off. They might be in a hurry," Watson advised.

Again, the old man looked at his watch, then at the wall clock. Click. *Two-seventeen.* The thin red second hand raced downward with the ominous sweep of a cockroach's feeler.

\* \* \*

"Grover, no matter what happens today," Christi said seriously, "I want you to know how proud I am that you've been elected captain of the football team and that you want to be with me. I know that if it weren't for you, I wouldn't ever have a chance to be Homecoming Queen."

Grover gave her a squeeze right there in the hallway.

"Don't be silly, Christi. Everybody in Vicksburg loved you before they even heard about me. And they'll love you long after I'm gone."

"Where are you going?" she asked in a sudden panic.

"I'm not planning on going anywhere," Grover smiled. "It was just a figure of speech," he lied, worrying more than ever about the threat of the draft after graduation. If he couldn't get a scholarship to wreak havoc on a football field, he knew the Army would give him a scholarship to wreak havoc in Viet Nam. The thought depressed him, but he forced a grin for Christi. "I'm not going anywhere but to the Homecoming Game and the Homecoming Dance with my Homecoming Queen. Count on it!"

\* \* \*

Rundy Pryor stared at his chronograph and felt a growing apprehension as the fractions of time rushed by. *Two-thirty-three-forty-seven*. Still no sign of his unknown passengers. He went below to down a quick gin and tonic.

*Something could have gone wrong*, he worried. *Maybe this is a set-up*.

He had re-checked the top layers of his cargo a dozen times. Everything seemed to be stowed as usual and nothing appeared to be missing, but maybe he should have looked deeper. He couldn't shake the feeling that someone had been on his boat.

*Damn that Watson! He's got Arnie's old extra keys*. The captain crossed the salon in three long strides and took the stairs in two more.

"G'd afternoon, Cap'n. Gonna jump ship?"

Pryor's eyes sought the voice on the ramp and found the young mulatto smiling up at him.

"Just going to pick up something from Watson before I go, Boy," he replied.

"Let me do it for you, sir. I sure enjoyed my candy last night. I hope you had a nice evening too. Now what can I get for you?"

"The keys. Watson has an extra set somewhere. I want them."

"Yes, sir. You just wait right there on the boat, sir, and I'll have them for you in a minute."

Jody immediately turned and started running up to the office. The captain checked his chronograph again.

*Two-thirty-seven-twenty.*

A yellow cab drove through the gates as Jody disappeared into the yacht club office. Pryor took a step forward, then decided to stay on board.

The captain watched a slim, balding man step from the cab's front passenger side and open the back door for an attractive fortyish woman with flaming red hair who greeted his gesture with a scowl.

A young man with a more subdued version of the same red hair opened the other back door and got out, followed by a tall, slim, blonde girl wearing navy blue slacks and a matching jacket. The cabby ran around to open the trunk and lift out the luggage.

As Jody emerged from the office, Watson huffed out to shake hands, and gesture toward *La Muestra*. The group looked over at the boat. Captain Rundy Pryor nodded a distant acknowledgment. Jody and the cabby picked up two bags each and trotted to the dock. The others moved more slowly, absorbing their surroundings. Watson walked a few paces ahead, leading them.

"Take those bags below and set them in the salon," Pryor ordered Jody and the cabby. "Did you get the extra set of keys, Boy?"

"Yes, sir," Jody smiled, setting down the bags, and fishing the keys from his pocket. "Here y'are," he grinned. He followed the cabby below, dropped the bags on the carpeted salon floor, and bounded back up the steps behind him.

"Here y'go, Boy," Pryor extended a dollar to Jody. "Thanks for picking up the keys."

"No problem," Jody answered politely. "If you need anything else, I'd better get it for you now. After all, I may not see you again."

"That's it," Pryor answered absently.

Jody grinned, and hopped off the boat behind the cabby.

Watson was ushering the group toward the ramp, gesturing widely with his arms and talking at a high pitch.

*Wonder what he's so agitated about, Pryor frowned. That fat man's gonna have a heart attack. Needs to learn to take it easy. Take your time.* He glanced at his chronograph. *Two-forty-one exactly.* He was anxious to get underway, but these unlikely people were taking their time about getting on board, gawking at the other boats like tourists.

Finally, the leader of the group looked at his watch.

"It's nearly two-forty-five," PapaLew announced. "I think we'd better get going."

Watson wiped his brow on his sleeve. "S'long, folks. Have a blast."

Though they were sixty feet away, Pryor could hear every word. At that last good-bye, he started the port engine, listened a moment, then turned the starboard ignition key. The engines settled into a comfortable idle at six hundred revolutions per minute, a deep rumbling bloo-bloo-bloo-bloo-bloo-bloo-bloo-bloo.

"Mr. Llewellyn?"

"Yes, Kelly, but please call me PapaLew. What is it?"

"Before we go, could I please run in the office real quickly and call the school to see if Christi won? Otherwise, I won't know until Sunday. I think I'd just die before then."

George Llewellyn's jaw tightened. *God damn it!* he wanted to shout, but his son's look stopped him cold.

"Sure, Kelly, go ahead," he smiled. "We'll wait right here outside the office. Charge it to the yacht club. Watson and I will settle up later."

Kelly ran inside.

Watson wiped his brow again and suggested, "Why don't y'all go get settled on the boat? I'll escort the young lady down in a minute when she's through with her call."

He looked at his watch. *Two-forty-three.*

Larry and his red-headed mother took a step toward the ramp, but George Llewellyn grabbed his son's arm. "Where are your manners, Son? We'll wait here, as we said."

Captain Rundy Pryor stood at the helm and reviewed the scene—the mulatto boy leaning against the storage shed, arms folded across his chest, expressionless; Watson, the frustrated shepherd, trying to get his flock to move; the red-headed boy and his parents, playing a three-way power struggle for all the world to see.

*That's life, isn't it? Power struggles. Like Arnie and this new owner. Arnie's down now, but he'll come back. Suddenly, Pryor remembered Watson's words: "Arnie don't take shit like that sittin' down.... Cover your stern.... These boys play for keeps."*

The apprehension he felt earlier returned. Someone had definitely been on board, though it didn't appear that the cargo had been disturbed.

*"These boys play for keeps.... Arnie don't take shit like that sittin' down.... If you need anything else, I'd better get it for you now. After all, I may not see you again.... These boys play for keeps.... I may not see you again.... Cover your stern...."*

Pryor blinked with comprehension, then fear. He vaulted down the stairs into the salon, cursing himself for not checking the engine room earlier. Rushing past the galley window, he saw the blonde girl come running out of the office, laughing, gesturing excitedly, hugging the red-headed boy. The mulatto pushed away from the wall and sauntered toward the group, while Watson stared at his watch, immobile. Involuntarily, Pryor looked at his own watch as he opened the engine room door. *Two forty-five.*

*La Muestra's* captain was blinded by a flash of light a millisecond before he heard and felt the full blast of the explosion that blew the port engine into a thousand steel missiles. In the next second, the starboard engine and fuel storage tanks blasted apart, hurtling steel and flaming raw fuel through gaping holes on both sides of the yacht. A third explosion in the forward cabin ripped open the bow, and destroyed all traces of the cargo that had been stashed there.

Fragments of wood and metal blew fifty feet in the air as the yacht tore apart from the inside.

On shore, the Llewellyn group ran for cover behind the office, then watched in awed silence as the remaining charred



hull of *La Muestra* sank into the river amid burning patches of oil on the water's surface.

George Llewellyn responded instantly.

"Watson, give me the keys to your car. Pick it up later at the airport. We were never here. The boat is owned by a Cayman Island corporation. That's all you know. Got it?"

The fat man nodded and handed over the keys. George handed them to his son.

"Y'all get in the car," he directed quietly. Larry nodded.

PapaLew turned to the mulatto.

"Boy."

"Yes, sir?"

"We weren't here. Never here. You didn't see anybody here this afternoon," he whispered, folding a hundred-dollar bill into the brown hand. "You understand that, son?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Don't cross me. It isn't smart."

"Yes, sir. I believe that, sir."

\* \* \*

"Kelly."

"Yes, sir?"

"I know we're all upset by what we just saw back there," George Llewellyn began in a soothing voice.

Kelly nodded and kept her eyes focused on the Mississippi River valley far below the King Air's window.

"But we're going to put that behind us now and forget about it," he suggested firmly.

"I don't understand what happened and why we left in such a hurry."

"It was obviously a terrible accident of some sort, but there are valid business reasons for me not to get involved in that. You're a smart girl. You understand, don't you?"

Kelly nodded a lie. "But what will we say to the people in Vicksburg when we get back early without the boat?"

"Nobody knows about the boat except your mother. You can tell her I didn't like the condition that boat was in and I'm

going to get another one. I will, Kelly, and then we'll all take a nice trip on it. Trust me."

PapaLew was watching Kelly's face intently enough to notice the minute dilation and contraction of her pupils.

"Did you mention the boat to someone else?"

Kelly's chin quivered, but she looked straight at him.

"I did."

The same inscrutable poker face that had financed George Llewellyn's first years at Tulane and helped launch him in business continued to serve him well.

"Oh, that's all right, Kelly," he consoled her. "Don't you worry about it. Can you tell me whom you told?"

"Just my best friend, Christi Boudreaux."

PapaLew looked at his son with a question on his face.

"Clem's daughter?" he asked Larry. Larry nodded.

"Hmmm. Well, just tell her the same thing you tell your mother. I mean it, Kelly. It's important to my business that I not get involved in something like this. I'm counting on you to keep this our little secret."

She nodded and turned again to stare out the window.

The senior Llewellyn followed Kelly's gaze, peering down at the patchwork of farmlands and forests on either side of the river, their peaceful browns and greens unaffected by the turmoil all around the world. The tranquility below induced thoughts he would have sworn were lost to memory - images of faces, echoes of wisdom, lessons of a better life he had learned quietly on the family farm with his parents and grandparents - lessons well taught by their words and even more by their everyday example. For most of the flight, with unspeakable sadness, he questioned how and why he had left the best part of his heritage so irretrievably far behind.

Chapter 11  
November 1, 1963  
Early evening

"God damn it! You get hold of our man at the phone company. I want the long distance charges for all lines at the Crescent City Yachting Club and Marina for the month of October.... Yes, God damn it, and include today!... Tell him to be sure to get all lines. There may be one or two unlisted. Call me at home before midnight tonight.... I know it's Friday. God damn it! What do I pay you for? I want it tonight!..."

\* \* \*

Helène Lepeltier Boudreaux pulled her wool coat tightly around her slim body and stared into the black sky beyond the football stadium lights.

*Comme moi*, she mused in her mother tongue, and then corrected herself for the millionth time.

*Like me.... Artificial light surrounded by infinite darkness.*

Helène saw Christi coming up the steps looking for her. She waved and smiled, forcing herself to sit up straighter on the backless wooden riser.

Two men in denim overalls seemed to be with Christi, though following a couple of paces behind. The younger of the two, who appeared to be about forty, was nearly as big as Grover Jones, and had his facial features.

Helène shuddered involuntarily, but smiled and extended her hand when Christi introduced them. As Christi went back to join the other cheerleaders, and the two men settled themselves on the bench, Helène uncharacteristically wished that Clem were there.

At awkward times like these, she resented the charade of his working late with that tramp secretary of his.

*But who am I to call Vayda Jander a tramp?* she asked herself, and smiled again for her daughter's sake.

Sandwiched between Lucky Jones and his friend Bubba Something-or-other, Helène tried to develop an interest in the half-time show.

"Sure is easy to see where Christi gets her good looks, Miz Boudreaux."

"Thank you, Mr. Jones."

"You can call me 'Lucky.'"

"All right, Lucky. What's your real name?"

"Lucky's it. Yep, Lucky's it."

"Tell her the story, Lucky."

"Naw, Miz Boudreaux don't want to hear that old story."

"Sure she does. Don't you, ma'am?"

"Of course, if Mister, if Lucky would like to tell it."

"Go ahead, Lucky, tell her."

Helène smiled encouragement.

"It ain't much really, but my mama always smoked Lucky Strike cigarettes. Well, right after I was born, my mama said, very first thing, 'Give me a Lucky,' and they handed me over to her instead of a pack of cigarettes. She thought that was so funny she decided to name me 'Lucky.'"

"What did your father think of that?"

"Aw, he don't care. A name's a name to him. Long as a kid comes when you call the name you given him, it don't much matter. Still, I wanted my boy to have a good solid name. Like 'Grover.' Has a nice ring to it, don'tcha think? 'Grover Jones.'"

"Very nice," nodded Helène Lepeltier Boudreaux, whose precious daughter Christina Lepeltier Boudreaux wanted to be 'Mrs. Grover Jones.' "Yes, it's a very nice name," she lied.

