

McMurtry's Typewriter

ALAN NAFZGER



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BOOK DISCLAIMER

Okay, let's cut the bullshit. I know that there are certain people who may think they see themselves, or someone they shoot dope with, in this manuscript, and will probably get pretty ill-tempered over it, or may decide to give me a hard time just because they went to school for that sort of thing (coz you know, a Wichitan getting famous from writing about other Wichitans, it's capitalistic, backstabbing and just not cool anymore). So I could say that this book is a work of fiction and that no resemblance to actual events, locales, entities or persons, living or dead, should be inferred at all, but you'll probably throw a fit over it anyway.

At the same time, I can't exactly call it based on a true story, since any and all items with a factual basis have either been changed, (re-) invented, altered or included for expressive use (and as a necessary component of a relevant story). Please keep in mind that if I really wanted to be an ass about it, I would have named you directly or said something really bad (and trust me, this version is a lot better than my original unedited profanities).

Believe it or not, I do believe a man's character is best judged, not by his friends, but by his enemies. I ask you to judge me by the enemies I have made writing this.

I have tried as much as I could to spare you the embarrassment accorded to the victim's code of fiction writing, but as such there is a limit and any jokes or references you find here, with a factual basis or not, are meant as harmless fun (and yes, it is harmless, because if most of you can dance to lyrics about "big city strippers," "taking pills" and "outlaw shit", you can chill out about the local fare). It's the price you pay for living here.

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ONE

It was Haystack's job to pick his uncle up from the Scott Street bus station. Haystack's given name was Daniel Mercy and his uncle's name was Elias Mercy, but the uncle was pretty much known everywhere as Creature. The family had pretty much assigned Haystack to the job because the next day his probation would probably be violated and he'd be where Creature had been, prison. His uncle had just done eleven on an aggravated twenty.

They say there is a fool on every corner when you're trying to get home and it hadn't gone smoothly for Creature at the Abilene bus station. He'd sat there the entire day and half the night watching busload after full busload of Hondurans and Guatemalans pass. In frustration for being stranded, he had told a carload of blacks to turn down the thump thump and they'd stabbed him in the hand.

Creature got off the bus in Wichita with his hand wrapped in his prison boxers. Evidently, he wasn't wearing any underwear because the only pair he had left the prison with was now tied around his hand. They got in Haystack's old pickup truck.

"Want me to take you to eat?" Haystack offered.

"Where?"

"IHOP."

"Oh, hell no."

"Why what's the matter with that?"

"I've been in prison for eleven years, that's what."

"What? You guys have pancakes all the time?"

"You'll see."

"Your ma gave me \$20 to fed ya." Haystack said.

"TDC gives you \$100 when you're released - fifty at the gate and fifty when you get to parole."

"What ya gonna do with it?"

"I'm thinking about stickin' it to the man. Reinvesting it directly back into the underworld where it came from - a prostitute, that or a hundred dollars worth of dope. But we got to get the second fifty from the parole office cause all I got right now is the fifty."

"Well, it's right up here on Seymour. But you ain't gonna pay nobody no \$100, are ya? There ain't no call for that. You feeling generous?"

"My aim is to overwhelm the criminal justice system with their own money."

"Well, I don't know if you're ever gonna bankrupt them, apparently they're loaded enough to want to lock me up. They got half the state already locked up. Pretty much everybody I know anyway."

"It's an industry. You'll see."

"So, then you need to maybe split it between the two - sixty for dope

and forty for the girl. That would be the smart way to go about trying, I figure.”

“Huh?” Creature didn’t understand.

“Do the math. If you spend it all in one place then best case (and you get busted) you and for example the girl. That’s only two arrests. But like you said, invest some of it in dope, there might be three arrests and in this county, an arrest is as good as a conviction. You might hit them for three incarcerations, instead of just two. Your hundred dollar investment might cost them hundreds of thousands, depending on the situation. Fight them and cost them even more.”

“Ever since you was a kid you been kicking my ass.”

“Well, I never thought about investing like that.”

“Like people, money is most happy when it runs in it’s natural circle. To spend the hundred on food or clothes just ain’t natural to that particular TDC money.”

“You ain’t no slouch. I understand and I’m glad you’re home. You can help me figure out how to not go to prison.”

“I don’t know about that?”

“So, let’s go buy some dope?”

“I gotta get the other fifty from the parole office.”

“There ain’t no ‘forty dollar’ in this town gonna be awake until this afternoon at least ‘till we’re done at the parole office.”

“So, the meth first and then parole.”

“I’m gonna have to piss in a cup, I’ll bet.”

“Okay, the parole office first and then the dope.”

“I heard they’re building a new big jail now, over a thousand beds.”

“Well, there is some kind of election going on. I don’t know much about it. Seventy million, I know that. He’s got the jail full, on purpose, like politics, so there’s an actual need for the jail to win.”

“Serious?”

“There ain’t an outlaw or even a homeless person in this town loose, leading up to the election. Both missions are empty. They’re all locked up.”

“My friends? They’re all in jail? Kartoon and Squirrel? What about D-Rock?”

“He’s gonna fill that jail.”

“He must want a new jail really bad.”

“The sheriff’s an ass, but he ain’t dumb.”

“No, he ain’t.”

“You know, he’s got so many people working for him, just them ‘re probably enough to get it passed. People naturally want to vote for their boss.”

“Seventy million though?”

“It’s a thousand beds, a thousand extra people they’ll want to arrest.”

"They'll be doing that for sure."

"Finally, they'll be arresting people I don't even know, people that ain't never been to jail. There ain't no 500 of us."

"That's the idea; I'm sure. Filler up."

"Sheriff said on TV it would make money for 'em."

"Jails for profit. We're screwed and not just us."

"Seems the only people that got money 're them."

"It's already bad enough. The cops just ain't gotta like you and, if they don't, you're out a there. And now add profit to the math..."

"You got a point there. If they like you, well 'we can't lock everybody up' and if they don't like you, 'you're goin' to jail.'"

"So what's it like?"

"Prison?"

"Your ma told you already, huh? I'm probably going over this damn chicken."

"Well, you're gonna meet some of the world's most despicable people there."

"Well, it is a prison. I figured that."

"Oh, I ain't talking about the inmates; it's the guards."

"Most of the inmates are there for having too much fun. It's the guards that are trash. Paul Harvey (the radio guy) a long time ago said 'you want to see the lowest form of life, be in the parking lot of a Texas prison at shift change.' It's true; I guarantee it."

"Hang on. You shot someone."

"No, I shot at someone."

"They blasted you out there on the news; said you emptied seven into a bathroom stall and missed. I was just a kid but that was a big deal."

"I've had enough ribbing about that, eleven years of it, frankly. If we're gonna get along, nephew, you're gonna need to cut me some slack on that one. Besides, maybe I wasn't trying to hit him, maybe just scare him a little."

"Well, sure. I'm just telling you what they said on TV."

"Well, what I was trying to tell you is that prisons ain't full of violent bad men anymore like the politicians want you to think. And it ain't full of thieves either. I had a question about boosting these new cars and it took me two weeks to find a car thief. Imagine that. In a prison?"

"Okay, now about these guards..."

"Well, the first thing you notice is that they curse more than the inmates. 'Wake the f#\$% up!' and 'What the f#\$% you want?' if you have a question and 'Get the f#\$% out of here' if they don't know the answer, which they typically don't. The F word in every sentence and they wear a cross; that means to them, they're better than us."

"Really? They cuss more than we do?"

“Good for you. It sound’s like you’re ready to go, that ‘we’ stuff.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“Well, it ain’t like in the movies. Now that everything is against the law your getting an entirely new breed of prisoner. Take a clue, they call us ‘offenders’. Like, we offended someone? But think about it. It’s free rent. It’s free food. It ain’t no good but it is free. Somebody does your laundry and someone even scrubs your toilet. You want something you can buy it. Hell, Clements unit up there was bangin’. I saw more dope up there than I ever saw on the streets.”

“Well, things have probably changed here. Wichita done grown up since you been gone. We got dope.”

“Well, you ain’t got nothing to worry about.”

“I heard they make you work.”

“Well, there is that. You’re young, ain’t sick; they’ll have you out in the hoe squad, but even that is something of a scam. They have these fields where they grow crops, but they let us out only on the side of the highway. Like fur politics. It’s so the voters can see it. Robbed and kidnapped and removed from their families, understandably we do more damage to the crops than to the weeds, so they aren’t out there for any real reason. Back in 2009, I took out an entire row of tomato plants with that hoe; wack, wack.”

“What’d they do?”

“They fired me and I didn’t have to hoe anymore.”

“Don’t the guards get mad?”

“They’re mostly fat and lazy; and mad takes work. Up on a horse with a shotgun, they’re not about to get down off a there and let someone take that gun from them. And besides it’s all for show. That’s why they don’t put us on the other side of the prison, the side you can’t see from the road. But you ain’t going down for no two years. You’ll go down get a number and you’ll be right out on parole.”

“How do you know?”

“Seen it. The revolving door. Look they have 166,000 in the seventy-seven regular I.D. units and they won’t tell us how many are in the transfer units. But there is a computer program that runs the entire thing; parole board just does what the program tells them to do. If someone in a county is coming in, someone’s got to get up leave. They need your bunk. Think about it like a Sam’s or a Walmart. They only have so much shelf space.”

“This guy in county said the guards can do whatever they want.”

“Well, that depends; some will simply lie on you. Basically, the answer to any question is, ‘it depends on who the guard is’. Will we get to eat? Will we get clean uniforms? Yes, they can do what they want. No chow; they just claim your group was talking, turn you all around and march you back to the dorm.”

“You can’t talk?”

"At chow? Security risk. Some jackass judge ruled they might not be able to hear the radio if we're talking out on the bowling alley or in the chow."

"That's messed up."

"It ain't about security. Talking is like the only thing we got on 'em. The county auctioned our cars; the bondsman and the lawyers took everything else. Conversation is about all we got left and that's why some of the guards want to take even that. Ruthless if you think about it."

"You gotta eat."

"Well, if you want, act like you might riot, they might back down and let you eat. Seen that. But most of these guys are just looking to go home so they just roll over and take it. So, yes a guard can take away your parole, all they gotta do is lie on ya. And maybe the next day a different guard won't care if you talk and you get to eat and talk."

"So, it's like that huh?"

"And, some judge ruled that they can wake you up, I mean you might be dead, once every two hours. So guess what? They wake you up."

"They don't let you sleep?"

"No, they wake you up and ask you if you're dead. Everything happens because they can. Because they're allowed. They aren't used to having power in the world and now they get a little inside and they use every bit of it."

"What are they a bunch of Nazis?"

"I don't know; it ain't no holocaust because they just warehouse everybody. They don't believe in no limited government; that's for sure. A lot of little bitty people and of course obese ones too. The few straight guards wanted to play football in high school; you can ask them and they tried. But they're not just mentally small but they're just tiny. Been holding an anger ever since then, seems to me."

"Sounds like the guards at the county jail. Losers every one. Applied with the sheriff's office but all the patrol positions were full, given to the guys who played before them in high school. Big wide guys. So the little guys are left to take the jailer's jobs."

"Either that or they were too dumb for the academy."

"They are dumb, that's for sure. But they don't want to be."

"A lot of Mexicans with TDC, them and their parents looked down on and put down all the while they been here. And now this is their revenge. In prison, you want your hair cut, either you got to be a Mexican or have a stamp."

"You have to pay to get your hair cut in prison?"

"Only if you're black or white."

"A lot of homosexuals?"

"Guards? Half of them at least. There are the lesbians trying their best to do a man's job. There are the punk guards; they're on vacation, working

a dream job where they can ogle other men all day. It's like me, checking out all the women, that time at South Padre. Most of them are so obviously gay, totally warped, they can't work anywhere else. Not in public."

"Yeah?"

"How'd you like walk into Applebee's and Cinderella walks up, "Hey, big boy, can I take your order. This and a lot of towns are church towns, these people can't work anywhere else."

"I think maybe you're just making this up. It can't be that bad. They're the government."

"No. They want them that way. Think about it. They'll never ask you want you did. They're not allowed to and that's a strict rule."

"How come?"

"Look. You stole a chicken and they gave you four years. They simply won't hire anyone smart enough to figure out that's wrong. An expense of, let's see, \$138,000 if my math is right, all that for a four dollar chicken?"

"It was actually \$4.99, plus tax."

"Okay, what happened there anyway? Your ma wrote me but I couldn't really tell what happened."

"Well, I was dating this chick with two kids and it was Mother's Day. I was broke and you know she was broke, a woman with two kids, but it was Mother's Day, you know, so we went to that chicken place out in Dog Patch. They're in the car waiting. They put a bag up on the counter, so I picked it up, smiled at the girl and say, "Happy Mother's Day." I figure what the heck is she gonna do, raise a big stink? I don't think she even realized it wasn't my order."

"And you just walked out?"

"I was broke. So, I'm in the parking lot, almost to the girl and kids in the car, and this manager comes running out tries to tackle me. Another one of these failed football players, I swear, he misses and breaks his arm on the curb.

"They're not supposed to do that."

"Well, he did. Aggravated robbery with assault is what they called it."

"Hell, that's on him. You didn't break his arm."

"Don't matter. Two shoplifting arrests."

"Misdemeanors."

"You know I got probation."

"And now they want to violate you?"

"Lawyer said."

"They violate everybody."

"He said he's gonna try to get me a week to get my affairs in order. But the jail is full at least 'till after Tuesday. You can stay with me over in Vidaville 'till I leave out. My roommates are in county. Ninety days for pitching nails in WalMart parking lot."

"Roofing nails?"

"Yeah."

"That's funny. I bet they're pretty popular for doin' that. I freakin' hate those assholes at Walmart."

"So, prison ain't really that bad, if you don't mind Mexican's and gays?"

"Well, and dumbasses."

"I was just curious."

"It's a waste of time and counter-productive."

"Obviously."

"It's like summer camp for bad kids; so long as you're bad you'll fit right in. Your ma told me you punched a cop."

"Yeah."

"You'll be fine."

The two men arrived at the parole office.

TWO

Julie O'Kane was getting dressed for work, as a probation officer, when her cat bolted into the bathroom. She'd been outside and came inside through the cat door. Among cats, K Kat was a self-aware and fierce creature. She almost never meowed or cried. And she was feared by every rodent, bird, and reptile in a ten square block area. They all risked a trip kicking and screaming to Julie's kitchen floor if they encountered her.

Her tail was puffed up enough to brush out a coke bottle and she shook her head as if she was trying to rid herself of a ringing in her ears. Then she hid in the closet.

K was Julie's cat. The cat wanted nothing to do with anyone else but her. One afternoon, when she was still at Midwestern, the botany professor, constantly out making observations of the campus plant life, had taken her over to a large dense bush.

"Look what I found," he'd said and gently pulled the branches apart. Three tiny kittens stared back at her.

"Take one," she reached in for the nearest kitten, a solid feral baby, who unlike the others didn't hiss. But still, the kitten was a tiny beast waiting to happen and her heart was pounding like a racehorse.

Julie would always remember the moment when she reached into the closet. She parted a few hanging clothes and found her on a stack of old jeans rapidly blinking one eye. Julie felt her. She seemed fine. She'd had cat emergencies before, everything from a cat caught in her mother's fan belt to canine-inflicted lacerations. Relative to the other bloody emergencies, today K Kat was fine. No real harm. All four legs still there. Both ears still attached. Neither eye was gouged out, but K sure was blinking up a storm.

Yet, Julie knew immediately and intuitively something wasn't right. She

dumped all but one towel out of a Rubber-Maid tub and placed her cat inside for the trip to the vet.

Once she arrived, the vet staff listened politely not wanting to offend Julie; who might eventually write her a check. Nothing visibly wrong with the cat, Julie admitted. But something still was wrong. The cat stayed for observation, naturally.

Only when Julie got home did she realize that she was still only half dressed for work. She had pulled on the slacks of a suit but she still had her pajama top on. And she realized that the all-woman vet's office must have got a chuckle out of that or maybe they thought she was a crazy cause of her cat situation.

THREE

"Probation is that door and parole is the that one." Haystack pointed to the two doors, next to each other in an old rundown strip mall. Leaky roof.

"Who's your probation officer?" Creature wanted to know.

"Julie something. Moderately hot. A new ho'. Well, not new; she's been here. You'll get old man Mac. He won't remember you next month."

"I heard about him; supposed to be seventy."

"He's over that, I'm sure, but that only means you can probably outrun him."

"So how come you ain't locked up?"

"I told ya. County's full. Got to keep it full to win the bond election, you know. Can't build a new thousand-bed jail if there's room in your crummy old jail."

"I see."

"Fed's eyeballing them, TV said. Overcrowding."

"That's fake news."

"I'm just saying."

"I wouldn't put it past that sheriff if he didn't call and report the bad inhumane conditions. Or just said the feds were looking to close the old jail."

"Ohhh. That would leave us without a jail. That ought to scare the hell out of everybody down at First Baptist."

"That's why he said it, so they'd get off their ass and vote."

"Sure gonna help him with the bond election."

"No room in the county, but they can send a man down-state for stealing a chicken. Hah!"

"Hell, TDC's free for 'em."

"Them?"

"County. They figure, let's send all of Vidaville down, and Dog Patch too; it's free. Since Dallas, San Antonio, everybody, got to pay taxes,

Wichita might as well get one (or sixty) up on everybody else and get rid of the ones they don't like. Like it's a contest who can clean their streets at the other's expense."

"If Wichita County was footing the bill, they'd be more reasonable."

"It's like TDC just put out a sign that says 'FREE PIZZA' and it's a contest what county can fill their belly first."

FOUR

In the afternoon, the vet called Julie to say that cat's cheek had swollen, but that was all she could say. Perhaps it was the result of a spider bite.

FIVE

"We're headed out to the Flying J."

"What's that?"

"It's not just for truckers. Tweakers go there too."

"New?"

"Not really, but new for you. The meth whores will be waking up and getting out. They'll be out there."

"Okay."

"Only downside. Sheriff's deputies sit there looking for skitzers."

"Wait. This is in the city limits. Shouldn't it be the police?"

"The sheriff's a businessman, you know. So, they think they're smart, just sitting there parked like their filling out paperwork. I just go over to Wendy's, there and wait them out. They're on call and every once in a while they'll burn off. Then you can buy or sell whatever you want."

"Well, we'll just wait."

"But there's a downside to even that. Damn Wendy's and Burger King both are like spoiled meat to flies, I guess they give the city cops free food."

"So the girls come to this Flying J."

"Backpack girls. What's what you want, right?"

"What?"

"White. They got a backpack or a really big purse."

"Why?"

"Well, that's all they got. But, you get them high and eventually they use that backpack to steal your shit. The bigger the purse the more shit you're gonna lose."

"Getting to be where a fella needs a set of scales by his front door to weigh them coming in and going out."

"Well, I ain't got nothing for them to steal."

"Minus that purse, they'd all weigh-in about ninety pounds, the ones

that's been doing it a while. But put them on the scale with all their junk and it'll read about one-thirty."

"Damn."

"But, I steal from them; I get their cell phone. Man, there is nothing mad like a strung out minx without a phone. She'll be hot, looking for it. Plumb freaking berserk. Freaking nuts. They dork out."

"Dork out?"

"That's what they call it now, when they get gettered out and screw up. They can't figure you for taking it; you're giving them the meth, so they think they just lost it. They run around looking for it everywhere. It's fun."

"That's where we're going?"

"That's the way it is; go over in Dog Patch and you'll see. You got to get them before they get you."

"Good to know."

"Hey, one time I get three bitches phones and pitch 'em out about a block from the house. All in one night. They're looking everywhere. I thought they might clean the house but they just turned everything upside down. But, what's funny is you get them together like that and they think the other ones got their phone."

"Kids, these days. Ain't you got anything better to do than mess with addicts?"

"So I give them my truck and send them to the store to buy new phones. I wanted them gone so bad I gave them the keys."

"They stole your truck?"

"They did. Gone two days. She'd of gone to jail except it was me and I'm ain't gonna call no cops. I don't call the law."

"So what happened?"

"Eventually? She came back. Apologized and you know nothing was missing from the truck but my cup and a set of jumper cables. I let her back in."

"Just like that?"

"She'd left all her stuff over. They'd left their Sharpie bags, whatever you want to call it. I've dumped all their shit in one big pile. She, they, don't have a place to stay. Never. Everything they got is in that bag - makeup, their coloring pencils. That's all they do is get high and color with their markers and lick each other's box."

"So you mixed all their stuff together?"

"And I dumped it back in the purses all jumbled up."

"Was this after they didn't come back from the store?"

"No. I waited 'till they got down the street a bit. Bras, panties, pencils, makeup, playthings. I don't understand it. They want to play with each other and hit each other with toys but they don't want the real thing."

"I don't understand it either, but that's screwed up."

“They were messed up about that for a week and wouldn’t come over.”

SIX

The phone rang early the next morning. K Kat was paralyzed. She could only move the tip of her tail. It was the work of a rattlesnake, probably a baby or a juvenile, though which variety the vet couldn’t say.

Wichita County had several types – blacktail, timber, rock, prairie, diamondback and once they even found a Mojave rattler out on a drilling site south of Electra. Of course, there were “deniers” who said that was impossible. Julie was now a “believer”; those Mojave rattler bites were notoriously known to cause paralysis but little swelling. The Western diamondbacks, on the other hand, typically caused swelling and rarely paralysis. So, K must have stumbled one of the “out-of-place case” snakes.

SEVEN

Haystack argued that he didn’t figure he’d done anything to violate his probation.

“What’s wrong with going to a strip club?”

He’d only gone to meet a buddy, drink a beer and see what was out there. One beer and now they wanted to send him to prison. He’s minding his own business, drinking his beer, when this one-armed meth-whore, wearing an athletic sock on the end of her amputated arm, started giving him a lap dance he never asked for.

“She moved my legs apart so she could get this clean shaven thing right close,” Haystack explained. “So, it’s right there in my face. This one’s called Gidget, something about Inspector Gadget is why they call her that. I fell sorry for her, but I told her I wasn’t interested; they ought to know when a man ain’t got no money. But she kept right on doin’ it; so I got up and walked out. I can get that for free right down the street you know. But the bitch starts screaming that I owe her twenty dollars and the bouncer starts to get in my way.”

Julie said, “You tried to leave, okay; you shouldn’t have been there in the first place.”

“Listen. I didn’t do nothin’. I dodge him and I’m out the door. This bitch, still naked follows me outside the club, and she brings the bouncer. She says, ‘Give him what for.’ What does that mean? I don’t know what that means. The bouncer shoves me in the back for the head. I’m outside of the club walking away. He’s showing off; probably does this for all the girls he ain’t screwed yet. So I turn around and pop him.”

“And so you see nothing wrong with that?”

"I feel really bad. I mean it must be tough making a living with one arm and all."

"So you hit the policeman with your fist in the face?"

"How was I supposed to know he was a cop? Clear he was off duty, but now they're saying he was on duty."

"The report says he was wearing a uniform."

"Bull shit. You people lie more than we do."

"We might, but that's only because there are so many of you guys."

"Hey, you're supposed to be on my side."

"I'm not your momma. I'm your probation officer."

"I mean you're supposed to keep us out of jail."

"That's not my job."

Haystack was growing more desperate. "If you send everyone down what walks into a strip club, you'll be out of a job."

"That's where you're wrong. There's always some other sap standing in line for prison, like it's a real popular summer camp or something."

"Funny you should say that. I heard..."

"We're hiring P.O.s right out of college. No experience necessary. In fact, there are so many of you guys, we can't find enough to fill all the empty parole and probation positions."

"That's only because no one wants to work for the government."

"The check's clear."

"That's right you people are the only people with money. If you actually work for a living like us, you're tapped. You can sure tell what cars belong to you guys in the parking lot."

"You're chance of ever working for the government is long past. I mean aggravated robbery."

"I hope you go bankrupt."

"That's not going to happen. So you fought with him."

"I lost, ain't that enough?"

"You might have let it go and walked away."

"But I didn't. He tazzed me, ran my name and suddenly he's uniformed. It's against police department policy to be in a police uniform moonlighting security."

"The report says you were outside in the parking lot."

"He beat me up in the parking lot, yes."

"And now you're probably going to prison."

EIGHT

Lots of people had rattler stories. Friends of Julie who owned cattle out in Clay County had lost some to rattlesnakes. Prize show cattle and the breeding stock had died as well. Cows were particularly vulnerable, typically

bitten on the nose while grazing. They only breathe through their nose, so when a bite causes their nostrils to swell shut, well it's a miserable death. K was breathing through her mouth.

NINE

The next morning Haystack was in the gallery of the District Court of Wichita County. The room was quiet, everyone whispering, waiting on the day-of-bad-news to begin. Julie left one offender, noticed Haystack and moved over to sit with him.

"I haven't had a chance to fill out your sheet yet, but you're in violation." Julie flat out told him.

"Isn't that up to the judge?"

"Technically, yes. But he's going to do what I say. You might not like that but that is the way it is."

"Cause I see a girl's twat? Nobody said I couldn't."

"You signed the agreement."

"You're just setting people up to fail."

"Well, you failed."

"One beer?"

"You broke the law and that violates your probation."

"I'm old enough to go to jail, hell prison. But I'm not old enough to have a beer and see some snatch. What a joke!"

"I talked to your lawyer."

"They didn't even card me."

"Are you done? I talked to your lawyer."

"That little shrimp."

"He's going to make like the beer it's a minor violation. It's okay with the assistant D.A. Her boss isn't here today. She won't argue with him on that. But an assault on a public servant that's a little more complicated.

"Well, if I'm going down for assaulting a cop, why even mention the beer? Are ya givin' me a break? 'Cause if you are... I'm not feeling it."

"Maybe if you just plead guilty maybe the judge will cut you a break. A light prison sentence."

"That's all you want, me in prison and with the least amount of work. You people are like electricity."

"Electricity?"

"Cops you all follow the path of least resistance."

"Well, if you don't just come clean, the judge won't like it and he'll give you the max."

"I want a jury then."

"That might be worse. In this town? The way the juries are?"

"I'm a stranger in my own life and that ain't fair."

Haystack shook his head, innocently.

"I'll get a better job. I'll drink less beer."

"That's not what they want. And I think you know that."

Haystack was twenty, tall and bony-looking. Brown hair, ungroomed. Eyes wondering, frightened, but he was from a family of offenders who'd all done this before. One would have thought he'd have taken the news better.

Julie was twenty-four, slim and five-five. She's been married to a junior loan officer in a bank for fourteen months. In her nearly two years working probation, she's met all types – from totally guilty to relatively innocent. No one was ever innocent. And, she'd always treated them the way she'd been trained, polite but with equal disdain.

TEN

Julie got up and walked to sit beside Mary Wyatt, her friend, and an assistant district attorney. She'd be prosecuting Haystack in the next five minutes.

Mary sensed her mood, "What's the matter?"

"I'm going back to school."

"Finally. Law school will be good for you."

"I should, I'm in court all day as it is."

"If you're going to be here, you might as well get paid for your time. You think you want to work on the dark side, with me?"

"No. Hell no. I was thinking something along the lines of mental health."

"You are such a softy."

"What will Mercy get?"

"Well, he got four for the chicken, he'd do half but Charles Bronson, with the broken arm, is writing us letters - 'dangerous criminal' and that he should be 'kept off the streets.' If the parole board gets a few of those he'll do the entire four-piece."

"Okay."

"For the assault, five to twenty. Depending on Judge Stafford's mood."

"He's just a kid."

"That's kid's everybody's job security for the next forty years."

"His parents aren't even here."

