



Prologue

November 15th
Tonka City, Oklahoma

Everyone expected Cynthia to be strong. To deal out comfort to her three grown children like face cards in a stacked deck. Yes, they'd lost their father, but she'd lost so much more. So, how the hell could she comfort others when she was dying inside?

This was the ultimate deal breaker. She and Gene were supposed to grow old and senile together, happy and in love. Yet, here she was, barely fifty-two years old, widowed, and about to say one last goodbye to the man she'd married over three decades ago. Whether or not she'd be an angry, bitter widow was still up for debate.

Members of the "brotherhood" of firefighters from departments throughout the state of Oklahoma were in attendance—all co-workers, connections, or acquaintances from her husband's thirty years as a firefighter. They'd come to pay homage to the "chief", given testimonials as to what a good man, co-worker, brother he was.

An impressive display of uniformed men and women lined the perimeter of the room. The fire engine waited outside, polished to a shine, ready to take Chief Ellender to his final resting place.

After a few last words from the minister, everyone filed slowly from the room. Dr. Cynthia Ellender approached the open coffin with her two sons, her daughter, and son-in-law—all still in shock from the recent revelation. The scandal her husband had bequeathed to his family, one that would likely rock this town for years to come, still raw and fresh in their minds.

Poor Trini, shamelessly spoiled by her father, broke down in dramatic fashion, as always, relishing the chance to be the center of attention. One look from Cynthia had her daughter's husband and brothers leading the twenty-five year old from the room to wait outside.

Finally, she alone remained. The funeral director stood at the door, along with six uniformed pall bearers chosen to transport their chief to the engine—none of whom dared to meet her gaze.

She released a long, slow breath and faced her husband one last time. She stared at the man whose bed, whose very life she'd shared—the man she *thought* she'd known everything about. They'd kept their secrets, but never from each other—or so she'd believed.

She reached inside the coffin, ran her hand over the broad chest, smoothed down the single row of brass buttons over his class "A" jacket uniform. Her fingers made a feather light pass over his badge, the various cords and patches. One last time she touched the five bugle pin adorning his collar, the five corresponding stripes on his sleeve, the white gloved hand arranged so carefully over his cap.

Cynthia leaned close to the handsome face, the sexy mouth she'd kissed thousands of times. In a voice wracked with a mixture of bitterness, shame, and fury, she whispered the very last words she would ever speak to her husband.

"You son of a bitch . . . how *dare* you?"




Chapter One

May 31st
18 months later
Lake Coburn, Louisiana

John Michael Ferguson stepped out of his F-250 pickup onto the hospital parking lot, his heart pounding with excitement. He'd had to wait too damn long before becoming a grandfather but dang if Cat and Zachary weren't popping them out two at a time. After a complicated pregnancy, they'd come a month early and Cat had nearly paid the price. She'd severely hemorrhaged during the emergency C-section, but had fought her way back. And now he was the proud grandpa of fraternal twins, a girl and a boy.

He took several steps toward the hospital entrance and stopped to stare back at his truck. "Come on, Pop. What the hell you doing back there? We've got some babies to hold."

His seventy-seven year old father stepped gingerly from the truck and growled his reply. "Look, we didn't all spring from the valley of the jolly green giants, you know. If I fall out of this too-tall-truck of yours onto the pavement, you'll be the one changing my damn diapers after I break something." He slammed the door, continuing his grumble fest. "It's bad enough you almost killed me coming over here, driving too fast. Now you want me to make a mad dash across the parking lot to get to something that ain't going anywhere. They're newborns—it's not like they can walk out by themselves." He shook his head. "Kids today got no damn patience."

John couldn't help but grin over his dad, John David "J.D." Ferguson, calling him a kid, at fifty-three years old. "Watch your step, Pop. There's a curb." He pointed to the sidewalk in front of his father.

"I see it. I'm not blind."

John removed his good straw Stetson and passed a hand through his thick hair. "That's not what the people at the DMV say." His low-spoken reply somehow carried to a man who had to have the TV blaring in order to hear.

"I can see plenty good enough to drive. Those assholes at the DMV don't know what the hell they're talking about. Communists—the whole damn bunch of them."

"I know. It's a conspiracy to keep everyone with common sense from driving their own vehicle. It couldn't possibly have anything to do with those cataracts clouding your vision."