"All this talking, I've worked up a thirst. Can I get you something, Miz Boudreaux?"

"No, thanks, Lucky, I'm fine."

"Get me a RC Cola while you're down there," his friend ordered. "And a hot dog. Aw, make it two hot dogs. Lotsa mustard and onions."

Helène shuddered.

"You cold, ma'am?"

"No, I'm fine. Just a little nippy out here."

Lucky Jones disappeared down the ramp.

"Finest time of year," Bubba nodded profoundly. "Gets a little cool in th'evenin.' Start a fire. Good sleeps. Real nice to take my grandsons camping."

"You have grandsons?" Helène asked incredulously, then realized that she was also old enough to have grandchildren.

"Half dozen of 'em," Bubba announced proudly. "Two of 'em old enough to camp out."

"Have you known Mister, I mean, Lucky, long?"

"Years."

"Did you know his wife, Grover's mother?"

"Yes, ma'am. We all worked out' the plant, 'fore she went back to farmin' full time. Grover's mama was a good basketball player. When she hired on' the plant, they put'n her right on the team. What was her name? Marian Steele. Used to think it was Mary Ann, but it was Marian, I remember. Good lookin' woman. Good basketball player. Lucky, he'd go watch her play and he'd get crazy in the gym. I seen the coach and the refs come over try to quite him down. She couldn't hardly play for the noise he made. ... Lord, them was games!"

"I understand she's gone now."

"Dead," Bubba nodded.

"Was she ill a long time?"

"Never sick a day in her life, she always said. A tractor turned over on her. Cut both legs off. She bled to death before anybody knew about it."

Helène shuddered again.

"I'm startin' to worry 'bout you, ma'am. You sure you're not too cold?"

Helène shook her head as Lucky approached.

"Here y'go, Bubba. Didn't have no RC. Gotcha Coke."

"Wha'd I owe ya?"

"On me."

"Thanks. Here, Miz Boudreaux, why don't you eat one of them hot dogs? Warm you up."

"You cold, Miz Boudreaux?"

"No, Lucky, I'm fine. It's just a little chilly out here."

"Here. Take a nip o' this," Lucky offered. He pulled a half-pint of bourbon from his front pocket, poured a fourth of it into his Coke, and handed it to her.

"No, thank you, Lucky," she insisted. "Really, I'm fine. Plenty warm."

"Seein' that bottle reminds me the time we give that vodka to ole Jackie Duvall. 'Member that, Lucky?"

"Yep," he chuckled.

"Tell Miz Boudreaux that story."

"Aw, she wouldn't want to hear that old story."

"Sure she would. Wouldn't you, ma'am?"

"Of course, if Lucky would like to tell it."

"Go ahead, Lucky. Tell her."

Helène smiled encouragement and mentally cursed at her husband for subjecting her to this misery alone.

*Damn him! Damn that Vayda!*

"It ain't much really," Lucky began, "but me and Bubba had some fun with it. We taken a quart of that Russian vodka and shaken some cayenne pepper in it. Yep, we shaken it up real good and let it set 'bout a week. It looked like liquid fire! Then ole Bubba here, he poured some of it in Jackie Duvall's coffee and, I tell you, if that boy hadn't a been a Cajun from Loosiana, he'd a died from it. Yep, me and Bubba had some good times outa that vodka."

\* \* \*

"I appreciate your coming in on Saturday like this, Miss Hocking."

"No trouble, Mr. Llewellyn. Caramel Cat's new litter is doing fine, so no use me sitting at home. I'd just as soon make the money and..."

"Good. I'm expecting a call from N'Orleans. Otherwise, I don't want to be disturbed. That is why you're here, Miss Hocking. See that I'm not disturbed. Thank you."

Before his secretary closed the door, George Llewellyn was going back over the notes he had scribbled last night. Clearly, someone at the yacht club was calling someone at Llewellyn's

store in Jackson. He tapped his fingers on the desk impatiently.

“Scuse me, sir,” Miss Hocking stage-whispered through the door with a timid knock.

“Yes?”

The door opened wide enough for a small head to enter.

“I wouldn’t disturb you, Mr. Llewellyn, sir, but there’s a young man on the phone who’s quite insistent that you would want to talk to him. He’s saying that he’s Tawanya’s brother.”

“I don’t know anyone named ‘Tawanya,’ Miss Hocking. He must have said ‘Tom Warner.’”

“No, sir. I’m quite sure he said ‘Tawanya.’ I even had him spell it for me,” Miss Hocking insisted with pride.

“Miss Hocking, if your hearing is that defective, I will have to replace you with someone more sensitive. I told you I never heard of anyone named ‘Tawanya.’ Is that perfectly clear?”

“Oh, yes, sir, Mr. Llewellyn. He must have said ‘Tom Warner.’”

“God damn it! I thought so. Now get back on the phone and put him through.”

“Yes, sir.”

The door closed.

“...That’s right. My name is Jody French. Tawanya is my older sister.”

George Llewellyn felt the phone becoming moist in his hand.

“A long time ago, she gave me a sealed envelope to open if I ever got really worried about her. There was a code for a name and a local phone number. When I called, they said you had moved to Vicksburg and gave me this number. They said to ask for Mr. Llewellyn. Tawanya’s been gone for three weeks without a word. She always calls, no matter where she is. Do you have any idea...?”

“Please deposit an additional ninety-five cents.”

“Mr. Llewellyn, are you still there?”

“Yes, Jody, I’m here,” the older man said quietly.

“Do you have any idea where she is?” Jody asked plaintively.

"I know for a fact that she was seen two weeks ago in Cartagena, Columbia."

"What would she be doing there?"

"That doesn't matter."

"Yes, sir. Was she alone?"

George Llewellyn decided to take a chance with this boy. Maybe together they could come up with something.

"She got on a boat called *La Muestra*."

There was silence on the New Orleans end of the line.

"Jody? Jody? Are you there?"

"Yes, sir."

"What's wrong?"

"*La Muestra* was blown up yesterday."

"How do you know that, Jody?"

"I saw it."

"You mean, in the paper?"

"No, sir. I mean, it was in the paper and I saw that too, but I saw the boat blow up."

"What do you mean? You were there? You live near the marina?" PapaLew recalled rows of shanties along the river.

"Yes, sir, I live near there, but I work there too."

PapaLew closed his eyes and tried to picture the young mulatto who had helped with the luggage. He had given him a hundred dollars and warned him against talking.

"You work at the marina?"

"Yes, sir."

"You were there yesterday when the boat blew up?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was anyone else there with you when it happened?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who?"

"Mr. Watson, the owner, sir. He's my boss."

"Anyone else?" PapaLew held his breath.

"No, sir."

"You're certain?"

"Positive, sir. It was only two-forty-five and none of the weekenders had arrived yet."

The boy sounded so honest that PapaLew had to convince himself that it had happened yesterday when he was there.



"Jody, what if I were to tell you that four people arrived at the marina in a cab about that time and that a man gave you a hundred dollars to keep quiet about it."

"I'd say you had received some bad information, sir."

Llewellyn smiled.

"And what if I said that Mr. Watson had given me this information?"

Without a moment's pause, Jody answered, "I'd say that Mr. Watson has his own reasons for saying what he says."

George Llewellyn almost laughed out loud.

"You're good, Jody. Really good. Now listen to me. I'm going to call you back in ten minutes at the pay phone where you are. Give me the number. We have a lot of things to talk about..."

\* \* \*

"I'm sorry they changed their minds about the boat, Kelly, but I'm glad you insisted on waiting at school to vote for me," Christi confided over the phone. "That just shows what a good friend you really are."

"I'm not that great," Kelly insisted, glad that they were on the phone and Christi couldn't see her blushing from the shame of casting her valuable vote for the hated rival Carol Jean Tolbert.

"So, maybe you can go to the Halloween dance at the country club tonight. Did Larry ask you?"

"Yeah, he just called, but I think it's anti-climatic to have a Halloween party after Halloween."

"They had to. There was a big golf tournament and awards dinner last Saturday and they couldn't have it on the actual day because the B-team games are on Thursday nights and, of course, nobody would ever have anything on Friday night because of football. It'll be fun, anyway. Do you have a costume yet?"

"Larry said that his mother has a closet full of costumes from Mardi Gras, and he's sure I can find something that will fit. I'm going over to his house in a few minutes. What are you doing this afternoon?"

"Nothing. Grover's helping Miss Fennstemmacher. I've got a book report due."

"Do you think Cameron will be at the dance?"

"I'm certain of it," Christi reported. "Carol Jean made a big point of telling me she had invited him."

"Cameron would have invited me if his family belonged to the country club," Kelly said with feigned certainty. "Of course, if we still belonged, I could have invited him. Oh, well," she sighed, "at least I'll see him there."

"Kelly?"

"Hmmm?"

"You need to get over this Cameron Coulter nonsense. Larry Llewellyn is a great catch."

"Right," Kelly responded flatly.

"He is," Christi insisted. "Now, cheer up. Your trip may have been disappointing, but we'll have a real blast tonight."

Chapter 12  
November 2, 1963  
Afternoon

Christi took the last apple from the refrigerator and slowly walked outside. The sun was still warm, but the air had a crispness now and the grass didn't spring back after each footstep. She tried to settle down under her reading tree with *Wuthering Heights*, but a nameless agitation kept her from concentrating.

*Maybe it's because I read this years ago when I wanted to and I don't want to read it again for a stupid book report.* The words swam together on the page and suddenly Christi had the feeling that she had lived this moment before, or that she was foreseeing the future.

*If I look up, I'll see the gardenia bushes against the side of the house and the sky will be a bright blue with a couple of puffy clouds to the southwest over the river. Then a dog will bark and I'll hear a screen door slam and I'll know I can predict the future.*

Christi looked up and saw the gardenia bushes against the side of the house, thick and green as she had imagined. She let her eyes travel up past the windows and roof to the bright blue sky beyond. The constancy of its color was interrupted only by a couple of puffy clouds to the southwest over the river. A second later she heard a dog bark and she waited tensely for the slam of a screen door so that the spell would not be broken.

Prudence Washington took the last apple from the small refrigerator in the quarters' cramped kitchen and slowly walked outside. The sky was a bright blue with only a couple of puffy white clouds to the southwest over the river. The sun was still warm, but her heart was too heavy to feel it caress her dark skin.

She stood on the stoop for a moment, leaning against the open screen door, undecided on her course, and felt the quiet isolation of the white neighborhood where she had been born in the McCain's old quarters seventeen years ago. Moving to the Boudreaux quarters after Clayton McCain died had not made any real difference in her life. She was still a black girl

in a white neighborhood and she would be expected to stay and serve until she died, as her mother would, as her grandmothers had done before her.

Down the street a dog barked and it sounded friendly. Prudence decided to seek its companionship. She took a bite of apple as she stepped down from the stoop onto the warm brick path. The screen door slammed behind her.

"Pru!"

She turned and saw Christi under the reading tree. Prudence took another bite from her apple and ambled across the yard. Her tall, thin body cast a long shadow as she walked. Christi motioned for her to sit down, and scooted over so that Prudence could lean back against the tree with her.

"What are you reading?"

"*Wuthering Heights*. For a book report."

"Didn't you read that a long time ago?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"Mama watches what books you read and then brings them from your library when you finish with them. She used to do it at the McCain's too. Kelly reads a lot."

"No kidding," Christi laughed. "She's a maniac."

Prudence nodded, "But I like to read too, so it didn't bother me. Anyway, I figure if I read a book, you read it first. I hope you don't mind. Your father said it was okay for me to use your library."

"Of course, I don't mind. We're friends, aren't we?"

Prudence looked into Christi's sincere blue eyes. Then she scanned the expanse of the Boudreaux home from its magnificent towering trees to its massive porches to the many-windowed room upstairs that was Christi's own. She sighed and stared at the tiny out-building from which she had come, the old slave quarters that could have been set down inside Christi's bedroom and still leave space to walk around.

"You really do believe we're friends, don't you, Christi? You actually believe it."

"Well, what's a friend? Somebody you know and care about? Sure, I believe we're friends."

Prudence took another bite of the apple and stared at the sky.

"Oh," Christi sighed, "I know what's wrong with you today. Ray was here on leave and is gone again, isn't he? I'd almost forgotten. I'm sorry, Pru. I guess you miss him terribly. I know I would."

Christi leaned back against the tree and felt guilty for being so wrapped up in the Homecoming election that she hadn't remembered that Ray and Prudence were having their own homecoming. She thought about how she would feel if Grover had to go away.

"He's gonna get killed," Prudence announced matter-of-factly.

"Pru! Hush your mouth! Don't even say a thing like that!" Christi made the Sign of the Cross. "He'll be fine."

"No," Prudence shook her head. "He's gonna die over there. I know he is."