"His dad cleaned out Texas Showgirls two nights ago. Put three bouncers in the hospital. Not a scratch on him but a broken hip. He's in the hospital. His mother managed to break her foot in the mele."

"What was his mother doing in there?"

"I'm not sure, but I think that happened in the parking lot."

"No one told me that."

"You're his PO. His uncle, just out of the pen, he's back there," and Mary gestured to the back row of the gallery.

Julie turned and saw Creature talking up two young women there to answer for simple possession.

"What's the problem? He's going down eventually for something, might as well be this. And that's just one less on your caseload."

"I'll still have ninety-one to worry about."

"Hah. See, that's your tell, you said 'worry'."

"I can't help it."

"If you want to worry, worry about his uncle. They call him 'Creature'. He'll kill or rape someone... no he won't rape. There hasn't been a real sexual assault here since meth came to prominence."

"Sex is just a gram now."

"And if he was to drive out to the Wayfair he could probably get sex on the mere speculation he might come into the possession of some. So, worry he doesn't rob or shot someone else."

"The uncle shot someone?"

"Actually he missed. Ambushed a guy in a bathroom stall. Had him confined in a three foot by six-foot space, fired through the door and missed... seven times."

"What happened with Judge Stafford on that other thing?"

"The public defender? Another reprimand, his fifteenth in twenty years."

"He really said, 'show me your tits and I'll see that you win the Miss Falls contest.'"

"They called it 'a misguided attempt at humor.'"

"They don't care, so long as he's putting people away."

"Why didn't they just cite him for being an idiot? One paragraph on page 8A of The Times. I asked her why it wasn't on the front page, the editor told me, 'Well, I don't know. I'm not sure the people want to read about stuff like that.'"

"Nothing on the TV?"

"No, but he must be taking hormones or something; he's pretty randy for a man that age with a young wife at home."

ELEVEN

"Speak of the devil, but looking at him most would think he's harmless." His bailiff, a sheriff's deputy in a uniform, told everyone to rise.

Wichita County had elected the judge and then re-elected him six times. He was fifty-seven and strangely five foot seven. White hair since he was a kid, if you can picture a kid everybody called 'whitey'. Today he looked healthy enough under the robe, but under the robe, he was unhealthily thin.

Julie glanced around; there wasn't more than a dozen in the gallery and Creature raised himself off the seat, probably not more than an inch and even then he was whispering something to one of the less-than-innocent girls.

Everyone remained standing, except Creature who'd resumed his sitting position, as Judge Bill Stafford looked over the court; he peered out at the new public defender who happened to be Hispanic and his helpless mixed race investigator. He looked over at the prosecution table at Julie and Mary and smiled. And then he looked back over at the defense table.

The judge said, "*Buenos dias amigos*. I hope this won't be a repeat of the Mexican-American War today. We just cleaned the carpets and there isn't any worker's comp." He realized no one laughed and they were all still standing, so he added, "be seated."

The young Hispanic lawyer smiled a goofy grin like he appreciated (placated) the judge's sense of humor. It's all he really could do if he wanted to keep practicing. Haystack did not smile and had no idea what the judge was about to do to him.

The judge turned to his clerk who handed him a file folder. He flipped through it quickly and frowned at the defense table. He turned to the court reporter.

"Your machine have one of those n's with a curly deal above it?"

For a second the woman was puzzled.

"You know like in Señor or Señorita?"

She eventually realized, "Oh, a virgulilla. No, sir."

"You ever think the county ought to buy one?"

"I never thought..."

"I don't think we should either. Better do this in English. And real slow, okay ladies?" And he glanced over confidently at the prosecution.

The public defender didn't flinch a bit and remained unaffected.

TWELVE

The first time Julie had to address the court was when Stafford asked her if she was happy with the guilty plea. She was surprised being asked but answered that she was.

Judge Stafford said, "you know I can now revoke his probation and sentence him on the original aggravated robbery. That's a four-year sentence."

Julie said she understood. But what she didn't understand was why the judge was speaking to her and not the defendant. How was she involved, other than reporting that the violation had happened?

"I see from the police report this business took place out at Maxima's. They take care of you out there, do they?" and the judge peered down at

Haystack.

Haystack grinned, "Sure if you got twenty dollars."

The gallery chuckled as well as old Stafford.

"The report also says a uniformed officer asked you for your ID and you threw it at him followed by a punch."

"I know it says that."

"What, watching young tight girls dance make you belligerent? Or was it the famous one beer?"

"How about that other place, the chicken place? Figure you'll ever be a paying customer, anywhere?"

"I hope to go there after this."

"Go there and pay for your food?"

"Yes, sir. I've learned my lesson."

"I know it was Mother's Day; that's why you got four years and not the max of five."

"Thank you, sir."

"So I can be lenient."

"Excuse me, Your Honor, but Mr. Mercy is in violation of a trust you placed in him, placing him on probation."

"Now Mary, relax. You and I are on the same side. We both work for the same voters and the checks come from the same place. We both know this knucklehead is going to prison. It's only a matter of for how long."

The judge gave her a reassuring smile and glanced at the paperwork.

"Now, Haystack. It says here they call you 'Haystack'. I've honestly in all my years on the bench never heard of anyone stealing hay. How'd you get that name?"

"I was a kid, fifth grade, and hauling hay in the summer. We was stacking it up pretty high and I fell off, hit the trailer hitch and broke a few ribs. Ma said I was lucky it wasn't my neck, but everybody just started calling me that."

"You worked a man's job when you's in the fifth grade?"

"I guess."

"Your pa had you out there hauling hay?"

"My Ma."

"Your ma? You're kidding. She's to be commended. Teaching you real 'merican values."

Judge Stafford looked out into the gallery. He spotted Mrs. Mercy and she waved at him. She hikes her foot in a cast up high, over the benches, so the judge can see it, as if to say she can't easily stand in recognition. The judge smiled at her in a bizarre way and it caused Mary and Julie to pass puzzled looks.

"It was your daddy that taught you to drink beer and stare at bare naked ladies without paying for it? Ain't it?"

Haystack thought it better not to say anything.

"I've had your daddy in here plenty. Marijuana probably but I specifically remember him taking a string of fish out of the lake without a license. Illegal fishing."

"That was when I was a kid. He's settled down, right respectable nowadays."

"Where is he today, now?"

"Hospital."

"Uh huh. That's what I heard. And your uncle, back there, fresh from the Walls. Manufacturing and distribution, pandering, armed robbery, extortion and he tried to kill a police informant while he was trying to use the toilet. If there ever was such a rascal, your uncle is it. And the others, I can't think of a Mercy, not one, that I can call a 'good egg'. Well, you get the point? Four years, no parole. Too many people are telling me you're dangerous."

"Four years for fighting with a cop outside a bar? We wasn't even inside. Nothin' got broke but my nose."

"Oh, Mr. Mercy. Haystack, I'm talking about the original sentence for breaking a man's arm in a robbery."

The public defender got in his two cents worth, "Your Honor, since that conviction Mr. Mercy has been diligently looking for work."

"Really, where?"

"He works in the concession stand at the softball complex."

"Concession stand."

"He's up-to-date on this probation fees. We feel this is just a slight misunderstanding."

"For the fight at the Maximus, I know the officer involved and he probably wasn't in uniform; he probably lied. He thinks he's tough shit and he likes to fight, but he was one hell of a tight end for the Coyotes. So, on this second charge, the charge you just plead guilty to, five years and a day."

"Are you kidding me? I'll appeal."

"Stacked. The two sentences are stacked. That means when you are done with the four, you can start the five. Since you pled guilty you gave up the right to appeal. This is getting to be a family tradition."

The public defender asked and received a seven-day furlough before Haystack had to report for prison. Not that the judge was feeling charitable; the jail was still full from the bond election.

"I hate to do this," and the judge looked directly at the newspaper woman in the front row. "But the jail is full, till we build a new jail." He spoke like he expected her to carry the message, once again, to the voters.

So the judge granted Haystack a temporary reprieve, but there was a stipulation; Haystack had to report to probation once each day and Julie would be responsible if he became a fugitive. Of course there was no

provision in the law to hold probation officers “personally responsible,” but judge Stafford pretty much promised that he would. And he said, pretty much whatever he wanted, unconventional at best and extreme at his worst.

Then the judge looked at Julie and asked her if she minded ‘babysitting’ for a week. When she began to respond, he cut her off. “Nope. Not on the record. I fell you’re about to embarrass yourself on account of your boy here. So just save it for my chambers.”

And just as the judge rose to leave Haystack raised his voice, “Hey Judge. We’re not done. If you think you can ship me off to some warehouse you’re crazy.”

Two deputies moved toward Haystack; they’d have probably beat him up but when the judge didn’t stop or react in anyway, they let it drop.

Mary asked Julie if she was going to see the judge in his chambers.

“Don’t want to do that.”

“You’d better. He holds a grudge and you’ll be in front of him for as long as you have this job. This county is not going to turn him out of office anytime soon. They like crazy.”

“He didn’t order it.”

“No but I’m just saying. Just listen and when he asks you to take your clothes off...”

Julie jerked, “Don’t.”

THIRTEEN

Judge Stafford became skinny and frail once rid of his robes, almost a normal human. He told her that he didn’t mean to be that harsh. He told her he was afraid young Mercy had played on her emotions; that he was ‘sick’ or ‘his mama needed him at home’ or he’d get ‘beat up’ in prison.

“Hell, we might be saving this boy,” the judge reasoned.

“How’s that?” Julie wanted to know.

“A few years apart from his family, a bad influence, if there ever was one.”

“His uncle.”

“His uncle would take him under his wing and teach him a life of crime. As if his daddy ain’t bad enough.”

“You may have a point, but nine years?”

“He may learn a few dirty tricks inside, but outside here in Wichita, with his daddy and uncle, it would be like a college. No, if I’d reinstated him like you wanted, he’d gotten hemmed up in something serious and we’d be right back here with a twenty or a forty. You divorced?”

“I didn’t want him reinstated.”

“Didn’t work out for you, huh?”

“I thought you might hold him in contempt after he threatened you.”

“What? That? That wasn’t a threat. That stuff’s water and I’m a duck and they always talk crap. Few, if any, are gonna act; too lazy, too dumb; see they know their limitations. You dating anyone?”

“Not anyone you’d know,” She lied.

“You don’t date cops?”

“I have.”

“You know that we have to stick together, we’re the only ones that will tolerate us. You date Lawyers?”

“Once.”

“The defense variety?”

“Yep, I mean yes, sir.

“Sometimes they can tolerate us cops.”

“You’re not a cop.”

“Used to be and you know that don’t ever leave you.”

“You’re...”

“You see married men?”

“I don’t. It’s just a solid rule.”

“Why not?”

“You are really bad,” but she grinned.

“You want to have dinner this evening?”

“You’re married.”

“So are you.”

“Divorced.”

“Who are you? Where do you come from?”

“I’m from here. My dad was a cop. Retired.”

“O’Kane?”

“My brothers are cops, one with Tarrant County and the other is with the FBI in Dallas. I’m the black sheep of the family and still here in Wichita.”

“And you’re working probation. What a dead end job. You got married when you were in college?”

“Yes, when I worked at MHMR.”

That seemed to interest the judge. “So, you’re knowledgeable about mental patients? How they behave? Marijuana. Split personalities. Why would you leave all that?”

“I traded paranoid schizophrenics for just run-of-the-mill screw-ups.”

“You like losers?”

“My ex used to say that.”

“He wanted you to quit?”

“If I could find a job that paid more. I was the one working. He was getting his MBA when we got married. He’s a bank vice president now that we’re divorced. Big house. A maid.”

“And you’re holding a grudge about that?”

"No, not at all. That's not the way I meant it."

"Come on, you can tell me."

"I'll probably get married again someday. Have kids."

"You already tried that."

"If once you fail, try, try again."

"You have offenders that wear ankle monitors? You know, house arrest?"

"I'm not trained for that, but yes there are some in the office. They're not mine. Why?"

"Oh, just asking."

Julie wanted out, the next thing the judge would be telling her his wife didn't understand him and they had separate bedrooms and they'd agreed they could see other people.

He didn't. It was far worse than that.

The judge told her, "My wife's crazy. You were at MHMR awhile, and I can see you're a person who naturally feels sympathy for others less fortunate."

She squirmed in the chair.

The judge continued, "I'm having a conversation with her and all of a sudden she's a different person. What would you do?"

"Like a mood swing; women are like that."

He leaned over his desk and shook his head. "I'm not talking about anything like that. I'm telling you she becomes somebody else, in voice and manner and she's speaking Comanche."

"Your wife?"

"Lacie. Originally from Austin."

"She's white?"

"Hell yeah"

"Split personality? She may need some professional help."

"You ever heard that Jerry Clower joke? 'Just shot up in here, one of us got to have some relief.'"

She didn't know what he was talking about and she didn't want to get involved, but it was too late now. This guy was out there.

"You're different now, judge."

"How's that. You mean vulnerable to extortion. You won't."

"No, I mean. Different from when you're in court."

"Is that good or bad?"

"Good. There's a chance you're actually human. I'd say that's really something new."

He sat back and considered what might or might not have been a joke. He contemplated his chances with the young good-looking probation officer. He decided he might have a chance and leaned forward, "But not so new that I think I'm a ten-year-old Indian brave that lived a hundred-and-

fifty years ago out near Palo Duro.”

FOURTEEN

When Julie returned to the vet's office latter that morning, her cat was atop a heating pad and covered with towels. An IV drip snaked up from her left leg. Her eyes were frozen open, glassy and were smeared with a medicated jell to keep them moist. Her mouth was open and her head tipped a bit off the side of the heating pad. She couldn't blink or swallow.

“Shouldn't we put her down?” Julie wanted to know.

“Not necessarily,” the vet said. “She'll probably pull through.”

This was hard for Julie to believe. It seemed to take real effort for K to lift her diaphragm to breath, but the lady vet spoke like it was routine. Actually, it was probably routine for a North Texas animal hospital, but not for Julie.

“Can she see?” Julie asked.

“Yes,” said the vet.

Julie touched K Kat's head and very slightly she began to purr. The tip of her tail twitched rapidly.

“See? She's in there,” said the vet.

FIFTEEN

Judge Stafford met his wife at what people then called “the Snake Farm” on I-35 in central Texas. He watched her lead four families of travelers through the exhibits. Lacie smiling, showing her perfect teeth, showed no fear at all. Her presentation was blissful. She moved as a delicate female as she spoke elegantly about the snakes.

Almost immediately, the newly elected judge saw a healthy pure girl with perfect skin, probably just out of high school and as fearless and unconcerned by the death only inches out of reach. Young enough to be his daughter, she would easily be an issue in a county where the voters were, at best, Victorian, at that time they were proud of the Puritans they elected. Things had changed since then, his job was safe now, but at the time she was all a very real risk. But none of that matters to a man young at heart. Either that, or the caveman inside, the judge said to himself that he had to have her. In any case, lured by the snake charmer, he traveled every Friday afternoon to see her Saturdays. He was captured by her magnetism.

After two months of Saturday tours, where he couldn't bring himself to speak to her, he saw her outside the farm, in pink shorts molded perfectly to form. Perfect hair. Perfect skin. She wasn't ever totally aware and it made her a bit nervous, a man approaching her in dark suit pants, in a starched shirt with a silk tie. And to make things worse, he introduced himself as a

district court judge; her heart stopped and she naturally thought she was in trouble. She knew she wasn't smart but she was smart enough to know lawyers and judges were bad news. But he quickly expressed to her that he was taken with her and the way she did her job. That wasn't something that happened every day, a man in a suit falling all over himself in admiration or her, or her work. Or lust; it didn't matter to her what brought him around. She'd never met a thirty-four year old man with white hair and she eventually fantasize he was an angel visiting her bed at night.

He asked intelligent questions about her work and after about twenty minutes he learned her full name. And that she was from Austin and had been at the snake farm for two years and she loved it; they didn't bother her. She'd even begun to consider college to become a herpetologist. She hadn't enrolled but was thinking about it. Seriously. And, she'd thought she might get a license to import and export exotic snakes. She wouldn't do that, if there was a test.

Three other women were working there - Lorie, Leanne and Lovie. Really. He learned about the other girls, their likes and dislikes. Lovie's tattoo was allegedly the one that inspired the Ray Wily Hubbard song; at least she was the one with a snakeskin sleeve up her arm. Reluctantly, he learned about the snakes, their natural habitats and how close they'd come at the farm to imitating near perfect conditions for them. Lacie rolled her shoulders and gave him a somewhat orgasmic shudder when she mentioned the Black Momba. She said the snakes might escape, but were easy to recapture in the AC. She shuddered again. Judge Stafford asked her if she wanted to sit and drink a Dr. Pepper.

He told he he'd gone to school in San Marcos and then law school in Austin, done legal work in San Antonio; much of his life had been spent in the area but he'd never seen the snake show before two months ago.

"Figure that. I've driven by there a hundred or more times and never stopped.

He told Lacie he'd gone to San Antonio to attend a funeral but stopped to see the snakes instead. He'd stopped on a whim. He didn't divulge that he absolutely could not endure funerals when high on meth, or that he had a hard place in his heart when it came to organized religion.

He'd never been a cop, like he told Julie, but worked for the deceased as an assistant prosecutor before returning to Wichita. Eventually he would run for District Attorney and then Judge. He told Lacie all of this, which of course impressed her immensely.

Lacie listened and nodded her head as he told his story. He told her he had enemies that thought he was too tough on criminals. They wanted him to show leniency.

"I send people to prison when they injure someone or themselves. That's my job."

And she nodded in agreement; hurting someone was definitely bad. He said nothing about the addicts or the shoplifters or the drinkers or the social misfits that found themselves on the wrong side of the tracks. He didn't want to appear to be a run-of-the-mill street sweeper to Lacie.

"I think you're an angel. Famous. A famous elected angel," was her response.

"It's not a popularity contest, what I do. If I sentence someone to lethal injection, it's because they got it coming to them. And his momma and daddy ain't gonna vote for me after that. Thank god there's a ton o' people that'll vote for me 'cause of it."

Lacie smiled at him, maybe he was afraid she's be turned off by the exercise of pure power, for a lot of Austin girls that was a turn off. "This is all very interesting," and again she rolled her shoulders and gave them a little quiver. Snakes. Power.

She surprised him, "What religion are you?"

"I'm a member of First Baptist, the big church that's on television. Sit right on the front row. I'm a little sensitive about that; they've ribbed me about that. They say I'm up there only to be seen. How do they know what's in a man's heart? You don't think it's too obvious, do you?"

"I don't know I've never seen it. We don't get that signal. I don't even know where that is."

"Oh, yea. I forgot."

"But your hair makes you stand out in a crowd. You probably look good on TV."

"That's a good thing; lots of voters notice the hair, I think. They might not remember the name but they say, 'that's the white haired, no bull shit, judge.'"

"Oh, my lord!" Her eyes enlarged.

"What's wrong?"

"You ARE an angel."

"I'm not."

"No laughing"

"I won't."

"How do you know you aren't an angel?"

"I'm just not."

"No, how do you know?"

"Believe what you want to believe. Maybe I am an angel if you say so." He was joking of course but Lacie took it all very seriously. And in those pink shorts how could he fault her for any religious idea she might have.

"It could be though. Maybe God sends helpers here and they're not even aware 'til somethin' happens, like maybe a murder, and they're needed."

Judge Stafford smiled and chuckled.

"You said you wouldn't laugh."

"I'm not laughing at you. I'm laughing at myself. I've ah had a few un-angelic thoughts race through my mind. It's just that well, you in those pink shorts of yours..."

"Oh, that? Boy angels want that just like everybody else. Nothing to be ashamed of there. If you have certain needs, well angels have needs too, you know. It's only natural."

She kept starrng at him, not looking for flaws, serious but with a cute way about her. This was a healthy woman, carefree and not likely to compromise her notions.

She surprised him again, "You don't believe in hell do you?"

"I've sent a few people there, I've been told. Why?"

It's just that you don't seem like that type to believe what you're told. I mean some old pope or whoever told people there's a hell, you don't necessarily agree with that do you? You're a judge and can make up your own mind, right?"

"I'm my own judge, you might say." He chuckled at his pun; though she didn't mind.

She asked, "Are you married?" and she grabbed his hand over the table. "No, you aren't. You where but now you're divorced."

"How did you know?"

"You're wife wanted out of your dumpy little town and you got yourself elected. That was the last straw. Not being able to leave."

"Exactly."

"Jesus tells me things sometimes."

"Smart man, Jesus."

She frowned and gave him a strange look. "But you aren't living in town. What's that town? Wichita Falls? You live out in the country."

"It's out in the country, yea. Right again."

"Cause you need quiet."

"Yes, I do. Been writing."

"Really?"

"Westerns. Self-published at the moment. But things are changing, you don't need anyone's permission to publish anymore. Amazon will accept pretty much anyone, these days. Even me."

"But you want a big publisher to promote your books."

"That would be nice."

"Well, if you believe in God, it could happen any minute."

"I'm ready."

"I'll pray for you but you have to understand the books have to be good or God won't help you. When it comes to money stuff, you can pray all day but he only helps those that help themselves."

"You want to have dinner tonight?"

This is the way it started. Before Lacie's near death experience. Before they married and she moved to Wichita.

Married for years, he accepted her cute eccentricities in exchange for reliable and energetic sex. The legal community (cops, lawyers and clerks) that ran across her, mostly at the WalMart, accepted the peculiarities as a pleasant distraction to their mundane city. To them she was a variety of Austin wildflower.

But those blissful days were coming to an end.

SIXTEEN

The way she was now wasn't cute or exocentric. It was normal everyday run-of-the-mill bickering. Man and wife.

"Judge," she called him that. "You know why you're so unhappy?"

Not more. "Why do you think I'm not happy?"

She'd told him the answer, more than a few times, and he'd made faces, thinking it was dumb. "Judge, you're not happy because you've not opened your heart to Jesus. You don't want to even try."

He might remind her they sit on the front row of the huge Baptist Church, the one on television, and he was so powerful that not a soul would ever think about taking those seats.

She might remind him that if his heart was open, he'd be just as happy on the back row.

If he got her worked up, she'd speak in Comanche. He couldn't tell, but she'd inform him what Iso-ta was telling him, that he was running himself into the ground and it would make the afterlife a difficult journey. She'd delivered at least a dozen incoherent messages from 1847 during the last few years of marriage.

Lacie insisted she was there when Iso-ta spoke to him. It happened in their first year of marriage and happened more regularly as it all spun down. She insisted that she remained in her body and that she just scooted over to make room for Iso-ta. She told the judge it was still her body, and sometimes his, she pointed out.

He thought Iso-ta might be renting a room in there, given Lacie was putting on weight, and about as much as a ten-year-old Comanche boy might occupy.

SEVENTEEN

The way Lacie remembered it, it was just a perfect day. It was in the afternoon. She recalled leading a group of kids from the YMCA on a tour, the kind they gave all summer long. It was more educational and less terrifying than the normal tourist show. She remembered flashes going off

and the boys who wanted to be snake handlers, their faces. Lovie working in the pit with the rattlers. Lorie walking with the group, narrating the lesson. Leanne in the break room.

"Want to see a rare African black snake?" Lorie asked the children.

Lacie moved to her appointed position and was ready to handle the snake, but she gasped. The Black Mamba was not in its cage. Lacie casually walked to the lab and stuck her head inside the door; no one and no gray snake, at least not in sight. Calmly she signaled the "silent code" for the girls to evacuate the building, and not just outside the door, but all the way to the parking lot. Lovie, Lorie, and Leanne slowly and resolutely moved the YMCA people out of danger back to their bus; actually, they thought to examine the bus, under all the seats, before letting them back aboard.

Lacie remained inside to deal with the missing snake. This was the part that made the young Lacie wet. The Black Mamba had never escaped and its bite would mean death. No antidotes in all of Texas, probably in the entire USA. They'd have to hook her up to an I.V. and eventually to a respirator, but eventually, they'd unplug it. Unplug her. She was day-dreaming an Afrikaner snake expert would come ravish her there on the floor and they'd worry about the snake afterward. She remembered a fraction of a second, jerking back away from the underside of a food cart stacked high with feeder mice. Gray snake, black mouth.

The next part she remembered even more clearly because it was the beginning of her very own near-death experience. She was okay then, she sacked the black snake, but just for a matter of a second. She saw Lovie pick up the sack, containing the Mamba. Lovie put it on the counter in the lab and dialed 911. She saw Lorie and Leanne start C.P.R., seeing the other three snake handlers, the top of their heads, seeing all this from above looking down.

Then it became dark and she was somewhere else. That was like floating on the Guadalupe, only now she was breathing and her heart was beating.

Lacie was asked later on (by hundreds of priests, ministers, the faithful, the faithless, journalists, the curious) if it was a tunnel. Everyone had that picture in his or her head, the idea of a tunnel with a light at the end.

No, she thought. There wasn't shape to the place she was. There wasn't any light, just a weird hazy glow to the sun. She told them it was a summer central Texas, but an overcast day, floating down the river. Normal. Except floating the river, she'd never NOT seen birds, coyotes or wild hogs. And there were no animals and no sounds as she, paralyzed, traveled down the river.

It was that way, she told her questioners, until all of a sudden she saw a little Indian boy standing on the bank. The little boy raised his hand and her progress down the river halted. The small Indian boy wore a loin cloth and moccasins and stood she guessed about 20 feet away on the river bank. He

said in Comanche, which she now magically understood, "Now is not the time. Up river. Not down."

Lacie told this story hundreds of times and was invited to join the Native American Christian Church. She traveled with evangelists who schedule spiritual awakenings all through the southwest. She smoked peyote every Sunday morning at communion and never stepped inside the First Baptist Church or appeared on television with the judge, ever.

"Up river and not down," she'd say it to people in English of course but then in Comanche. And the natives knew it was real because it was a white woman, who'd seen Iso-ta on her way to heaven, but he'd turned her around. An Indian might make up such a story, but not a white woman with flowers in her hair.

EIGHTEEN

The story coming out of the hospital where she was taken would fill hundreds of churches. She asked, "where am I?" and a nurse told her she was at Dell Seton in Austin, brought there near death, but now she seemed to have survived, the only Anglo woman ever known to have done that. The nurse didn't seem open to revelations, visions, or even religion so Lacie waiting patiently for her fiancé at the time, our judge. At the time of the accident, he'd been on a plane back to Dallas; so he couldn't get back very quickly once finally someone called and told him she'd regained consciousness. Her herpetologist boss got to the room first, and she was the first Lacie told about the river and the Indian boy. She listened because she didn't want to be sued.

Eventually however, the judge had a hold of her hand on the bed.

"Something happened to me."

"I'll say it did."

"No, I had a near death experience like people talk about."

"And what was it?"

"I was dead and out of my body. I did. I died, but it wasn't right, so I got turned around. I came back. I came back to you."

"Ain't that sweet?"

"A boy shaman turned me, on the river."

"I want you to quit your job."

"They're paying me 'till I'm out of here."

"They don't want you to sue them."

"No, I don't believe in all that."

"You will, when you get the bill for this."

"I don't care about that either."

"The doctor said the hospital would get a lot of PR from your

recovery.”

“Are you going to listen to my story or not?”

So he listened and then said, “Look, I have a place in the country on five acres. Never so much as a grass snake; two oak trees. A five-hundred-year-old mesquite. Three Japanese maples that I planted. A big house but not too much to clean.”

“Sounds wonderful.”

“I want to marry you.”

“You want to marry me? We haven’t even...”

“I’ll put up a fence, and you can get a dog.”

“You think we’re compatible?”

“You’re compatible to me.”

“Oh, that’s so sweet. You’re pretty compatible to me too. Can I let you know tomorrow?”

“Why?”