"I don't have cataracts."

John sighed. "I know, and you don't have an enlarged prostate, either. It's perfectly natural to go to the head every ten minutes. May as well put the damn diaper on you now, and then you can fall out of my truck anytime you want to."

"Eh, go on with you." The older man waved him off before heading for the entrance, stopping long enough to pull a handkerchief from his pocket. He wiped his face with the square of cloth decorated on one corner with the initials JDF hand-embroidered in bold blue lettering. "Feels like summertime."

John Michael had to agree. Even at 9:00 a.m., the day showed all the signs of the heat and humidity common to southwest Louisiana in mid-Spring. Never mind the miserably long, hot summer in the forecast. "Tomorrow's June 1st—the beginning of hurricane season. I wonder if we'll have any worth naming this year."

“That’s a kind of wait-and-see thing. The National Weather Center’s predictions haven’t exactly been spot on lately, have they?”

“Nope, they’ve fallen far short for several years, thank God.” It occurred to him Zachary would need extra help battening down the Lake Erin Feed & Supply store’s hatches if they *were* hit with any storms from now through November. He’d likely be worrying about more important things, like keeping his wife and new babies safe.

They stepped through the automatic doors of the entrance and headed for the elevators. John pushed the button for the third floor. He looked down at the man he’d passed up in height somewhere around the age of fifteen.

“You know, we’re at a hospital. I’m sure there are some fine urologists here—and I know they have an optical clinic on the north side of the building. We could get you some appointments.” All he got for a reply was an ominous growl. “It’s called maintenance, Pop. To keep in top running shape—like changing the oil, refilling the washer fluid, and rotating the tires on a vehicle.”

“It’s called minding your own business.”

“You *are* my business when you think I should be at your beck and call to haul you around town.” The doors whooshed open at the second floor and an older woman boarded. Judging by the look on his dad’s face, her presence saved him from a verbal tongue lashing.

By the time the doors opened onto the third floor, his dad had obviously decided to let it go—for the time being anyway. He knocked lightly on the door to room 324, pushed it open at his daughter-in-law’s call to enter. He grinned at Cathryn, propped up in her bed and holding a baby. He whispered a silent prayer, thankful she’d made it through the process of bringing life into this world. Pale, but beautiful, she sat there beaming at him.

John could barely remember a time when Zachary hadn’t been crazy about Cat McDaniel. It had started somewhere around sixth grade—had taken nearly twenty years for his son to do something about it and get her to marry him. Since then, she’d infused some much needed joy into their family.

“Hey there, Poppa John—or should I say Paw Paw John? Wash your hands first and then come on over here and introduce yourself to one of your grandchildren.”

He did as she told him and approached the bed to give her a gentle hug. “How’s my favorite daughter-in-law doing?”

She kissed his cheek. “Does it still count if I’m your only daughter-in-law?”

“It absolutely counts. I could have twenty of ‘em and you’d always be my favorite. Which one do we have here? Scratch that, he’s swaddled in blue so this must be my new grandson.” He took the infant carefully and sat in the chair nearest her bed. “Hey, young man. I’m your grandfather. But you can call me Paw Paw John.” A gruff throat-clearing from the door had him looking up at his dad.

“Excuse me, but that tagline’s been taken already, boy.”

Cathryn chuckled. “Hey Paw Paw John.”

“Exactly!” He nodded and pointed a thumb at his own chest. “*I’m* the only Paw Paw John in this family.” He puffed out his chest to his son. “You gotta be oldest and ugliest to get dibs.”

Cat waved off his comment. “Pfft, there you go fishing for compliments again, Paw Paw. You know darn well there’s not an ounce of ugly on you.”

“Ugly is as ugly does,” John growled. “And it’s not my fault five consecutive generations of Fergusons displayed a complete lack of imagination in naming their sons. That’s why Beth and I steered clear of it when we had one. Zachary is a nice, strong, perfectly acceptable name. And more importantly?” He leaned forward to make his point. “It’s *not* John.”

The older John chuckled as he greeted Cathryn at the bed and kissed her forehead fondly. “Forget him. How’s my girl? You had a pretty rough time of it, I hear.”

She gave him a one shouldered shrug. “I’m good, still a little weak, and they limit my nursing sessions, but I’m getting stronger all the time.”