"You stop that kind of talk right now, Prudence Washington! You don't even know for sure that he's going over there. They don't send everybody to Viet Nam."

"Maybe not every body, but every black body. My people are just cannon fodder in this war."

"I know you're upset today, and so you're not thinking clearly," Christi consoled. "Even if, and I'm saying 'if,' every black body does get sent over there, they don't all get killed."

"Don't you read the paper, Christi? Everybody's getting killed over there. It's crazy!"

Christi closed her eyes and tried to remember what she had seen in the paper about Viet Nam. It seemed so far away. She didn't know anybody who was going. It wasn't like The War that was fought here in Vicksburg, where you could still, a hundred years after it was over, walk around and occasionally discover an old shell casing, or a button buried in the ground from a gray or a blue uniform. The War in Vicksburg felt real. Whatever was going on in Viet Nam was different.

Christi worried for a brief moment that Grover might go over there, but almost immediately remembered that he would have a draft deferment because he would have a football scholarship to go to college instead. She pictured the

two of them strolling across the campus at Ole Miss, holding hands, kicking at newly-fallen leaves. One more year and they would be there together. They would have their whole lives together.

"It makes me mad, I tell you! Doesn't it make you mad?"

Christi glanced at her dark friend, embarrassed that she hadn't been listening, wondering what had made her angry all of a sudden. Taking a chance, the white girl nodded in agreement.

"Well, then, let's go."

"Go where?" Christi frowned.

"To Tolbert's, for an ice cream sundae."

"But Prudence, you know you can't go in there."

"That's what I just said. My people can wear a United States Army uniform and get their balls blown off in Viet Nam, but we can't get a sundae at Tolbert's. Doesn't that make you mad?"

So that was it. It was almost enough to make Christi mad too.

"Okay, Pru, let's give it a try," she nodded.

The two girls looked at each other and laughed.

"Why not?" Prudence shrugged. "The worst they'll do is shoot or hang me. Of course, it could be devastating for you. They might not invite you to be a debutante!"

Christi laughed again. "Got any money on you?"

"Enough," Prudence replied, "but we won't get that far."

"Don't be pessimistic. You're going to Tolbert's with me, Christina Lepeltier Boudreaux, of the illustrious Mississippi Boudreaux family. That's a name to be reckoned with."

Prudence drawled in a Southern belle imitation, "I reckon we'll find out soon enough."

The girls scrambled to their feet.

"Let's not take the car," Christi suggested. "It'll look more casual." She gently tossed *Wuthering Heights* onto the porch, and called through the front door to Nellie Mae that they were going to take a walk.

When the innocents arrived at Tolbert's, hungry for a sundae with extra whipped cream and nuts, Christi stepped in front of Prudence to open the big glass door. The popular

Homecoming Queen crossed the cool tile vestibule with her maid's daughter one pace behind.

Within seconds, the Saturday afternoon crowd was silent. Christi felt fifty pairs of eyes on her. She smiled at Old Lady Tolbert, Carol Jean's grandmother, who was nailed in place behind the cash register.

"We don't serve her kind in here."

"But, Miz Tolbert, she's with me," Christi tried to explain.

Old Man Tolbert came out from the back, startled by the sudden silence. He glared at Christi.

"What's that nigger doin' in here?" he asked harshly.

"We just came in for a sundae, Mister Tolbert," Christi answered respectfully.

"What's your name, Girl?"

"I'm Christi Boudreaux. Christina Lepeltier Boudreaux," she emphasized each word.

"Clem's daughter, I guess."

"Yes, sir."

"Does your daddy know you're in here with a nigger?"

Christi felt Prudence's hand on her shoulder.

"Come on, Christi, let's go," she whispered.

"No, sir, he doesn't. He's at the office."

Christi blushed from the confrontation, and from suddenly wondering what her father was doing in his office this late on a Saturday afternoon. The *July 25<sup>th</sup> incident* hit her again.

"You best get on home, young lady, 'fore I call him."

"But I want a sundae," Christi insisted respectfully.

"Fine. You just sit yourself down, order a sundae, and we'll forget all about this commotion."

"And my friend wants one too."

Kelly's neighbor, the giant Lefty Owens, with his three inseparable sidekicks, started easing out of the back booth, glaring at Prudence.

"Sit down there, boys," Old Man Tolbert growled. "This is my place. I'll handle it."

The four troublemakers sat, but on the edges of their seats, and never took their eyes off Prudence.

"Miss Boudreaux, you may sit down and order, and tell that nigger to leave, or you may leave with her, but right now,

you are disturbing my business and in Warren County, Mississippi, that's still a criminal offense. If you wasn't Clem Boudreaux's daughter, I woulda already called the po-leece."

Christi's face burned, and her stomach grabbed her body. She turned to her accomplice.

"Come on, Prudence. I guess we'd better go."

The tall thin girl and the shorter plumper girl, one black, one white, left Tolbert's side by side and walked calmly down the block. When they were out of sight of the big glass windows, they collapsed together on a bus stop bench.

"Still mad?" Christi asked.

"Madder than ever!"

"You hide it well."

"My people have to."

"I know. I'm sorry."

After a long silence, Prudence said quietly, "I want to tell you that I'm sorry."

"For what?" Christi wondered aloud.

"For doubting that you were my friend."

\* \* \*

"Watson. George Llewellyn here. Listen. That girl with us yesterday made a call to Vicksburg on your yacht club phone. Send a copy of your last four weeks' long distance logs to me with that one circled.... No, it's a matter of principle to me, Watson. I want you to understand that I always pay my debts. By the way, while you're at it, figure up what your marina is worth. You've decided to retire, Watson, and I'm going to take it off your hands.... Maybe you don't understand. Money is no object to me, Watson. It's just one way of keeping score.... My man will contact you...."

\* \* \*

"This is George Llewellyn, Shimwell.... Drop the nicey-nice about the store. I won't have my employees making long distance calls during business hours, not even when they walk down the street to a pay phone. Do you understand what I'm



telling you?... I want your resignation submitted in writing this afternoon, Shimwell. The picnic is over...."

\* \* \*

Clem Boudreaux paced his living room floor, left hand rubbing his face, right hand grabbing the back of his neck, trying to calm down and collect his thoughts. Christi sat silently on the sofa, waiting. Finally, her father took a seat opposite her and spoke in his best sales voice.

"Old Man Tolbert called me at the office this afternoon, Christina."

She wondered what had been interrupted by that call.

"Wipe that look off your face, young lady. You could have gotten Prudence hurt. Maybe even yourself."

He paused and took a deep breath.

Christi stared at him and said nothing.

"You should have considered the consequences. Did you think about that at all?"

"Yes, I did, but I don't care about being a debutante."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Nothing," she shrugged.

"Don't you realize what could have happened there?"

"All we were trying to do was order a sundae."

"There's a helluva lot more to it than that, young lady, and you have been raised to know better. Didn't you think for one minute about what just happened in Birmingham? The Klan blew up a downtown church, a Baptist church for God's sake, just to send a message to civil rights workers. Four girls about your age were killed in that church, Christi! Dozens injured - and it could've been more!"

"I know, Daddy, but that was Birmingham. Vicksburg is different!"

"Not so damn different, young lady. This is the South! Civil rights workers get shot. Their houses get bombed. Think I want you bringing that on us? We are the Boudreaux family, for God's sake! We are not civil rights workers!"

Christi thought about her daddy's brothers. At least two of them were in the Klan. They would all be furious when they heard about what she had done.

"But Daddy, I'm not a civil rights worker."

"Maybe not, but if you'd'a been a damn Yankee in there at Tolbert's today, instead of a Boudreaux born and bred in Mississippi, I doubt anyone would have been so tolerant. I doubt they'll ever be so tolerant again."

"I can't believe you're making such a big deal about this," Christi pouted.

For the first time in her life, Christi felt the intensity of her father's pent-up rage and fear. He rose abruptly from his chair, and paced back and forth across the rug in front of the fireplace. When he finally stopped and faced his daughter, the color had drained from his face.

"God damn it, girl!" he growled at his only child. "You could have been killed!"

Chapter 13  
November 2, 1963  
Evening

Jack-o-lanterns with hideous faces lined the country club drive, the flickering sentinels of doom casting their ominous warnings into the void of a starless night. Ghosts of a dozen cavalymen hung suspended between outreaching fingers of ancient magnolia trees. A long, black Corvette glided into the drive with the sleekness of a fence-walking cat and came to rest under the columned portico where a cast-iron cauldron released its steamy vapors on the ghoulish Witch of Confederate Vicksburg who stirred and cackled and shrieked at arriving guests.

A black-faced scarecrow rushed to the Corvette's passenger side while Prince Charming, dressed in white satin brocade and a blonde pageboy wig, opened his own door. His Cinderella was magnificently attired in a long gown of matching white satin brocade, protected from the night chill by a flowing cape of white ermine and a pair of exquisitely-embroidered white gloves extending up past her elbows almost to the cap sleeves of her gown. Her thick blonde hair was piled high in a mountain of ringlet curls and upon her head rested a sparkling rhinestone tiara. Cinderella's true identity was hidden behind a white satin mask.

An ancient pick-up truck pulled in behind the Corvette, and a plaid-shirted Paul Bunyan, carrying his huge wood-cutting ax, stepped out. He was accompanied by an Indian princess in a gown of fringed chamois decorated with feathers and beads. Her dark braided hair was adorned with more feathers, and on her feet were beaded moccasins.

Cinderella and the Indian princess greeted each other with squeals of delight. Prince Charming and Paul Bunyan chuckled and rolled their eyes, feigning exasperation with the ordeal of assuming such disguises. They all entered the club together, pausing briefly in the vestibule for a newspaper photographer to take some pictures and get their names.

The party was already a success if judged by the noise level and the eerie atmosphere created by the elaborate Halloween

decorations. The young newspaperwoman had all she needed for a full-page feature in Sunday's society section. A more seasoned reporter might have sensed a hard news story brewing beneath the artificial gaiety.

Three hours into the party, Christi and Kelly went to the girls' room together. A sudden silence greeted them. The other girls stopped their preening in front of the mirrors and walked out of the room. Christi and Kelly exchanged glances and wondered aloud what was happening.

"They're probably jealous of your costume, Kelly. It's incredible. I've never seen real ermine before."

"Me neither. You should see Mrs. Llewellyn's closets."

"I'll bet. How'd you like seeing Carol Jean and Cameron dressed up as Raggedy Ann and Andy?"

"Pretty disgusting," Kelly frowned. "I can't believe Cameron would wear that ridiculous red wig. I guess she made him do it. It's probably why they left early."

"I wondered if that was Carol Jean's way of making fun of Larry, with the red hair and all."

"I never thought of that," Kelly sighed. "Who would have imagined a costume party could have so much intrigue? But I'm not sure what's going on around here. Strange. Do you think everybody heard what you did at Tolbert's today?"

Christi shrugged, "If that's what's bothering them, it's a good thing the election was held yesterday."

"Do you suppose a Homecoming-Queen-elect can be impeached?" Kelly asked frivolously.

"Let's hope not," Christi grinned. "I imagine that Grover would probably start a civil war over it."

The two friends laughed and returned to Prince Charming and Paul Bunyan, who had just competed with each other in the apple-bob. They insisted that Christi and Kelly break the tie. The girls removed their respective feathers and tiara, handed the accessories to their dates, and leaned over the barrel of water with a dozen apples still floating on the surface.

"Nigger-lover!" was all Christi heard as she felt a huge hand on her neck, shoving her head under the water. Her nose burned as the cold liquid filled her nostrils. She tried to

raise herself up, but the hand was on her neck so hard that it pushed her face down against the side of the barrel, bruising her cheek. For a moment, she thought she was going to drown, but mercifully, the hand released her and she jerked up, gasping for air.

Through the water dripping off her face, Christi could see Grover slugging Lefty Owens. Then one of Lefty's friends hit Grover from behind. Larry grabbed that guy and slugged him, and then another of Lefty's friends joined in. And another. All the football players who were there followed Grover into the fray.

Most of the girls, except Christi and Kelly, were screaming. Some of the guys immediately took their dates and left, but a lot of them stayed to fight. After a while, Christi couldn't tell for sure who was on which side.

Finally, someone pulled one of the beautiful porcelain lamps from its plug and threw it against the plate glass mirror above the fireplace. The glass exploded and everyone stopped for a couple of seconds. Before they could resume the brawl, a dozen Vicksburg policemen burst into the room.

"Police! Stop where you are! You are all under arrest."

Christi's heart caught in her throat. Her daddy would blame her for all of this. Maybe it was all her fault. She looked helplessly at Grover and was about to cry. The room was deathly quiet. Even Lefty Owens was still.