“There’s just so much I have to figure.”

“We’ll get you a car, all your own. I’ll take you to parties at the country club. Or if you want a pool, I’ll put one in.”

“More to think about,” and she chuckled, the first time since the bite.

“Rest, dear.”

He leaned over and kissed her head and squeezed her hand. And she then decided, the next day, she’d agree. He had nice white hair, and she was guessing it was fine and soft like an angel’s. He was mature and had an important job.

Because of the news coverage, the next year, revenue out at the Snake Farm doubled. And, the twenty-one days Lacie was laid up, the judge flew too and from Austin. Eighty dollars round trip. The first ten days were the only days in modern history no one from Wichita were sent down as if the judge had a bargain with the devil maybe. Some cases were postponed, and everyone else got probation, unheard of previously.

She could forget about the snakes. Those nasty things that now freighted the hell out of her. She’d marry the judge. She asked the nurse if a judge was “your honor,” then what was the wife of a judge called and the nurse said, “dignified.”

It was later in the night when a Native American family was walking down the hospital hall. It was past visiting hours but, they’d rode from Oklahoma to visit someone, it seemed. One of them was little Iso-ta, and he again stopped at Lacie’s bedside and stood there looking at her.

“The Wichita are an honorable people and reliable in trade.”

Lacie would tell Oklahoma and New Mexico Indians of nearly every tribe that the boy’s words had been permission for her to marry the Wichita County judge. “It was the same little boy that turned me around on the river.”

She had gotten out of the bed and wandered the hospital asking about the dark-skinned visitors, where they'd gone. There was no sign of them, and no one else had seen them. She fell asleep and awoke refreshed and ready for her ring. Her strength was returning, and the judge would be returning in the afternoon.

She would tell the congregations she visited about a crucifix she'd found. It hadn't been in the room before, and she asked the nurse, and she didn't know anything about it.

NINETEEN

Married life was grand. Each morning, he'd get up and find her in the garden communing with nature and her medical marijuana, not entirely legal in Texas. She grew it between two big oaks that she believed to be two old Indian women. Sundays she drove up to Lawton, Anadarko, Chickasha or Shawnee (always a different church - celebrities were asked to do that) to preach and commune with peyote.

Inside the judge's home, the books were piling up. Books and DVDs of shamanism; animation; Jewish, Catholic and Islamic mysticism; faith healing; peyote and medical marijuana. Comanche cultural traditions. A huge encyclopedia of world religions.

The books and videos helped little to bring the Indian boy around. He just popped into her head whenever he (or she) willed it. Lacie claimed she could bring him out of the spirit world into this world by praying to Jesus. But she refused to do it on the spot. She'd say "later maybe" or "is this a test?"

"Oh."

"What's his name?"

"Iso-ta."

"And he's an old Indian?"

"He's an old dead Indian. Yes."

"How old was he?"

"He's ten."

"That's all?"

"What's age got to do with the truth?"

"I just figured you'd share more in common: language, age, gender maybe."

"He was killed by a snake."

"One of the black ones?"

"No, they aren't from here, and it's the mouth that's black. They're more like gray. He was killed by a rattler, a juvenile diamondback."

"They pack a punch; I remember you telling me."

"It was 1847 when he passed over."

"How'd you know I was about to ask that?"

"Jesus, of course."

"Okay, what am I thinking now?"

"Is this a test?"

"I was wondering what happened to that sweet sexy girl from the Snake Farm."

"No, you thought you wanted me to straighten up the house and clean the kitchen."

"Uh, I wasn't."

"Judge, you're a liar, and you have funny priorities. I'm trying my best to help you find the truth."

"Maybe if you went back to New Braunfels and found a job. I hear WalMart is looking for talented people. No benefits but no snakes either. Sometimes, out in the country like this..."

"Judge, you really need to learn to relax. You'll never open your heart to the Lord when you're wound up like this."

He'd been enduring this for years now because Lacie had been bitten by a snake. He'd built the pool and fenced the entire five acres. He'd bought her an Australian terrier, a breed advertised as a "vicious hater" of snakes, and a Chevy, she drove to a health food store she found over on Lawrence.

The country club parties were out, all that idle chatting. The judge couldn't get her to go to church with him, which meant he had to be on television all by himself, which he debated might be counter-productive given people naturally would wonder where the judge's new wife was. He hadn't touched her in months, but that didn't seem to bother her any.

He needed a way to get her to leave of her own volition. He'd not get married again, so a divorce wouldn't be necessary, unless it was easily and inexpensively obtained. Maybe what he was looking for was a hassle-free separation. Could he be that lucky, politically, financially?

And then it occurred to him. Simple and direct. No mistaking the message. He had a plan, and he ruminated on it for weeks. Planned it in his head, a hundred different ways. Accidentally spoke it out loud, in his truck, while driving into town. He'd take his time and find the perfect situation, and then he'd strike. Pardon the pun.

TWENTY

Until that morning, talking to that little probation officer, Julie something or other, he hadn't had the incentive to get his wife actually moving. Julie was a cop, in the general sense of the word, and knew how to keep her mouth shut. The judge didn't know why, maybe it was the law thing, but the little Irish filly was energizing him, and the judge hadn't felt that in the year since his mistress was arrested in Dallas with an ounce. There was little

he could do for the mistress.

He'd had a few casual encounters in this time, but felt it was too much work. Drinks, dinner, having to sit through a sappy movie in Vernon, all just to get the woman in bed. He felt it was killing him. It was better to have one girl, addicted to meth, right near, who you could count as reliable. And JoJo had been reliable.

He'd have her down at the Circle Inn in disguise – a cowboy hat, boots, and even spurs once. The clerk passed him and his costume in the parking lot once, "Hello, Judge" and he gave JoJo hell about that, but she swore up and down she'd not told anyone. Finally, a miracle, she realized that he'd put every single Circle Inn resident away at least once. The sex offenders reported out of that address, and everyone else there was out on parol. Most of the others were girls on probation playing house out of a twelve by twelve room.

She flat out told him, "every single room has an offender and half of them ain't dumb like you think. One of them probably told the manager you come here to see me."

So, he moved her to the La Quinta out on 287. This was ideal — less competition for her. And there was a Whataburger directly across the street. Less police surveillance and most of the truck drivers that stopped at the Whataburger would tip her a gram. That made two grams, one for her to inject and one for her to sell. Plus she still made money dancing.

The judge figured it cost him less money out at the La Quinta. She also thought she was making out better; of course, there was the taxi to and from Maximus', but the judge wanted her out there and "under the radar" so it all seemed to work out until she and a girlfriend want to Dallas looking for a big score.

The judge would get her relatively aggravated just by texting her that he was on the way with a gram. When he got there, he'd have herself play with herself and then she'd know when to take her hand away and extend her arm to him. He'd give her the bump and ninety percent of the time she'd orgasm. Just from the dope. She wasn't inhibited about it, not a bit.

Of course, it took some practice to get the symphony working. Working with the timing and the dosage and the mood (for JoJo), the judge reasoned other "couples" had discovered these aphrodisiacal properties. It was all tricky, but they'd grown to master it, what the judge called "the show".

The judge asked her if she came when the meth hit her brain or her box. It was a legitimate question, but JoJo hadn't a clue why or how that worked. The judge asked his doctor, and he immediately, with hesitation, said, "the brain."

"Given proper stimulation before the injection, it's a well known property of the drug. Female orgasm. CDC research and as far as that goes male orgasm as well."

First, the judge had never heard of men having orgasms when shooting up. But, clearly the doctor had been approached with this question before, and he seemed to have researched it. He'd cited the CDC.

The minute she'd appeared in his courtroom charged with possession, he knew the tiny blond addict would fit the bill. Shackled and humiliated, she flashed a smile at him anyway. He gave her the maximum probation then looked her up at her probation address, the Circle Inn, and offered her a gram to make up for what he'd done to her life. On their first encounter, he explained that she got the extended probation because he didn't want her slipping out of town or in prison, that he liked her.

What a picture it turned out to be, every Sunday and then every Wednesday, while Lacie was up in Oklahoma getting her religion on, the judge was shooting JoJo up with instant and nearly effortless gratification. At first, the judge was too afraid to inject himself, but he didn't mind watching her. He thought of it as a game, to see if "he" could get her done and relatively so easy, "look ma, no hands" and when it would happen he'd signal with his hands up in the air and yell, "touchdown!"

But Julie was a different type of girl, more virgin than not, despite having being married. He'd not noticed her until she spoke in court about Haystack and he decided to give her a difficult time; women like that he calculated. Sometimes it worked. Talking to her in his chamber hadn't changed his mind. She was a good-looking former virgin with a cute figure. And she was game too. She might not volunteer her vein to him, but she'd be squirmy and agile enough he figured.

He'd asked her to meet him at the Lazy Dog Saloon, and he wasn't surprised when she didn't show. The long mesquite bar at the Dog was a lure for judges, lawyers (mostly prosecutors), probation and parole officers, cops and the two newspaper reporters. The reporters probably weren't ideologically the law but were parrots just trying to make it. Drinking around cops and getting info was pretty much their job. Julie worked in the probation office and would have been entirely welcome at the Dog, but she might not be comfortable being the lowest life form in the room. It didn't matter to the judge; patience was a virtue.

But four shots of Jack and he had out his twelve dollar Dollar General drop phone out dialing a number down at Throckmorton. He said to the woman that answered, "I'd like to speak to Dickey Briscoe please."

She said, "We ain't got no skins, but we got meat."

"I just want to talk to Dickey."

That got a grunt from the woman on the phone; clearly, she would have to get up from her couch. A man came on.

"You know who this is, Dickey?"

"Uh, I think so."

"Your day in court is coming up."

"Next week, sure."
"You might get out of those charges, but you need to do me a favor. You think you can do that?"
"They put a tracker on my truck without a warrant, you know."
"I don't give a f#\$%0. You shouldn't be moving dope."
There was a long pause.
"Do I have a choice?"
"Well, you might get 20 years, or you might have the charges dismissed. But it's up to you."
"My lawyer..."
"It ain't up to your lawyer, now is it?"

TWENTY-ONE

They left downtown, Ninth and then Brook and down Kell, Haystack driving his uncle. Creature was taking in the city, that had changed little in the ten years he was locked up.

On Taft, Haystack warned him, "Over here by the college, they see you driving around at night, in a old pickup truck, they'll pull you over sure as hell."

"It's not the college; it's these houses. Safes, money, furniture, new cars in the drive. Collectables. Antique toy soldiers, big freakin' geode rocks to steal."

"How you know that?"

"Been inside."

"Which house?"

"No, inside prison. But you're right, a old truck like this, well to them it just screams thief."

"I ain't no thief."

"You ain't changed. You're the same kid you was when I went in."

"Yea, but I'm just telling you since you left; things's changed."

"You stole more than me already, and I'm your old convict uncle."

"I stole a pizza, a pair of boots (these uns), a bathtub, a bicycle, and a chicken. I'm out of the business though."

"Yea, you're out of there now. You'll be stealing Kool-Aid out of the scullery next week."

Creature was huge for fifty, naturally, but on top of that, he'd spent ten years lifting weights and working out. For a guy that old, he was fit.

Creature was out of prison less than 48 hours and already had everything he might need - a hazer straw cowboy hat and a pair of Pirarucu boots. They'd belonged to his departed son now buried. TDC had wanted seventeen hundred dollars to let him out for the funeral, so he'd not been there to put the boy in his grave. He did have his boy's hat and boots. His

son had gone off to San Angelo and got himself shot in a bar, by a homosexual nobody recognized and never saw again.

Creature didn't talk much about the boy to Haystack, and the twenty-year-old only had a vague picture of his cousin, in the fish skin boots, the hat, and oddly some neon bright western looking suits – a blue one and a green one – came to mind.

“Ma wants you to come with us to church Sunday.”

“The preacher's gonna tell us we're a rowdy bunch of people, but I ain't gonna worry about it, not 'til I get old.”

They stopped for pizza on Southwest Parkway and had two pitchers of beer. It would be getting dark soon.

Haystack worried, “I get stopped and have to blow a breathalyzer. I'm toast.”

“What's the big deal? You're going to prison anyway. Just tell them. When they run your license, it's gonna tell them you're on your way down.”

“That ain't gonna work.”

“Might.”

Haystack had calmed down a bit since court. He had, seven days to gather information and to think about prison, to decide if he wanted to run or not. While they'd eaten pizza, Creature had given him some advice. Prison didn't sound like anything but a waste of time. He didn't need it cause he already had his head on straight. If he didn't win parole, a possibility, he was 20 now and would be twenty-nine when he got out, and that pushed him west.

Haystack's little brother (living in Amarillo) had offered him his identity – driver's license and social – so he could work. But then there was the whole fingerprint issue and realization that he'd need to leave Texas for sure. But, theoretically, it was possible.

“Wouldn't it be good if we could hop a flight to anywhere?”

“You talking about that song? I think she's saying 'cop' a flight. Like cop a flight. But that's a good question,” Creature said.

“Well, I don't need to go to prison.”

Creature asked him, “Take me out to Tanglewood will ya?”

Haystack did turn in that direction, without hesitation, but he complained, “You're not doing anything but trying to get me pulled over.”

“I wouldn't worry too much.”

“No, you should worry.”

“There's only one way in and one way out?”

“No, they've changed all that. Three or four ways in and out, now.”

“Hot darn. In the old days, if they heard an old truck and looked out and saw a bunch of rough looking ol' boys like us is driving around in there, they'd call the cops. Then the cops they'll just sit there at the entry, and they'd have us bottled up. Hell, a four-wheel drive couldn't get out of that

canyon.”

"Sounds like you learned that the hard way."

"Nephew, I learned everything I know the hard way."

For being in prison the last ten years, Creature was an astute observer. When they arrived, he took it all in rapidly.

"Funny how rich people own the government. Nice public joggin' and bike trail with nowhere for the rest of the public to park. No one hardly ever complains about that do they; taxpayer funds paying for all that concrete and hardly a working-man to oppose it. The real people just say, here's our money now build something nice for the people I work for."

"Rex Tillerson lives in here."

"They think they're slick. Who's that?"

"Exxon."

"The drunk ship captain?"

"No, he was the Secretary of State for a week or two. I think he told Trump where he could stick it and got fired. He's from here, you know.

"He's a regular Batman, huh? A caped Chupacabra."

"What?"

"Turn here."

Haystack knew, for a fact, they'd be pulled over. It was just too suspicious, suicidal to be in that neighborhood. Someone would call the cops.

He didn't want to, but Haystack of course complied.

"I had a celly by the name of Blue. Good kid. Used to work for a rich doctor. He's still rich, but they made him a different kind of doctor now. He can't write scripts anymore, and he's got house arrest."

"What for?"

"He's writing prescriptions left and right. Pay your office visit an' he'd say, 'What do you want? Addys, Oxys, Hydros' and then he'd send you down to his pharmacy. He owned the one right up on Ninth. Blue'd find people to come in get those pills and then he'd buy them off them out of 'em in the pharmacy's parking lot. Blue'd then take the pills out to the night clubs, and they was making some serious bank."

"How'd he get busted?"

"Some guy grabbed the pills outta his hand and took off running, maybe \$100 worth at most. Blue pulled a pistol, with twenty people watching, and shot him in the back of the neck. Right square. Dropped him like a rock, he said. He and this girl who was on his arm."

"They're out of there."

"Yep."

"Even the girl?"

"She got ten. He got twenty-five."

"And the doctor got house arrest?"

"He lives there." Creature pointed at a house.

Haystack stared at the illuminated trees in the front, the professionally lighted facade of the house.

"Blue'd also get him boys."

"What boys?"

"You know, boys. Young boys."

"You mean he's a queer?"

"His daddy was a doctor as well, swore he'd go to the laws and rat out his own son if he didn't learn to like woman. Had a nurse of some sort of spy in this guy's office. In the end, daddy bought him that house, if he'd stay out of the gay bars. That meant that the young doctor had to have boys brought to him, but it also meant he could sock away all the money he made."

"You gonna rob him?"

"Thinking about it."

"This truck is too recognizable, and all these people have security cameras. The cops are probably on the way already."

"I'm just gonna see what he's got. Blue wants me to hurt him, but where's the profit in that?"

TWENTY-TWO

The scaly villain had bitten K on the left cheek, and the swelling misshaped the tiny head. She drooled out off the edge of the heating pad. But always, her tail was flipping up and down when Julie visited.

She received saline fluid, potassium, and other meds, but no anti-venom. Anti-venom was available but would be ineffective unless they knew the variety of the snake. So Julie's cat lay there, immobile but for the tail. K was the most helpless thing Julie had ever seen. The vet, however, seemed to see this sort of thing all the time and didn't seem affected much at all.

TWENTY-THREE

Julie sat in her secondhand MINI Cooper, waiting for Haystack to return home. The house he rented from Vida, the world's most personable and noble slumlord, was dark. MHMR where she worked her way through college was a couple of blocks down Ninth. She's made a mistake telling the judge she moved from mental health to probation. The less information he had the better it would be for her moving forward.

The judge was laying his wife's problem on her; he even told her that she also looked like a mental health worker. *Gee thanks; coming from a redneck sexist dickasaurus that means so much.* She wished she'd said, "Oh, really? You

married her. What were you thinking?" But she hadn't said anything.

It was all set up so she'd be honored; a judge wanted to sleep with her. She could tell all the cops, and all the lawyers that would ask, that she'd told him to screw off. "You're a smart little lady. You like your job; I mean probation? Maybe I can help you out. Help you up. Put in a good word. At the least you'd have my ear in court; you know, to do some good for your kindergarteners. It's not like I got some disease or something."

Wow, she told herself, I get to sleep with a disease-free fifty-year-old judge. She didn't, but she thought about it.

There in front of Haystack's rent house, a car pulled up, exhaust smoking, registration expired, quarter panel rusting through.

Two young longhairs got out, marijuana smoke rolling out the open doors. One had a pizza box and the other eight beers. One was tall enough to be Haystack but heavier; this was Bulldog, called that because until last year he had a Basset hound he called "Bulldog." He liked weed. People would say to him, "that's not a bulldog," and he'd invariably reply, "No, but he thinks he is." So the ten-years he had the Basset, and there was occasion to distinguish between the man and dog, the man became "Big Bulldog" and the Basset hound become "Little Bulldog." When the dog died, the man just became just 'Bulldog'.

The other one, just thirty minutes out of county jail and already skitzing, was Joker. This one had "white power" tattooed where his eyebrows were, but he was such an idiot the Arian Brothers had threatened him and forced him to tattooed over it. It looked like shit, blue eyebrows, but it only set him back 10 minutes, and he got on with things. There weren't many mirrors in his life, and he soon forgot all about it. But, what had bothered him for slightly more than an hour was that the tattoo artist had told him he looked a little yellow and he needed to get a Hep C test.

The AB, protecting their reputation and supervising inking, added that he also needed to have his "sphincter" tested for "anal seepage". Joker thanked them for the advice.

The next day at the free clinic, the nurse explained what anal seepage was and that there wasn't any need to have it checked. Maybe his friends had played a joke on him. What Joker pondered was, why would AB, white guys, play an embarrassing joke on him like that? And why hadn't they liked his White Power expression? Outside on the sidewalk, he sat down and contemplated it. It had nothing to do with his Hep C, but he cried and then he got up and walked halfway across town to Texas Showgirls, where his "girlfriend" worked.

Of course, she wasn't, but she would go with him for an ounce. And probably he landed one every month or so; so he told everyone she was his girlfriend. He'd hoped to catch her in the parking lot; Joker was banned from the actual club. Well, what had he done? He was banned for telling

customers that he “dated” one of the dancers. The owner thought that was bad for business. Joker spent a lot of time in the parking lot sitting leaning up against the north wall out of the sun.

These two idiots, as sweet-natured as they were, had just been released from the county jail. One was high, and the other was geedered. They were talking loudly about how they bet the power had been turned off. They left the front door open, obviously, the lowest of low-income houses had no air conditioner. But Haystack hadn't neglected the electric bill. The light switches had just been off. The lights came on and then the loud music. Julie could hear it out at the street. But she figured this was Vidaville; no one would care or dare to complain.

Three months before, suspected of shoplifting but not arrested, they'd been banned from WalMart. They didn't fret too much about it because there were two other WalMarts to “work.” Well, they tried the others and were stopped nearly immediately after walking in, trespassed. They didn't figure it out until they were in the County lockup and were told by the others about the new facial recognition technology.

Once released from the trespassing charge, they promptly stole a box of roofing nails from the Home Depot and pitched them in the WalMart parking lot, the part the employees used. Of, course they used their own car and were caught on tape, arrested, and the news blasted their mug shots that night and for the next two nights as well. The headlines were just too appealing to pass: “Nail Bandits Busted” and “Nail Bandits Get 90 Days” and the newspaper, as a community service heads up, that summer morning had published, “Nail Bandits Released.”

Maybe Haystack's roommates would know where he was, Texas Showgirls, Maximus; somewhere more civil, the Iron Horse, the Bar L. The food in prison was notoriously bad; his uncle would be preparing him for this. Maybe he was out at the Pioneer. But she didn't feel like driving around to twenty different bars and restaurants, so she needed to ask.

The last place she would have thought to look was Tanglewood.

TWENTY-FOUR

Creature had to wait a good while before the door was opened, by a Filipino girly boy. He was a short chubby little boy-man. Creature figured he'd never pass as a woman; he did, however, have the mannerisms down.

He looked out at Haystack's pick up on the street. He sucked on his teeth and said, “What is it you want?” with just enough of a woman's irritation, Creature rolled his eyes.

“Creature asked, “Where's the doc at?”

The boy only would open the door a foot and no more. He had his hair greased back like a Mexican and wore a tiny stud earring in one ear. And he

was wearing a cotton tropical Asian shirt. And he was a nerd as well; the top button should have been left open, but he'd buttoned it. "The doctor doesn't practice anymore."

Creature shook his head, "I ain't sick, you faggot. This is business. Tell him a friend of Blue's is here."

The boy said, "Wait here." And, like a halfwit, left the door closed but unlocked.

Creature felt that sort of inattention was an invitation and didn't feel he needn't stand there switching thumbs. He opened the door and waltzed in.

The boy had sashayed down the hall, never looking back, so he didn't see Creature enter. Creature moved into a formal living area and looked about and didn't see anything worth stealing, a bunch of artsy fartsy paintings and some weighty looking statues. He ambled on.

Creature reached a formal dining room. The sissy was standing, hands on his hips, waiting for an apology. The candles on the table were lit. A brown guy, balding and sickly, was sitting by himself. There were two plates, half eaten; apparently, he'd interrupted their romantic dinner. This would be doctor Ali Raza.

Doctor Raza looked up from his plate, and this got the boy excited.

"What an asshole. I told you to wait."

"Hey, I didn't get this way overnight. It took years of incarceration to reach this level."

Then Raza said, "It's okay, Marcie." It was clear from the doctor's tone, he believed Marcie might take a punch at the man at any moment. Despite prison, Creature could read the rich like a book, and the doctor had been rich, had been rich a long while, and the thing he feared most was not being rich.

"I was hoping you'd be counting your money," Creature got directly to the point.

Creature noticed the doctor was wearing swimming trunks and maybe that was an electronic monitor on his ankle. He looked out a pair of glass doors at a good-sized pool and diving board.

"Excuse me?"

"The money Blue said you and he made."

"Blue, sure. How do you know him?"

"We did time together. He said to look you up if I were ever in the neighborhood. And guess what?"

"You were driving by and... I see."

"I'm Elias Mercy. My friends call me, 'Creature.' My enemies call the police."

"I'm not your enemy. Good to meet you."

"Happy to be here."

"What can I do for you?"

"Well, for one thing you can put some money on Blue's books."

"Books?"

"So he can buy snacks, paper, pencils, stamps."

"Oh, how do I do that?"

"You don't know anyone in prison? The internet?"

"I never learned all of that stuff."

"But, you'll learn." Creature took a step forward, scared the daylight out of the two lovers.

"Okay, I can do that," Raza quickly agreed.

"It's just that you owe him, that and a lot more."

"The money's gone. I'm stuck here for another year. But I'll be a dermatologist the year after that. It's a pretty good racket, scaring people with skin cancer. Come back next year."

Creature knew it was bullshit and this Paki would never hand over any real money. It already looked like the doctor had sold off some furniture and the paintings in the front room looked unevenly spaced, several of them had probably been sold. Out on the patio, the pool equipment was laying out; they weren't hiring it done. Maybe Marcie had done pool work before. So much for a big cash payout and he didn't feel like waiting another year.

"Well, I just stopped by to tell you Blue was okay. Help him out will ya?"

"Oh, sure. I will. Glad you stopped by."

"Maybe, I'll stop by again, if you're home."

"I'm always here."

Maurice moved to show Creature out. Annoyed at this, he looked up the stairs. If there were money, it would be up there. So, Blue had told him.

Out at the truck, Haystack was nervous.

"Are we in a hurry to get out of here?"

"No, take your time."

"You didn't hurt him?"

"I think he's as broke as us, just trying to hold on to the house. So what's the point?"

TWENTY-FIVE

One of Haystack's roommates, Bulldog, thought he might have his way with Julie; she didn't look all that official. When she asked if Haystack was there, they invited her in and stared at her for about twenty long seconds. When they started horsing around, insisting she drink a beer with them, she pulled out her ID. She held it there for them long enough to read, if that were possible, she thought.

They were intoxicated and high and pretended they didn't know what a

PO was. They were still drinking the long necks as they conversed with her. Bulldog stepped up, tripped, stumbled, and grabbed the ID out of her hand.

“Wichita County. What exactly are you?”

She grabbed the ID back before he chose, and that made him angry. He cursed and tried to fetch it back. She took hold of his pinky finger and twisted until he yelled, “Uncle. Uncle. Okay. Okay. I won’t read it.”

Bulldog was a big guy, but he went right to his knees.

Sooner or later she’d have to let him up, and that might be a problem. He’d probably want to hit her. She had a pistol, in her apartment. Not that she was allowed to carry one.

She told him, “Don’t ever try that again. You understand?”

“I understand that you’re hurting me.”

“I’m a probation officer. What is your name?”

“Bulldog. You’re hurting me; I should be asking your name.”

“Bulldog? Don’t give me that street bullshit. What’s your real name?”

“Ralph

“Ralph what?”

“Ralph Abernathy.”

“Ralph Abernathy, if you touch me again, you’re going to jail.”

“Who’s touching you? You’re touching me.”

“I’m serious.” And she gave the pinky a little twist.

“Okay, okay. Yes. I understand. Ma’am.”

“You’ll sit there on the couch and not move as long as I’m here. Understand?”

“Yes, ma’am. Any way you want it. We’s just clownin’.”

“Okay,” she released him.

And he immediately tackled her and threw her on the couch. Joker’s eyes got about twice their normal size; his jaw dropped.

Bulldog got on top of her with a knee worked up high between her legs. “Lady, I been locked up for three months and twisting my finger nearly off ain’t my idea of foreplay.”

“Ralph, you’re touching me. You’re going to prison.”

“You nearly broke my pinky. You can’t do that. I’m a nice guy, but now I got you.”

“Get off me.”

“Can’t do that.”

Someone walked in the open front door, and both men turned.

Joker said, “Bulldog, you’d better...”

Before Joker could get it out, Creature had Bulldog by the belt and was spinning him in the middle of the room like a huge centrifuge machine, and he was picking up speed.

Julie pushed herself erect on the couch. She straightened her clothes.

Creature was looking at her for some signal, maybe that he could stop spinning Bulldog. She gave it, and he let Bulldog go. Haystack dodged his roommate as he went flying out the front door. Joker chuckled like a fourth grader.