J.D.’s arthritic hand lingered on her head for a moment. He blinked several times and finally gave her a satisfied nod. “Good to know. Where’s the other one? I didn’t come here prepared to wait my turn. Hell, I thought I’d have my own bundle of joy to hold.”

Cathryn chuckled. “She’s in the nursery. Her pediatrician is doing some blood work and running tests to ensure everything is as good on the inside as it is on the outside. She should be back soon.”

Zach pushed open the door, carrying a large cup of coffee in one hand and a bottle of orange juice in the other. “Hey, we got us a party going on in here, or what?”

“Now we do. Hey Zachary, that’s a handsome little man you’ve got there.”

“Yes sir, I have to agree with you.” He shook his grandfather’s hand and pulled him close for a one-armed hug. “Wait until you see our daughter, Paw Paw. She’s going to be every bit as pretty as her mama.”

“A looker already, huh?”

“You bet.” Zach approached John, stood bent at the waist, resting his hands on his thighs to watch his sleeping son. “What do you think, Pop?”

“Well, Son—” Suddenly overcome with emotion, John had to blink to clear his eyes. “I think I can get used to this real quick. Congratulations.”

Zach beamed at his father and accepted the hand shake he offered. “Thanks.”

All eyes pivoted toward the doorway as the pediatric nurse entered, pushing the portable bassinet into the room. “Here’s the other half of the dazzling duo. We’ll leave them in here to visit for another thirty minutes or so.”

Cat waved at the woman. “Thank you, Ms. Jackie.”

John stood to get a better look at his granddaughter. He grunted before casting a glance in his son’s direction. “Oh man. Are you ever gonna be in trouble in about fourteen years.”

Zach snorted. “I hear you.” He reached out for his son and turned to his grandfather who was finishing up with his hand-washing, obviously anticipating his turn. “Paw Paw, you want to hold your great-grandson?”

J.D. deposited the paper towel into the trash receptacle and turned, wearing a gleeful expression. “Well, hell yeah. Why else would I have suffered through your dad’s death defying driving skills?” He took over the chair John had previously occupied and clapped his hands together. “Hand him over.”

Zach settled the baby into its great-grandfather’s arms, and the infant’s eyes opened wide. He stared into the older man’s face, as though studying him, or committing to memory, every laugh line, every wrinkle, and every work worn surface.

J.D. checked out the baby boy. “Hello, young man. What’s your name?”

“Caleb . . .” Cathryn spoke, barely over a whisper. “Caleb Paul Ferguson.”

Without looking up, J.D. nodded and smiled. “Paul, after your father. I’m glad to hear that. He adjusted his hold on the child. “Caleb Paul Ferguson,” he repeated. “A fine name for my first great-grandson.”

John cleared his throat loudly. He lifted the baby girl from the bed, gently cradling her in his arms. His gaze ricocheted from his granddaughter, to his daughter-in-law several times. He nodded, smiling at

Cat. “Yep, she’s got her beautiful mother’s features written all over her.” He walked over to the chair next to where his father sat, holding Caleb, and seated himself. “What’s this little beauty’s name?”

Zach approached, spoke reverently, as though he were about to reveal some great truth. “Her name is Cassandra, Pop—Cassandra Beth Ferguson.”

John’s heart skipped a beat when he heard the name. He turned to Cat, who sat sniffing, tears running down her pretty cheeks—obviously emotional at the scene. “Beth…” His voice broke as he cleared it and continued. “Bethie would approve.” He met his daughter-in-law’s gaze. “Thank you, Cat.”

Cathryn nodded, accepted the tissue Zach handed her, and then latched onto his hand as he sat beside her on the bed.

John scanned the room—his father, himself, his son, and two grandchildren—four generations of Fergusons here in this room. As much of a thrill as it gave him to be a part of it, he was keenly aware of the missing presence. He knew if his wife could speak to him from the grave she’d say it was her biggest regret—not being a part of her grandchildren’s lives. He gave Cat an encouraging smile. He suspected she was thinking the same thing about her father not being around to see his daughter’s babies.

Beth and Paul would have both loved this.



John checked the time, realized their visit was nearly over. “Before we go, Paw Paw *Johnny* would like to hold them both at the same time. May I?” He grunted in satisfaction as Zach placed Caleb in the crook of his free arm. He gazed from one to the other, noticing the various differences and similarities of facial features between his two grandchildren. “Look at ‘em, would you?”