"Officer," she recognized Larry Llewellyn's distinctive in-control voice, "could you and I and the club manager talk for a moment?"

Everyone watched in silence as the three walked to the far end of the room and spoke for several minutes in low voices. Finally, they returned from their huddle, and the policeman announced, "Okay, the party's over. Everyone go home. Boys, you will show your driver's licenses to the officer at the door, sign out with your name and car tag number, then leave in three-minute intervals. You will take your dates directly home. No congregating, no parking, no cruising, no stopping at Tolbert's. Anyone on this list caught on the streets tonight more than a half-hour after checking out of here will be arrested. Is that clear?"

There was a general mumbling of assent. Christi sighed in relief and felt her swollen cheek. The club manager gave her an icepack and led her to his office to rest. Grover, Kelly and Larry went with her.

"What did you say to that policeman, Larry?" Christi asked when the four of them were alone.

Larry shrugged, "I told the manager he could put all the damages on the Llewellyn tab, so he didn't care about filing charges against anyone after that."

"Was it Lefty Owens who called me a 'nigger-lover?'" Christi wanted to know.

"Damn sonofabitch should'a been hauled in!" Grover exploded in response.

"Take it easy, Grover," Larry soothed. "It wouldn't do any good to have Lefty thrown in jail. His daddy would bail him right out, as usual, and we'd have a lot of bother having to be witnesses and all. There are better ways to deal with someone like Lefty Owens."

Christi smiled weakly at Larry and wondered why Kelly couldn't seem to appreciate him. She admired his confident aura, and trusted his good advice. Christi didn't have any idea what Larry meant when he said 'there are better ways to deal with someone like Lefty Owens,' but she was sure he would think of something appropriate.

Larry looked away from his stricken friends for a moment and clenched his fists at his side. Then with a firm, confident pat on Christi's shoulder, he reassured her again, "Don't worry about the police not doing anything to Lefty. I promise you, Christi, there are better ways to deal with someone like Lefty Owens."

Chapter 14  
November 3, 1963

Prudence took an apple from the small refrigerator in the quarters' cramped kitchen and slowly walked outside. The sky was a bright blue with only a couple of puffy clouds to the southwest over the river. The sun was still warm, but her heart was too heavy to feel it caress her dark skin.

She stood on the stoop for a moment, leaning against the open screen door, undecided on her course, and for the thousandth time felt the quiet isolation of the white neighborhood where she had lived in slave's quarters for all of her seventeen years.

Down the street, a dog barked and it sounded friendly. She decided to seek its companionship. She took a bite of apple as she stepped down from the stoop onto the worn brick path. The screen door slammed behind her.

The tall thin Negro girl went in the direction of the dog's bark, but never caught up with it. Almost by accident, she found herself heading toward the river, to the spot where she and Ray had parked the night before he left.

*Hard to believe that that was Friday night and now it's only Sunday afternoon. This Army experience is going to be an eternity. She looked up as a cloud momentarily darkened the sun and then passed on quickly. "You're right, Lord," she whispered aloud, "thank you for reminding me."*

*Prudence moped on alone, reflecting on her isolation. I could invite a friend over sometime. Too proud, I suppose. Our place is no worse than anyone else's, but it's slave quarters. Neat, clean, efficient, remodeled slave quarters. And everybody probably thinks it's better than it is because of the Boudreaux name. Nice people, but so white.*

She looked around and felt the desolation of the river vantage point that had seemed cozy and romantic in the car with Ray.

A black station wagon turned down the dirt road and Prudence's first impulse was to hide.

*I must be getting paranoid after that incident at Tolbert's yesterday. Relax.*

As the car approached, she wished she had followed her first instinct.

"Well, well, well. Look who's down here by the river, boys. If it ain't the little Boudreaux nigger."

Prudence tried to ignore them, her eyes darting around quickly for an escape route. The hill behind her was almost straight up, and too slick with brown grass to climb. *Oh, God!* Her heart pounded out a plea. Another cloud passed in front of the sun.

*Oh, God!*

The car engine shut off. Lefty Owens was the first one out. Three others followed.

"We gonna have our picnic here, Lefty?"

"Looks good to me. Even got a little nigger gal to wait on us. Ain't that right, little nigger gal?"

*God, I want to spit in his face. Lord, give me strength.*

"I said, 'Ain't that right, little nigger gal?'"

"Yes, sir, that's right."

"Well, then, step on over to the car and fetch us some beer, nigger, and don't try to run off. That wouldn't be too friendly and I just might get upset."

"Yes, sir." Prudence walked quickly to the station wagon and looked in the back seat.

"Open the tailgate, nigger. Beer's in the cooler. Niggers are so dumb. Don't know where the beer is."

Prudence unlatched the tailgate, rolled down the window and lifted the cooler lid.

*Oh, God! There must be nearly two cases in here. And they're already drunk.*

She pulled out four cold cans from the ice, and a chill went through her.

*Oh, God! Let them all pass out soon.*

"You didn't get one for yourself, nigger."

"No, sir, I don't drink."

"Right. And you don't steal." They all laughed at her.

*God, would it be so wrong to kill them? I could kill them all. If I had a knife, I'd kill them all.*

She looked at her hands quivering in fear and rage.

"Bring me 'nother one, nigger."



"Me, too."

"Yes, sir."

*God, how long can this go on?*

She looked up and the sky was still a bright blue. As the afternoon wore on, pent-up terror and anger began taking their toll on the young girl's psyche. She wanted to run, to fight, to kill, to hide, to cry, to be white.

*Where are you, God? Where are you?*

"Beer, nigger!"

"Yes, sir." Prudence had lost count of her trips to the car, but she was exhausted from fear. Her mouth was dry. She took a piece of ice and sucked on it, trotting back to the group.

"There are only two beers left, sir."

"You been drinking our beer, nigger?"

"No, sir."

One of the group stood up and peed at her feet.

"I saw you take something out of that cooler and put it to your mouth. Was that some of my beer?"

"No, sir, that was a piece of ice. I was getting hot and just wanted a piece of ice. I didn't drink your beer."

"You're an uppity nigger, ain't you? Taking my ice without asking."

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

"I'll bet you're gonna be sorry."

"Now, wait a minute," Lefty slurred. "Maybe this nigger gal ain't all bad."

"What?"

"Yeah, maybe this nigger gal ain't all bad. She's been getting that beer all afternoon without a word of complaint. Not as lazy as most niggers I've seen. I think she deserves a little reward."

"Shit, Lefty! You crazy? Reward a nigger?"

"Boys, boys, boys, when will you learn to trust ole Lefty?"

They all laughed.

"Didn't we have a good time last night? And you thought a costume party at the country club would be boring. Listen to Lefty, boys, and you'll go far."

"So what's her reward?"

"This is the same nigger that wanted an ice cream sundae at Tolbert's yesterday. Ain't that right, nigger?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, boys, I think she's earned it. What's your favorite flavor of ice cream, nigger gal?"

"Vanilla, sir, but I don't think ... "

"That's right, nigger. You don't think. Ed, you take my car and get over to Tolbert's right now. Bring back a quart of their best vanilla ice cream. This nigger gal's gonna get her reward. You hurry back now. Don't let it melt."

The car and Ed disappeared, and Prudence felt the presence of the others more intensely.

"Go to school, nigger gal?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can you read?"

"Yes, sir."

"Write your whole name?"

"Yes, sir."

"Boys, what we got here is a exceptional nigger."

*God, where are you? Where are you?*

"This nigger is probably smart enough to know that if she mentions this nice picnic we've had to anybody back in town, we wouldn't take kindly to our reputations being smeared in the mud like we was some common honkies. Do you understand that, nigger?"

"Yes, sir. You don't want me to tell anyone about this."

"Wha'd I tell you, boys? This here is a exceptional nigger."

The bright blue sky was fading to a murky orchid. For the longest time, Prudence huddled quietly on the grass, pulling her knees tightly against her chest, her thin arms trembling from fright and fatigue. One of the group looked as if he might pass out any minute.

Prudence sprang to her feet and flew down the dirt road. Lefty's reflexes were quicker than she had calculated. He was only a few seconds behind her. Prudence ran and prayed.

*Oh, God! Where are you?*

Without looking back, she sensed that she was gaining distance from him, pulling ahead by at least thirty feet as she approached the creek bridge.

*Oh, God! Let me make it over the bridge and around the bend.*

She was halfway across the bridge when the black station wagon careened around the curve, heading right at her. Ed slammed on the brakes and jumped out of the car.

"If that's not a typical ungrateful nigger! Running off just when I went to all this trouble to get ice cream!"

Prudence collapsed against the hood of the car, knees trembling.

"Maybe she wanted watermelon instead, but I promised her a sundae," Lefty panted, "and, by damn, a promise is a promise, nigger or no nigger. Get in the car!"

Lefty grabbed her arm, shoved her in the back seat, and climbed in beside her. The smell of his beer breath almost made her nauseous.

*Maybe I could throw up on him,* Prudence hoped, but her stomach was too numb to cooperate. *Oh, God! Where are you?*

The car lurched forward over the bridge, up the dirt road toward the other two who had not bothered to chase after her. Lefty got out and pulled her with him.

"You sure are a skinny nigger. Don't your white folks feed you good?"

*Oh, God! Don't let me spit in his face. He'd kill me.*

"Well, no matter. We got some ice cream for you, just like I promised. What are you shaking for, nigger gal? You afraid of ice cream? It ain't poison. It's fresh from Tolbert's, just like you wanted. All us white folks like it. Now, take off your clothes, nigger gal. We wouldn't want to get your pretty dress all messed up with ice cream. I bet that dress belonged to Miss Christi Boudreaux before you got it, ain't that right? Or is that one of the bitch Kelly McCain's old dresses? I'll bet you've even got on some of those white girls' underwear. Let's have a look. I said, 'take off your clothes, nigger gal.'... Well, look here, boys. This is one skinny nigger. Bet she ain't even hardly got tits. Take off that bra and panties, nigger gal. Did you hear me? Boys, it looks like she's gonna need some help getting undressed here. Who wants to help her out of this fancy underwear so it don't get all messed up?... Well, well, now, this is one skinny nigger. Okay, nigger gal, we're going to treat you to our special chocolate sundae."

"But Lefty, I didn't bring no chocolate," Ed whined.

Lefty laughed, "We got all the chocolate we need right here."

Ed frowned, then laughed with him. The others joined in.

"Ain't that right, nigger gal? You're all the chocolate we need."

"How we gonna do this, Lefty?"

"Let's see here.... Shut up, you nekkid nigger! Your clothes is nice and safe, right over there, so you just shut up, lie still and relax. You're the one wanted a Tolbert's ice cream sundae. Ed, you grab hold this nigger gal's arms and hold 'em up over her head. You two each get hold one of her legs. Quit all that squirming around, nigger gal. We're going to a lot of trouble for you."

"Wha'cha gonna do now, Lefty?"

"Boys, boys, boys, don't you think I know how to make a chocolate sundae? Spread them legs."

Lefty pried the lid off the ice cream and grabbed a scoop of it in his hand.

"I said, 'spread them legs!'"

Ed and the others laughed hysterically as they realized what Lefty was about to do.

"Hold still, nigger gal. It ain't that cold.... Don't that feel good? Nice Tolbert's ice cream to cool down your hot nigger pussy.... How's this for a chocolate sundae, boys?"

Lefty laughed, scooping up another handful. "This here's what they call hand packed ice cream," Lefty explained. They all laughed hysterically.

"Let somebody else hold her arms awhile, Lefty. She's plumb wearing me out. Let me sit on one them legs and get a better look at what you're doin.'"

"Okay, swap out there. Now, what you bawlin' 'bout, nigger gal? Ain't that just like a nigger? Give'm what they ask for and they start cryin' for somethin' else."

"Maybe she wanted a cherry on her sundae, Lefty."

"Ed, sometimes you amaze me, boy. A cherry on top? Sure. Now, where we gonna get a cherry out here in the boonies? Shut up, nigger! That whimperin' is startin' to bother me. A cherry?"

"You don't s'pose this nigger got her own cherry?" Ed wondered out loud.

They all laughed again.

Lefty shook his head, "No nigger over eight years old got her cherry."

"I got me a hard dick here, Lefty. I could poke it in there and check it out."

"Don't you start screamin,' nigger. You made enough noise for one day. You want your tongue cut out? That's better. I'm kinda getting used to that sobbin.' Just keep it down or you'll never talk again. Don't you worry about ole Ed here, nigger. He ain't gonna hurt you none. He's just pullin' off his britches so's he don't get'em dirty and he's gonna poke around a little and see if he can find a cherry for you.... Wha'cha doin,' Ed?"

"Getting that freezing ice cream out. Think I wanna stick my dick in that?"