Julie watched Creature straighten his Resistol and bow slightly, as chivalrous as any convict ever had.

Bulldog had picked himself up from the front porch decking and acted like he might rush Creature, but he stopped in the doorway when he saw the size on the bruiser who was now bowing to the lady.

Haystack offered Julie a soda, which she declined, and the situation was defused.

TWENTY-SIX

The rattler, an eight-foot female, opened her eyes and after several hours moved her head from side to side, drained and disoriented. She didn't know where she was. She caught the scent of what she feared was dog urine. She wasn't in the grass or sand or rock. She had no concept or inclination of a Persian rug or hardwood flooring. She'd been cold, very cold and still, there was a cold mechanical wind blowing; clicking on and off occasionally. The scent she feared was all about, but she didn't have the energy to move. She'd lay where she was until the sun rose and heated her body.

TWENTY-SEVEN

The one time Lacie happened to mention a dream she had to the judge he responded with a vulgarity. So this time she didn't bother him. In the new dream, the Comanche boy had warned her to watch her step.

It was Saturday morning, and the sun did rise, and she felt she'd need to pray. She generally did that between nine and ten, in the back yard on the lawn furniture with a blunt. The judge jumped on that and wanted to know why she needed to do that so early. She answered that "Jesus loves the morning, the world clean and wet with dew."

The judge issued the customary profanity and mentioned that bacon, eggs, and biscuits would be nice. Her reply was not to have one. She'd eat raisin bran; he could have that with her if he wanted, but later. The judge felt like more profanity but let it go. She had carried the dog with her; he might have stopped to urinate before he got outside.

That morning he was in the kitchen, alternating glances outside where Lacie was trekking lightly around the garden, probably looking for snakes that were never there, and glancing into the parlor at the dead but menacing looking rattler curled up on the rug.

What Lacie couldn't understand was why she'd married a man who ate the flesh of animals and would surely die of a heart attack at an early age. She prayed about it, and the answer she received was to continue to try to open his heart. He wanted to write westerns, and maybe if that happened for him, he'd open his heart and stop giving people the needle.

He'd spoken to her kindly before and in a civil tone. He'd flown to hold her hand at the hospital after the snake ordeal. He'd made promises of a pool and a fence, and he'd kept them. He'd had convicts come cut the grass for her. He'd not bought her first choice, but he had bought her a reliable car. And of course, he'd driven to Kansas and bought her the dog. No. She couldn't give up on him; he might be a wonderful husband someday. He had potential. Everybody had potential.

Done communing with the Great Spirit, Lacie and the dog entered the back door into the kitchen. The judge felt guilty and offered the dog some extra bacon and eggs he'd prepared. The dog, excited, ran directly past him into the parlor barking and raising Cain. Lacie and the judge both followed the dog into the parlor.

Standing in the doorway, they both saw the strike, the little dog hit in the neck. At the moment Judge Stafford stood dumbfounded, not believing the moron had put a live rattler in his house. It was understood that it would be there, but not alive. He ran to get his shotgun. It was an excellent weapon, given to him by the sheriff; who'd confiscated it from an out of season hunter. Of course, the sheriff was driving the hunter's F-250, but what was important at that exact minute was the judge had the man's high dollar shotgun.

Lacie was screaming and sobbing in a way that prevented her from picking up the dog, who clearly wanted held. By the time the judge returned and leveled the gun at the snake, he realized the value of the rug and hardwood flooring under it. So he just stood there idly.

She eventually picked up the dog, but not until the snake was out of sight. It had warmed up a bit, and she slithered off looking for cover, first under the coffee table and then under the couch.

When the first of the sheriff's deputies arrived, Lacie was holding a dead dog. Both foolish deputies came out with pistols drawn. One of them asked the judge where it was, and he told them to put away the guns; that he didn't want his floors shot up. They complied and holstered their weapons; they sorely wanted to discharge their weapons; they never got to impress the sheriff or the judge, and move up.

By the time the deputies got to the parlor, the snake was three rooms away and plenty warm in the sunroom. The heroes searched the front room and reported back it wasn't there. Lacie, still crying, only now realized it had killed her dog. One of the deputies, now there were four, said, "that dog probably saved your life or at least a lot of pain."

Another deputy chimed in, "that's what they do. What a brave little dog. You want me to take him?" he asked Lacie.

Lacie recoiled and the judge told him, they'd bury the dog; that they needed to get that darn snake.

Another six deputies arrived, putting ten in the house searching. The snake slithered from the sunroom to the judge's study and hid behind western novels on the very bottom shelf. Of course, a brave quixotic deputy charged in there like it was fourth and one, and after looking under the desk, started pulling the books off the bottom shelf. With the ambulance came another four officers to watch the yard. These guys, less daring, weren't so eager to capture the snake but they were content to be curious about the judge's young wife. They ogled her from the lawn.

No one thought to ask why the county was so opulent they had so many deputies patrolling on a sleepy Saturday morning, or why they were all allowed to congregate on one man's property. The answer, if anyone had asked, would have been, "because we can."

TWENTY-EIGHT

Investigator Jake Wise arrived in an unmarked Crown Vic, white and recently washed. He washed it every other day, on the county's dime. He was getting out of his car, putting on his suit coat, when the ambulance left. There was a news camera set up across the street and Wichita was very political; the sheriff and the commissioners would want to see him on the news and looking good. He enjoyed his pay. He liked the performance package car. He intended to remain their go-to investigator and be elected sheriff someday and make the real money. But mostly he fancied that he was the only law enforcement officer (besides the sheriff) who was allowed to carry his choice of weapons. It was uniformity all around, except he was allowed the choice weapons.

He'd been told what to expect, but the judge, his wife (still holding the dead dog) and nearly a dozen patrol officers standing around in front of the hose was a surprise. The media could generally be counted on to cover the first responders in a positive light, regardless of the facts, but they'd surely show the bitten officer being loading to the ambulance and maybe it rolling out of the crowded drive. Regardless of what the media did, the voters would see nine officers standing around doing nothing, all freighted to enter the house now that one of them had been bitten.

They saw Jake walk up; one of the deputies nodded reverently to him. But they continued mumbling among themselves about how hot the judge's wife looked. When the subject of Lacie played out, it was "Why wasn't this is a job for animal control?" The dog catchers were paid about half what a deputy got, but this was their job; a snake was an animal that needed to be

controlled.

Jake had to chuckle; had it been a human perpetrator hold up in the study, hardwood floors and Dalbergia paneling be damned, they'd have taken a dozen crazy chances getting in there to kill him. But the snake just wasn't big enough game, so they all just stood around.

"You get him?" Jake wanted to know.

"Waiting on animal control, coming out from the city."

"Where is it?"

"It's in the judge's study."

"Spread out and look busy. You're on television."

They all looked across the street at the news cameras. They then dispersed in pairs to act like they were searching the hedges for the snake.

Jake walked right into the house and in five minutes appeared back on the porch with the snake in one of the judge's pillowcases.

"Sure, there was only one?"

That comment didn't help Lacie's nerves one bit. She was already throwing things in her car; the dead dog was laid out on the passenger-side seat.

The deputies all looked puzzled? How many had there been? Of course, Jake was already thinking the snake had been placed there on purpose. And if that was true maybe whoever hated the judge that much might have brought a second or a third snake, like a patrolman might have a backup as well as a drop pistol.

"Well, stop standing there and get in there and make sure. The judge and his wife might want to get along with their Saturday."

The deputies then scrambled to get inside. They didn't like the investigator's tone, and the odds were slight, but there might have been a second or third snake. To them, this was just a freak accident of nature. A couple of them thought they might make it on the news by stopping to pick up the pillowcase and appear to be judging its weight.

Jake's phone buzzed; it was the sheriff, calling from a confiscated Tracker bass boat out on Arrowhead. Jake enlightened him on the snake situation.

"It might have wondered inside the house, but I doubt it. It seems that the smell of dog piss would have scared the snake in a different direction. The judge has the air set at sixty-eight, far too cold for a snake to want to be there. Or somebody put it there as a joke of some kind. Or, somebody was trying to inflict harm on the judge."

The sheriff told him to look around really thoroughly and then let it go.

TWENTY-NINE

"I think someone screwed you judge with that snake," Jake told him standing in the kitchen. Jake figured he might need the judge's endorsement when he ran for sheriff someday. "You keep it too cold in here for a snake to just crawl in and who opened the door for it. This is a sturdy house on a slab foundation. It didn't just come up from the crawl space."

"Wait. Hold that thought."

The judge pulled a bottle of Jack out of the cupboard and offered a glass to Jake. Jake shook his head. The judge poured himself a healthy measure.

"It could be just criminal mischief, but I doubt it. Who's gonna walk up to a... my house in the middle of the night, open a door, risk being shot-gunned and pitch in a snake. No. It's just too fantastic."

"Well, the sheriff asked me to look into it. You understand."

"Ahhh, I see. I appreciate your concern, but it's just not a good day. A rattler waltzes into my house, and my wife walks out an hour later. She beat half your deputies out of here, and she won't be back."

"She said, that's it? Just then?"

"Said she was leaving."

"Maybe it's only temporary."

"She won't be back. She's bit when she was younger. Made her very sick, you see."

Jake watched the judge drink his whiskey. He wasn't all that emotional. None too worried.

"She was bitten here; how long ago?"

"No, you heard that song Snake Farm?"

"I heard it, yea."

"It's down by New Braunfels; she worked there when she was just a kid. Put her in the hospital for a month."

"It must have really got her. What kinda Rattler?"

"Wasn't. Black mamba."

"She survived a black mamba? From what I understand, the Discovery Channel, that doesn't happen very often."

"She ain't been herself ever since."

"You want me to go get her and bring her back?"

"Oh, hell no."

"She goes to church with a bunch of natives up in Oklahoma. Drives up there to Lawton two days a week. Religiously. Stays nearly all day. And the sex, I didn't sleep with her before she got bit, but I doubt if it helped her any there."

"Really? Too bad; she's an attractive lady."

"And never on a Sunday or a Wednesday."

"Maybe she heard something last night."

"Didn't mention it to me. She was as shocked about it as I was. And I

can tell you I was pretty shocked.”

The judge looked out the window out back of the house. Deputies were searching the garden, moving aside his wife’s marijuana plants with their feet to look under them.

“What are they looking for?”

“A snake. A bag or container of some sort. If someone brought the snake here, they might have just discarded whatever they brought it in.”

“A wild goose chase.”

“Sheriff asked me to make sure. And well that’s the way things work in this county. I take orders from the sheriff, and the sheriff takes orders from the judge.”

It wasn’t that way, but Jake thought he’d play it that way, cause someday he was gonna, of course, need the judge to get elected.

“I wouldn’t mind if you were the sheriff someday. But, I didn’t hear anything last night.”

“You mind if I ask your wife?”

“If you can find her.”

“Where do you think she went?”

“Jesus probably told her to go up to Lawton.”

“Jesus?”

“Jesus!”

Jake contemplated things.

“Well, I don’t fancy driving up there to look for her and since you say she doesn’t have a cell phone.”

“Refused to let me get her one. Said I could always reach her here.”

“And you don’t know who, outside that Native church, she might be staying with?”

“I think you like your job too much.”

“I just need to keep the sheriff informed, that’s all. Nothing personal.”

“Fine. Fine. He’s not the type to make a mountain of a molehill. I expect he’s already told you to make a show of it and then move on.

“Judge, just one more question and then I’ll move on. Has anyone threatened you lately?”

THIRTY

Julie visited K at the vet’s office daily and twice that Saturday. She rubbed her cat’s head and talked to her. Julie hadn’t spoken to her cat often, but this was different. She sang a strange song (Sweet Child of Mine) and the vet techs just giggled, but Julie didn’t worry too much about things that didn’t matter.

Julie wanted to know if she slept, since her eyes refused to close. She didn’t ask but wondered, if the cat slept did she dream about more snakes?

If K lived, would she have rattler nightmares? Had K been surprised (ambushed) or had she been hunting the snake and simply become over confident? Difficult questions.

THIRTY-ONE

Judge Stafford left the house, with the deputies still searching, not only his 5 acres but the neighbor's pasture as well. The judge said he'd be at the Lazy Dog, but he didn't go there. He drove to Throckmorton to personally scold Dickey Briscoe.

Driving soothed the judge's nerves, but this time he was troubled. He kept thinking had he been born out here, south of Wichita and west of Fort Worth; he'd be moving dope and eating rattlesnakes, which sounded worse than it was. And his best friend would have been Dickey Briscoe. Throckmorton was the rattlesnake capital of Texas and the meth capital as well, depopulated and just far enough to be isolated, but near enough to Wichita and Fort Worth to drive the dope easily into market. Dickey was a mule in more ways than one.

"How many times did I tell you? It was supposed to be dead."

"It was dead when I left. Judge, me and Red we found her in her den. Red smelled her out, I poured some gas in there, an' she came right out. I threw her right into that freezer."

"We had a deal. Dead and in the middle of the rug in the front room. I said deliver the son of a bitch dead."

"Judge, that snake was dead. I threw her in the freezer, feed the dogs, and changed the oil in the truck. I took her out of the freezer, hard as a rock, and drove into town, ask my wife, that snake was dead. We watched a movie at Sikes and then drove it out to your place."

"Bullshit!"

"I put a solid dead snake right where you told me."

"Well, it came back to life then."

"It musta warmed up somehow."

"It killed the dog."

"Dogs usually..."

"It got him right in the neck. That could have been me!"

"Judge, I told you on the phone. I carry dope. I don't cook it. And I hunt rattlers, and I butcher them. That's how I take care of my family. This James Bond stuff, 'make it look alive' that ain't my specialty."

"Dickey, I oughta..."

"So it got away?"

"No, animal control came and took it away, I guess. I came out here."

"So, you said I could have it when you was done with it. It was big enough I could have sold the skin over in Nocona."

THIRTY-TWO

Julie O'Kane was at the sheriff's office to speak with Jake Wise, who'd called wanting to talk to her about Daniel Mercy. She had to run up to the sheriff's office anyway so it wasn't that big a deal. She'd met Jake numerous times but he hadn't seemed all that interested.

Lonny Farmer, a sergeant with the city police, was there as well. Julie knew him slightly from Denim and Diamonds, but she'd never seen Jake there. She had a feeling he didn't drink or smoke or dance even. Jake was clean cut and military looking. No wedding band. She wondered if the women out at the Lazy Dog with handcuff fetishes kept him busy. She figured definitely. He dressed like a lawyer, and carried a Beretta. And no ring, not that it mattered with the skank out there. The only thing she would see that might mar his image was the cheap boots he wore.

Jake flat out told them, "If I printed the names of all the douche bags convicted by Stafford who was back on the street and might have the ability to catch and release a rattlesnake, the county'd run out of paper."

Julie let her eyes wander over to the computer printer and the three cases of paper stacked beside it. How many people had the judge sent away? It was a figure of speech, sure, but how many was that? She wasn't brave enough to ask; they probably didn't know anyway. He'd made his point but asked if they had any ideas.

"If you count all the guys doing time still, who might have friends or family with pet rattlesnakes, the list could be even longer."

Jake continued, "It could be gang-related, AB, AC, Scorpions, Cossacks. Wichita County ranks higher than the average in the state of Texas for gang activity, according to the Texas Department of Public Safety."

"They say that about every county with a bond issue before the voters." Julie pointed out. "It's just politics."

"Darn girl, what side are you on? Are you a cop or what?"

Julie sat back and chose not to say another word.

Jake continued, "MS13."

Sgt. Farmer commented, "They are particularly nasty."

Julie chuckled inside. No MS13 member even knew where Wichita Falls was. It was a place to stop and piss when driving to Colorado. Jake, and the others, just made up threats to public safety so they'd be needed. But she didn't say a word.

Jake went on, "Or it could be that simple DWI; the guy lost his wife, family, and job, then he learns the guy who pulled him over, his wife has his old teaching job. What's that guy?"

"You're not thinking the officer arrested him so his wife could have the teaching job?"

"No, but I'm saying that guy might think that."

"And want to go get a rattler. He was a biology teacher. I see what

you're saying."

Julie couldn't help speaking, and she hoped it wouldn't be a problem. "It looks bad, her taking his job."

Julie had made a mistake. The two men looked at her like, maybe she wasn't a team player or they looked at her like that deputy's wife had a right to that job. It didn't matter, it had happened, and not a soul had said anything about it, except Julie just then.

She had to move the conversation along, or they would have stared at her all day it seemed. So she said, "It could have been anyone."

Jake then rescued her by cutting to the chase, "I'm likin' this Haystack character. I'm thinking the judge is likin' him too. The kid threatened him, and the judge was worried, so he assigned daily reporting and close supervision to Julie here."

"I'm not so sure... He gave him a week of furlough, daily reporting. It really wasn't much of a threat. I talked to the judge, right after that, and he just blew it off." Again they looked at her like she was out of her mind. Any real cop would have immediately agreed with Jake's suspicions.

"Anyone else threaten him?" Sgt. Farmer wanted to help.

"I tried to ask, and he just wouldn't help. He insists they heard, saw, nothing that night."

"What'd she say?"

"Nothing, she's left."

"But you saw her?" Julie asked.

"For a minute. She packed some things in her car and drove off. Took the dead dog with her."

"What's she like?"

"Blonde, twenty-something. Pretty. Putting on weight. The judge used to bring her around town and as I hear it out to the country club. I'd say she was one-ten; now she's pushing one-fifty. She'll dress out at about one-eighty in the end."

"That's so rude."

"She was almost killed by a snake when she was younger. Terrified obviously."

"She's not a heifer," and then Julie had to laugh.

Jake chuckled along with her, "You gotta excuse me. I'm sorry. I'm just a country boy. Grew up on the Waggener Ranch. We joke like that. I'm sorry."

"You were a cowboy's kid?"

"For a while and then I was the foreman's kid."

"Well, you wouldn't know it looking. You clean up pretty good for a cowboy."

"Thanks."

"So, how sure are you someone put it there?"

"Come on. I'm sure. A judge? What are the odds it just crawled in there of its own free will?" Jake responded.

"How do we know it wasn't meant for her, the wife?" Julie asked. And they stared at her again, this time not in disdain. This time she said something perhaps something helpful to them in making an even bigger bust. They considered it.

"It worked didn't it. She left," Julie explained her argument.

Neither man knew how to respond. They thought it was out there, outside the box, and most times they'd want to defend the judge, but the drive to put people away required an open thought process. So they listened.

In the end, Sgt. Farmer didn't think it was malicious, but an accident; he clearly didn't have the killer instinct to be a famous cop. Jake thought the only reason a snake would be inside a judge's air-conditioned home was to bite him, and that was his position. Privately, he needed to be elected sheriff, so he could cash in, and nailing someone for this certainly wouldn't hurt. People would remember. That Vidaville trash was going to prison anyway.

Jake went on without hesitation, "The TV reporter, I've known her since high school, as honest and forthright as they come; she says on the news last night, 'The sheriff's office refuses to say if someone's judging the judge.' I didn't say a darn word to her."

"But they think it was an attempt on his life." Sgt Farmer rang true.

"That's for the ratings. They don't know any more than we know. They're a bunch of Myna birds and repeat the most salacious thing they hear," Julie said. "Otherwise people change the channel."

Julie figured the two men were about to get into a long debate about the use of the media. "The media can be, if managed properly, an excellent tool of law enforcement." She'd heard it all before and it didn't need to be discussed again, not with her in the room. She wouldn't win so it didn't matter, she quickly tried moved on.

"So, who caught it?"

"I did." Jake answered.

And a hero too.

"Waggener ranch?"

"You learn a lot about animals out on a ranch."

"I'm sure you do," Julie flirted with him, out on that ranch with all those animals, knowing how they did it from an early age. She didn't say that.

And he didn't take it that way cause his response was, "But I never came across any reason we should think the snake was meant for the wife of a powerful man."

"What? No cowboy ever wanted to get rid of their wife. Hah!"

The longer they talked about it, Sgt. Farmer was becoming persuaded

maybe, "you don't know where she went?"

"Oklahoma somewhere."

"Big state."

"Tell me about this Haystack character, Mercy."

Julie explained, "He said to the judge. 'We're not done. If you think you can ship me off so easy, you're screwed.'"

"That's all? I heard it was more."

"I was right standing there."

"That's not a threat." Farmer said honestly.

"I didn't take it that way."

"He's telling the judge he's gonna run and this little girl here can't hold him. That's what he was saying."

"Jules, what do you think?"

"I told you. He did something wrong, and he thinks he doesn't deserve such a harsh sentence."

"He deserves it. That all deserve it." Farmer hoped if Jake was the sheriff someday, he could move over into that lead county investigator position. Better pay. The county was rich.

"You know where he was last night?"

"With his uncle, they got back home around nine."

"His uncle has a PhD in crime. I should have thought about that angle; he was out teaching the kid how to get revenge. Stafford was the one that gave him the twenty on that shooting.

"I think we're looking at the wrong Mercy. It's the uncle that's good for the snake." Sgt. Farmer said.

"They're both accountable for it," Jake demanded.

Farmer said, "you think you can put a tracker on that truck?"

"The nephew, it's his truck. The uncle, I don't think he drives." Julie told them what she knew.

"Guy's like that don't have a license. He's been locked up, and the state probably has thousands of dollars surcharges on him so he won't ever be able to drive. I mean really, you want that guy driving around?"

"They were in that old pickup last night. The nephew was driving." Julie made sure they understood.

"He'll be out of here next week... if he don't run off someplace. I tell you the new jail will be nice, but this election is gonna be the death of me. We got every wino in three counties locked up and dangerous people, like this kid, are out on the streets. You didn't hear me say that."

"I thought we wanted the jail full?" Julie asked.

"It's on the news every night; you can say it. People don't see it as a hoax like you and I do; they just ain't that jaded yet. They just see it as a good reason to vote for the bond."

"I'll take care of it," Jake said to Farmer.

"When you think you'll get the warrant?"

"I can't find either judge. But frankly, I don't even bother Stafford anymore."

"You can't use it in court unless..."

"I don't want to use it in court."

"What do you want it for then?"

"Well, I want to know where he's at."

Sgt. Farmer explained to Julie, "There isn't any sanction on violations of the Fourth Amendment. Like you said, we just can't use it in court."

"I want to know where they go, who they see. Who they rob and who they shot. And I don't want to be driving around all day looking for them. And if your dodo bird flies away in that truck, he won't make it halfway to Oklaunion."

Julie, "I have to go."

"Well, don't leave mad."

"I'm not mad. I just have work to do, like eight people to see."

THIRTY-THREE

The vet called. On her own, K had moved to the back of the cage (off the heating pad), and at Julie's arrival, she'd lifted her head about 15 degrees and then laid it down again.

THIRTY-FOUR

Lacie had told the judge, "I'm leaving. I'll call one of my friends," meaning one of the religious Indians up at Lawton – "to take me in until I can get something figured out."

He didn't ask her if she was coming back.

That was the extent of that. Lacie did say, "Don't ask me where I'll be; I'll not be around no snakes; I can tell you that. And don't come looking. It's called a reservation for a reason. I've seen them hide people and they can't be found. I'll probably never speak to you again. I hope someday to forgive you, but it might be a decade or two."

"Wait, forgive me for what? I didn't do anything," the judge complained.

THIRTY-FOUR

Saturday morning she'd left and then Monday Judge Stafford was feeling his oats. He told his assistant to phone Julie O'Kane and get her up there for a conference. He had two hearings, Dickey Briscoe and another.

In the other hearing, the kid pled guilty to stealing a pack of cigarettes, and the judge gave him 90 days.

Between the two hearings, the judge pictured Julie out at "the ranch," as he was now calling his five acres. She was in a tight little sundress, and he's sitting in his study at the computer. Julie, in his mind, brought him lemonade and she took his manuscript and sat. She read, no pen in hand, and didn't comment, but when she reached something witty he'd written, the judge fantasized, she smiled 'come and get me' at him admiringly. And then the fantasy was over when the clerk called the Briscoe case.

Briscoe's hearing was critical and complicated. The Throckmorton sheriff had put a cheap Chinese made tracker on Dickey's truck Feb 17th and had gotten a warrant June 16th, only a week before a Wichita city cop spoiled it all by pulling him over. The cop asked for a consent search, Dickey had declined, and the cop lied that Dickey'd agreed and he searched anyway, standard pretty much everywhere. So, there were two charges, one distribution, and the other simple possession. The two searches were illegal, and they all should have been thrown out, but it was the prosecutor's job to try to bluff his way through it. The elected district attorney didn't want her just throwing her hands up. Maybe Dickey would plead guilty; a lot of these idiots did.

The judge did something he NEVER did; he threw out the distribution charge out based on the illegal tracking device. The search of the vehicle he ruled was legal and then accepted a guilty plea for the possession. He sentenced him to a year's probation, a hundred and sixty-nine dollars a month in fees and a five hundred dollar fine. Dickey's wife was so enraged she couldn't speak. Lockjaw. She was something like a rabid dog, the foaming at the mouth, the shaking, and she sweated a bucket. Good thing she couldn't speak; she'd have spilled the beans for sure.

Dickey walked away to get fingerprinted and sign legal papers. When he got back, the wife was no longer restrained, and she was talking up a storm.

"Some damn deal you made. Do you know what he did to you? How are we gonna get that kind of money?"

"I know somebody."

"That's what got you into this in the first place, you idiot."

There was a long pause. At least six people were acting like they weren't listening in the back of the courtroom.

Finally, she relented, "So where do we get the money?"

"Who do you think?" and he gestured with his chin to the bench.

THIRTY-FIVE

Creature, Haystack, Joker and Bulldog. The four men had made up and were drinking long-necks and promising to live peacefully together without hassle. They even, for a short time, even discussed robbing a restaurateur that took money out of the business Sunday night and deposited it Monday morning in a bank. After what Creature did to Bulldog, pulling him off the probation officer, even talking about something like that showed a certain level of toleration. Potential cooperation.

Haystack loved long-necks, and he was drinking them like they were going out of style. After all, for him, they were. But he considered them man's greatest invention; but looking at prison, he just knew he'd be missing them a lot. He wanted to leave, turn up the truck radio and be rid of these guys.

His uncle just kept talking about prison until suddenly he asked, "Haystack, where are your keys?"

"I have to be somewhere too," Haystack said. He wasn't sure where, but he needed out of the roach infested house. He needed to be in New Mexico, then Arizona for a day, and then Las Vegas for three days and then Los Angeles for forever.

"Haystack, you're too drunk to go anywhere. I'm not that drunk, where're your keys."

THIRTY-SIX

West on Ninth, south on Kemp, west again on Seymour and then into Tanglewood. It was a quick trip to Tanglewood from Vidaville. Creature took Haystack's truck, and there wasn't much he could do about it as drunk as he was.

From one of Vida's leaky rent houses to a doctor's mansion, Creature was getting ideas and taking notes. Dark shingles might make the snow melt faster, but who the hell needed that in Wichita Falls. It looked modest from the street, but on the canyon side, there was a lot more to see. On that backside, there was a flagstone patio and a swimming pool with a diving board. Shrubs and trees native to Texas, funny someone had seen to that, while the doctor wasn't a native. He guessed they needed very little water. Creature knew about the backside of the house because he parked out front and walked around back. Dr. Raza was there, but the lady boy wasn't.

"How ya doing today?" Creature blurted out.

Raza was shirtless in swimming trunks. The doctor was a foreigner and skinny as a rail. He was squirming in his lawn furniture, looking to sit taller, perhaps there would be trouble, and it could be avoided if he looked big enough to put up a fight.

Raza had a file folder and papers had fallen off his lap onto the

flagstone. Raza didn't seem to notice. Whatever the papers said must be something to mesmerize such a loser. His eyes had glassed over. But Creature realized it wasn't boring paperwork that gave the man that look. This doctor was trash, an addict, and clearly on his way out — plenty of reasons there to take his money.