His dad walked up and chuckled. “Yep, that’s an armload of pooters, right there.”

John laughed in agreement. He heard a soft knock at the door, but didn’t bother to look up. Another in the continual flow of nurses or techs, he supposed, who’d attended Cat’s every need. He blocked out all conversation as he concentrated all his attention on his two beautiful grandchildren.

“Don’t you look good holding those two?”

The pleasant female voice broke into his silent reverence of the two infants. “Probably not as good as I feel, but thanks anyway.” He looked up, grinning, and did a double-take at the woman standing before him. “Cynthia?” He squinted, to make sure he was seeing correctly.

Hands resting on her trim hips, the woman smiled and nodded. “I would have known you anywhere, John Michael. I swear, other than that distinguished looking salt and pepper hair of yours, you look exactly the same.” She crossed her arms. “You suck for that, you know.”

“Cynthia Anne Robicheaux . . .”

The pretty redhead’s green eyes sparkled with laughter. “Nobody’s called me Robicheaux in a long time.” She touched the name tag clipped to her lab coat’s lapel. “It’s Ellender now. I married a man from Oklahoma.”

He frowned, trying to recall having seen her in the past thirty-five years since graduating high school. “You’ve been an Okie all this time?”

She nodded. “Two weeks after graduation, I took a bus to Oklahoma to spend a month with my grandparents. I met Gene my fourth week there and never returned.”

“Until . . .”

“Six months ago. I lost my husband a year earlier and our three kids have scattered to different areas. I decided it was time to come on back to Louisiana. I want to spend time with mom while she’s still here.”

“I’m sorry about your husband.” He smiled as he remembered a particular incident. “Your mom baked the best red velvet cakes. Oh man, the pudding-like filling and cream cheese icing. Damn, that was good eating.”

Cynthia nodded exuberantly. “She still does.”

The elder John cleared his throat and spoke up. “Robicheaux? Are you Ham and Bess’s daughter?”

“Yes sir, do you remember me?”

He slapped his thigh and laughed. “Now I do. I remember you tagging along with your dad everywhere he went.”

“I bugged you mercilessly to see those new chicks every time you got in a new batch.” She went over to give him a hug. “How are you, Mr. John?”

He nodded. “I’m good. And Johnny’s right about your mother’s red velvet cakes. That’s when people baked ‘em from scratch. Not these crappy mixes with no taste.” He shook his head. “It broke my heart not to make your dad’s funeral a few years back. I was with my wife at Lourdes Hospital in Lafayette. She was fighting her own battle with the big ‘C’ at the time.”

Cynthia’s face fell. “Oh. Did she . . .”

“No, she beat the cancer. Sometimes I wonder if . . .” He stopped, wiped his mouth with his hand.

John Michael met Cynthia’s curious gaze. “Mom has Alzheimer’s Disease. She’s in a continuous care facility now.”

“I’m so sorry.” She reached out to his father, touched his arm gently. “Have you looked into the support groups here for the families of those afflicted with the disease? Sometimes it helps to talk about it with others in the same situation.”

He cleared his throat with a loud harrumph. “Thanks, maybe I’ll look into those.”

John Michael and Zach exchanged looks equal in their levels of skepticism. Both implying, *Yeah, old man, sure you will.*

“So—” Cynthia swiveled and pointed to Zachary. “You’re the father, obviously. You look too much like John Michael not to be his son.”

“I am and extremely proud of it.”

“Well, I need to speak to both you and your wife about a particular procedure for,” she checked at her paperwork, “Caleb.”

“What procedure? Is something wrong?” Zach’s voice registered panic.

John Michael groaned. “I think she’s asking about a circumcision, Son.”

Cynthia gave him a quick nod. “You are correct. I’m the pediatrician and I’m here to answer any questions the two of you may have on the procedure, or to help you decide, one way or another.”

John David stood quickly, adjusting his belt buckle. “Holy crap. I don’t need to be here for this conversation. Are you about ready to go, Johnny?”

“Sure am, Pop. Doesn’t sound like anything I want to hear about, either.” John stood carefully, handed his granddaughter to Zach, and placed his grandson carefully in his designated bassinet.