"Shit! You'd fuck a snake hole, Ed. Scared of a little ice cream? Besides, it's melting out already. That must be one hot pussy. Maybe I'll try it out when you're done. Go ahead. Hurry up now, Ed, I think I'll try it out.... Shit, you're lookin' good there, Ed. You found any cherry yet?"

"I'm... pokin'... 'round... in... here... pretty... good,... but... I... don't... feel... no... cherry... yet.... Aahhhhh," Ed finished.

Lefty nodded, "That's what I figured. No cherry. Well, get off there, Ed, and grab her arms again," he ordered, unzipping his pants.

"Let me try a little of that chocolate.... Yeah, just let me get in here and try a little of that chocolate.... You like this, nigger gal?... You like... havin' ole... Lefty... in your... hot... nigger... pussy?... Bet you... always... wanted a... white boy,... didn't you,... nigger?... Don't... this... feel... good?... Yeah,... nigger... gal, ... don't... this...just... feel... good?..."

\* \* \*

Prudence lay still, curled up like a kitten in the grass, long after the station wagon had disappeared down the dirt road.

She stared at a clump of weeds an inch from her eye and tried to hide behind it. The sound of a car approaching could not arouse her to move.

*Maybe they've come back to kill me.... I don't care.*

A black Corvette crawled up the incline, raising little dust in its wake. Prudence focused on it, letting the weeds blur in the foreground. The car looked vaguely familiar, but stirred an ominous feeling in her.

*I don't care. I don't care.*

She focused again on the grass and let the black car fade into the twilight.

"Pru!"

She looked in the direction of the familiar voice.

"Pru! Oh, my God, Larry! She's not moving!"

Christi jumped out of the car.

"Prudence! Prudence! Pru, are you all right?"

Prudence blinked her tear-swollen eyes and tried to focus.

*It's Christi... Christi Boudreaux.*

Pru tried to say her name, but no sound would come.

*Christi? Is that you, Christi? You are so far away....*

Prudence closed her eyes again.

"Larry, something's terribly wrong. Prudence, talk to me. We've been looking all over for you. Oh, God! I knew she was in trouble. I knew it. Larry, what are we gonna do? Prudence, tell me you're okay! Pru!"

Larry looked around at the scattered beer cans and cigarette butts littering the ground, then picked up an empty matchbook from the Vicksburg Country Club and turned it over in his hand. A quart container of Tolbert's Dairy Ice Cream dripped its remains into the dry grass next to the girl's discarded clothing. He handed the dress to Christi and she draped it over Prudence's still body. Larry knelt quietly a few feet away, not looking at her nakedness.

"Prudence," he said gently. "It's okay now. I'm Larry Llewellyn, Christi and Kelly's friend. We're going to take care of you. Nobody's going to hurt you anymore."

Christi searched his face and frowned, "What happened?"

Larry looked at her and shook his head.

Prudence opened her eyes again. She felt her dress draped over her. She saw Christi kneeling beside her, touching her shoulder gently. In the fading light, she saw a black Corvette on the road behind her friend.

"Christi..."

Christi breathed a sigh of relief at the sound of her name.

"Yes, Pru, I'm here. It's okay. I'm here."

"Christi..."

Prudence closed her eyes and when she opened them again, Christi was still kneeling beside her, touching her shoulder, stroking her back. The sky had darkened and the wind from the river blew colder. Prudence looked past the clump of weeds to the black Corvette. She couldn't shake the ominous feeling it gave her.

"Christi..."

"Yes, Pru, I'm here. Tell me what happened."

The frightened black girl looked at Larry and shook her head.

"It's all right, Pru," Larry said quietly. "I understand. You talk to Christi. She's your friend. You can tell Christi everything. I'll wait in the car. You take your time."

He rose and walked back to his car alone.

"Tell me, Pru. Tell me what happened," Christi urged.

"I can't."

"Why?"

"They'll kill me. You'll tell someone or call the police and they'll find me and kill me."

"Who?"

Prudence shook her head again.

"All right, Prudence, I swear to you that if you tell me, I won't call the police. I swear it, but you need to tell me. For your own sake, you need to tell me."

Prudence nodded and began to cry. As she dressed and sobbed out the story, her words seared the surface of Christi's soul. Christi's own anger and shame from the day and night before came rushing back to her, along with a thousand other hurts she had buried and never wanted to face. Feelings of devastation and rage fought for control of her.

"I swear to you, Prudence, I won't tell the police what happened here, but these are the same sick people who hurt me and I promise you this — they will pay for what they did to you."

"But you said you wouldn't call the police!"

"And I won't. I swear I won't."

Christi remembered the savage look on Larry's face after the fight at the country club last night. Savage, but under control. She remembered his words, she believed them with all her heart, and now she repeated them to Prudence, "Don't worry about the police not doing anything to Lefty. I promise you, Pru, there are better ways to deal with someone like Lefty Owens. There are better ways."



Chapter 15  
November 15, 1963

Christi was having trouble making herself go to school. She would see Lefty Owens and his friends in the hall and she wanted to kill them. She had told Kelly what they did to Prudence, and, for the past ten days, Christi had wanted to tell Grover, too, but she was afraid that he might actually kill them. She was trying to relax and let Larry handle it. Kelly seemed to be absolutely certain that Larry would do something about it, but nothing had happened yet.

The bruise on Christi's cheek was finally fading enough that makeup would cover it. Still, she felt the pain of it, and the pain of being thrown out of Tolbert's. In her nightmares, she heard Lefty Owens hollering "Nigger lover!" She wondered how those civil rights workers kept on doing what they were doing. She decided that they must be more than a little bit crazy.

She tried to concentrate on her classes all day, but it was impossible. Her teachers decided that she must be excited and distracted about the Homecoming game that was only a few hours away.

\* \* \*

"What are you moping about now? What more could a colored girl want?" Nellie Mae asked her only daughter.

"Here it is time for your Homecoming game, you got a new uniform on, and your team is going to the state championship. I don't know what's got into you. You haven't been the same since Ray was here."

"Mama, I'm tired of your acting like we have it so good, living out here in slave quarters, wearing hand-me-down clothes, and even a hand-me-down cheerleader's outfit from the white school, acting like I should be grateful for all this just because I'm black. Do you think it's right that we have to use their school colors so we can wear all their old uniforms? Just listen to you, Mama. 'What more could a colored girl want?' We're not colored. We're black, Mama."

"I don't like you calling us 'black.'"

"And I don't like being called 'colored' or 'Negro.' I'm black, and black is beautiful."

"Listen to you, now, picking up all that high-falutin' new talk that's just going to get you in trouble some day. The real trouble is that you don't want to be any of that. You want to be white!"

"If I were white, I'd have a white boyfriend and he wouldn't be going to Viet Nam to be killed."

"Quit talking like that, child. You're gonna bring it on, talking about it."

\* \* \*

"Now, listen, Vayda darlin.' You know I'd love to be with you tonight, but my little girl's the Homecoming Queen and I can't miss it for anything."

"Okay, I understand. Just this one Friday, but when are you going to tell her?"

"Vayda darlin,' I promised I'm gonna do something about it when Christi graduates. Just be patient a little longer. Ole Clem will make it all worth your while."

\* \* \*

"Mom, may I use your car tonight?"

"Well, sure, son, you know that I never go out after dark, especially when your daddy's out of town. What's wrong with your Corvette?"

"Nothing, but it's homecoming, you know. I just thought we might want to take some friends along later and we'd need more room, so the Cadillac will be better. I'll leave the Corvette in the garage, in case you need it."

Larry watched his mother pour herself another drink.

"You know I'd never drive that thing, son."

"Well, just in case, remember, I'm telling you that it will be in the garage all night and the keys are right here on the mantel."

"I'll remember," she nodded seriously, slurring her words slightly, "your Corvette will be in the garage all night and the keys are right here on the mantel."

\* \* \*

"*Ah, ma chère!* You look beautiful in that dress!"

"Thanks, Mama. Are my bra straps going to show?"

"Let's pin them, just to be safe, so you won't have to worry."

"Good idea. Thanks."

"Now, remember, after Grover puts the crown on you, look over so your daddy can get a good picture."

"Yes, Mama, I will."

"And please don't expect us to entertain Grover's father after the game."

"I don't think his father will be there. They have a sick cow."

"My goodness, why don't they call the veterinarian?"

"They can't afford a vet, Mama."

"Oh, my dear, I'm so sorry."

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes, my child, it does matter. One of these days you may see that it matters very much."

\* \* \*

"Yes, ladies and gentlemen, fans from Vicksburg and fans from Jackson, this is quite a game! A minute thirty-five to go and tied twenty-four, twenty-four. Only a few seconds left in Jackson's last time-out. No matter what the final score may be, this one will be talked about for years to come!

"All right now, play resumes and it's fourth and two on the Vicksburg twenty yard line. It looks like Jackson will go for it, but they better watch out! Here comes Grover Jones from the sideline! He is definitely limping, but he's back in the game!"

\* \* \*

“Well, well, well, look at this, boys. Llewellyn’s Corvette. Let’s us follow a while and see what that little red-headed prick is doing out in our neck o’ the woods. He ought to be at the Homecoming dance with Miss Kelly McCain.”

“Maybe we should get his attention and invite him to have a drink with us, Lefty. Show there’s no hard feelings.”

All four in the black station wagon laughed.

“Sometimes you amaze me, Ed. Yeah, sometimes you just amaze me. Let’s do that. Let’s invite the little prick for a drink.”

The station wagon speeded up as it followed the sleek sports car onto a dark narrow side road.

\* \* \*

The scene in the gym was exactly as Christi had dreamed it would be — green and white crepe-paper streamers and balloons on the festive ceilings and walls; long folding tables set up around the room, each draped identically with rented white cloths and decorated with small centerpieces of green candles and white carnations. Sprigs of dark green ivy peeked from the centerpieces, trailed across the tablecloths and hung in garlands around the skirted stage where a six-piece band was playing the latest songs under a subdued spotlight.

Although everything looked right, it didn’t feel right to Christi. This should be the greatest night of her life, but there was a pall over all of it. She was happy to be with Grover, but the rest of it was empty.

She watched Carol Jean, who was with Cameron, throwing herself all over him, but Cameron couldn’t keep his eyes off Kelly. Larry, who was with Kelly, was being charming to everyone, but it was obvious that he might as well have been without a date for all the attention Kelly was giving him.

Finally, sometime after midnight, Larry excused himself from Kelly and walked around the table to the other unlikely couple. Kelly’s heart beat faster as Larry leaned over to ask Carol Jean for the next dance, leaving Cameron and Kelly alone at their big table for the first time all evening.

Kelly smiled expectantly.

*Cameron will have to ask me to dance now. And it's a slow one. He'll have to hold me now.*

The lights dimmed as the bandleader announced in a whisper over the song's introduction that the very next dance would be the last one. Kelly held her breath, waiting for Cameron. He turned to her just as Larry took Carol Jean in his arms.

"Nice evening?" Cameron asked after a long look.

"Not yet," she replied with as much meaning as she dared.

Cameron leaned back in his chair and hummed the song's melody.

*Oh, God! He's trying to drive me crazy. Cameron! Cameron! You can hum anytime! Dance with me! Hold me! Cameron!*

"This is nice," he smiled. "I love this song."

He hummed again.

*Cameron! Look at me! Hold me!*

"Would you like to dance, Kelly?"

"I guess. If you want to."

"Oh, well, nevermind. The song's almost over and I'll bet you're tired. You've danced with every guy here."

*Not with you, Cameron! I haven't danced with you, she screamed inside. Why do you always do this to me?*

As the band repeated the final chorus, Cameron looked straight into Kelly's eyes and said, "I'm taking Carol Jean home at one. Could I stop by to see you after that?"

The song ended with a plaintive chord.

Kelly nodded, "Of course. I'll be home by one."

The lights dimmed their lowest for the last dance. Cameron rose as Carol Jean and Larry approached their table. He held out his hand to Carol Jean and led her to the dance floor. Larry sat beside Kelly, his arm draped over the back of her chair.

"Shall we?" he asked.

"Shall we what?"

"Go park by the river?"

"Lar-ry!"

"Well, then, how about a dance?"

"Okay."

He laughed as he led her onto the crowded floor.

"You're not being very romantic for the last dance," she pouted.

"Not much point in it, is there?" he asked, pulling her roughly toward him.

\* \* \*

By the time Cameron arrived at one-thirty, Kelly had changed clothes three times and was waiting at the front door wearing slacks and a sweater. Cameron had traded his suit for a pair of jeans.

"Let's go for a drive," he whispered under the porch light.

Kelly nodded. "I'll leave a note on the refrigerator."