The house changed nothing; the man would be Paki and an addict, anywhere. Creature pulled up one of the two hundred dollar lawn chairs. Plush green cushions, fade resistant, and 'wow' how comfortable. Creature looked up at the back of the house. Two and a half stories, upper deck across the entire back and stairs coming down each end.

"You're shingles, they don't really match your house."

The doctor ignored that.

"I didn't expect you'd be by today. We only spoke yesterday."

"Losing your license hasn't ruined you?"

"No, my license hasn't changed. It's my pharmacy privileges that, well. That's all."

"You mean you can't get the good stuff?"

"That's right. I'm not a feel-good doctor anymore."

"What sort of doctor you gonna be?"

"I'll be a look-good doctor. Which in many ways..."

"Soon as you lose that ankle monitor?"

"What?"

"You said you'd be a dema... a skin doctor?"

"Yes."

"It doesn't sound lucrative."

"Oh, you might be surprised. There's a lot of money in cancer and skin cancer is the most common form."

"That's what you said."

"You put a white coat on and say the word 'cancer', and they get out their wallets, I can tell you that. Don't worry about me."

Creature was puzzled how he'd ever make real money out of this. He was thinking, pity he couldn't steal the pool.

"I'm worried about you."

"Me?"

"A felon out here looking for a roofing job."

"I can take care of myself."

"I believe you. Maurice asked around about you; you passed, and I'm willing to take you on as a partner."

"A partner?"

"Yes, in an investment scheme. I generally wouldn't use the word scheme, but under the circumstances and just to make things clear... you understand."

"You should know I don't have anything to invest."

"Oh, but according to Maurice, you do."

"What's that?"

"Leadership, experience. Balls. You invest some risk, and we'll split it fifty-fifty."

"It?"

"The loot, of course."

"An insurance job. I know what you have, and you ain't got enough to bother with, and an insurance company will smell it coming a mile off. Look at your situation. They ain't dumb."

Without a word, the doctor picked up the papers from the patio. He looked very stoned. He straightened the folder. Placed a few papers into the correct order and he handed Creature the entire folder.

Creature read through as best his attention span would allow. When he got the gist of the heist, he read, "Two famous typewriters, twenty-three movie props, memorabilia including two saddles, two pistols, two cowboy hats. A manuscript. And what is this sign: Hat Creek Cattle Company?"

The doctor smiled at Creature's naivety.

"And who's Newt?" Creature wanted to know.

THIRTY-SEVEN

"And if I don't give them back?" Creature wanted to know.

"I'll have Maurice shot you."

"He won't shot nobody. He's a girl."

"Maurice loves me. I could ask him, and I believe he would. He's very emotional."

"A convicted felon, with a gun in your house; that could be trouble for you."

"It could. And nothing will be done about it because those papers were given to me by the most ruthless politician in this county."

"The Sheriff?"

"Worse."

"I don't know anyone worse."

"There's worse, trust me."

"Who?"

"I have the power here. If I tell him you aren't helping us and still have the papers, he'll want to kill you. So screw you."

"Now hang on. I didn't say I wouldn't help. I only said I wanted to keep the papers... sort of like to study it more."

"You can't keep the papers."

"How about I keep half the papers? Like the ones about the security system?"

"How about two-thousand dollars before, actually now, and eight-

thousand after, when you put the items in the plane? I keep the papers. Every single page.”

“Okay, I see this isn’t your plan. Someone done your homework. Just like in medical school, huh?” Creature jested.

“What medical school did you attend?” the doctor asked.

“None. So, if you aren’t the brains, who are you?”

“Why I’m in human resources.”

“Huh?”

“I get people.”

“Who else is helping me to rob this museum? I can’t do it myself.”

“Maurice said you live with some unaccomplished thieves.”

“Okay. I think they’ll be down.”

“But the folder remains here. Please place it there on the table. Put that paperweight on it, so the papers don’t blow away.”

Creature did as he was told.

“Those guys. I don’t have to pay them out of my share do I?”

“No, I’ll have a thousand for them. You don’t have to tell them anything, just that a collector wants the stuff. And if you bring them here or tell them about me, I’ll send Maurice to shot you.”

“Everything you say to me don’t have to be no threat. I can rob a museum without the power trip feeding your ego.”

“Of course, you want to triple your money.”

“I’m listening.”

“The politician.”

“The memorabilia collector?”

“Why do we need him?”

THIRTY-EIGHT

Julie stopped by Haystack’s house, didn’t see the pickup or the smoking banger the two idiots drove. No one answered so she walked around the outside of the house looking in the windows. She wished she’d brought her thirty-eight; forget the rule. Creeping around like that was dangerous. She was in Vidaville looking into windows. She could always quit, but she’d never really done that. She might and without notice; that would show the judge. Maybe she could join the police department or go to law school. Her friend in the DA’s office always brought that up, every single time they met.

Walking around the house, feeling scared, Jake kept creeping into her mind. She had no husband anymore and hadn’t been irritated by a man in a long while. She calculated Jake, Mr. Military, wouldn’t shower three times a day; he might go all day without a shower. Jake wouldn’t drive five under the speed limit. Jake wouldn’t look at her butt as a short-term investment.

Her cell phone buzzed, and it brought her back to Vidaville where, if

she was shot looking into windows the shot wouldn't necessarily have to come from inside. Most were trying to fly under the radar and would steer clear, but people were crazy everywhere around there and a neighbor might just be high, or just sleep deprived, paranoid, and hallucinating. He, or she, in that state, might start shooting at any sort of police behavior.

The phone was the judge.

"Hello, Judge."

"You get my message?"

"No, I've been out and you better just use this number."

"They wouldn't give it to me. Can you believe that? The judge and they wouldn't..."

"Well, anybody can say that over the phone."

"I had to get the number from Jake Wise. Hope you don't mind."

"Not a bit. What can I do for you?"

"You're supposed to call me."

"Okay, let's pretend I just called you."

The judge hesitated; he was high, just that Julie didn't realize it, "I thought I just called you."

"I'm just kidding. You called me. Fire away, judge."

She began walking back to her MINI.

"How's your boy Daniel Mercy?"

"I'm actually there right now. At his house."

"Can you come over the house? I need to talk to you about my wife's condition."

"She's been hospitalized? Is she alright?"

"You mean is she the loving, tight little teenager I married? Hell no she ain't."

"But she's there at your house now?"

"Went to Oklahoma and pray, and smoke peyote. I suppose you heard about the snake?"

"I saw it on TV and Jake told me about it."

"Well, let me tell you about him. He ain't everything he represents himself to be. You stay away from him; he ain't gonna do nothing for you."

"He thinks someone put that snake in there on purpose."

"Crazy. He wants to be sheriff you know, that's all there is to it. But I need help. Your professional advice as a mental health counselor."

"Judge, I'm not qualified to..."

She wanted to tell him straight out that she'd not go to bed with him and he was wasting his time trying. But what if she could learn something about the missing wife. Like something about the snake; something she could take to Jake.

"Judge, I might be a while getting out there."

"Don't worry about that. So long as we can figure this out. What's the

best treatment, you know?"

"Sure. Of course."

She disconnected the line and put the phone in the console.

Creature drove up in Haystack's truck as she was about driving off. She got out and spoke to him in the yard.

"I need to talk to Daniel."

"Why you want him, when I'm standing right here?"

"You sure have a high opinion of yourself. I need to see Daniel once each day until, well, you know."

"I don't know."

"Where you been?"

"I got a job. Rich doctor out in Tanglewood."

"This is a legal job, not a B&E?"

"Moving stuff."

"If there's a burglary out there, we're coming right to see you."

"It's nothing like that. Come on; a doctor don't rob no houses. I promise."

"Oh, thanks. That makes me feel so much better. I came by looking for Daniel."

"He's probably out with his buddies having a good time before he goes downstate."

He watched her drive off in the tiny car. She looked really fine to him and he wished he could tell her he was already planning on a promotion and that the prospects were good and that in a week he'd be at the top of the organization. He'd be the richest parolee in the history of the county and not the loser she apparently thought he was.

Raza had been as full as a tick; the gun he gave Creature was a Springfield 9mm and it was loaded and in the glove box. The idea was to steal the sign off a pizza delivery car and drive up to the man's house with a pizza box and blow him away when he came to the door.

Maurice had lobbied for using the pump action .22, a kid's gun. And the puff offered him a thirty-ought-six. Creature looked at it all like a comedy.

It wasn't his style to use a rifle or a popgun. He was a professional, though he'd never actually killed someone, and whoever researched it, the job wasn't a deer, and he didn't have time to wait around in a blind waiting for some politician. What he understood was waiting around would only invited police patrols to spot him. Finally, Maurice reluctantly brought out the pistol.

Creature needed the two thousand for the original deposit, that sent Maurice scrambling up-stairs to fetch it. And later he'd need another thirty thousand for the "promotion in the food chain" as he called it. The most money might be hidden in ten different places because it took thirty minutes to find it. Maybe Maurice was having trouble opening the safe.

Surely there was a safe.

THIRTY-NINE

It took two minutes after Julie left for Creature to run inside and fetch an empty pizza box. It took nearly an hour for Creature to find a pizza car and steal the sign. By the way, he didn't open the door and unplug the light from the cigarette lighter; the door was unlocked, but he just cut the cord and took the part he needed, the sign from the roof.

It did look odd a pizza delivery truck. But if a cop rolled by he might not even stop him and if the cop wanted to make an issue of it, the guy'd canceled the order, and so he ate the pizza.

It looked clear.

Dr. Raza had given him directions to a rural location; west of town, on a poorly paved county road, off a major farm-to-market road. When he arrived, there were three cars on what he thought would be a rarely used lane; one in front of him turned into the man's drive. It was the MINI.

"If that's not that Julie woman's car, it's very similar."

The car behind him went around him. Creature drove around the area for ten minutes before returning.

FORTY

Judge Stafford was waiting for her outside and was standing in the middle of her headlights as she killed the engine.

"You have any trouble getting out here?"

"My cat's sick, that's all."

He brought her in through the garage and then to the kitchen and told her to make herself at home. He poured her a Jack and coke, without asking her if she wanted one, and they went into the study. She looked at the books, so he blurted out.

"These are mine."

"He pointed to five, self-published Amazon novels, all westerns. The books he was pointing to were bookended by hardcover, *Lonesome Dove* and *The Time It Never Rained*.

In compliance with his fantasy, she took one of his books off the shelf. She opened it.

"Judge. I had no idea you were, Bill Munny."

"That's me. You heard of me?"

"No, but it sounds familiar. Judge, your eyes are really bloodshot. This thing is really affecting your health."

"I just haven't slept in three days."

"I'd ask why not, but I have an idea. Just call her and ask her to come back."

He said nothing. He watched Julie read. Maybe she would react favorably.

She did read the first page, but contrary to his fantasy, she wrinkled her nose and frowned at him.

"How long did it take you to write this?"

"A few days."

"You wrote this in a few days?"

"Yea. What's wrong?"

"Oh, just a few typo's and some grammatical thingeys. Oh, maybe you did those on purpose; writers do that sometimes. But in your case, you might leave them only in the dialogue, for effect. Maybe slow down a bit."

The judge handed her a pen.

"You're the only person on this planet that knows my name."

"Bill Munny? Where do I know that name?"

"Unforgiven."

"Oh, Clint Eastwood. How original."

She wasn't impressed and taking her clothes off like he'd envisioned. What to do next? The judge was something like a deer in the headlights. Frozen.

Polite as an expletive deleted, she marked up the first page and handed it back to him. He looked at the numerous corrections and was embarrassed.

"Slow down, and you need an editor."

"You can't see your own mistakes."

"I'll say."

"I have this idea what I meant to say and then when I read it. That's what I see."

"Slow down. Fix your mistakes, and maybe Amazon will do a little something for you, like promotion-wise. You know these publishers invest millions in their popular writers."

"It takes money to make money."

"Hey, I get it; make Munny. Clever."

The judge hadn't meant anything clever; he was just being a dolt. Not being clever, she realized.

"*Lonesome Dove*," explained Julie.

"You read it?"

"Everyone's read *Lonesome Dove*. I read in *Texas Monthly* he was hauling around a manual typewriter and the reporter asked him if he actually still used it. He said he did. The reporter offered to help him go get a computer, and he could write faster. Supposedly McMurtry said deadpan, 'I don't want to go fast.' Just as matter of fact as that; he said he didn't want to go fast. He told the journalist he wrote ten pages a day, no more and no less. If he

did more, the quality would suffer and if he didn't, he would lose interest and never finished the project."

"I read that article."

"Amazingly talented man."

"I've ordered a old type writer." The judge was thinking something, there was a long pause, and generally he didn't stop like that.

Something was on his mind. You didn't "order" an old typewriter online. You might "find" one in an estate sale. The judge didn't always make perfect sense.

But then he continued, "So you liked the TV show?"

"What *Lonesome Dove*? Never saw it, actually. I guess I was too young. Just read the book; that's all."

"Oh, no! More people watched that than any other mini-series in history."

"I hear people talk about it all the time."

"You want to see it? I have it on Blue-ray."

"What now?"

"Sure."

"What about your wife? She comes home, and she'll be madder than a boiled owl. She finds me here it will be worse than any snake."

"No, she's run off. Nothing I can do about that. She just hates snakes... and me."

"Judge?" She looked accusingly at the man.

"Home theater. Popcorn. I swear to god; I won't touch you."

"Well, I have to tell you, your reputation..."

"Come on, it'll be fun. I want you to see my man cave."

"Man cave?"

"Don't worry you're allowed in there, for Christ sake, it's movie night and you're a cop. If I molest you, then you can shot me."

He led her to a security door with keypad access. He punched in the numbers and the lock released. It was like the vault of a bank and not a small one. He opened the door, hit a light, and lead her into the basement/theater.

At the bottom of the stairs, she saw an incredibly nice room, theater seating, a huge QLED TV. He powered up, and the speakers came to life. It was the ten o'clock news, and they were going on about the bond election and a story about a kid that lead the cops on a four-mile chase over a pint of corn liquor.

All the while not really watching, he fumbled with the disks. Julie looked at the movie memorabilia the judge had collected. Movie posters looked authentic. Guns and hats, maybe. A saddle and a curious left handed gun belt. He saw her staring at it.

"That was Gary Cooper's in *High Noon*."

"I didn't know he was left-handed. Gee. What a collector's item. What's that cost, if you don't mind me asking?"

The judge hesitated. He thought she might be evaluating/judging him.

"I'm sorry. That was rude. It's not my business."

"I don't even remember, but it wasn't cheap."

"The hat."

"Nothing really, an extra from *The Riders of the Purple Sage*."

"But hey, it was there."

"Yea. 1941."

"And these?" she gestured at different items.

"Tom Mix, Roy Rodgers, and Clint Eastwood, of course."

"Wow, judge I had no idea you..."

Now, he was getting somewhere with this one, and he bowed up a bit.

She, however, felt sorry for him. Imagine that. He's been taken advantage of probably. In a way, he deserved to be cheated, but what good is having it coming to you when you have no idea you're an ass.

So, she sat down in a very comfortable seat directly in the middle of the screen. The judge politely, nervously, skipped a seat when she glared at him for invading her space.

"Why are you over there?"

"Oh, you were kidding?"

"You can sit here. It's your house. I hate to tell you where you can and can't sit."

"Well, it is *Lonesome Dove* and close proximity like that, you and me. I don't trust myself to be honest. I mean what would Gus do?"

"Tonight, maybe it would be better if you didn't try to cheat me at cards."

"I understand."

FORTY-ONE

Creature came out of the dark with this pizza box into the light above the drive. It was exactly the same MINI parked there by the open garage. She was there, no doubt, and that was bad news. The salty PO, cute but salty. She was sleeping with the mastermind politico. No, it just couldn't be. Raza had specifically sent him to kill a man, the man who dreamed up the museum heist. Would she be screwing someone important? Raza had refused to give Creature a name, only an address, and said it would become clear and he wouldn't regret it.

He stood there and worked up his resolve. He rang, hoping she'd be on the toilet or in the back of the house. What if she answered the door? He'd have to shot her, and that would give the political fellow time to retrieve his weapon. In Texas, law, like this political, always had weapons. That was just

common sense; you don't shot the woman first. But heck, she was a PO; she might shot him first. He wished he'd not rang that doorbell. This might not turn out so good.

What if he shot the political and she saw him do it? He'd have to shot her as well, and that would be such a waste. A pity and he didn't want to do that.

No answer to the doorbell. Lights on but no movement inside. He knew better, but he rang it a third time. He couldn't stand on a political boss's porch with a pizza box and a pistol forever. He tried the door and found it unlocked. Now, he put the pizza box under his arm and pulled the pistol out from his belt. He walked inside, looking in each room, he moved to the back of the house.

When he reached the kitchen in the back of the house, he was flustered. He put the pizza box on the counter. Noticed a bottle of Jack on the counter. He took a swig and then thought to take it with him.

Creature lost concentration for a minute or two having another sip or six of the whiskey; he'd not had that taste in his mouth for a minute or two. He stepped to the very back window and looked out into the backyard. It was dark, but it was possible; they'd left the house and walked out there. Looked to be some sort of garden. Maybe that PO was a freak and liked doing it in weird places.

Right then, at his own reflection, the glass broke, and there was a pop.

"Jesus Christ." He'd broken the glass just by looking at it.

Another of the pains broke. He woke up and dropped to the floor. Glass rained down on him, and he began to notice bullets impacting the custom cabinet doors on the other side of the room. Someone was shooting at him? Who? How could anyone but Raza know he was there? Maurice was out there with that damn kid's toy.

"I'm gonna kill them two."

Had to be them and there was only one solution. Creature left the same way he came in only about eight times as fast. He left the pizza box, and the bottle of Jack was spilled half-out on the floor. He ran down the drive, out to Haystack's truck and drove like out of there not really thinking.

He drove to the Old Town Saloon in case he needed an alibi. There on a bar stool, he realized he'd almost been assassinated by a flaming homosexual with a toy gun. How embarrassing that would have been. Maurice had gone on and on about how he loved the little twenty-two. He felt such a fool. A woman, in the bar, asked him what he did for a living and he answered, "I'm an amateur." Well, of course, that rid him of her and he quickly left.

FORTY-TWO

Two hours after walking down into the basement, Julie was on her phone with 911. She told the dispatcher it was Judge Stafford's house and a deputy was there in five minutes, and then a sergeant and then twelve other deputies.

The judge was drinking rapidly out of the half spilled bottle of Jack. She heard him say they were downstairs watching *Lonesome Dove*, but the way he said it, she thought, it sounded like a lie. This was going to end badly for her and her reputation. Maybe the judge had been right; he'd ask her to let it go, but she was the one that called 911.

Unmarked cars began to arrive inside of thirty minutes; all the detectives had to get out of bed, get dressed, and get out there. Jake would be in one of those unmarked cars, and that would be very disappointing news for her. Then came crime scene services. Finally, the sheriff showed his fat face. He wore a straw cattleman's hat and didn't say a word. The investigators spoke, and he listened to what they thought happened.

Every light in the house was on. The evidence tech people even had a two-hundred-thousand-dollar mobile lighting apparatus, powered by a generator, and they loved to use it. They pulled it back into the back yard, and it was brighter than the stadium Friday nights. Everybody was so proud. Look how big our tiny little government has become.

And then she heard the voice she didn't want to hear. Jake asked the judge loudly, "You were alone?"

"No, Miss O'Kane there, she and I were downstairs. Didn't hear a thing; home theater, surround sound. Cost me a fortune. They did something to the walls when they built it, you know."

"Daniel Mercy threatened you. This sounds about like him."

"I don't think so."

"His truck was out here."

"I'll sure make it bad for him if it was. Listen, he might a, but I just can't figure it."

"Maybe he was high or something. Thought he saw you in the window."

"He's just mad, shooting at the house."

Jake made a note or two and moved on to sit next to Julie on the patio couch. It was all very casually like he was gonna ask her out on a date. Fat chance of that ever happening, but he did sit beside her in a way that said he was just getting off his feet — taking a break. Perhaps like he didn't even need to talk to her; she wasn't even there.

In a hushed tone, Jake asked her, "You alright?"

"We were watching a movie."

"What were you doing that for?"

"Oh, you'll laugh."

"Try me."

"Just being dumb, I guess. I was trying ta find you something on that snake and the judge's wife."

"You're playing detective?"

"I thought you wanted me to."

"For me?"

"I feel embarrassed."

"Don't. It's the sweetest thing a woman's ever done for me."

"I doubt that."

"So, ya find me something?"

FORTY-THREE

When it was all over, the four detectives surround the judge, who was now so drunk he couldn't get out of his lawn chair and was nodding off. Julie listened with them, trying to reason with him. They'd figured $A + B = C$, and there was no question. Someone had brought the rattler the other night, someone, who knew how to do it. And someone had tried to shot him earlier that night, someone who didn't know how to do it. Both would go down in the paperwork as "the attempted murder of a public servant".

The first thing they were going to do was find Daniel Mercy. All five then surrounded Julie, still on the outdoor couch.

When it came to Julie, Jake took the initiative as the leader, "When'd you see him last?"

"Two nights ago."

"He's supposed to report daily. That's what I ordered," the judge's speech was slurred.

"Well, you'll have to check down at the office, but I didn't see him."

"And you looked for him?"

"At his house and all the Scott Street bars. Shepard Access and Old Iowa Park road. Old Town Saloon."

"So you came out here to have an arrest warrant signed. Right? This one, right?"

Jake held up a paper Julie'd never held or seen.

"Give it over; I'll sign it."

"Judge you just did. And you signed it before the shooting," Jake tried to explain to the judge how it would look in the paperwork.

Jake turned back to Julie.

She played along. Jake knew what he was doing. She answered, "Uh. Yeah. What else was I supposed to do?"

"We'll need a warrant for a tracker on the Mercy truck."

"Give it over I'll sign that one too," the judge drooled saliva.

"Sir, you can't sign this one. It needs to be another judge. You're the victim here."

"I ain't no victim. I'll show you victim. Go find that assmonkey and bring him here."

"And for your protection. We'll have two units outside and a man inside at all times. When you go to work, they'll be with you. You visit the Dog or go to WalMart, they'll drive you."

"The judge looked at Julie." He was so close to seducing her, and now it would never happen with all these uniforms around.

"No. I don't want... all this," and he waved all the people standing around. He'd just gotten rid of his wife, and now he wanted to play.

"I spoke with the sheriff and..."

"Just cause someone shot out my windows?"

"You're a valuable asset to the county, valuable in the fight against crime. And the sheriff insists on it."

"Well, I don't."

"He said you'd buck like a wild horse. But he told me to tell you you'd be free to pursue whatever activity you liked as soon as this is cleared up."

"That's what he said, huh? Humm, well. Get on with it. What are all these people doing standing around looking at me for? Get to work."

Most scattered.

Jake walked Julie to her car. He checked it over with a very expensive flashlight, for spiders, snakes, and explosives, before he put her into it. There was someone in the kitchen, measuring it all, determining angles. The pizza box was still on the kitchen counter, but she hadn't heard anyone say anything about the whiskey on the floor. The detectives just left the judge passed out in his patio chair.

Getting in her car, she felt cornered, and she wanted to talk. "And he didn't call me out here to talk about probation. He wanted to talk about his wife. He's saying she's crazy, but he was trying to get me to sleep with him."

"So what did you learn about the wife?"

"Evidently, she is a little off."

"The snake thing of course, but..."

"He said she's been nuts a while. He said. She hears voices. Smokes peyote. I'm not an expert, but she sounds like she's chronically undifferentiated maybe just a split personality."

"I heard that, but I didn't believe it."

"The other half is some Comanche kid."

"So you think there's a possibility she up in Oklahoma?"

"I imagine."

"We have to find this Mercy piece of work."

"You have a tracker on his truck, where is it?"

"Parked in front of that house over in Vidaville."

"You think the judge..."

"He'll be okay. He's been sending them down faster than anybody and for years. This is just a bump on the road. He'll be alright and back at work in the morning."

Jake shut the MINI's door and approached the judge's truck; he searched it with that big flashlight as Julie pulled out to go home.

FORTY-FOUR

Creature was sitting in the doorway drinking a longneck, cowboy hat down on his eyes. Hotter than heck was what he was thinking. The door of the house was wide open like the feds just kicked it in and left. They hadn't, but the electricity had now been cut off. No one had paid the bill, especially not Haystack. You'll learn why later.

Creature was drinking the last of the beer before it got too warm. His hat, showing sweat stains, was strangely crimped; Julie'd not noticed before. Here was an ex-con and an ideal repeater for them. And there was Jake about to beat the living daylights out of him if he didn't get out to her way inside the house.

"He shot at Judge Stafford," Jake said.

"I doubt that. You're crazy," Cowboy responded.

Julie was only there to legally search the house. Otherwise, Jake would have immediately roughed Creature up.

"You piece of shit, tell me where he is," Jake yelled.

"You can't search if he ain't here. I know that much."

"And why do you think that?" She asked.

"Cause the laws don't want you planting no contraband. That's why."

"Yeah, well at about two a.m., there was about twenty cops here, raided the place and found zilch. Nada. He wasn't here then and he ain't here now."

"His truck's here." She pointed out.

"Well, that ain't him now, is it?" Creature wised off.

"I'm going inside now," Julie announced. But Creature didn't move.

Jake grabbed him by the throat and threw him aside.

"Choking? You choke like a little girl."

"You two relax and try not to kill each other; I'll be right out." Julie walked into the house.

It didn't take long to search. Jake stood on the porch with Creature. The Pizza box left at the judge's matched the boxes in the scattered about house. Cockroaches, dirty clothes everywhere, empty beer bottles, no lights and it was hotter than heck. No rifle. No pistol. A few knives, none illegal.

They'd checked Haystack's truck as they walked up on the house. They'd looked in the bed and in the windows. There might have been a rifle behind the seat but creature had remembered to lock it.

FORTY-FIVE

Strangely Haystack met a sweet little chica, smart and practically inspired, at the La Cantina and went home with her. He wasn't going to stay the week, but she insisted. Her fiancé would be in jail until Saturday morning. He saw on television where someone tried to take a shot at the judge. They were supposed to do a job Saturday, smash and grab out at the museum; Joker and Bulldog knew where he was if Creature needed him before that. This girl fed him tacos and treated him right in every way. Why would he leave; Creature had his truck.

FORTY-SIX

The deal had been for Julie to get Jake inside the house, legally a routine probation inspection. There was some sort of rivalry between judges and the other judge might have known something about the Stafford's problem, because he'd refused to sign the search warrant, so now he was buying her dinner at El Mexicano's, her favorite.

Julie learned several important things. He'd never been married. Had no children. Had been in Iraq. Had never shot anyone here, or there. Had never even pulled his gun in the line of duty. And most importantly, he'd never planted evidence on anyone. Sure, he had disdain for them, the underclass, but every cop she'd dated admitted, bragged, they had, and told her how smart they'd been doing it.

He swore he'd never done it and she believed him.

According to Jake's phone, the pick up was in Tanglewood again, in front of Dr. Raza's house.

"A familiar name."

"What's he do?"

"Prescriptions."

Over the meal, Jake told her the story of Blue and the killing and the doctor's business arrangement with Creature, the deal Jake just knew they had. He couldn't prove it, but Julie had asked, so he told her what he suspected.

"If he's working for the doctor can't we just violate his parole? Two felons hanging out together."

"I understand in the old days, yes. But not anymore, or so I was told. If we enforced that there wouldn't be any on parole and I'd be out of a job. They all know each other, and basically they don't know normal citizens. They socialize, and if you think about it pretty much all crime is organized loosely.