He leaned over him. “Poor little booger.” He gently tucked his grandson’s blanket around the tiny figure. “I hope she does a good job, for your sake. Sometimes, they botch those things, you know.” He looked up to find a host of eyes upon him. “Well, not me—and I’m sure you’ll do a good job, Cynthia. I’m just sayin’.”

His dad snorted. “Well, looks to me like your sayin’ ain’t helpin’ much. Let’s go, boy. It might be best to make our exit before they start tossing stuff at us.”

John grabbed his hat and nodded at everyone. "I'll be back tomorrow, probably without the old guy, since he finds my driving so appalling and all." He found Cynthia's eyes pinned to him. "Cyn," he said, slipping in the nickname he'd called her in high school. "It was good to see you."

"You too, John Michael." She smiled again. "Maybe I'll see you again before they leave the hospital."

"I hope so." He nodded at her and ducked out of the room, grateful his old man had exited the room without witnessing the wink she'd sent his direction. The old fart would jump to foregone conclusions in a heartbeat. He pulled the door quietly closed, and turned, only to have his father in his face, wearing a smug expression.

"I gotta hit the can again, Johnny."

"Of course you do." He shook his head as his dad disappeared into the men's restroom. He stood there in the corridor, twirling his truck keys in his hands for several seconds, thinking about Cynthia's wink. What exactly, if anything, had she meant?

"You're still here."

He spun on his heel to see her approach, wearing the same captivating smile she'd possessed all through high school. "Waiting on Pop, as usual." He used his thumb to point at the restroom door. "His second home, lately."

"Enlarged prostate, huh?"

"Yeah, but don't let him hear you say that. He's in denial." He smoothed the rim of his hat trying to come up with a better topic of conversation.

"Those are two beautiful grandchildren you have in there. Are they your first?"

He nodded. "If Zach has anything to say about, they'll be my last. He almost lost that sweet girl in there."

"I heard about it when I came back from my day off. It got serious during delivery but she's fine now. It's remarkable how well the twins have adjusted to the environment outside the womb, though. Not a single sign of respiratory distress, none of the usual complications to babies of premature birth. Mother and babies are perfectly fine. There's no reason to believe her next pregnancy will be troublesome. Each one is different."

He waved his finger between the two of them. "You and I know that, but who's going to convince my son?" He shrugged. "Of course, if Cat wants more children, I have a feeling they'll have another go round at it. So, what did they decide about the procedure?"

She grinned. "Helmet head."

John winced. "Poor little guy. When?"

"Since they were a month early, I've advised them to wait a couple of weeks. They'll decide whether to bring him back here, or use their own pediatrician, or even use a specialist."

He cocked his head at her answer. "I didn't realize the medical profession had circumcision specialists."

Her laughter rang out between them. "Not specifically for circumcision but a pediatric urologist. Whomever they choose, your grandson will be fine." She grabbed her buzzing phone and read the text. "I need to be somewhere." She slipped it back into her pocket and grinned at him. "You know, some of my best memories from home involve your dad's feed store."

He nodded. "The shipments of chicks, I know."

She lifted one shoulder. "Yes—and those hay bales." Lifting her hand, she wiggled her fingers in a wave. "See you around, John Michael."

Cynthia spun on her heel and walked away from him at a brisk pace. She'd been a pretty little thing in high school, and she still was. No denying he'd always had feelings for this particular redhead.

John turned, paced an impatient trail in front of the restroom door, waiting for his father.

He froze in his tracks. *Hay bales*. Suddenly, a memory flooded his mind, as vividly as if it had happened yesterday, instead of forty years ago.

He'd spent all afternoon unloading a trailer full of hay bales. Cynthia had shown up with her dad and offered to help, nothing less than an insult for a young man of thirteen. She'd hung around to watch him nearly bust a gut trying to impress her with his speed and strength. He couldn't remember the details, but he'd ended up kissing Cyn that day.

Somehow he'd forgotten all about the late summer event responsible for providing him with enough fantasizing to last all through junior high and most of high school.

John swiveled in the direction she'd headed, in time to see her turn back for a second look at him. Still within earshot, he caught her light-hearted laughter as she sent him a final wave and turned a corridor to disappear from view.

How in the hell had he forgotten Cynthia Anne Robicheaux?