Cameron followed her down the dark hall to the dimly-lighted kitchen and watched as she wrote, "*Going for a ride with Cameron. 1:30. Love, Kelly.*"

She stuck the paper on the refrigerator door with a Mickey Mouse magnet, then turned to Cameron in the semi-dark room. His eyes were on her as they had been at the dance and suddenly she felt too weak to stand.

Cameron reached for her hand and pulled her toward him as he leaned back against the kitchen sink. With his other arm, he encircled her and drew her body close. His lips found hers and touched lightly. She responded to his kiss and pressed her body harder against him.

All her hopes and fears and dreams of Cameron flooded into that kiss and, before their lips had parted, Kelly was wondering if it felt good to Cameron — if he would always want to kiss her like this — if he would always want her as much as she wanted him.

Without another word, he took her hand and led her out to the car. They drove in silence for a while, awkward at being together after the long evening of waiting. Kelly looked at Cameron's profile and dreamed.

He reached over to turn up the radio and began singing along with Elvis, "*There's no strings upon this heart of mine, It was always you from the start; Treat me right, Treat me good, Treat me like you really should, 'Cause I'm not made of wood and I don't have a Wooden Heart.*"

Kelly closed her eyes, leaned back in the seat and hummed along, lost in the sound of Elvis and Cameron in stereo, daring to dream *"There's no strings upon this heart of mine..."*

Cameron drove aimlessly, listening to the music, painfully aware of Kelly sitting at the far side of the front seat, cool and aloof by the door, unaffected by the kiss he had tried to make perfect.

*What do you want? Why are you here with me? Why won't you tell me what you're thinking? Kelly! Listen to the music! Listen! These words are for you!*

He tried to be casual, reaching over to turn up the radio and singing along with Elvis, *"There's no strings upon this heart of mine, It was always you from the start; Treat me right, Treat me good, Treat me like you really should, 'Cause I'm not made of wood and I don't have a Wooden Heart."*

He looked over and saw Kelly close her eyes and lean back in the seat, humming along, probably bored with him.

*Kelly, why can't you hear me? "There's no strings upon this heart of mine, It was always you from the start..."*

Kelly opened her eyes and panicked.

"Cameron, are we going to Larry's house?"

Reflexively, Cameron put on the brakes and looked around, realizing that without thinking, he had been heading in the direction of the Llewellyn estate.

"I wasn't paying attention," he apologized, making a quick U-turn.

*Now she's going to think I'm crazy. Why can't I ever do anything right with her?*

Elvis sang alone, *"...And I don't have a Wooden Heart."*

Cameron drove south, parallel with the river, wondering what Kelly was thinking. In the dark silence, his heart skipped a beat when he saw flashing red lights on the road ahead. An ambulance without its sirens on approached at a leisurely pace, heading toward town. Seconds later, another one turned onto the main highway, following the first. Cameron slowed to a stop along the shoulder and peered down the intersecting asphalt road. In the distance, more lights flashed red and yellow.

"You want to see what's going on?" he asked.

"Sure," Kelly nodded.

Cameron turned onto the side road. Just over the first rise, where the blacktop curved downward and narrowed to a one-lane bridge, they came upon the accident scene. Red lights of a Warren County Sheriff's Department patrol car flashed in deathly silence. The yellow lights of Bennett's Water Street Garage illuminated a muddy, dripping, black station wagon hoisted up behind.

Kelly and Cameron got out of his car together.

"That looks like Nick Nichols," Kelly whispered. "Let's ask him what happened."

Cameron and Kelly approached the scene in respectful silence. The short, fireplug of a man was the youngest of the county's deputy sheriffs. He looked up from scribbling in his small spiral notebook, and grimly nodded in recognition.

"What happened?" Cameron asked.

"Drunk kids. Missed the curve, crashed through that low guard rail and into the water. All four of them drowned." Nichols shook his head and sighed.

"Who were they?" Kelly wanted to know for sure.

The uniformed broad chest and shoulders loomed large in front of Kelly as she looked squarely at his sober face and into his penetrating eyes.

"Your friend Lefty Owens apparently was driving," Nichols answered slowly, searching her face in the intermittent light from his patrol car and the wrecker.

Kelly returned his stare.

"Don't call Lefty Owens a friend of mine," Kelly declared boldly. "I'm just glad there wasn't some other car involved and that he didn't kill anybody else."

"He did. There were three others in the car."

"I'm sure I know who they were too. It's no great loss for Vicksburg," she added defiantly.

"Maybe not, but just keep quiet about this until I have a chance to get back in town and call on the families. By the way, does your mama know you're out this late, young lady?"

"I left a note on the refrigerator."

"Well, I suggest you take her home, Mister Coulter," he nodded at Cameron. "It's after two."



"Yes, sir, we were on our way home when we saw the ambulance," Cameron lied glibly.

Cameron and Kelly rode home in silence.

Nick Nichols finished his official report of the accident and filed away in his mind the unofficial 'open case' version which included the fact that Kelly McCain, known to have a vendetta against Lefty Owens and to be dating Larry Llewellyn, had arrived at the scene with Cameron Coulter, known to be dating Carol Jean Tolbert and to be a friend of Larry Llewellyn. He frowned.

What bothered the deputy was his nagging, as-yet-unfounded hunch that this had not been a random accident any more than the country club incident with Lefty Owens two weeks ago had been a random Halloween prank.

Nichols lit up a cigarette and leaned back against his patrol car, reflecting. He might be the youngest man on the force, but he was smart, and he had grown up in Vicksburg. He knew these people. Every instinct told him that something was not right.

Chapter 16  
November 19, 1963

Everybody who was anybody in Vicksburg turned out for the funerals of Leftwich Ozias "Lefty" Owens and his friends. Deputy Sheriff Nick Nichols officially was there to pay his respects to the families. Unofficially, as always, he was observing everything and constantly adding to his vast knowledge of the inner workings of Warren County, Mississippi.

Cameron Coulter was there as president of the senior class, along with other representatives of the high school from which the four would have graduated in another six months. Kelly McCain was there because she knew Cameron would be. Larry Llewellyn had borrowed his mother's Cadillac to give Kelly and Christi a ride. He invited Prudence as well.

Prudence Washington, of course, had to stand outside the church, not daring to go in and try to sit among the white folks, and certainly not eligible to be placed with "the families' niggers" in the reserved pew immediately behind the next-of-kin. After the service, Larry asked the three girls if they wanted to go to the cemetery.

The thin black girl nodded, and murmured through clenched teeth, "I want to hear the dirt thud against those caskets. Then, maybe. I'll be satisfied." She sat in the back seat with Christi. The trio of girls rode in silence, each wondering if justice had been done divinely, coincidentally, or deliberately.

Larry drove his mother's car sedately, saying nothing, feeling the satisfaction and loneliness of competence.

\* \* \*

"...for which let us give thanks as we gather together and bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies, from Thy bounty, through Christ, Our Lord. Amen."

*That blessing is just like me, Christi thought as she made the Sign of the Cross during the silence following her father's Amen. Part Boudreaux. Part Lepeltier. Part father. Part mother.*

*Part old. Part new. What am I anyway?... Sixteen years old and what am I?... Well, whatever it is, it's better than being that turkey.*

All eyes were on the perfectly browned bird in front of Clement Boudreaux. He stood to carve and the conversations resumed.

"Now, hurry up, Clement. You know those babies can't be good for long," Christi's mother interjected as her father poured his third glass of wine. "Everybody help yourselves to the vegetables and start passing things around."

Always the same admonitions. Every year more Boudreaux babies. Nellie Mae and Prudence would try to keep them all quiet during the Thanksgiving dinner. One o'clock. Nap time for most of them anyway. Christi was cousin to thirteen girls now, all but the eldest living in Vicksburg. Besides the teen-age Christi and her California cousin Maggie, the other girls were under six years old, all offspring of Clem Boudreaux's younger brothers, of whom Billy was the most vocal at dinner conversation, as usual.

"Well, I don't care. Somebody better stop them Commies before they take over the world. Once you let'em take over Viet Nam, there goes the rest of Southeast Asia. There won't be no end to it."

All nodded assent.

In the silence that followed, Christi asked, "How did it all start, Daddy?"

Clem Boudreaux took another sip of wine, looked at his innocent daughter, and sighed, "That's a hard question, Christi. It reminds me of a story John F. Kennedy used to tell about the outbreak of the First World War."

At the mention of Kennedy's name, a pall descended on the large family. It had been less than a week since the young president had been assassinated before their eyes and the wound was fresh in all of them. No one breathed as they waited for the eldest brother to go on with Kennedy's anecdote about how the war began. Clem poured himself another glass of wine and continued.

"Kennedy would tell how diplomatic negotiations dragged on through the long summer of 1914 and then terminated in

hostilities. With war upon them, Prince Von Bulow approached his successor, the German Chancellor, and asked, 'How did it all begin?' And the German Chancellor answered solemnly, 'Ach, if one could only say.'"

Silence.

"Sure is good dressing, Helène."

"Thank you, John. Have some more gibley gravy on it."

"B'lieve I will."

"It's the same old thing it's always been. Commies trying to take over the world."

"Just like damn Yankees, trying to take over the whole country. Making promises they can't keep. Hard enough for a white man with good sense to scratch out a decent living and now they want to give hand-outs to niggers."

"But you know, this Viet Nam thing could turn out to be a blessing in disguise. Just keep shipping our niggers over there to get blown away. That'll cut down on the hand-outs we gotta give 'em over here."

"For Christ's sake, I don't know what this country's coming to. Niggers are gonna be the ruin of it..."

\* \* \*

"...Gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you again, as we leave to go our separate ways, for the opportunity to gather here together as a family on this Thanksgiving Day, in peace and love, to enjoy the fruits of Thy Harvest, this food for the nourishment of our bodies, from Thy bounty, through Christ, Our Lord. Amen."

"Amen."

Clem Boudreaux opened another bottle of wine. Chairs scuffed across the hardwood floor, china and crystal clinked to the kitchen, and televised football droned through the house, occasionally punctuated by lazy conversation and a few snores. Christi surreptitiously picked up the black hall phone.

"Kelly, can you come over?"

"Who's there? Did y'all eat yet?"

"Ate at one. Every Boudreaux in the county is here, but I don't care."

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. Maybe nothing. Maybe it's just me."

"Okay. I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

Christi took the last apple from the refrigerator and slowly walked outside. The sun was still warm, but the air had a crispness now and the grass didn't spring back after each footstep. She tried to settle down under her reading tree with Pride and Prejudice while she waited for Kelly, but a nameless agitation kept her from concentrating.

*Maybe it's because I read this years ago when I wanted to and I don't want to read it again for a stupid old book report. Being a senior is definitely not what it was cracked up to be.*

The words swam together on the page and Christi had the feeling she had lived this moment before or that she was foreseeing the future.

*If I look up, I'll see the gardenia bushes against the side of the house and the sky will be a right blue with a couple of puffy white clouds to the southwest over the river. Then a dog will bark and I'll hear a screen door slam and I'll know I can predict the future.*

She looked up and saw the gardenia bushes against the side of the house, thick and green as she had imagined them. She let her eyes travel up past the windows and roof to the bright blue sky beyond. The constancy of its color was interrupted only by a couple of puffy white clouds to the southwest over the river. A second later she heard a dog bark and she waited tensely for the slam of a screen door so that the spell would not be broken...

"Christi!...Telephone!... It's Johnny Chambers!"

Christi was startled by the sound of her mother's voice calling from the front door at the same time Kelly turned into the driveway. Christi mumbled under her breath. *"Why does she care so much about Johnny Chambers and his money? I'll have plenty of my own money from Daddy."*

"Tell him I've gone for a ride with Kelly," Christi answered over her shoulder as she tossed her book on the porch and headed for the car, "and I'll see him at school sometime next week."

The determination and coolness in Christi's voice stopped her mother from protesting. She stood, immobilized with frustration, watching Christi get in the car and drive away, then, remembering Johnny on the phone, hurried back into the house. The screen door slammed behind her, but it was of no use to Christi. The spell had already been broken and she knew she could not predict the future.

\* \* \*

"Well, Jody," the fat man huffed, "I guess this about finishes'r up."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Watson," the young mulatto grinned as he stacked the final box in Watson's station wagon, "That should do it. I was surprised you found a buyer so fast. I didn't even know the marina was for sale."

"Heh, heh," Watson chuckled, "lotsa folks may think I'm slow, but I do all right. Sold this place for more than it's worth. 'A fool and his money,' you know. Heh, heh. 'A fool and his money....'"

Watson absently followed the boy to the tool shed for a last look around, puffing from the extra weight of a huge Thanksgiving dinner. The late November sun sank unspectacularly over the Crescent City as they emerged from the small wooden building and ambled along the sea wall.

Relieved of the employer-employee relationship, the older man drifted idly into a monologue of reminiscing about the yacht club that Jody would soon be managing. Many of the unsavory details that Jody had heard earlier from PapaLew were carefully edited out of Watson's version.