"Social animals hunt in a pack."

"They all work together, and there isn't enough prison space. We're full. We're full. We violate someone, and then we have to parole someone else; we need the space."

"Math."

"It's designed that way. Hey, some old timer told me this once. The underworld is three shifts. One shift is inside, locked up. The second shift is actively working on a crime, getting ready to get caught and locked up. Third shift is trying not to do a crime, but it's hard and eventually they move into that second shift territory. But there are two sorts of people, good guys, and bad guys."

"And you can't tell the villains 'cause everybody is too pretty."

"Yep."

"Well, it sure is a cycle they go through. Two cycles anyway, in and out. In and out."

FORTY-SEVEN

Three important things happened that week. First starting Wednesday, Haystack didn't really need his truck. He was perfectly happy in the warm loving Latina's arms. His pards, they'd come get him early Saturday or late Friday. He didn't need the truck; his uncle could keep it. It wouldn't get him to California anyway. He'd already called his little brother. He'd have his new female friend take him to the bus station.

Second on Thursday, Creature brought a one-armed meth addict out to the doctor's for a party. And then he just moved into the air-conditioned home. Creature parked the pickup truck on the street, which irritated the neighbors, but miracle of miracles, no one called the cops. Creature, now armed with the nine, felt like he could drive a classic old car of the doctor's. The doctor had a three-year-old Cadillac and a two-year-old BMW, but Creature wanted the '68 Lincoln, white with a black vinyl top. It was something of a whale, but way cool.

Creature told the girl that the house and the cars were his. The homosexual was the cook, and that the old truck out front belonged to the Paki addict out by the pool. This might not have seemed at all important, but Creature told Gidget about a job moving movie memorabilia and you know how much strippers talk.

Third, on Friday, Jake spent the night at Julie's. They ate, drank and listened to old records. There were probably ten turntables in all of Wichita and Julie owned two of them. They talked about Haystack, Creature and Dickey Briscoe, who the Throckmorton authorities couldn't locate. His fingerprints were on a bottle of Old Granddad and four of the twenty-two casings found at the back of the judge's place. Briscoe's army records showed him in a size nine. It hadn't rained in forever and there weren't any

tracks, but he'd walked out in the pasture pressing the grass down and they were guessing.

But it was a mess. Creature's fingerprints were on the pizza box and they had a vehicle he had access to (inadmissible in court) parked in front at basically the same time the shoots were fired from the back. They missed Creature's fingerprints on the bottle of Jack, but of course the judge had ruined that in the thirty minutes he took to drink it. No one had reported hearing the shots, and so they were guessing at the time as well.

Since then the truck was parked at the doctor's; it hadn't moved. The young people decided to just enjoy themselves as they waited for something to break. There was just nothing else for them to do in Julie's apartment.

Unimportantly, the judge surrounded by protection slept for three days, postponed court and then unable to chase women when he woke up he smoked more meth, not the right drug for a man stuck in a house guarded by cops. He went from window to window peering out. And between smokes, he sat in his home theater and fantasized about Julie editing his books for foreplay.

Then something moved him in the direction of film, watching the old westerns in his cave, making cowboy movie in his head so noble he could sell it overseas. A film that he wouldn't need a big time actor to sell, made by people who'd never left Texas for Hollywood. He'd send Julie to pick up any award and he'd hide in his basement in his Bill Munny anonymity. But he hated Hollywood and didn't need them. Of course, if they came begging...

He dreamed Julie brought him a kid's script and he got to respond – established artist to fledgling artist. High-minded crap.

Bored and high on dope again. He actually typed a letter, full of advice, and mailed it to Midwestern's English department. He didn't just dream it, he eventually actually mail it.

The script didn't exist, but in the judge's mind, he didn't like the kid's title "Methita Falls". Heck, it wasn't even a western. He didn't like the characters and he explained that the character needed to be older and "gooder" citizens, not the "geetered out meth addicts stealing trucks, impregnating the senioritas and robbing businesses who sent money back to Mexico." The judge didn't want to break the young man's spirit or discourage him from writing, but he had a strict policy of speaking the truth to aspiring authors. Stafford was so bent he dreamed Julie liked his honest response so much, she took her clothes off for him the third time that day.

Finally exhausted, he sat in his study depressed. He'd soon have McMurtry's typewriters, two of them. And magic. He couldn't go too fast, not on one of those. No matter how much he smoked, he'd be forced into perfectly calm grammar. He was sullen sitting there, because he couldn't get to work on it until they caught Dickey Briscoe.

Friday, the judge smoked a lot and called a different lawman every five minutes asking if there was any progress and he hinted they might want to get off their asses and “find that son of a bitch” – game wardens, captains, lieutenants, sergeants, patrol deputies. He even called some jailers to twist any arms that might lead him to Briscoe. And then he called city cops, and the FBI.

Now this account might give a person the idea the judge was out of his mind on dope. He never called anyone twice and he was always professional, except for the "get off your ass" comment. He wanted only to show a calm concern for his own and the public's safety. Even the sheriff, approaching obesity but still highly perceptive, didn't think his call was particularly odd.

But he did end the day with a call to the CDC in Atlanta, telling them Dickey had been playing around with anthrax down in Throckmorton and he'd weaponized rattlers and he wanted them to send a few people down to deal with it. No one inside of Wichita County had any idea what was going on in the judge's head.

The problem was clear. He'd know where the magic typewriter would be Saturday by noon, but he couldn't very well go pick it up with two patrol cars and a close quarters deputy driving him everywhere. A smart young lady had reinforced his idea to ditch the computer and use a typewriter, and now he wouldn't be able to start his next novel until they got Briscoe locked up.

FORTY-EIGHT

He was sky high when he realized the typewriters were magic; later, the judge jumped at the vacancy on the museum board. He'd learned of the fortieth anniversary of *Lonesome Dove* and the exhibit that would coincide with it. He'd received a detailed list of the exhibits, and he was standing there when the actual book Bill Wittliff used to adapt the screenplay arrive. He'd opened it with white gloves that made him feel important. He made friends with the museum director who offered him every assurance of the safety of all the items. The amount of the insurance policy was wisely redacted from Dr. Raza's papers, but it was a sizable amount and possibly overkill.

The judge led a coalition of governments that pitched in to help the university sponsor the exhibits. He helped persuade the county, city, the Air Force base, the county water district, the historical association, friends of the public library, cowboy churches in four different counties, the Wichita County 4-H Club, the men of Kappa Alpha, WalMart and Levi Straus to all pitched in financially. They bought a lot of advertising.

The judge attended three-panel discussions at the university. Every self-

proclaimed McMurtry expert with a PhD received invitations and most agreed to participate. Some of the scholars came from overseas; a Russian, an Indian, and a Japanese professor came to discuss how their people loved McMurtry equally. It wasn't necessary; no one believed anyone loved McMurtry as equally as Texans. The local McMurtry professor said it best that night, "Even the ghost of McMurtry is treated like a rock-star here in Texas," to which all three of the foreigners conceded.

The original manuscript arrived, and as far as the judge knew no one handled it except for the curator, who placed it immediately under glass. McMurtry's galley proof and the original jacket art arrived.

An unnamed billionaire, who'd bought them at auction, personally brought the two typewriters. Mr. McMurtry had used a Hermes 3000 manual typewriter, and they were labeled: Archer City and Washington DC.

For the judge's purpose, these typewriters were the Holy Grail and he promised a "big, wet kisses" once he was in possession of them, as soon as the loon Dickey Briscoe was incarcerated.

The Reagan library in California loaned them President

Reagan's signed first edition. Midwestern brought over ten items from the collection of his papers: a letter from Reagan congratulating McMurtry on winning the Pulitzer, a letter from Nolan Ryan telling the writer how much he enjoyed the 1985 novel, a note from fellow Texan Tommy Lee Jones expressing the hope that the writer would drop by the set so they could visit, a similar note from Debra Winger, a set of notes, handwritten and signed with xs and os from Diane Keaton. A pair of tickets to the Academy Awards presentation, the one he was nominated for but didn't win and two tickets for the awards in which he and Diana did win. Some of the items had nothing to do with *Lonesome Dove*, but few cared. Anything McMurtry was just wonderful.

And there were the posters and the props. Call's Saddle, slicker, hat and forty-five, Gus's saddle, hat, gun and bloody buckskins, the Smithsonian's 'Hat Creek Cattle Company' sign, Lori's shawl, Blue Duck's '73 Colt SSA, Det's bloody shirt and spear. Several drawings from the production designer and Newt's cap which was actually from *Comanche Moon*, but no one objected.

James wasn't going to do it, but at the last minute he loaned over the Oscar Trophy, and the Medal of Freedom Obama had given McMurtry.

FORTY-NINE

Dr. Raza would not be taken advantage of; he obtained special permission from his probation facilitator, to leave his house arrest and walk through the exhibit. The lady felt pride that a Pakistani doctor would be so insistent he be released from house arrest even if only for a few hours of "cultural

enlightenment” was the phrase the doctor used.

“I’m a part of this city as much as anyone wants to admit,” the Pakistani addict begged.

For the woman, it was the lure and charm of the America cowboy, as much as the power of McMurtry that even foreigners, like Raza, enjoyed *Lonesome Dove*. She, probably thought Raza grew up watching westerns and just hadn’t learned their lessons all that well. She had actually known McMurtry and allowed the Pakistani to leave the house and walk through the museum.

The papers Dr. Raza held were for a heist of professional caliber. High-dollar, world-class, an elaborately planned smash-and-grab job designed, on paper so that the items could be simply ransomed back to the insurance company. According to the plan, everything would be returned for a sizable payoff. The problem was this was really was “Methata Falls” and its criminals were super-sized screw-ups.

Just as prescribed, Creature had a gang of five including Honeybun. Honeybun was a conman and hustler but most importantly he was a trained actor, and he frequently had roles at the Back Door Theater. Honeybun’s job Saturday would be to provide the diversion needed to take down a museum. He’d done significant bank fraud and identity theft, but this would be his greatest role.

Entering the museum would be Creature and Haystack and the two eggheads. No one in the crew had stolen anything larger than a F-150, but Raza was desperate to keep his house and art that remained. The judge was just as greedy to be a recognized writer and he put more than a little pressure on Raza and of course was providing considerable amounts of seized money to get it done.

The setup wasn’t that bad. There would be two typewriters, ten ephemera, and seventeen film props, all in one place and to Midwestern, the entire state, they were priceless. Ransom ought to be easy.

FIFTY

By six-thirty am Saturday, Creature, Haystack, Joker, and Bulldog were gloved, hair-netted and gettered out of their mind in a van outside the museum. Haystack had the bike he’d stolen from the previous year’s race, strategically, in the back of the van. They watched the clock carefully, every tick of it.

Out on Southwest Parkway, west and down by the stadium, they were about to start the Hotter Than Hell 100 bicycle race. ESPN was there as well as 21,000 participants. Honeybun also had a stolen bike with a fancy cart attached, the kind used to haul an infant, or fireworks as the case might be that day. He detached the cart and walked twenty feet away with his bike.

He dispersed three backpacks full of fireworks and rigged them all to burn at six fifty-eight, two minutes before the start of the race. He'd placed another three identical backpacks conspicuously together, sure to get the attention of the bomb squad.

When the first backpack went off, ten Blackcats, and he heard the first panicked post-9-11 voices, two smoke bombs went off. Honeybun reached into his sock and pulled out a disposable cell, dialed Wichita County's 911 service and delivered the shocking news. "There's a guy with a gun in the stadium parking lot shouting 'Allahu Akbar' and firing at cyclists."

Smoke was drifting from the parking lot and Honeybun put on the blood, theater blood, and ran screaming from his position. He ran from in the back all the way to the front of the race.

Creature, still sitting outside the museum in the van, made a similar call to 911 and then Joker the same. Everyone assumed Joker would screw it up, but his effort was the most spectacular. It didn't matter, soon unrehearsed calls were pouring in. Some people at home watching it on television even called to report it.

Every American city had elaborate plans to deal with an "active shooter" situation, but at an event, no one official wanted to be the first to push the button or make the first call. It took more than a few minutes for the officials in charge to make the call. The director of security had smoke and what sounded like small weapons fire, but he couldn't see be an actual gunman. He did see chaos and confusion. Bikers were panicked to leave. Those in the front, the professional and Olympic class cyclists, basically behaved as if the race had begun; they peddled fast and east down Southwest Parkway.

They raced out of harm's way, a perfectly reasonable thing to do. To the others, in the middle, that didn't seem fast enough. Moving forward wasn't an option. They tried to move sideways out of the road. They collided with riders moving forward along the edge of the mass. The man in charge of security pushed the panic button when Honeybun ran past him looking hit by bullets or at least fragments of something.

At 7:03 am creature got out and snipped the padlock on the manhole cover, next to the museum. On campus there were no highline wires, which made the place very spiffy looking; electricity to the buildings was delivered underground. Creature ducked into the tunnel, pulled back the slide and put 15 rounds into the transformer. He didn't miss with a single bullet, of course, the transformer was fairly large. He exited the tunnel and signaled for Haystack to back the van up to the loading dock.

For good measure, wearing disguises they all made peace signs to the camera on the back dock, the gang forced the door with crowbars. Joker walked to the back-up generator in a closet near the back door. He pulled the sparkplug wires until it ground to a stop. The power outage set off

alarms at the University police station, but they were already halfway down Southwest Pkwy flying to the race's starting line. The nearest cops were two miles away and headed west, the wrong direction.

ESPN was showing the total chaos and CNN and FOX would be as well inside of five minutes. SWAT boys arrived and with no one to kill, they stood perplexed but weapons drawn and ready. Sirens screamed. Medical teams, already there, treated scrapped knees and they were transporting one shattered elbow. More red and blue emergency lights arrived. Smoke hung by the stadium like a fog. The ESPN helicopter was buzzing the chaos, getting what the director thought was great footage.

Creature threw Call's saddle over his shoulder and by bruit example led the others. This was done in the light before Joker had wrecked the generator. After that they all pretty much worked in the near dark. Creature had insisted Raza buy them the police quality flashlights and they really paid off. But Joker forgot his in the van and had to go fetch it.

The saddles went in the van first; Bulldog and Haystack teaming up to get Gus's. Then the typewriters. Then the movie props and clothing items. And finally they placed the paper items in three of the twelve USPS cardboard priority boxes. The letters and Oscars tickets in one. The *Lonesome Dove* manuscript in a second and Bill Wittliff's copy was placed in a third box. The nine other boxes were excess. Everything went into the van, as part of the plan, except the Hat Creek sign and the Oscar. The plan specifically said NOT to take the Oscar. You are welcome to speculate on why. I'm just here with the facts, not the rationale; which, I can tell you frankly, makes my job here considerably easier.

At 7:15 am on Fox, a frantic local reporter was on the scene with "breaking news" of "confirmed casualties". The nation got an idea of at least one gunman who had shot "wildly" into the peloton of bikers. The local guy, propelled into the national spotlight, seemed very proud of himself that he knew the word "peloton"; the truth being known, had it not been for the company incessant adverting their exercise bike, he wouldn't have known the word from prairie dog shit. But he said it seven times in his one minute of now international fame.

Fifteen minutes in and the mass of people still had not dispersed. I mean some had but most just stood there. Since no one appeared to be actually shooting, it was more dangerous to move. So most just froze. Many tried to race out of there and crashed, many had simply abandoned their bikes and ran away. Honeybun went to his car to clean up the fake blood.

At 7:30 am, CNN reported two bikers were confirmed dead. And the phrase "defenseless victims" was introduced.

By 8:10 am, ESPN's grasp of the situation with all their cameras, reporters and communication proved better journalism than FOX and CNN. Honeybun's three empty backpacks had been opened by a robot.

Candy was discovered in one, about \$100 worth. A healthy assortment of fruit flavored condoms filled a second and old National Geographic magazines completed whatever the actor (always a consummate artist) was trying to say. After reporting the contents, ESPN admitted it was "probably an elaborate hoax." At the time, no one in the police or media realized that it might have been a diversion.

Haystack had driven the doctor's old Lincoln over to the mall and it was waiting for them as a backup incase something happened to the van. But nothing had, so it remained there for a time.

They drove in the van out to Jacksburo Highway and unloaded the swag into a Beechcraft Baron G58. Saddles, guns, spear, all the loot fit. They didn't weight it, but assumed it would be out of the state in a matter of minutes, but no one (no pilot) seemed to be around. Creature didn't know who the plane belonged to, maybe it was the politician's, but he followed the plan, padlocked the hanger door and they left.

Haystack rode his bike from the airport to the mall to pick up the Lincoln. Creature gave the two morons five hundred and drove them back to Vida's house and then took the van just west of the old Brookshire's grocery and burned it. Ten people watched him do it from the Circle Inn but there were no cameras so what did it really matter. He walked from there back to Tanglewood, not far.

FIFTY-ONE

The first police detectives arrived at the museum just after 9:00 am and realized the race charade was part of the heist. The University Police briefed them. They took a look at the crime scene and called the chief of police, who in turn called the sheriff. None of the evidence techs would leave the Hotter Than Hell 100 crime scene until all efforts were exhausted, "Good God, man we're on national television." There would be construction of more hotels, convention center improvements and hopefully a new jail, and other big projects which the sheriff and the other politicians would all have a financial interest in. All this negative publicity over the race might affect that construction. So the politicians decided, largely independent of one another, the museum heist would have to wait until the media storm out at the stadium lifted. That was the bad news.

The good news was the FBI's Rare Asset Recovery Unit was on the way from Washington. Someone in the Wichita Falls FBI got wind of the theft and knew what to do, call the cavalry. They told the local detectives he over the phone the thieves might want to contact the college quickly and to be ready for that possibility.

The school's president and dean of students showed up, the university police didn't even have to inform them. They raced to the museum when they heard the news.

FIFTY-TWO

Two bottles of Asti Spumante were in the fridge. Maurice opened one, emptied it into three mismatched glasses and one coffee mug. Raza offered a proud, "Cheers men, and congrats. We did it." Everything was safe in the Baron, but Creature absolutely hated hearing Raza, a freakin' Pakistani, toasting. Celebrating like that, like he was an American and welcome here and pretending he'd done something. Creature listened, thinking all the while their partnership would be short and he was going to take everything the doctor had, including the house. Creature was going to drag his ass out the back gate, shot him, and throw his ass down into the canyon.

FIFTY-THREE

There was nothing to do at the museum but lock it up and wait for the crime scene techs, who were making a show out of the Southwest Parkway scene. So the detectives went out on a lark; they took WalMart weeks of museum security surveillance, the tapes of people filing into the exhibit, good crisp video of the guest's faces.

By noon, WalMart gave the detectives the names of the only two shoplifters who'd visited the *Lonesome Dove* exhibition – Ralph Abernathy (Bulldog) and John Lovett (Joker). The detectives would have made sure the media knew about it and called them "persons of interest" except the media wasn't milling about at Midwestern. The few local journalists had no idea about the museum break-in and the politicians wanted to keep it that way hopefully forever if they could recover the memorabilia. Two embarrassments could be avoided by only talking about one.

The WalMart facial recognition software wasn't perfect; it didn't scan for felons or any of the Wichita County arrest mug shots. It only scanned for persons banned from the store by trespassing tickets. And lucky for Raza, Creature and Haystack they weren't in the same boat as the two idiots, or else they would be "persons of interest" as well.

The three Wichita stores probably lost millions each year in theft and of course wanted to build a larger database but it was a massive job; the state of Texas had 2.9 million felons in a state of only 30 million. The WalMart computers just couldn't handle that. But for this little case, the technology worked perfectly. Of the 2,871 people who paid their \$5 to see the *Lonesome Dove* objects, only two had shoplifted in the last year. And it was done in less than two hours. The detectives felt brilliant. What were two losers like these doing attending a museum exhibit? Maybe a gun or knife show or Buck Fest, a tractor-pull or a hotdog-eating contest. There were endless "they can't even read" jokes between the detectives. Those jokes soon filtered down to the patrol cops who all knew the morons. It wouldn't be

long until it would all be in the newspaper and on the TV news.

FIFTY-FOUR

Sunday, the judge called a few people, just to be participating, and asked if there was anything he could do to help. It was a tragedy for the literary community, an enormous embarrassment for Wichita County and a real blow to their war on terror. The bike race would never be the same after yesterday, he said. And true, entries would be down for the next four years and it was rumored that the race director had said in despair that it would have been better for the race if it hadn't been a prank.

The way the community leaders generally covered each other's asses was breaking down. They would in the next month turn on each other in a way particularly ugly to the outsiders looking in on them.

Early Monday morning, the judge got up to find newspapers. He'd prematurely pitched his Kindle and all the technology in anticipation of the typewriters. *The Star-Telegram* was still an hour away from publishing their paper story, but would contain even less information than the Wichita paper.

FIFTY-FIVE

For a day and a half of offering no comments and guarded denials, the college finally issued a statement confirming basically all the rumors.

On Saturday, thieves broke into the Wichita Falls Museum of Art at Midwestern State University. This was done while law enforcement was responding to 911 reports of an active gunman firing into the Hotter Than Hell 100 bicycle race. It is suspected this was only a diversion and thank goodness. . . .

And then it went on. But the trickery had worked. The college would not disclose how much of the *Lonesome Dove* exhibit was stolen, only that it was substantial. The authorities were still investigating. Very few details of the heist were in print, and the television coverage of the break-in was even more lame.

FIFTY-SIX

Tuesday, the *Times Record* got their head in the game. On the front page but below the fold, "Two Suspected in Museum Heist." But, the photos of Bulldog and Joker wouldn't help find the men, it would take divers for that.

Thirty minutes after the paper was thrown up in Raza's drive, 4:38 A.M., Creature woke the two idiots and drove them out to Sikes Lake of all places, shot them in the head and chest and tied half of the doctor's weight set to their bodies. He sank them in the lake.

There was also a rough list of the items taken in that Tuesday morning

paper.

FIFTY-SEVEN

Wednesday, the *Times Record* printed a detailed list of items stolen, on page 8A, along with the timeline and graphics of the museum layout, courtesy of the *New York Times* whose artist produced the floor plan.

FIFTY-EIGHT

Thursday, Dickey and his wife were out in a tent at Arrowhead and on their last dime. They were roasting rattlesnakes and drinking lake water and had nine-dollars-cash.

She was bitching badly about their situation, it was 104° that day, and he just couldn't take it anymore. He was fine about the temperature; it was the unceasing noise that was driving him to give up. He told her there was just enough gas for her to drive him back into town and then for her to get back to Throckmorton. He'd just turn himself in.

She then continued, "I say tell the district attorney, the son of a bitch, here's the deal; take it or leave it. He's the one that special ordered that snake. We didn't even get her when he was done."

Dickey's wife had been after him, since he was sentenced to a year of probation, to give up and rat out the judge. But, then it was her bright idea to throw the snake in the freezer.

"I swear you act like this was all my fault. I told you to make a deal; I don't know why you couldn't have done that already. And I don't know how I can trust you to make a deal with the DA now. You want me to go up there and talk to him for you?"

Dickey looked out the window of the tent, "Honey."

"What?"

"There's deputies out here, with shotguns."

"Well, that's it. I'm going home."

"I don't know how. They'll sure as hell steal the truck... I loved that truck."

"We'll get you another truck. You just make the best deal you can. The jail's full and they won't want me. I'll be waiting for you at home."

"It might be a while."

"Dickey, do you ever listen to me?"

FIFTY-NINE

While Dickey was being searched and placed in the patrol car for transport, Julie and the judge were riding in what the judge called a "Crown Vic sandwich," a patrol car in front of the patrol car he was in and one behind him as well, three Vics in a row.

Julie, when she agreed to wear a wire, she thought it was just foreplay with Jake, but later he insisted that he had been serious, that she try to get the judge to say something about where he'd hidden his wife's body. She went to the judge, even suggesting they watch the second episode, but she refused Jake's recorder.

In the sandwich, the judge seemed talkative.

He said to Julie, "I miss my life. But you know what's worse I miss my truck. I used to drive over to Harvey's for a hamburger and have the cops over there stop me. They stop everybody, and it really pays off, let me tell you. They're the richest lawmen I know. And it's job security too; cause all the car's they impound for in the city. But I wait for them to swagger up to the window, and then I let them have it. I like looking at them figure they figure it out."

He continued, "The only good thing I can think of coming out of this will be the new jail. All those beds for the county. First, they learn someone's trying to kill their judge. Second, they find out terrorist done come here to disrupt their sacred race, turns out worse, typewriter thieves. The sheriff was right on TV, all this 'cause the jail was full. And heck, they'll need a third court to handle all the new cases, that'll come with the new jail that's gonna pass. We might be as big as Tarrant County someday with all their courts. It's great."

"That's bad for you, judge."

"What?"

"Right now, you have control over half the cases. You have half the power. There are two judges now, with a new judge, you'll only have a third of the power."

The judge sat solemnly thinking.

"I don't care a thousand beds are better than three-fifty. Three-fifty is chicken scratch for an ambitious county like this."

"A man of principle. I like that," Julie said sarcastically.

The deputy driving was caught looking back at them in the mirror. He'd probably been listening too.

"Boy, watch the road. Never mind what's going on back here, this ain't none of your concern. You cops are fighting evil, and I admire that, but sometimes, you need to keep your nose out of other people's business. You know that?"

To Julie, he whispered, "They'll be one inside the house and two outside. They're quiet as church mice, but they're still there. We'll have a

drink and watch the second part of the movie if that's okay with you." He said then loudly, "You hear that up there? We're going downstairs to watch a movie."

SIXTY

The first time Creature woke up that Friday morning, he thought he smelled the one-armed dancer who it turned out wasn't anywhere in sight. He went banging on Marice's door wanting to know where she was. He couldn't remember her name, he'd been awake from Monday to Thursday afternoon, and now it was Friday, and he was awake again. The only thing he could remember at that moment was he'd watched the Monday local news. And today was Friday.

Maurice said, "I drove her home, and that was a week ago, dumb ass!"

Creature realized he was messed up and that he needed more sleep. He went back to bed.

Twelve hours later, Creature woke up again. Dying of thirst, but the next thing he realized was that Maurice was on top of him in the bed jumping up and down. "Get the hell off me, you fagot."

"A policeman, a detective, is here."

"So? I ain't done nothing."

There was a moment to think and Creature made his move. He smoked a bowl and set out in his big bird boxers and his cowboy boots. He was going to meet the detective, but turned back around to Maurice.

"Who is he?"

"A detective with the sheriff's office."

"What's he doing?"

They moved to the back windows and Maurice gestured down at the pool. They looked down on Dr. Raza, totally nude, except for the electronic monitor on his ankle. He stood, hands on his hips, answering Jake's questions. Nice suit for a cop. Creature knew it was the cop who'd choked him and threw him off the porch, the PO's boy toy.

Creature went back to his room, his head feeling the meth. He felt a purpose and wanted to "be done" with the cop. He could put on his green suit; it was hanging there on the closet door. He could drink some Jack; there were a few gulps left in a battle on the nightstand. He could beat the devil out of Maurice for waking him up. But he did none of those things.

"Where's my piece?" He searched the covers of the bed.

"What?"

"My damn nine."

"That isn't your gun. The doctor loaned it to you."

Creature stopped looking for the gun.

"You took my gun?"

"It wasn't yours."

Maurice ran like a bitch to his room and Creature heard the door bolt. This was one hell of a house, deadbolts on bedroom doors, fairies stealing guns from under the covers and then hiding and probably crying.

Creature beat on the door, louder and louder, threatened to break it down, until it opened and produced the weapon. Creature chambered a round and started down the stairs, just as Raza was coming up.