Darkness sneaked up on them, and Watson seemed suddenly startled by it.

"Appreciate you coming down here on Thanksgiving to help me out, boy," he said gruffly, thrusting his hand toward Jody in a gesture of friendship. "Guess it's time to go now."

"Yes, sir," Jody nodded, looking intently at his own expensive new watch. "It's definitely time to go now."

With his right hand, Jody firmly gripped Watson's. With his left, he grabbed the old man's shoulder, whirled him

around off balance, and shoved him from the sea wall into the cold turgid Mississippi River.

In the dim light, Jody saw the whites of Watson's eyes grow large, and watched his mouth open silently in horror like a fish when the hook sets. Watson flailed helplessly in the water for a few seconds, stiffened in pain, and sank out of sight. Jody peered intently into the black water and counted slowly to a hundred before turning toward the office to phone for help.

"This is Jody French at the Crescent City Yachting Club and Marina. I think my boss just had a heart attack..."

\* \* \*

*Dearest Ray,*

*I miss you so much, but to answer your question, not a single thing has happened in Vicksburg in the whole time you've been gone. Dull, dull, dull, as usual in this town. No news at all. I'm fine except for missing you! It seems you've been gone forever.*

*Speaking of forever, the whole Boudreaux clan was here for Thanksgiving dinner today and I had to keep all those babies quiet for two hours! That was forever! And, I helped cook, so I'm exhausted. Will write again in the morning.*

*See you in my dreams.... Love always... Pru*

\* \* \*

The weeks before Christmas vacation were hot, muggy, and interminably long. Christi and Kelly tried to befriend Prudence and cheer her up, but Prudence was becoming progressively more quiet and hard to reach. She spent most of her spare time writing in spiral notebooks that she hid between her mattress and box springs. She started learning to cook and made brownies to send to Ray for Christmas.

\* \* \*

*"Mon Dieu! C'est magnifique!"*

*"You really like it, Mom?"*

"Christi, it's exquisite. And, Grover, what can I say? This is not simply a wonderful Christmas present for Christi, it is a testimony to your talent."

"That's nice of you to say, Miz Boudreaux."

"I'm not saying it to be nice, Grover. I grew up in Paris. Remember? I assure you that one cannot reside in Paris without learning something of art."

"She's right, boy," Clem added grudgingly. "The woman knows something about art, and, if she says it's good, then it's good, and that's final. Matter of fact, I like it myself. Reminds me of the flowers on Christi's wallpaper, but damned if they don't look alive in your painting."

"*Vraiment*. Alive. Such jubilant yellows bursting into a bouquet of life! Ah, Grover, now I understand," Helène smiled. "Now, I understand."



Chapter 17  
February 21, 1964

Margaret Rose Stevenson contemplated the initials on her pillowcase and, for the thousandth time, was amused at the irony of it. She would never be "MRS" Anybody. Her brown eyes wandered to the other pillowcase that was almost completely covered with a mass of dark curls. Gently, she smoothed them back.

"Time to get up, Sleepyhead. Your public is waiting."

"Oh, Maggie, can't you ever sleep late?" the soft voice purred.

Like a cat stretching after a long nap, Alessandra raised both arms up until her hands reached the mirror that served as a headboard for their king-sized bed. Pushing against it, she straightened her body and rolled over.

The white lace nightshirt that had been loosely wrapped around her fell open, fully revealing her flawless body. Alessandra smiled dreamily, her eyes still closed, and reached out with her right hand.

"Too late!" Maggie laughed on her way to the shower. She closed the bathroom door, then reappeared briefly.

"But, did I mention how exquisitely beautiful you are this morning? Like a *trachops cirrhosus* waiting for its prey."

"It's my business to be beautiful," Alessandra replied to the mirror.

She rolled over on her stomach, propped herself up on her elbows, and noted with satisfaction that she was indeed exquisite. Good for several more years. Maybe the eye job in a year or two. Not wanting to think about that, she turned again and relaxed on her back. Great legs, for sure. She lifted one up slowly in the air. Admired it. Let it down. Then the other. Exercise. Enough for today.

Alessandra rose languorously and padded barefoot to the front door, opening it cautiously to the full morning sun, retrieving the *Los Angeles Times* from its place on the mat, and lifting a handful of mail from the large brass mailbox that had recently replaced the small old black one.

"Your turn in the bathroom," Maggie called out. "Five minutes for me. Fifty-five for you."

Allessandra let the paper drop on the bed and continued leafing absently through yesterday's mail.

"What's a *trachops* whatever-you-said?" she asked languidly.

"A frog-eating bat," was the unexpected reply. "A truly fascinating creature," Maggie laughed.

"Speaking of fascinating creatures," Allessandra interrupted, "here's a letter from your twit cousin Christi in Vicksburg. It's marked 'Urgent!'"

She continued in a faked Southern drawl, "Wondah what sort of melahdrahmah is unfolding along the Mississippi now. Could it be that precious Grover stubbed his toe on a cow patty, or perhaps the elusive Cameron has asked Kelly to return his Christmas card? Oh, Maggie, how evah will you solve this one?"

"Jealously does not become you, my dear," Maggie warned, taking the letter and walking toward the kitchen.

Heading for the bathroom, Allessandra shrugged grandly and glanced at the mirror for the effect. Somehow, it was unsatisfying.

Maggie poured a glass of orange juice and sat in a comfortable rattan chair under the indoor shade of a huge ficus tree. She sighed and opened the letter.

February 17, 1964

Dear Maggie,

*The most awful thing has happened! Prudence's boyfriend has been killed in Viet Nam! He wasn't even there a week! Since he didn't have any relatives, he put Prudence's name down as next-of-kin and they just told her they're shipping the body back to Vicksburg for burial.*

*Pru's hysterical and Nellie Mae can't do anything with her. Their preacher is out back with them now, but Prudence didn't want to talk to him. She won't even talk to me or Kelly. She screamed at us that if Ray had been white, he never would have been sent over there to be shot at. The way she looked at us, you would have thought the whole war was our fault.*

*But, there's something even worse that nobody else knows but Kelly and me. Prudence (now swear you won't tell anybody this!) was raped a couple of days after Halloween. She thinks she's pregnant. What can we do? You're the only girl I know who's been around enough to have any sensible ideas. (I don't mean that in a bad way.) Mama would go into shock. You know how proper she is after growing up in Paris and all! I hate to think what Nellie Mae would do.*

*Please stop whatever you're doing and answer this letter or call me immediately. Thanks.*

*Love,  
Christi*

*P.S. Cameron did not give Kelly a Valentine, which is exactly what I expected.*

Maggie methodically tore the letter into shreds and mixed it into the garbage with yesterday's coffee grounds. With a glance toward the bedroom, she picked up the kitchen wall phone and dialed a local number.

"Hey, it's Maggie.... Didn't you tell me you knew a doctor in Memphis who does scrapes? Some guy who lived near you in Atlanta and got run out of town?... For God's sake, of course it's not me!... Somebody you don't know.... If you've got it, just give me the name and number. I've gotta get off the phone.... Okay, thanks.... Bye."

Maggie hung up the phone and busied herself making coffee and scrambling eggs until Alessandra appeared, towel-drying her luxurious hair.

"Well, what's the crisis in the Deep South this time?"

"Cameron didn't give Kelly a Valentine."

\* \* \*

Prudence Washington lay absolutely still and tried to keep her breathing shallow and steady. She could hear her mother stirring in the next room.

*Hurry. Hurry. Get out of here.*

She felt the saliva forming in her mouth and knew it would soon be too full to swallow.

*If only I could swallow a little. Just a little. Please, God!*

Even as she prayed, she felt the flood of saliva and then the sickening bile rising to her throat. Her face prickled with heat at the same time her hands and feet turned cold and clammy. Damp perspiration coated her forehead.

*Breathe! Lie still and breathe! I will not be sick! I will not be sick!*

The bile was in her throat now, fighting to mix with the saliva. Slowly, Prudence turned her head to the side. Slowly, slowly, so as not to move any other part of her body, she opened her mouth and let some of the saliva trickle onto the towel she had placed on her pillow last night. The saliva poured out.

*Breathe! Breathe! I will not be sick!*

A trickle of perspiration dropped onto the towel as the foul-tasting bile nearly choked her.

*Breathe! Breathe! Lie still and breathe! I will not be sick! Please, God, don't let me be sick!*

The quarters' front door closed quietly, followed by the squeak and thud of the screen.

*She's gone! Thank God, she's gone! Breathe! Breathe!*

The knot in her stomach slowly began to rise, up, up, slowly, up, until it was caught in her throat and choking her. An involuntary chill and shudder passed through her entire body and the bile overpowered her. The taste of vomit was in her mouth, the smell of it everywhere. Prudence grabbed the towel, pressed it against her mouth, and ran gagging to the bathroom.

\* \* \*

February 29, 1964

Dear Maggie,

*You were right, as usual. Everyone did seem to calm down a bit after the funeral. Prudence looks really terrible, though, and is starting to lose weight. She's been throwing up all over the place, but everyone thinks it's because she's so upset over Ray.*

*Prudence grabbed me and Kelly after the funeral and made us swear that we hadn't said anything to Nellie Mae or anyone*

*about "the problem." We swore we hadn't talked to anyone in Vicksburg, and we told her we had an idea to help her out, but wouldn't discuss it with her while she was acting so crazy. We're going to take your advice and leave her alone for a few days. Maybe she'll come around. I hope you're right!*

*Thanks for calling, and for everything!*

*Love,*

*Christi*

*P.S. Kelly won first prize in the George Washington Essay Contest at school. She wrote a series of letters between George and a fictitious friend of his in England during the Revolutionary War. The judges said it was creative and original, though stretching the contest guidelines. Kelly turned it in as a joke!*

\* \* \*

A skinny black hand, ungloved, protruded from a heavy coat sleeve, pointing straight out the old Chevy's window to indicate a left turn onto the muddy cemetery road. Five hundred feet behind, Nick Nichols slowed his patrol car carefully in the misting rain that turned these asphalt country roads into treachery.

He noted that the Chevy's right brake light was burned out. Old car. Young black girl driving. Probably no brakes, either. He sighed, snubbed out his cigarette in the overflowing ashtray, and turned into the mud rut made by the offending vehicle. No need for lights or siren. She would stop soon enough along the horseshoe-shaped drive.

He waited, a hundred feet back, while the girl got out of the car and plodded through the unkempt cemetery to a freshly mounded grave. Oblivious to his presence, she stood in a daze, unmoving, arms hanging limply at her sides. The rain became more insistent, but she did not flinch as it stung her face and soaked her uncovered mass of black hair.

Nichols glanced at his watch. He was officially off duty five minutes ago, but as usual, he had found something of interest to keep him later. He radioed his location and watched the unmoving black figure in the rain. For a second, he let his brain trick him into believing the girl had

disappeared and left a statue in her place. Still, he waited. He tried to imagine what grief could hold a person immobile in the rain, but as always, he shifted back into his own reverie, which was a peaceful one.

Nick Nichols recognized himself as one of the truly blessed people on earth who had found a fulfilling career that made him look forward to getting up in the morning.

*I may never be the Sheriff of Warren County, but one of these days, I'll get on the city force and I'll make Chief, the Deputy assured himself for the hundredth time in his short career. And I'll be a damn good Chief. Who knows? After that? Maybe I'll even become the mayor of Vicksburg.*

Nichols smiled and unconsciously lit up another cigarette.

The last cigarette was cold in the ashtray before the young black girl moved, trudging slowly back to her car through thick, sucking mud. Nichols met her in the road, thankful that the rain had eased a little.

"Scuse me, Miss," he interrupted her solitude, as politely as if she were a white girl.

She looked up, obviously surprised to hear a voice, but not startled.

"Yes, sir?" she answered calmly, looking directly at the man's face.

Nichols was momentarily taken aback by the directness of her gaze and her total lack of fear. Seldom did anyone, black or white, confront the deputy sheriff without a shadow of awe or fear or guilt. Then he remembered where he had seen this black girl.

"May I see your driver's license?"

"I don't have one, sir."

"Hmmm. Is this your car?"

"No, sir."

Still no awe or fear or guilt on her face.

*This girl has been through hell, Nichols realized. Nothing can hurt her now. Her own pain is her shield.*

"Whose car is it?"

"Mister Clement Boudreaux's, sir."

Nichols was not surprised to hear the name that had just been on his mind. He prided himself on being two steps ahead of the facts.

"Does he know you're driving it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you work for him?"

"No, sir, not exactly, but my mother does."

"And you don't have a driver's license?"

"No, sir."

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen, sir."

"And what's your name?"

"Prudence Washington, sir."

"And you live with the Boudreaux family?"

"Yes, sir. Out back, sir."

"Do you know Clem's office phone number?"

"Yes, sir."

Nichols scribbled the information in his notebook.

"Who taught you to drive?"

"Mister Boudreaux. Did I do something wrong?"

"Your car got my attention because the right brake light is burned out. Did you know that?"

"No, sir."

"And, of course, you've been driving without a license."

"Yes, sir," she maintained, with undeniable poise.

Nichols debated internally a moment. He could take the girl in, leave the car out here miles from town, and cause everybody a lot of aggravation, or...

"Am I in trouble, sir?"

Nichols looked past her to the fresh gravesite, and shook his head, "No. You've had enough trouble."

"Yes, sir," the girl sighed.

"Family member?"

"No, sir. Boyfriend, sir."

"Car wreck?"

"No, sir... Viet Nam."

Nichols flinched, remembering his own recent tour. "I'm sorry," he nodded, and Prudence believed that he truly was.

Chapter 18  
March 7, 1964

"Is there anything else I can get for you now, Miss Fennstemmacher?"

"No, Grover, thank you. You've been very kind. I'm surprised a young man like you could make such delicious chicken soup."

"I used to watch my momma," he paused, then went on with a catch in his voice. "She always said it was good for what ails you. Have some more before you go to sleep."

"I may do that, but I feel better already. To tell you the truth, I thought I was dying this afternoon. I've never felt so weak. It scares me to think what might have happened if you hadn't checked on me."

"Now, Miss Fennstemmacher, we know you're not going to die of the flu." In the brief silence that followed, they both, uncomfortably, remembered her father's funeral last fall, after his short bout of influenza.

"And, if I hadn't checked on you, one of your friends would have," Grover added hastily. Just as quickly, he realized that her phone seldom rang and no car ever pulled into the driveway except Grover's or those of his friends.

"Still," she smiled weakly, "it was you, and I'm grateful. Tell me what I can do to repay you."

"Nothing," he shook his head. "I don't need anything."

"I insist. Name it."

The image of Christi Boudreaux flashed through his mind.

"Okay," Grover grinned. "A place to come back to after I've gone off to college. Let me keep some things here."

"Consider it done. This will be your official Vicksburg home."

"Not a bad trade, I'd say," Grover laughed lightly. "A home in Vicksburg for a pot of chicken soup."

"My kingdom for a horse," she replied. "Sounds fair to me."

"Fine. Now that the horse-trading's finished, you get some sleep. Call me if you need anything later. I think I'll run by Christi's for awhile," he said, pulling out a slip of paper and



scribbling on it. "Here's the number where you can reach me."

"I have the number right here," the old lady tapped on her temple. "You gave it to me at Christmastime."

"Oh, yes, ma'am. Well, I'll be going now. Do you want me to turn out any of these lamps?" he asked, glancing around the dimly lit, ornate parlor, exquisitely furnished in pre-War antiques.

"No, no. You run along now. I'll be fine."

She watched him walk briskly to the truck, his huge shoulders hunched into the misting rain.

\* \* \*

Christi and Kelly waited impatiently until the prominent couple left for the Warren County Chamber of Commerce dinner, and their maid Nellie Mae had gone with friends to a committee meeting at church. Then they dashed out the back door through the chilling rain to the quarters.

"Pru, it's us. Open up," Christi called, more brightly than she felt.

Prudence opened the door without hesitation, as if she had expected company. Christi and Kelly noted the Bennett's Water Street Garage wall calendar spread open on the tiny kitchen table.

"It's time to talk about this," Kelly stated boldly.

Prudence nodded her agreement, then sat impassively while the blonde girl told her the plan to drive to Memphis and take care of everything.

"Not that we generally approve of abortion," Christi added, shuddering at the word, and making the Sign of the Cross, "but in a case like this..."

The dark face across the table stared back blankly, then contorted in pain.

"But, what if this is Ray's baby?"

"Jesus God!" Kelly gasped. "Is that possible?"

Prudence nodded, looking down at her lap.

"The night before he left, we... I... well, we had talked about getting married... and... but... I... wanted to finish

school first... and... I wasn't sure it was right... but... then,... he was going away and I wanted him so badly... and... we... in the car by the river... and... then... two days later, I was walking down there by myself... and... they... oh, God!... What can I do?"

Prudence broke into heavy sobs that wrenched a knot in Christi's stomach. Stunned and helpless at the agony of their friend, Christi and Kelly sat in numb silence, listening to the rain beat down heavily on the quarters' old tin roof.

None of the girls saw even a glimmer of a headlight when the old truck pulled into the Boudreaux's driveway and Grover ran up the front steps in eager anticipation, surprised at his own boldness in arriving unannounced. Seven times, he rang the bell and waited before dejectedly retracing his steps to the truck.

"If only I had married him," Prudence chided herself when the sobbing was over, "then it wouldn't be so bad."

"What if it isn't Ray's baby?"

"It is! It's got to be!" Prudence screamed at the younger girls. "It's all that's left of Ray. It's all I'll ever have!"

"But, what if it isn't?" Kelly insisted.

"It is," Prudence calmed down. "It simply is. And that's final."

"But," Christi began, raising her voice, "what if..."

The splattering rain stopped suddenly and the silence was startling.

Christi sighed and nodded in acquiescence, "Okay, Prudence. It is."

"If only I had married him," the pregnant girl repeated.

"Is that what you would have wanted?"

"Same as you would, if you loved somebody that much. I wish you could understand."

"I do understand, Pru," Kelly nodded, and Prudence sensed that she truly did.

"You know, Ray put me down on all his papers as his wife. He thought that if he believed it enough and acted like it was true, then, somehow, it would happen. He didn't have any other kin, so I guess he really needed to believe... that..."

somehow it would happen.... Only, now it's too late... and..."

"Don't you start bawling again, Prudence!" Kelly interrupted. "It's not too late!"

"What are you talking about?" she asked with a frown.

"Well, of course, we can't bring Ray back and you may never have been his legal wife," Kelly paused, "but I've got a hunch that you can be his legal widow." Kelly grinned, nodded, and looked at Christi. "I'm going to give Larry a call."

The tall blonde girl stood up and hooked the wall calendar in place on its nail.

"Yeah, we may be approaching the Ides of March here in Mississippi," Kelly said, tapping her finger on the calendar, "but I've got a sneaky suspicion that it could still be early October somewhere in Louisiana..."

\* \* \*

"Okay, okay, slow down, Racer. Therefore, they're dead. Watson and Shimwell were expendable. I'll miss The Torch, though. He always did good work. Wish I could have seen some of those 'accidental' explosions of his."

"Yeah, but Arnie, it scares me. How did PapaLew put those three together so fast? How'd he figure it out? And, if he does know, then he probably knows it was all your doing, and he'll be after us next."

"You scare too easy. Who said ole Llewellyn had anything to do with this? Maybe the fat guy Watson did have a heart attack. And that bean counter Shimwell? He could'a blown himself away. He never had no guts."

"Yeah, but The Torch? The Torch, Arnie? Hard for me to believe he got that careless," Racer insisted.

"The Torch was way overdue for an accident on the job, as many as he's done around the world," Arnie countered. "It could be just a coincidence. After all, we're talking New Orleans, Jackson, and Houston. Not all in the same town. Three dead guys in three different states don't prove nothing."

The phone rang in the next room, and Racer ran to answer it. When he returned, he was moving slowly, and the color had drained from his face.

"Another dead body?" Arnie asked sarcastically.

"Worse. Turns out that Watson, Shimwell, and The Torch all went out on the same day. All at the same time. The exact same time. That don't sound like no coincidence to me."

"Hmmm," Arnie agreed, shaking his head. "That ain't no coincidence. That's a message from my old friend Georgie."

\* \* \*

March 27, 1964

Dear Maggie,

*Things are looking up for Prudence. She's gone back to school, seems to be happy that she's having Ray's baby (I sure hope it is!), and she's gaining back some of the weight she lost. Still skinny, though.*

*Yesterday, she finally told Nellie Mae that she and Ray had gone over to Louisiana to get married when he was home on leave. Of course, Larry got it all taken care of officially, so she has a certificate and everything. He also gave her a little gold wedding band with 'For always - Ray' engraved inside.*

*That was thoughtful of Larry. He really isn't such a bad guy. It's too bad that Kelly is so hung up on Cameron that she can't see Larry's good traits. He's crazy about her.*

*And, speaking of "crazy about," Grover is definitely getting a football scholarship to Ole Miss! I can hardly wait to be there with him! Of course, Kelly thinks that she and Cameron will be going there together too. She can't seem to realize how much Carol Jean Tolbert has her claws into him. Any chance he'll ask Kelly to the Senior Prom? She's actually counting on it. I've got a feeling that's going to be another long night!*

Love,  
Christi

\* \* \*

Hocking MacMillan Samuels stretched his long, lanky body, and pushed back luxuriously in his green naugahyde desk chair, surveying his new law office with approval. He had a nice view of the Ford County Courthouse, and a ten-second walk to the Tea Shoppe, that he considered the best gathering spot in Clanton, Mississippi.

*Not bad for an old country boy raised on the banks of the Yalobusha River, he thought. And not such an old country boy at that,* he added to himself, caressing the thick moustache from which he periodically removed all traces of gray.

*Premature gray, he assured himself. No harm in a little camouflage at the tender age of forty-six.*

"You have a visitor, Senator. A Mister George Llewellyn is here. Says I can call him PapaLew."

"Here?" he repeated into the intercom.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, don't keep him waiting. Bring him right in. No, I'll be right out," he corrected himself hastily, jumping to his feet and straightening his tie in one motion.

"George, ole buddy, come on in!"

"Big Sam, good to see you. Looking mighty spiffy these days. All that hair and none of it gray," he winked. "Now, who would believe we were ever classmates?" the balding visitor chuckled.

The disconcerting reference to gray hair put the state senator on the defensive. *Damn that George! He always says what I don't want to hear. Wonder what he's after.*

"Well, well, ole buddy, sit down and tell me what's going on in your life."

"I'd have to 'take the Fifth' on that one," PapaLew laughed. "I suspect you would too."

"Not me, ole buddy. I don't even talk to ole Arnie any more. Living clean. Three kids. Couple of hunting dogs. Nice wife."

"Hardly sounds like the famous 'Big Sam' of years past," George commented wryly, hoping he hadn't flinched at the mention of Arnie.

"Time changes a person, ole buddy. Look around. Don't I look respectable?"

"I'm sure you couldn't keep on getting re-elected if you weren't looking respectable, Big Sam," George winked. "Yeah, the fine folks of Mississippi put a lot of stock in respectability. Bet you're a deacon in the church by now."

Sam laughed uneasily. "If I didn't know better, ole buddy, I'd say you been checking up on me."

"Friends have got to look out for friends, Big Sam. You've always known that."

Facing the inevitable, the senator pulled on his mustache and sighed into his hand. "So, what can I do for you, ole buddy? I hear you're doing okay for yourself."

George nodded. "Can't complain, but I'm getting worried about this Viet Nam situation."

"Now, hold on right there, ole buddy. I'm just a state senator. I couldn't go to Washington and stop this thing if I wanted to."

"I'm not interested in the politics of the war. It's good for the economy and that can't hurt me. It might even open up some new Asian business connections."

"Well, then?"

"They keep escalating our troop involvement and I'm getting concerned that a student deferment isn't going to be enough to keep a boy out much longer."

"Is your boy draft age already?"

PapaLew nodded, "And I sure as hell don't want him drafted."

"Whoa, now, ole buddy. That's federal. You don't think I have that kind of power, do you?"

George Llewellyn leaned back in his chair, smiling, and stared at his old poker partner across the desk. The senator squirmed.

"Come on, ole buddy. I'm flattered, but surely you don't think I carry that big a stick."

The impertinent visitor laughed out loud.

"I might not have thought so, Big Sam, until I ran into this sweet little colored gal down in Jackson. Of course, I didn't look at any of the pictures she claims to have," he winked, "but this little ole colored gal swears to me you carry the

biggest stick in the state legislature. And, she says you've got the imagination to use it right."

The senator leaned forward in his chair. "Now, ole buddy, you cain't believe everything you hear around the capitol. Besides, we're old friends, and I put a lot of stock in that friendship."

PapaLew rose from his chair slowly. "You're right. I'm gonna forget all about what I heard and I'm gonna rely on that friendship. I know you'll want to do a favor for an old friend," he smiled, laying a piece of paper on the desk and patting it. "It's none of my business how you do it. If it takes more money than you think I've got coming from that friendship, then give me a call. I'm counting on you."

"Wait a minute, ole buddy! You got two names written down here!"

The departing visitor shrugged. "And you've got that big stick, remember? Now, I'm counting on you,... ole buddy."