"Where'd he go?"

"What were you going to shot him?"

"I'm up. Might as well."

Raza, a disgraced pill doctor as out of it as he was, could see something was surreal. Creature, standing there with a large handgun, in a cowboy hat and Sesame Street boxers, bare legs and boots, was looking to shot a cop.

"His phone buzzed, and then he left. Something more important than you I guess."

"He asked about me?"

"He wanted to know if you worked here."

Maurice was peeking through his bedroom door, now open no more than an inch.

"I told him you came by now and then to mow the lawn."

Suddenly, Creature realized Raza was naked. Embarrassed and coughing up bile, he ran and barricaded himself in his room.

SIXTY-ONE

Julie's buddy, Mary the assistant DA, said, "His bond was set at a hundred thousand, so Dickey will be in jail at least another six weeks. He's requesting a bond reduction, but we can put it off that long."

"Who's his lawyer?"

"Public defender, of course. Speedy Gonzalez. But I told him no deals; maybe after a month or two. All of a sudden, he wants to argue; that's what took so long. He's got some fanciful story and wants us to drop the charges. He doesn't do anything to defend anyone, and someone takes a shot at a judge and now he thinks he's Perry Mason."

It was Friday morning, they were in a coffee shop, and Mary was telling Julie all she knew about Dickey Briscoe.

"Then, after I throw him out. Gonzalez lets Dickey talk to the Sheriff's people and sees it as mitigating circumstances and wants him released on his own recognizance."

"What a public defender?"

"Yea, it's the first time I've ever seen him lift a finger."

"We'll see how long that lasts."

"Yep, Judge Stafford will be livid if he hears it."

"What's your boss say about it?"

"He said, 'No deals. Biscoe's brings half the meth into this town and kills animals for a living.'"

"He kills snakes."

"Oh, you didn't know. Not that it comes up all that often. He's one of the biggest animal rights freaks in the county."

"Yea, but snakes?"

"Mostly dogs. You remember when three years ago, there was a big stink over trips by investigators outside of the county."

"I didn't work here then."

"He was looking for dog breeders to charge."

"Huh? That's crazy."

"Sure, he'd run them out of the county, but he was still hungry for those headlines. And they were looking to build a new shelter. His uncle is a builder."

"I don't get it."

"The dog show in March, twenty-seven tracking devices, placed under their vehicles."

Julie didn't grasp it quickly.

"To lead his investigators back to their kennels; He called them 'lair'. You know it's all black market now, even the elite dog show breeders are in hiding."

"Well, they should be."

"Well, whatever. This was all in the newspaper. Someone found a tracker washing under an RV or changing a tire or something, and you know how word gets out. The dog show people they all check and they find more devices."

"No?"

"And people weren't even upset about it. The only stink I heard was about the expenses, the investigators following these people to where they kept their dogs and then busting them. Like the other counties where they found these dogs, were profiting from the seizures but Wichita County was footing the bill, which was tens of thousands of dollars, them traveling all around."

"That's hard to believe."

"That dog show's hardly anything anymore. It used to be a big deal. You know police states rarely have health economies. I've studied that and he's a Nazi."

"He's your boss."

"Listen, I'm 40, no kids, an ex-husband 3000 miles away. This job is what I do. I hear everything, and they think I'm a potted plant, so they keep talking. I used to tape the soap operas and watch them at night. But frankly, this courthouse is better than any day-time soap."

"But this story you just told me was in the newspaper? He can't get reelected."

"This was years ago and he was, twice now, and by huge margins. It's a one church town, and these people don't care. So long as the tracker isn't under their car; it's some other suckers problem."

"People like pure-bred puppies, but they don't like breeders."

"Yea, ain't that crazy?"

"And nowadays, not being liked is against the law."

"So, why don't you go over to the other side?"

"Well, to hear my daddy tell it; I'm lazy."

"Lazy? Your dad called you that?"

"Well, he's got a point. A defense lawyer has to work. An army, the money and the power are behind the prosecutor and the cops, or the 'dark side' if you listen to my dad. He likes *Star Wars*. He says it's all rigged to feed the prison industry. He won't say 'system'. Prison system. He says 'industry'."

"And you think he's right?"

"I know he's right."

"Mary, you lead a very interesting life."

"You want to straighten it out, go to law school. I'm staying right here in the catbird seat, were I am comfortable."

SIXTY-TWO

Friday after work, Julie visited her cat and then drove back to her apartment. In the parking lot, Jake walked up behind her without saying a word, frightened her and then tried to kiss her. She tried to step back, but he wouldn't let hold of her. They went inside; then afterward she scolded him, but they horsed around again after that.

And after their second bout, she jested with him, "I think my 'affair' with the judge is over. He wants me to edit his books. He's terrible. Last night was my last out there. It's just creepy. How was your day?"

"I learned Dr. Razza's skin is brown, but his little dinker is white. Some sort of birthmark. And I have I have a witness."

"I don't need a witness. That's gross."

"No, the museum case. I'm gonna break it."

"Really? You?"

"Come on; get up. I want you to meet her. It won't take long, she has to be at work by nine."

"What is she, a prostitute?"

"Dancer, yea."

"She's pregnant and wants to trade you testimony to let her off, so the baby won't be born in prison?" Julie was a sarcastic woman when she

wanted to be, and she thought Mr. Toughguy liked it. Actually, he didn't really listen to her.

"Uh, I don't know if she's pregnant. She didn't say that on the phone. It's Gidget the one-armed dancer. You know her?"

"I don't."

"So they call her Inspector Gidget. You know. Click with the arm. The cartoon character. She dances at Maximus."

"She turn tricks for meth?"

"Probably; get up. We have to take Gidget to work."

"She's not a reliable witness."

"Saucy today aren't we, girl?"

"I'm sorry. I'm just glad you came over."

"Me too. Now let's go."

As they were getting dressed, "This Gidget chick, told a friend of hers about a guy she partied without in Tanglewood who's done time. She says he has money now, a house and an old Lincoln and a job 'moving movie memorabilia'."

"She wants the reward."

"Nope. Doesn't know anything about it but she will talk to us. Not at the club and not at her hotel, that's why we have to go get her."

"She said she wanted a female officers there."

"I'm not a police officer."

"Probation Officer, what's the difference? She wouldn't know the difference. So you're it."

"You're using me."

"Why'd you think something like that?"

"She doesn't trust you."

"Probably not anybody."

"She was raped by a cop?"

"Who told you that?"

"I'm just guessing."

"Julie, you are cold."

SIXTY-THREE

Julie sat in the back seat of Jake's Crown Victoria, a block from the La Posada apartments. Jake waited patiently for her to walk out and down to the car. Julie wondered if he was going to call her and tell her they were waiting. She'd see them; it was a police car, unmarked meant little to street savvy people.

Early twenties, pretty, one arm, pale, thin and in a tank top. Gidget had a large shoulder bag and she was holding like it contained all the drugs she owned.

Never ever leave your stash in your apartment to be stolen. Holding it is safer than a break in. Julie had six guys on probation for burglarizing meth addicts and salesmen, all black men not users, but streetwise enough to see an opportunity when it hit them in the face. Robbing addicts was a cottage industry in Wichita, Julie knew full well. Even Gidget had become wise to it as well.

Jake introduced them, "Gidget, this is Julie O'Kane, the officer I told you about. The guy you were telling me about, he's the uncle of one of her cases." Jake got in and closed the door.

Julie said, "How are you, Gidget. Is that your real name? What do you want me to call you?"

Shyly, "Gidget is what everybody calls me."

"Okay. I can do that."

As soon as they were buckled in, Jake had them moving. Jake made small talk and then gradually moved to the real issue at hand. It was a house in Tanglewood. The nicest she kept saying, but she didn't know the address. Maybe she would know it if they drove by it, especially if the Paki was still there and the old truck was still parked out on the street. She said it was the worse ride in town, primer and three other colors. Jake knew exactly who's house it was and who's truck it was.

For the more personal stuff, Julie took over.

Julie asked her what night she was there. Gidget said, "Thursday, a week ago." She thought, her night off from Maximus.

Creature, she didn't know his name, had picked her up in the club's parking lot in the Lincoln and she'd spent the night. An Asian homosexual brought her home the next afternoon in a new BMW.

Julie asked if the man wore a cowboy hat and fish skin boots. That threw her, she didn't know there was such a thing, but responded, "I guess, they looked fancy." And Gidget added that he got all dressed up in a "really" ugly suit, which pretty much nailed Creature as the culprit.

"Anything else you can help us with?"

"Yea, he smokes it, like this is the 1990s or something. He don't shot it. Not yet."

They pulled up in front of the doctor's in Tanglewood. Jake pointed to the house. "Is this it?"

Gidget looked at the house and then the wreck of a truck and nodded.

"You're sure?"

"I'd be sure if I saw the inside."

"You shouldn't have asked her that," Julie informed him.

"What? I didn't hear anything."

"You were saying you were fairly sure."

"There's no one home?"

"He doesn't have a warrant."

"There's a pool," Gidget tried to help.

"Sweetheart this is Tanglewood. Everybody has a pool."

"You'd think it would be cheaper to build just one pool and have everybody use that one," Gidget reasoned.

Julie and Jake both chuckled. This girl, a dancer, basically a prostitute and an addict, was likable. Something had happened to her family, school, an accident, a wreck; something put her in this situation. She wasn't inherently bad, and she was trying to do the right thing. Later, they would agree (Julie made Jake promise) to "adopt her" and "keep her out of trouble," as best as he could; it wasn't possible for officers like it had been in the old days. But he promised Julie to try.

Jake waited for more information. Julie was ready to be done.

"He has an old Lincoln."

"You mentioned that, but I'm always out and about and I've never seen an old Lincoln like you described."

"A white one and black on top."

"And what did he say he did for money?"

"He said he moved movie memorabilia... from storage to different collectors."

"Yea, you saw the newspaper."

"About the reward? Somebody told me about it, but that's not why I'm doing this."

"Well, don't turn down any money," Julie coached her.

"Okay, I won't."

"You dislike this guy? He's a son of a bitch ain't he?" Jake said.

"Oh, I just thought of his name, Creature. He goes by Creature." Jake was taking a ton of notes in his little detective book.

Julie took over. "You need to go to rehab?"

Gidget opened her purse and brought out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Expertly with that one hand, she lit it and put everything back in her bag. She fumbled to roll down the window, so Jake did it from the driver's side.

"Look, with all respect. If you want to reach me, just leave me alone. I can take care of myself, you know."

"Okay, please take care of yourself, Gidget. Here's my card. I work at the probation office. If you need me, you can call me there. Or call Jake. He's not so bad as cops go."

Rolling back toward town, Jake pulled up about a block from the club. She was visibly nervous he wouldn't. She'd have to get out and walk the rest of the way, and that was fine; she just didn't want let off at the front door.

SIXTY-FOUR

To Gidget's horror, Creature was sitting inside the club. What? She'd just gotten him into a lot of trouble. How could he have know? He didn't know anything, but he had money and apparently had worked his nerve up to bang.

Gidget worked up her nerve as well. She did the salsa, on stage, in her outfit, an athletic sock over her stub. The song was rock-n-roll, but her steps were, well salsa; no one gave a shit. She was naked and had lost an arm, what was the big deal?

The eight-ball had cost \$80, and they went into a back room, spoon, cigarette butt, and an ounce of water. She thought she could really screw him over; he was totally hard-up (smoking it wasn't working for him) and he was too trusting of her. Creature trusted the one-armed dancer; who else was more qualified to teach him how to inject it? He didn't want to OD of course and she could sense that.

"Don't worry you can't OD. You just over-amp."

"What's that mean?"

"If you take too much, you just get nervous. You know sped up like. But you don't die."

She taught him, but she thought how easy it would be to scare him.

"You know how you know you have good dope? You put it in the spoon and you put 20 units of water over it and it melts and then you draw it up and you have 40. If there's stuff still in the spoon then you got ripped off. They cut it."

She went through the process again, he wasn't too bright, but this time she dropped the needle.

"Shit! Gonna be dinted. I know it will be; I saw it hit the floor. Relax."

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, I dropped the needle. If you like barb it, it pops going in. Like you're hit with a fishhook. So, when you pull it out, it like pulls your vein and your skin. Gross. You know it's barbed, you might look at it or you can drag it across your finger. That's how you know the end of the needle is bent."

"All you do is sharpen it. Like this."

She took out a matchbox. She dragged the point over the side of the box.

"Okay ready? Don't move. Tell me if it stings."

"Stings?"

"That's how you know you missed the vein. The vein is gonna carry it all over. If it's not in there, it's gonna burn."

"Okay, I'm ready."

She did this masterfully with the one arm.

She pushed the plunger, and it didn't sting or burn; it went wa-wa.

Vision, hearing. Wa-wa.

"Take your panties off."

She wasn't listening to him. She was loading up her fair share.

"Show daddy your haircut."

He grabbed her ass, and it upset her work, and she only had one arm, so it was all shaky to start with.

"You know this is not easy."

"Oh, you can handle it."

"It's not that. It's talking about money I don't like. It feels funny."

"What? You can talk to me, sweetie."

"Okay, last Thursday night at your place."

"My place?"

"In Tanglewood."

"Oh, that place."

"You didn't pay me. I got a bump out of it, but I gotta live. It's just that you live in that big ass house and you can't give me anything?"

"Oh, baby. I'm sorry. I'm loaded. Here take this," and he pulled out \$200 maybe \$250 in a variety of bills.

"Oh, what's your name?"

"Creature, call me Creature."

"I can't take your last money."

"I'm loaded," and he showed her even more money.

"What'd you do rob a bank?"

"Better than that. I'm gonna rob a corrupt government official. The worse of that downtown bunch."

"Who's that?" she asked.

"Judge Stafford, son of a bitch."

SIXTY-FIVE

With K Kat, progress came slow but steady. The vet staff bragged about her every improvement; that she'd sit up using the wall to keep her propped up. And then she used her litter box when no one was watching. Julie lay down on the floor; K struggled to walk across the cage, like a kitten learning to walk. And then K was just as relieved to touch her mommy. It was mutual and conspicuous. The staff left different soft foods in her cage (all ignored), until finally, without anyone watching, she downed an entire can of salmon.

"Come get your cat before she eats us out of house and home," the vet sang cheerfully.

SIXTY-SIX

So Haystack's seniorita friend never bailed out her man; with the election over, Tuesday night they PR bonded everyone out. Luckily for Haystack's face, the woman's man went to the bus station and bought a ticket to Laredo.

Saturday, one week after the museum job, Haystack was in the front passenger seat of the Lincoln listening to Creature listing the benefits of shooting meth instead of smoking it. She already knew where Haystack was going, but he enthusiastically yelled out to her, "We're going for a drink. Be right back."

Driving off he leaned forward just enough watch her in the mirror, Adela was her name, standing in the street waving to him good-bye.

"Wow, what a woman." Creature had noticed. "She can't take her eyes off you."

"Finest woman, I ever met."

"You want to stay here?"

"I ain't goin' to prison, not for stealin' no chicken."

"They'll add five on to the end of it."

"Not if I don't get caught."

"Look, I've been trying to tell you prison ain't that bad. It ain't like in the movies."

"Now, I've been with Adela all week. How you think prison sounds to me?"

"Okay, not another word. You do what you want."

"You still game for a drink?"

SIXTY-SEVEN

The uncle and nephew sat in the Lincoln with whiskey, out at Lake Wichita.

"Here's how, nephew, and happy days."

It was Saturday and going against his word, he'd said plenty more to discourage flight from the law. Creature spoke and Haystack listened.

"Well, if you're gonna run, you'll need money. The doctor says we kill the judge and we can have all of his share. Raza don't want it."

"What?"

"It's gonna be a lot. We done committed the robbery of the century. Some yankee newspaper said that. I'm pretty sure, if you help me kill him, he'll let you have the Cadillac. You want to let out for California with a new car."

"You want to kill him? That's just pushing your luck. We got away with it. It's best to just walk away. You keep going back, and they'll get you."

"Revenge is best served cold."

"You did ten years. Man, just take the money and go. I'm going. I'm gone. I'm free."

"No, we take his memorabilia and kill him."

"This your idea?"

"No, the doctor's."

"I want to live a quiet life with Adele. Make little brown babies.

"You're white."

"In a quiet Mexican village, one on the coast. I'm not fishing for bass and crappie the rest of my life. I want the big tough fish. Understand?"

"Fishing?"

"What?"

"Saved me from pornography. It did."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm not going to prison, and I'm not getting paroled out back to Wichita Falls at age thirty. I'm going deep sea fishing instead. What you think about that?"

Creature wasn't listening, his drug induced ADHD distracted him, and he was watching two young athletic girls kite surfing.

"I ain't got no regrets. I've been thinking."

"Well, while you're doing that," Creature said, "I'm going to drain the lizard."

"If I hadn't stolen that chicken I wouldn't have met Adela."

Creature got out and walked to the public toilets, fifty yards way. He did wash his hands afterwards and that was all the time that it took. He peaked out to make sure the cops weren't in ambush.

"What?"

The Lincoln wasn't there. He ran out into the parking area. Haystack and the Lincoln were gone.

SIXTY-EIGHT

Without a dime, all his money (\$9,845) was in the Lincoln's glove box and afraid to phone Raza, Creature walked back to Tanglewood thinking the entire way. They were more than concerned, Raza and Maurice didn't know what to say, or do. The Lincoln was gone, and that prompted Maurice to drive out to the airport. He reported back that the plane was empty. It was there but empty.

The doctor wanted to report the Lincoln stolen, but Maurice persuaded him Haystack wasn't a "real criminal," as he phrased it and might squeal. It would be best to just write off the classic beauty.

They thought, Haystack had cleaned them out and now they'd have to act to cover their tracks.

SIXTY-NINE

That Saturday night, the doctor poisoned Creature's dope. You'd think a doctor would have done a better job. I don't know if you've ever seen something like that before; Creature wrecked a room before he just lay there and then he died.

Maurice rolled him into the canyon below. Literally, he bound him into a ball with a watering hose. He looked like a big green ball of yarn rolling down the arroyo to the bottom. The four sacks of Quikrete wasn't so easy but Maurice managed.

SEVENTY

Earlier that Saturday morning, rid of his minders, the judge had smoked a bowl and went out to the hanger. The plane was his truest mistress. His project and might bring \$200,000, if he could finagle the title. He knew nothing about flying or airplanes, but an opportunity had presented itself that might help him promote his westerns.

Of course, it wasn't his airplane. It had been seized from a man growing marijuana in his back yard, not unlike the judge's wife. The plane's owner was one of hundreds in the county growing recreational pot, only this grower had assets. The seizure papers were in his office. He'd fought a long protracted battle with the feds for the plane, and now he had it all lined up. The paper's had gone into his inbox and had disappeared. The judge had sent the wealthy man, who could afford to have fun, to prison and his lawyer only ran into roadblocks trying to contest the seizure. Supposedly, the authorities had found a seed and residue in the plane. The lawyer finally just let it go. Losing the aircraft was a forgone conclusion; it was Wichita County. It was just another case.

In the meanwhile, the judge used the plane as his personal storage space. The county was paying the rent on the hanger. He could legally auction it to someone once he got the title in his hands. That is what judges do, after all.

Judge Stafford, without help, loaded all the loot, saddles and all, into the bed of his truck in less than 13 minutes, less time than it took our four villains to clean out the museum. No heart attack or stroke. Nothing scratched or torn. Nothing lost, like happens with meth sometimes. He felt, but didn't dare mention it ever, but if meth were legalized it would boost economic production ten percent the first year; he couldn't say what would happen after that. He threw a \$4 blue tarp over the top with bungee cords and drove it all through the town, the lance that killed Dets sticking out the tarp and over the tailgate about three feet.

SEVENTY-ONE

Jake was working the hell out of the museum burglary, but he took time with Julie Sunday night.

He told her, "Gidget entertained Creature last night."

"Yeah?"

"You will not believe who she's pointing to on the McMurtry stuff and that means the whole Hotter than Hell drama."

"Who?"

"The same guys who has Larry McMurtry's stuff, wants it, needs it."

"Creature told her the judge has it? I don't think..."

"Creature told her the default plan was to get the typewriters first. He told her it was their first priority. Sound about right?"

"Maybe that's what Creature's fingerprints were doing over there the night Dickey shot up the place."

"You said you told him to slow down and you said he'd 'ordered' a manual typewriter."

"Yea, but I was out there, I didn't see..."

"She said it was in a plane, somewhere. She said the Air Force base. But..."

"She doesn't know."

"Okay. Take those off, will ya? I want to see that cute little bush you got." The insurance investigator wants you to go back one more time; the judge might slip and say something stupid."

"How's that look to you, big boy?"

"Nice. Real nice. Thank god they're stupid. If they were smart we'd never catch a one."

SEVENTY-TWO

He made love to her and whispered in her ear sweet police nothings as he worked away. And afterwards, more police pillow talk.

"The secret of police success is not brilliant deductions or the psychological manipulations of these dumb asses in interrogations."

"What is it then?" Julie wanted to know.

"The stupid are quickly caught, because their idea of what is cunning is so actually dumb it makes them obviously targets."

"How's that again?"

"Human beings tend to assume that their own level of intelligence is the norm. So these dumb asses they think everybody is dumb."

"So what about the intelligent people?"

"They're likable people. What da I want with them?"

"They just haven't been caught."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. They're careful. You want to do it again?"

SEVENTY-THREE

Monday, Julie dropped, casually as possible, by the judge's office and asked when he was going to show her the final episode, that she didn't want to see Gus die, but what could she do about it; it was already on film. The judge paused. Was this some sort of a trick? How could she possibly... No, she couldn't know anything. But she sounded ready and perhaps willing.

"Well, anytime. What else do we have to do but see Gus die? But we might have to watch it upstairs."

"Oh, no. I'm not in high school, and I'm not falling for that trick. I thought we were friends."

SEVENTY-FOUR

She drove out before nine, said she was excited to see the end. She knew from the book how it would end, but actually wanted to see how it was done.

The judge was amped and had moved the television from the upstairs bedroom downstairs to the front room. He's hooked up the Blu-ray and was almost ready when Julie arrived. He met her at the door and turned off the lights. "Follow me," he said and led her to the smaller television.

"We'll have to watch it here. The big TV downstairs is on the fritz but this TV is okay. I watched Big Jake on it the other day."

"It'll do fine." Julie was dying to get into that basement. She wished she'd not looked the other way the two times the judge had opened the security door. That door would be a real problem. The judge was such a terrible liar; the McMurtry stuff would be downstairs. The problem was she was a terrible liar too.

"Have a seat." He waved at a bulky leather sofa that was covered with pillows and a quilt. Opposite was a twenty-five-inch television with a disk player beside it.

"Champaign?" he asked as he stepped behind a bar and opened a refrigerator.

"Of course. How many Emmy awards did *Lonesome Dove* win?"

"Ten, twenty, thirty-seven, I think." He was high, she realized. He removed a bottle, quickly popped the cork, filled two glasses, and said, "Cheers."

They clinked glasses, and he downed his in two huge gulps.

"I needed that," he said and wiped his mouth with his arm. He seemed

to Julie on his very last leg.

"Judge, you're still not sleeping."

"Rough week."

"You lead a stressful life. Take a hint. S L O W down."

"This week's been... let's say eventful."

"Slow down."

"Can't. There's too much to do."

"Worried it's all gonna fall in on you, if you sit still?"

"How did you know? ... Oh, you were in mental health. I can't talk to you. You'll know my secrets."

He contemplated it all and then gestured 'screw it'; he wouldn't worry about it anymore, and he poured another glass. He drained it as well. He removed his belt, frightening Julie, but then his boots as well and he sat, not on the sofa beside her, but on the armchair. He pushed play, and they watched the final episode without incident.

SEVENTY-FIVE

"Come with me, Julie." The judge had been sitting there drinking Champaign for two hours. He'd opened a second bottle and on top of that he'd been in the bathroom a very long time, glass action.

"I want to show you what came in the mail today."

"What is it?"

"Something historical, magical, old school, top-secret stuff." And he placed a finger to his lips. "Shh."

Still in his juvenile NASCR socks, he led her thought the house, down the hall, thought the kitchen to the study. He flipped on the light and gestured to the space where his computer used to be.

"This is a Hermes 3000, the best portable manual type writer ever made. This particular one was used by Larry McMurtry."

He sat at the desk and put paper in the machine. He typed "LONESOME DOVE" and hit the carriage return. He pulled the paper out and handed it to Julie.

"You're kidding right?"

"A souvenir."

"Are you kidding me?"

"No. Wanna type a page?"

"This was stolen from the museum."

"I was out at the race."

"It doesn't matter."

"I paid good money for this."

"You're gonna be in a lot of trouble."

"You're not gonna tell on me, are you?"

"This isn't elementary school. This is serious."

"I bought it perfectly legal."

"Nearly all the items in the museum were taken."

"I'm on the governing board. I'm aware."

"Judge."

"But it was for sale?"

"Who?"

"There was a gang of them, a bunch of screw ups. They're out looking for them as we speak."

"I saw their photos in the newspaper. They live with Daniel Mercy."

"You think he was in on it with them?"

"Judge, I really have no idea. But how'd you get this typewriter? Where's the other one? And do you think you're goin' to..."

"They loaded up all the loot and burned out of there. The typewriter, I only have one, just happened to fall out of the back of the truck. They disappeared. That stuff is probably out on the black market. Sold off separately, they'll never see it again."

"And, this is the only item you have?"

"I don't know where the other stuff is, probably out of the state by now. It was probably flown out the day of the robbery. The airport, there is a lot of crime out there."

"Judge, how'd you get involved?"

"It's complicated but I'm not involved. I'm just exhausted, I can't go any longer. You don't want to try it out?"

"No, I don't and this is making me feel very uncomfortable."

"Oh, let me take you upstairs."

"Absolutely not!"

"I'm older and more experienced than that detective you're seeing."

"You stole this."

"Technically, I'm just holding this for a friend."

"You could be the one going to prison. Your career."

"He's... I trust him. He's in the process of selling it all back to the college, the insurance company."

"What do you get out of it?"

"You're looking at it."

Julie stepped away from the desk and toward the door.

"For a lousy typewriter what WILL NOT improve your writing one bit, you're taking on considerable risk. You are in possession of stolen property. It's a felony."

"Relax, everything is a felony if they want to make it into one; I'm a lawyer you know. What difference does it make when they are gonna do what they want?"

"You'll be caught. And you've made me complicit. Everybody knows

I've been out here. The first thing they're gonna ask you when you get caught; when was she out there and when did she learn about the typewriter?"

"Come on Julie, I'd never give you up. We are the only two that can really appreciate this gift I've received."

"Your wife doesn't know anything about it?"

"No, of course not. She's in Okalahoma, that snake you know."

"And the museum will get the things back?"

"Uh, yes. Of course."

"Including this?"

"Well, that's not part of the deal."

"I'm going to go now," she said.

"Okay. Okay. You don't need to freak out on me. You were the one that told me to slow down and write like McMurtry."

"No, it was your idea."

"I thought you'd be impressed, a struggling writer solving his problems the only way he knows how. You're supposed to be..."

"I'm gone," and she began walking out.

"No, come on. You're over-reacting. Let's go upstairs and have some more Champaign."

"Nope."

"I'm sorry."

She was out the front door and not in her car yet when he realized he'd have to take the stuff back to the airport. He'd have to lug all the stuff back upstairs and out to the truck. He was still sore from bringing it. And now he was out of energy, low on meth. The thought maybe he would stop by the jail and get some free labor to help him. If he could just go to sleep for three days.

No that wouldn't work. The girl might squeal on him and he needed to get rid of the stuff ASAP; either take it to the landfill or to the plane.

SEVENTY-SIX

Julie's plan had been built on romance, sex, and the law. And the law part of it was tricky. Otherwise, Jake wouldn't be interested. She'd hoped to impress Jake with her ability as a cop, but now that she'd succeeded, it needed to be managed carefully.

The judge was clearly in on the heist, and she guessed what cops called the mastermind, the big prize. She'd deliver the proof inside a week, and the judge would be finished, humiliated by the media (probably on a national scale). Could she do that? Why not? Stafford had done that to thousands, paraded them in front of cameras. Stafford deserved all that, but what about Lacie? Jake kept saying she was dead somewhere.

The destruction she was about to sow was far greater than the dumb typewriter was worth. The truth was she liked the judge. He'd been a cop that went to law school. Been a prosecutor and had been elected in (empirically) the most self-righteous community in the world. He had a little charm, a little something going for him. This would be a shock to the attentive public, who'd been telling their followers, "this is the type of man to elect."

The problem she wasn't true law (and she knew it); she liked nearly everybody. She could never admit it in legal circles but liked Charlie the "Indiana Street Wino" who never left Indiana except in a police car. And she liked Haystack.

And as for romance, she only met men around work. She'd met a few outside of her work circles, but once they found out what she did, they were seriously less interested. She didn't take that too personally, but she did take it. So with these laws, if she showed the slightest sentimentality, Jake'd quit her and the same for any other man with a gun she might meet.

I'm sure this has occurred to you, but her relationship with the man seemed contingent on her bringing in a roasted judge. She felt she'd be with Jake regardless, a friend with benefits, and that was okay. Her job would be okay; no one wanted that job anyway; they always had openings and it would take a lot to get fired. She could always quit and go back to school.

For a time that night, after leaving the judge and his typewriter, she convinced herself she'd stay quiet and (like her friend Mary) just let the summer pass sort of as entertainment. Her friend Mary in the DA's office was very light-hearted about the goings on in the county. She could be that way too.

She'd agreed to help Jake find out something about that snake and Lacie. This, however, was big. Jake would want to marry her if she brought him the judge. The sheriff was aging and would be retiring soon; Jake would probably be the next sheriff and what woman doesn't think of such things?

And of course, she'd been raised to do the "right thing"; if not the right thing, the "police thing" anyway.

SEVENTY-SEVEN

It was a night even the Comanche would have been afraid to raid on, a pitch-black night. At the airport, Haystack used his new halogen "first responder" flashlight to show Adela the padlock on the plane's hanger. They'd just turned to fetch some bolt cutters and head for Mexico. In the glove box of the Lincoln Haystack had found nearly \$10,000 in cash and the heist instructions that his uncle had liberated from Raza.

So, they were walking there, feet from the hangar door, and the judge

nearly ran over them in his truck. Nowhere to run really, the judge had to have seen them in the headlights. But he did nothing to acknowledge them but mumble, "Get a room." The judge thought they were just a bunch of rich kids screwing in their dad's plane for kicks.

In the parking lot, they sat in the Lincoln, made out some and watched the methed-out judge unload his pickup back into the plane.

SEVENTY-EIGHT

The judge was definitely linked to the museum heist; he as much as admitted it. Why would he do that? Did he think that would impress her? Julie had seen the typewriter. Unless... it was another fake; she felt certain some of the memorabilia in the man's basement was fake. He'd been duped into buying that; why, in light of the burglary (a list of what was stolen was published in the paper), couldn't someone sell him a bogus typewriter. But, really what would the odds on that be?

Everyone in the county government, that tight society of cops, thought she had been banging the judge. Actually, it wasn't all that bad, they typically didn't speak with citizens outside their isolated circle. The whole town didn't know. Wouldn't they all be surprised if she brought him down.

Her probationers wouldn't like it a bit, not that they mattered; they'd call her a snitch, but they would be the first to admit that wouldn't be out of character. She was the law, just doing her job. The county wrote her a check.

She anguished back and forth. A battle raged. She went to bed at 3 am, couldn't sleep and called Jake at 5 am.

SEVENTY-NINE

Jake claimed to be awake. He was so nice. He said he was up already drinking coffee. She didn't share all the details but that she'd been out at the judges and it looked like he was right and the judge was probably involved and she left it at that.

EIGHTY

At Jimmy's Eggs, over guess what and gravy, Julie told him, "He's not as smart as I thought. He has the typewriter, and he says it was used to write *Lonesome Dove*; it's sitting on his desk. He showed me last night and the other one is probably down in the basement. The other things are probably down there too; he wouldn't let me go down there."

Jake absorbed it and closed his eyes, "You're sure?"

"It's on his desk, not four feet from where the snake bit the deputy."

"You ever see any drugs or paraphernalia out there?"

"No."

"Well that doesn't mean anything; addicts can be pretty sly."

"You think?"

"Well, if he's not an addict, he's still a thief."

"Unless someone sold him a fake. You think he's so smart because he sends people to prison like you want."

"He does that. He is on our side. Or has been. No crying. No to-do. Steady and sure. That's why I don't like doing this."

"He's an ignoramus and owns a lot of fake movie stuff. I don't know. I think. It just seems he got ripped off."

Jake sat at the table, thinking, "Okay, I didn't hear that. And you have no reason to think it's not the stole typewriter. The object now is to get a warrant, and the judge isn't going to want to hear that. If it was some darn dog breeder or meth cook, maybe, but for a judge to sign a search warrant for the home of another judge... wow. This has got to be done correctly. You hear me?"

"I hear you."

"You wanna go and..."

"Sure, mornings are great for me."

EIGHTY-ONE

At seven, Jake called the investigator from the FBI's Rare Asset Recovery Unit and woke them up at the Hilton. He also called the district attorney, the police chief, the sheriff, and the insurance investigator. And by nine they were all in a meeting room at the police department. The meeting might have been in the sheriff's office, but the judge was at the courthouse and might have been tipped off if he knew about such a meeting. One thing Jake prided himself on the element of surprise. He never let the bad guys know that he was coming for them.

Jake simply told them that he and Julie had, while investigating the snake and disappearance of the judge's wife (they hadn't), stumbled across some information about the museum thefts.

Elias Mercy, a violent felon with ties to Ralph Abernathy (Bulldog) and John Lovett (Joker), had been in the judge's home. His fingerprints had been found on the pizza box. Julie, a county employee and probation officer, had seen one of the missing typewriters and the judge had told her that it had once been used by McMurtry and that he'd bought it.

The FBI detested private insurance investigators, but the company was supportive. The DA and the sheriff had personal and political connections to the judge and wanted to move slowly and cautiously. They did question

if Julie wasn't fabricating this as a "jilted lover." Jake smiled and winked at them, "I can say for certain she's not a jilted anything." That must have been some code that communicated; she'd just been in his bed.

In the end, they all found common ground, and peace won over the day. It would be a joint takedown, plenty of headline for everybody.

At 12:30 pm, two SUV's picked up Julie and brought her to the police department. She was startled at the show of manpower, the FBI, sheriff and police departments. Twenty men were milling about like they'd been on the case the entire time. That's what most of them did for a living, mill about the real detective's cases, but still the numbers were intimidating. And she thought, "thank god; these people don't really do anything it would be like Cuba or the Soviet Union if they actually policed." Still, some did police, Jake did, she realized.

With Jake, a proud papa, in the background, she was interrogated by the FBI. She felt it; she was giving evidence on a man at the top of the food chain (or prison industry). Without the judge backing them up with harsh prison sentences, they'd all be wasting their time. And now he'd perhaps gone off the reservation. Thousands of cases might be reversed by the largely impotent appeal industry, lawyers who collected large fees from offender's families but rarely won their client release. This would be like a little blue pill to them.

She retold her story, and they allowed no detail to go untold. Many questions she had to say she didn't know, Jake had coached her well. The questioning was very federal, thorough. They asked about romance; was it a romp? No. They might have believed her, or they might not have. They walked her through many photos taken by Midwestern and even more produced by the insurance people. Yes. In her opinion, what she saw on the desk was the stolen typewriter. Yes. It could be a fake. Anything was possible, but she'd not seen anything to make her think it wasn't real. Anyway, how would anyone find a typewriter precisely like the one McMurtry used?

When they started going over the questions she'd already answered, she got testy, "seriously again."

They explained why they needed to do that, "We just don't make mistakes. We're not allowed to." But they did ease up a bit.

"It's no mistake."

After an hour they handed Julie over to the DA, who was a perfect ass. He insisted on doing the interview over in the courthouse; Jake made them wait until the judge left for the day. It added just a hair more to the hassle. And, the DA insisted the "witness" be videotaped. This upset Julie more than anything.

At 2:45 pm, Julie was loaded into a car with Mary in the back with her. Jake and another detective rode in the front. The DA took another vehicle.

Halfway to the courthouse, Mary broke the ice, "So, let's hear it. What happened?" No one had told her; didn't trust her maybe? She'd just been told to ride with Julie.

"Why do we have to go up here?"

"Court. You're going to court."

"No one said anything about that."

"Don't worry. Judge Stafford has left the building. Isn't that right? How long has there been a GPS on his truck. Since the snake?"

"Since, his wife disappeared."

"He's out at his house by now?"

"What GPS?" but Jake looked at his smartphone.

Jake's eyes got huge, but he didn't say a word. He'd need to drop Julie and Mary off at the courthouse and then drive out to the airport. The GPS history showed that the judge, in the middle of the night, had gone out there. He'd gotten a notification, but of course, he'd been asleep. He'd missed it the notification.

"But court?"

"Judge Grudge wants to see you before he signs the warrant," Mary explained.

"Jake added, "Professional courtesy. Anyone else we'd have and have in the past kicked in the door already, ten warrants in hand."

Mary chuckled, "Funny, how that works; for all their years and solidarity, all Stafford gets from Grudge is a piss-ant interview with a witness. Like only he'd be able to tell if you were lying. It won't take five minutes."

"Everyone is coving their ass."

"What's the big deal?"

"Easy for you to say. This will go to trial, and I'll have to testify."

Mary leaned over slightly to almost whisper, "It'll never go to trial. He'll make a deal. We'll make it that way. He'll hand over the stuff and take what we offer him. He'll hand over the thieves and take what we offer him."

"You're sure?"

"The system is designed that way. Trials are a bitch. They take too long, and the defendant sometimes gets away with it. Too many things. If everyone had a trial, we couldn't put near so many people in prison and do you know how many people make a living off this? And, the pressure we can put on a defendant is immense. They basically all buckle in the end. And those that don't wish they had."

"And if he doesn't buckle?"

"He will."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because he knows how trials work in this town."

Mary leaned over very near Julie and did whisper, "The first three rows

in jury selection are reserved for people who've voted guilty before."

"That's not..."

"Shhh. Every once in a while a newbie reports and tries to sit up there but for the most part they just send jury summons to the same old addresses."

"Well, he'll raise hell about that. His lawyer."

"Oh. That's a sacred, no, no. He'd alienate every cop, every judge and every prosecutor. And that's one army you don't want to piss off."

"He will. He's crazy."

"He's an addict. I'm sorry. I thought you knew. Once all this begins, and he gets locked up, he'll have to stop the meth. And then he'll be back to normal and reasonable. And besides anything about jury selection will be on appeal. And by then Stafford will be a felon and off the bench. Then, he'll be as harmless as your probationers."

"The lawyers."

"And a lawyer? It would be economic suicide in this county. He'd never work, and if he did we'd make sure he lost. Pretty soon, people would realize the guy can't win and hire someone else. They wouldn't let them even practice real estate law or family law. He'd have to leave."

Julie made eye contact with her friend.

"You understand this is just between us. They'll ruin anyone. Me. They'll ruin you too."

"I don't want that."

"Ok, they enjoy having power. Okay?"

"So, you can't say anything."

"Not if I want to keep working."

"If you want to keep living... I didn't mean to say that. I meant to say 'if you want to keep living here.'"

EIGHTY-TWO

The actual DA questioned her until 5:08 pm. He'd whipped out a legal pad and faced her down over the table. Slowly, painfully, Julie repeated the entire story. She kept her cool, but she was losing her good nature. She'd like to be with Jake when this was over, but now she was losing the energy even for that.

Mary told her at the end of the interview, "They're preparing a warrant now. Your story will be enough. Just tell Grudge what you told us. And tell him the same way you told us."

Jake had gone to the airport. Found the plane, empty of course. What was he doing visiting a hanger in the middle of the night? And he'd been out there two nights previously. Why hadn't he noticed this before? He was going to have to be more careful.

EIGHTY-THREE

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"Judge, you're still not sleeping."

"Rough week."

"You lead a stressful life. Take a hint. S L O W down."

"This week's been... let's say eventful."

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"Can't. There's too much to do."

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EIGHTY-FOUR

To the exact minute, the judge was triumphantly waving “good-bye” to the G-men (he looked like that little emoji puppy waving at them), Adela and Haystack were crossing into Mexico. Not long after the judge returned the loot to the G58, they’d loaded it all in the Lincoln. Both saddles fit in the trunk with room to spare. The spear didn’t nearly fit there, but they wrapped it in a blanket and put it up front with them; it stretched from front windshield to rear glass. The balance of all the props were neatly packed in U-Haul boxes in the back seat. The manuscripts were in the same USPS Priority boxes on the front seat to Adela’s right; she sat in the middle next to Haystack. Everything all of North Texas was looking for was in that Lincoln. On the dash, there was a Fed-Ex Overnight delivery from Amarillo to Adela’s Flood Street address.

EIGHTY-FIVE

This isn’t erotica, but just so you know. They’d made love there in the front seat in Fort Worth (behind a Sonic), then in Austin (at the Motel 6) and then in Nuevo Laredo in an empty parking garage after crossing over. And then in Monterey, they did it again, and this time the hotel room was immaculate; Haystack couldn’t stop going on about how this “grand” room was less money than the “crappy” Austin room.

This was a fancy upscale hotel downtown, not far from the legal district. The waiter poured the water into their glasses in a funny impressive way, starting the pitcher low and then as he filled the glass he moved the pitcher higher and then low again as he finished. Adela, looking very Mexican, in a short white dress and a smart sun hat, dealt with the hotel clerk.

Business done, she whirled and they embraced and she kissed him like he had never been kissed before. It was an airport kiss, but he wasn’t going anywhere. He was clear on one thing she was happy to be home with a new man.

They walked hand in hand out to the terrace, to the pool. They drank some margaritas. A boy arrived with a message from the concierge that the luggage and boxes were in their suite. He would eventually learn, but the boy spoke so rapidly Haystack only understood the word vaquero. Adela nodded that it was all there and okay. The car was empty and was already moved into the parking garage.

Adela had taped \$8,000 of their \$9,648 into a box that had once contained crepe paper and let the baggage boys bring it up to the room. It would be there when they went upstairs.

EIGHTY-SIX

Not far from downtown Monterey, lived a piñata maker, retired from city work, but he'd not been just any worker. He'd been the city manager, and he wasn't entirely a piñata maker, but had been trained as an attorney. He knew people, but sick of it all (the politics) he'd retired and was content to make beautiful and functional piñatas that he charged little. Two doors down lived a wealthy man who made guitars and sold them off his front porch and around the corner was a widow woman who altered women's dresses and her craft was displayed on her front porch.

Something in Senor Lopes yielded, and he'd moved from the realm of politics (where he'd been hard) to the realm of art (where he could now be soft). Perhaps it was the stress, maybe his age. It wasn't his grand-daughter running off and moving to the United States, but he'd written her that she was too "good" to emigrate. There was some silly dispute with her father over the rules, boys, and she'd gone to Texas with a girlfriend.

She'd eventually patch things up with her dad, but now the piñata maker's granddaughter was there with an American and a complicated story. Something of a situation, but also something of an opportunity.

EIGHTY-SEVEN

Back in Texas, finally at home, K Kat gimped stiffly from room to room, inspecting the place. She was very thin, and her hind legs didn't always go the same direction she was traveling, but she was blinking. She stopped drooling, and after a few days Julie found her up on the bed, resting.

EIGHTY-EIGHT

The next morning, Adlea's granddad, locked up his home and stepped into a taxi. Ten minutes later, the cab stopped in the front of a modern office building in Garza Garcia, the Corporative Prodesa, and he got out. There was nothing illegal about what he was doing, at least not in Mexico, but still he looked left and right carefully down the street.

Suarez and Sandival, in bold gold lettering, had offices in five American cities: San Antonio, Houston, Albuquerque, Phoenix, and Los Angeles. He didn't even glance at the other law offices in the building. This is the only one that could help him.

The older man spoke to the part-time model, receptionist, and waited. He walked a bit around the lobby, then he sat and read the newspaper. In time, the receptionist sent him to the next floor up. He took the stairs and found the office of Kenny Ruiz, a partner in the law firm and the attorney the judge had listed in Raza's mysterious heist papers because of his undergraduate degree from Midwestern. That was followed by two law

degrees earned in Austin and another in Monterey.

Mr. Ruiz was forty-two years old, originally from Wichita Falls, but now he had dual citizenship. He'd married a Mexican woman and had never left Monterey after that, except business travel, Easter and Christmas. He specialized in litigation arising from Mexican-American commerce.

Speaking Spanish, they got through a long list of formalities, and soon enough, they were at the heart of the matter.

Senior Lopez said, "You have close ties to Midwestern and Wichita Falls. I understand you know the president of the college and many of the people there. You are listed as a major contributing alumni."

"Yes, I'm involved with the school still. May I ask why this is important?"

"It is very important to a friend who knows a man in possession of the *Lonesome Dove* collection. This man would like the items returned, for a price of course."

Ruiz's professional, \$400 per hour, manner vanished. His jaw dropped. His eyes bulged out a bit, and he looked like this might have brought on a case of the runs.

Senior Lopez continued. "I'm just an intermediary, the same as you. You know about the museum?"

Ruiz nodded that he did. He subscribed to the Times and Record News, but it always arrived generally a week late. He'd read about the burglary only a day previous.

"I need your assistance."

Ruiz didn't think he would accept pay from the criminal side of things and the last thing Mr. Ruiz wanted was another job without pay and one that might incur expenses. He doubted the university would pay him. Perhaps the insurance company would pay him or at least reimburse him if he had to travel.

But the appeal of helping his old school would win out. If this old man could be believed, then Ruiz would be needed. The heroic aspect of negotiation, the return of valuable cultural items was significant. Bringing home the items of the beloved writer would be perhaps the highlight of his career. The newspapers would love it and him.

Ruiz calmly asked, "The items are safe and unharmed? Together in one place?"

"Sure."

Ruiz smiled and thought it through. "The items are to be delivered where?"

"Here in Monterey. The hand over will be careful and methodically done. There will be instructions; I have a paper, and they are itemized for you. He's a smart man, and the slightest mistake might mean the items will disappear forever. He'll probably sell them on the black market. Collectors,

I feel, might pay for part of the *Lonesome Dove* story.

"I'm not sure Midwestern will get involved without the authorities getting... I don't know this for certain, however."

"If that's the case, there can be no deal. My friend has gotten his heart set on not being caught, but being paid."

"What will it cost them?"

"Much."

"Of course. I have to give them some amount. An idea."

"My friend doesn't know. It was redacted from some insurance papers he came across. But I've looked into this, and the newspapers put the amount at two million dollars."

"So, you'll accept one million?"

The amount didn't faze either man. Ruiz had always been accustomed to large international trade deals or disputes – oil, natural gas, copper, zinc, silver, tomatoes. The piñata maker was accustomed to running a large corrupt city.

A million dollars might scare Midwestern, but given the McMurtry popularity, certainly they could raise the money from alumni and from the Texas literary community. And of course, there was maybe insurance money. They might pay one million to avoid paying a two million dollar settlement. That was entirely the plan.

"When do we meet again?"

"Tomorrow but I caution you again, Senor Ruiz. Any involvement with the police here or in the United States would be the end of our relationship."

EIGHTY-NINE

At ten the next morning, a black Audi sedan stopped at futbol field #23. From the back seat, Kenny Ruiz emerged and began walking the sidelines. A red team was playing a blue team, twelve to fourteen-year-old girls. Ruiz was joined with a greeting by Senior Lopez, who carried an unmailed USPS Priority box.

"We're being watched?" Ruiz asked.

"Of course. My friend is very careful."

"Am I being watched?"

"No."

"Good. You called Wichita Falls?"

"I leave in two hours. I fly there, and I'll met with everyone."

"They understand the rules?"

"Yes. They want some verification."

"This should work," and Lopez handed Ruiz the box. Ruiz looked inside and pulled out a copy of *Lonesome Dove*. It looked like any other copy.

"It's Bill Wittliff's copy. The one he adapted the screenplay from. It has his notes in red, in the margins."

"Holy..."

NINETY

An hour after MSU President Anita Baker had the Wittliff book examined and authenticated, she convened a meeting in the conference room adjoining her office. In the room where the insurance people, Kenny Ruiz and the vice president of financial affairs.

She showed them the book. "This was given to us yesterday in Monterrey. It is Bill Wittliff's and that's been verified." No one reacted.

Ruiz told the story of the meeting with Senor Lopez and laid out the terms of the exchange.

When he was finished, Baker said, "Our priority is getting the items back. Catching the crooks would be nice, but I doubt this Mr. Lopez was or even knows the thieves. No, that doesn't matter, really."

"The insurance man asked, 'So, no FBI?'"

Ruiz answered to President Baker, "Legally, we don't have to. There's nothing wrong with buying your property back. It's done all the time." Her opinion seemed the only one that would really matter.

And she spoke slowly and carefully, "I spoke with sheriff's office investigator Jake Wise, here yesterday. The four men who stole the collection are all known. They will be captured. The search is on and will not stop; he's assured me of that. As far as the FBI is concerned, they'll be just elated if the case would simply go away. When we get the exhibits back, the case for them will be solved. That's what they said."

Dr. Baker then turned to the insurance people, "You've done this before?"

"Certainly, ransom isn't popular with the public. But generally everyone, clients, are happy. I wouldn't make press releases that it happened this way, but yes, we should proceed."

"Maybe the FBI could..." the financial affairs man said.

Ruiz interrupted, "But they have no authority in Mexico. They'll have no control, like they do here. The Mexican police will have control and they really could care less about McMurtry or his place in history or public opinion here. And if we lose these items after being offered their return... we'll have more egg on your faces than we already do."

Dr. Baker added, "I've thought about this and the fewer people involved the safer this will be. It's on me. My call. My career. We're going to proceed. I have your support in this, I assume?"

Everyone agreed.

NINETY-ONE

The next day in Monterrey, McMurtry's fought-overs were divided into five parts: the two saddles, the movie props, the ephemera, the two typewriters, and McMurtry's typed transcript.

The black Audi and a rental truck stopped at the piñata maker's house and picked up the first part, the two saddles. And, while Ruiz was bringing them back to his office a bank transfer of \$200,000 was made. And after this, Haystack came from the hotel with the *Lonesome Dove* movie props, the hats and guns mostly and the spear.

The process repeated itself. The waiting was torturous for both sides. Dr. Baker and some authentication people had flown down and were waiting in Ruiz's office. She was visibly relieved on each delivery.

The Mexican banks closed at five pm. At a few minutes before four, Senor Lopez called Ruiz with some complicating news. For the transcript, his friend needed to be paid in advance. Ruiz didn't sound upset but did argue that this wasn't their arrangement and so far everything had gone smoothly.

"True," the piñata maker admitted. He was very polite. "But the danger, as my friend sees it, is that once you have the final manuscript those at the insurance company will forgo the last payment."

"And what if we make the final payment and he chooses to keep the manuscript?" Ruiz asked.

"I suppose you'll have to trust me. You know who I am and where I live. I'm an old man why would I want to upset the mango cart?"

"I'll call you in ten minutes."

The university president agreed, "We've come this far; it seems okay to me. Shall we pull the lever and gamble?"

The final transfer of money was made at 4:56 pm. Ruiz phones Dr. Baker from the Audi that he had the manuscript and it was on the way back to her.

NINETY-TWO

After her two week inside convalescence, as the vet recommended, Julie opened the cat door. Julie had to show her how to go outside. She looked at the yard (once her sovereign territory) She cocked her head as if listening and beat it inside again. She never ventured outside again, and become an inside cat.

K Kat, that lethal stalker, the fierce evolutionary universal soldier, whose teeth had pierced so much fur, feather and scale, crouched, lion like, in the window sill at the back yard, where the Kingbirds are now sovereign.

NINETY-THREE

Senor Lopez hired two apprentices for his piñata business, which grew large after a Monterrey newspaper and two national magazines published human interest pieces on his “skill and artistry” making piñata and hardly even mentioned that he once ran the entire city.

A candidate for President of Mexico, a man who would later win, brought even more reporters to his home and called him one of “Mexico’s cultural treasures.” Nothing was ever published or really rumored about his part in the return of the McMurtry collection.

NINETY-FOUR

Haystack had a bit of trouble with catechism instruction. First, there was the language thing, which he attacked, not at all his approach back in high school. He passed the priest’s examination in Spanish and with the priest’s sincerest compliments on learning Spanish. That freed him and Adela to be married in the church. Not for lack of trying, she had a problem conceiving; it took her an entire six months for Adela to become pregnant. At that time, they bought a beach house near La Pesca and a marlin boat they could run tourists out into the gulf, sport fishing.

NINETY-FIVE

The sheriff expertly navigated an election win for his new jail. The bond passed, and by the exact number of county employees, 873.

The floods never washed Creature up and out into the canyon proper, and the droughts never emptied Sikes Lake.

Dr. Raza continued to decline and never practiced, not even dermatology. He died of skin cancer three years after losing the Tanglewood house.

Maurice wears a pair of Pirarucu boots and takes tickets down at the Iron Horse. When the rodeo comes to town, he wears an old straw cowboy hat.

Jake never was elected sheriff. A retired Air Force colonel, originally from Wisconsin, won that job. Julie went to law school, and in Austin to boot. Judge Stafford had the balls to come find Julie there. He found her in a coffee shop down the street from the law school. She politely asked the barista to throw him out and the kid was happy to do it for her.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I need to apologize to my alma mater, Midwestern State University. The school's museum is top of the line and actually impregnable. This book is fiction and a criminal would have to be an idiot to try anything outlined in this story and should not try. I might add that I received an absolutely phenomenal education. James King, Tom Hoffman and Arthur Beyer and others impacted thousands of others, not just myself. I'm certain.

And, I apologize to the Hotter Than Hell 100 bicycle race. I rode in one of the early races and things have really grown. The security surrounding the events is outstanding and I doubt anyone would be foolish enough to disrupt the race.

I would have never mentioned these two institutions in the context of crime, but without the college and the race, I was left with a considerably diminished story. I appreciate your understanding and support for the arts.. I will send as many of you free copies as the publisher can afford to give me.

I want to thank William Dale Jennings, who encouraged me and persuaded me more than thirty years ago to stop writing about sorority girls and to get out there and find some flawed people to write about.

And, I owe a great debt to John Grisham who persuaded me to forgo law school and study political science instead. He saved me a great deal of time and money. I found irritating Bolsheviks far more interesting than defending shoplifters and addicts.

Finally, I want to thank Larry McMurtry; without his magnanimity and good humor this work would not be possible. Mr. McMurtry has been a friend and mentor since my youth and I'm ashamed to say I've only been able to grasp only a tiny fraction of his fine example. I'm sorry, sir; I tried to slow down and do only ten pages a day, but the desire to be done just eats me up. Don't give up on me. The next time, I'll work more slowly.

My apologies to Rex Tillerson, a great Secretary of State, who does NOT live in Tanglewood. And Tanglewood, what can I say? If I can sell enough of this book, I'll be your neighbor.

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